

Addressing anti-Asian racism in screen representation

Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Human Rights Commission acknowledges all First Nations peoples across the continent and their continuing connection to land, waters, culture, and communities. We recognise the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which these resources are compiled, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise the long history and ongoing leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in anti-racism and anti-colonialism advocacy on this continent.

The Commission consistently heard from communities that the media plays a crucial role in combatting racism. Factual and equitable representation of negatively racialised communities is foundational to anti-racist media narratives. It first requires us to acknowledge and tackle the harms of racist portrayals and stereotyping. Portrayals of communities that reinforce racism and stereotypes misguide public perceptions and self-perceptions of negatively racialised communities, while also preventing audiences from accepting anti-racist messages.

This resource presents several case studies of Asian and Asian Australian communities' experiences of systemic racism in news reporting and solutions to address it.



This resource contains descriptions of experiences of racism that could be distressing and traumatic for some people, particularly people with lived experience of racism. If needed, you may want to seek support from formal support services [here](#). Please note that we have occasionally reproduced language from research sources that describe people in derogatory and offensive ways that are recognised as unacceptable today. We included such terms to demonstrate and dissect the language and thinking of the time, and we apologise for any offence or distress that reading such language might cause.

This resource was developed based on the commissioned advisory work of the Griffith University research team consisting of Dr Ubayasiri, Dr Willing, Dr Teo, Dr Anacin, and Ms Chew.ⁱ Designs by Bree Buttenshaw for Saltwater People (2024). Layout by Bree Buttenshaw for Saltwater People and Miranda Douglas.

Identifying and countering racist representation on screen

Creative industries, including screen writing, acting, presenting, broadcast shows, journalism, theatre, and related arts all play a key role in shaping how people with Asian backgrounds are represented in media, and by extension, enabling or countering anti-Asian racism.

Persisting racist and harmful stereotypes on screen

The Orientalism and yellow peril fears identifiable in news journalism and government rhetoric during the White Australia Policy years did not subside when multiculturalism was taken on as an official policy in the 1970s. Instead, racist representations remained, even when casting and hiring decisions in the creative industries, arts, and journalism became more diverse.

Tropes and stereotypes that position Asians as inferior, such as portrayals of Asians being threatening, predatory, or submissive, continued after the White Australia Policy was discontinued and well into the 1980s. Examples include moral panics about Vietnamese youth in gangs in the 1980s,ⁱⁱ and fictional films that negatively stereotype Asian women in hyper-sexual ways, such as characters like the Filipina “mail order bride” Cynthia in the movie *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.ⁱⁱⁱ

Academic Dr Olivia Khoo has found that, despite the fact that there have long been ‘Asians “in” Australia’, Asians are often shown as perpetual foreigners, whose presence is portrayed as temporary or transient, and therefore never a more permanent part of a nation centred on whiteness.^{iv} Dr Khoo argues that these stereotypes sacrifice the

Asian character, including by presenting them in one-dimensional ways that are devoid of nuances, and disappearing them into the background of the story.^v These portrayals are often designed to highlight the complexity of white main characters, and in cultural discourses, help develop an Australian national identity and a modern national cinema that are centred around whiteness and its preservation.

This sacrifice of the Asian character for white national identity-building continued into the 2000s and remains an issue today. In the 2000s, Dr Benjamin Law, a Chinese Australian TV show writer and presenter, publicly called out anti-Asian racism in the popular series *Neighbours*, which introduced an Asian family into the story but in the context of accusing them of stealing a white family's dog and using it as food.^{vi}

While such explicitly racist storylines are not as common today, racism persists on and behind the screen. In 2021, for instance, there was a wave of complaints made by Indigenous, Pacifica, Asian, and other negatively racialised actors again about *Neighbours*. Indian Australian actress Sharon Johal raised concerns over repeated racist impersonations by cast members on set, while actress Menik Gooneratne also filed complaints over racial attacks by viewers over her Sri Lankan heritage and called out the lack of institutional support that she received.^{vii} These examples highlight that racist representation on screen is a symptom of a more structural problem, as shown in the lack of institutional support and readiness in dealing with racism, as well as industry culture that privileges whiteness and normalises racism.

Equitable representation on screen and self-representation

Racist portrayals of Asian Australians cannot be brushed off as just slurs, bad portrayals, or off-hand jokes. When Asians and Asian Australians are only portrayed negatively or stereotypically, the broader systemic issues that marginalise these communities, such as racism, are also erased, dismissed, downplayed, or made into a joke.^{viii}

The quality, and not just the quantity, of representation matters. Having more Asians and Asian Australians on screen does not necessarily challenge racism if, for instance, they are only cast in stereotypical roles, or that their experiences are reduced into something to be laughed at, not laugh with.

More recently, progress towards anti-racism in the media has been achieved in contemporary shows written and produced by Asian Australians, such as the TV shows *The Family Law* and *White Fever*, which often explore the nuances of their own lived experiences, including internalised racism and a cultural environment that fetishises Asian women.^{ix}

Asians and Asian Australians, like any other communities who experience racism, should have the space to tell their own stories in authentic ways. Portrayals of Asians and Asian Australians should reflect lived experiences, which are diverse, nuanced, and influenced by complex intersectional factors of class, gender, generational differences, and the experiences of having multicultural backgrounds and hybrid identities. To support this, it is crucial to embed anti-racism in the screen industry, so there is safety for people who experience racism to create stories that genuinely reflect their experiences, concerns, and aspirations.

Pathways forward – committing to a National Anti-Racism Framework

The Commission heard the importance of better resourcing community-controlled media outlets and utilising non-traditional and participant-led research to amplify perspectives of Asian and Asian Australian communities. We also heard about the need for media organisations to develop culturally safe workplaces to advance culturally safe reporting, and to resource and platform stories that amplify the voices and lived experiences of First Nations and other negatively racialised communities.

We heard calls for stronger media regulation and standards, including in digital media and in relation to online hate. Recommendations include reform that ensures anti-racism media standards are community-informed, enforced, and independently monitored, as well as establishing adequate moderation and regulation mechanisms across platforms to better protect individuals and communities from online race hate.

Read more about what's next for the National Anti-Racism Framework [here](#).

References

- ⁱ For the purpose of this project, the scope of 'Asia' discussed is limited to the regions of East, Southeast, and South Asia, and did not substantively cover other regions of Asia that are conventionally studied in fields including Middle Eastern Studies and Central Asian Studies.
- ⁱⁱ Andrew Jakubowicz, 'A Quintessential Collision: Vietnamese in Australia after a generation of settlement and adaptation', *Vietnamese in Australia: A Quintessential Collision* (Article, May 2004) <<https://andrewjakubowicz.com/publications/vietnamese-in-australia-a-quintessential-collision/>>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Elaine Laforteza, 'What a drag! Filipina/white Australian relations in 'The adventures of Priscilla queen of the desert'' (2006) 2(2) *ACRAWSA E-journal* 1.
- ^{iv} Olivia Khoo, 'Telling Stories: The Sacrificial Asian in Australian Cinema' (2006) 27 (1 & 2) *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 45.
- ^v Ibid.
- ^{vi} Benjamin Law, *The Family Law* (Black Inc., 2010).
- ^{vii} Jason Om, 'More allegations of racism from former Neighbours actors', *ABC News* (online, 19 April 2021) <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-19/more-allegations-of-racism-from-former-neighbours-actors/100078186>>.
- ^{viii} Olivia Khoo (n 4).
- ^{ix} Aaron Teo, 'Is it wrong to have a romantic type based on race? Yes - it's a form of racism we rarely speak about', *The Conversation* (online, 14 May 2024) <<https://theconversation.com/is-it-wrong-to-have-a-romantic-type-based-on-race-yes-its-a-form-of-racism-we-rarely-speak-about-229002>>.