LANGUAGE MATTERS

Good Practice for Representing Diverse Identities
“It isn’t up to us to decide what term would be appropriate to use, we need to be speaking to the individual and they need to tell us what they are comfortable with.”

– Female, White, 32
The UK is at a crossroads when it comes to diversity and inclusion in our society. There has been much discussion of a gradual polarisation of our society and media stories that evoke the idea of a ‘culture war’ are prominent. Research conducted by Ipsos MORI for the Policy Institute at King’s College London recently showed that half the country (51%) think the UK is currently the most divided it’s been in their lifetime, though a large proportion (77%) of people also agree that the media often makes the county feel more divided that it is. Division and inequalities in our society have been brought more to the surface over the past year and during the Covid-19 pandemic. With this as the background, there is an even greater need to understand what it means to be inclusive, particularly given the unique cultural identities that exist in the UK.

An essential element of being an inclusive society is being armed with the right language to best talk about different groups within society with care and consideration. Language importantly must be understandable, contextual, and appropriate, not only for that specific cultural group, but also for the wider population. Research conducted for the BBC, BBC Studios and UKTV by Ipsos MORI aims to do this and hears first-hand from different communities to know what they want and need to feel represented properly through language that reflects their lived experience. This extends to the language used by organisations internally but also the language that is used in our media and content.

Part of the challenge when it comes to identity it that it is multi-dimensional and incredibly personal. For any individual, community or group, having assumptions about your own identity or identities imposed upon you can lead to generalisations or stereotyping, as well as undermining your own sense of self. And whether you define yourself by your ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation or your abilities, people’s identity ultimately is a celebration of themselves. This understanding when it comes to identity proves the need to better understand the language around it, especially considering its fluidity and evolution through people's lives.

This research provides a deep dive into the language when referring to groups of people and outlines some principals which will be important to consider when it comes to speaking about and representing diverse communities.
Things you learn and experience in life filter into your own perception of your identity and I believe this will continue to evolve throughout my life. The older I get the more I accept my identity and am proud of it.”

– Male, Black, 25

Language is continuously evolving, and so must how we use it

Part of the challenge of language is that it is continuously changing and evolving. Organisations should strive to keep up with how different communities choose to identify and what language is best placed to represent them.

Consider how language can be reclaimed.

This is true when considering the LGBTQ+ community. Historically, the term ‘queer’ has seen an evolution in meaning. Where originally it was used to describe someone or something that was peculiar or strange, it then evolved into a term of derision against homosexual people. However, demonstrating how language changes, ‘queer’ for many people within the LGBTQ+ community
has now been ‘reclaimed’ and now used as an inclusive term and an integral part of many people within this community’s identity. However, highlighting how the evolution of language can sometimes be difficult, there can be divided stances within communities. For older people within the LGBTQ+ community, ‘queer’ still holds a lot of negative connotations and memories of how it has been historically ‘weaponised’. While language can be reclaimed by communities, it remains important to be conscious of nuances.

**Changes in language can also cause potential issues when it comes to wider understanding.**

Through the quantitative phase of this research, participants who were aware of terms were asked when presented with definitions whether they aligned with what they thought they meant. For ‘queer’ there was more uncertainty compared to other terms. A quarter (26%) said the definition of ‘queer’ they were presented with (“a term used by those wanting to reject specific labels of romantic orientation, sexual orientation and/or gender identity”) was not similar to what they thought it meant. Words can be reclaimed by communities, however, wider understanding may be slower to catch up.

**Language is also important in how different and more inclusive terms are introduced.**

This is especially true when considering areas such as disability or learning differences, where stigma still exists. Neurodiversity or neurodiverse as terms are still relatively new to our language having been coined in the 1990s. As umbrella terms they aim to include within them a lot of different types of people, for example those with autism, dyslexia, ADHD or other conditions and learning differences. At their core these terms are a celebration of diversity and though, as will be discussed in more detail later on, specificity is important when it comes to identity, new terms such as neurodiversity and neurodiverse seek to encompass a spectrum of people who think or learn in different ways, replacing or moving beyond previous terms which can be seen as judgemental or derogatory.

The challenge with new terminology is wider comprehension. In the quantitative phase of this research, neurodiverse had one of the lowest levels of awareness of the
“The good thing about this term is that it recognises that people’s brains process things in different ways. I see this as a positive step.”

– Male, Physical disability, 40
terms tested at 45%, with only 13% claiming to be confident of its meaning. But, it remains an important role of organisations to ensure language reflects people, consumers and audiences and function as part of bringing inclusive terminology and identifiers to a wider group of people.

**Specificity around identity is key**

One of the pitfalls of talking about diverse communities is generalisation and a tendency to misrepresent people through conflating different and diverse groups into a single identifier. It is vital to try and accurately represent their unique experience and background rather than depending on more generic terms.

Sometimes, umbrella terms might be required. But, **when possible, different and diverse communities should be specifically referred to**. BAME (denoting Black, Asian and ethnic minority people) is an important example of this. Though it is often used and widely understood, it can carry negative connotations among the groups it seeks to represent. Not only can it function as a form of ‘othering’, it can also be seen as a lazy way of grouping anyone who is ‘not white’ into one homogenous group. Official use of BAME is catching up with these views and in March 2021 the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities recommended that the government stop using the term BAME and, therefore, use of this term by companies and in media and content should also seek better and more specific terminology around ethnicity. There are similar issues with other terms which, though more specific than BAME, are still too generic to accurately represent diverse communities. The term ‘Asian’ falls into the same trap of genericness.

However, **not all umbrella terms face the same issues**. LGBTQ+, though similar to BAME in grouping use, is one that has in part been determined by the community and has been historically amended to be more inclusive of a wide range of sexualities and gender identities. Ingrained into this term is a sense of community or collectivism, which is lacking in terms such as BAME which is imposed onto a particular group of people.

**Specificity is also important when considering the unique communities within the UK.**
“[LGBTQ+] represents inclusivity to me, but it also broadcasts that same message to wider society. It provides a community for people who may feel marginalised.”

– Non-binary, Female Identifying, 22

The USA informs a lot of our culture: what we watch on TV, our films, and who we follow on social media. But, it also plays into the language we use and sometimes this does not accurately represent the diverse communities in the UK. This is seen with the phrase ‘people of colour’. Though widely used in the USA, in the UK it is seen as more problematic. The research revealed the phrase to be problematic, as its emphasis on the term ‘colour’ as a descriptor of ethnicity ignores any of the cultural, or self-determined aspects of people’s identity. Instead focusing on the aspects of individuals’ identity that they have no agency over.

**Language should look to celebrate identity**

Importantly, language forms an integral part of people’s celebration of their heritage and culture. Through this research, self-determined identity was something to celebrate. Though
“This is akin to being called coloured. My identity shouldn’t be defined by what ‘colour’ I am. I’m an individual and part of a diverse community with a diverse heritage”

– Male, Black, 40
“I always say I’m Indian even though I am a British citizen. I am proud of my heritage.”

– Male, Indian 34
“I like this term [Black] as it refers to someone’s cultural background rather than just their skin colour.”

– Female, Black, 20

often identity can be linked to forms of hardship and discrimination, identity should not be hidden. While umbrella terms such as BAME were seen as being too generic and not capturing lived experience, other terms around ethnicity were seen as better forms of celebration of identity. Black is one example of this where it is seen as a term that encompasses culture, history, society, nationality, and heritage and not just skin colour.

An important part of this celebration is intersectionality and how different identities play an equally important role in an individual’s entire identity. In communicating, we often seek to oversimplify. But, when it comes to identity, ensuring the full nuances of someone’s identity are acknowledged is important. We see this when it comes to how ethnic and national identity interact with one another and how individuals navigate between these two aspects of their identity.
Embracing the fluidity of inclusive language

Understanding identity is complex. Part of the challenge is its fluidity, the way society talks about individuals and communities is continuously changing and evolving. Research such as this gives an in-depth understanding at this moment of how different types of people choose to identify, and which factors feed into this. However, understanding appropriate language use will require regular reviews and conversations with communities where accurate representation and description can be complex and change over time. It is important for organisations to enter into candid public discourse on the inexorable link between the language we use and its representation of individuals, as well as communities’ identity. This means that, as identity becomes more fluid, the language that we use to represent it must reflect that nuance. Thoughtful consideration about terms that actively disregard cultural heritage, or connote a sense of ‘othering’, should help define what is suitable and acceptable language.

While this research is not prescriptive, there are steps media owners and brands can take from this to develop a strategy for more inclusive language. Organisations should strive to challenge their assumptions when it comes to this area and seek more nuanced views of identity. It is important here to understand how identity is incredibly personal to all groups of people and when talking about and to them, should seek to celebrate and not diminish their own sense of self. Ultimately, language that celebrates peoples self-determined identity is key to creating stronger relationships with audiences for brands and media owners who get this right.
Methodology

This research was conducted between October and November 2020 by Ipsos MORI, commissioned by the BBC, BBC Studios and UKTV. Online communities with 60 participants ran as an initial phase. Participants were from a range of communities depending on ethnicity, sexual orientation or whether they consider themselves to have a disability. Online communities happened over a 3-day period. Two-hour focus groups followed this initial phase with 30 participants selected from the online communities. Quantitative research was conducted via the Ipsos online omnibus with a nationally representative sample of
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