

Controversial Use Of “Ethnic Affinity” For Targeted Advertisement

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It is common knowledge and widely accepted that any activity we conduct on the internet is used to create an [online profile](#) of our interests, age, and sex. Our information is being collected through activities such as online shopping, reading the news, and even watching YouTube videos. This information is gathered and stored on our browsers and [accessed by advertisers](#) to deliver targeted advertisements.

One place you may have noticed high volumes of targeted advertising is Facebook. Facebook has one of the most [refined targeted advertising systems](#) based on the amount of information we provide. Facebook uses information from our Timelines, apps, and behaviors to help businesses identify target audiences and efficiently advertise.

Facebook has [recently been revealed](#) to have allowed advertisers to target audiences based on ethnic affinities such as “Asian-American” or “Hispanic.” Unlike other information such as interests, sex, and age, a user is [not able to set](#) their ethnic affinity. Instead, information on such as page likes, group memberships, and friends are used to generate ethnic affinity automatically. The use of ethnic affinity is not inherently controversial. For example, advertisers can use this information to more efficiently advertise cultural events and concerts.

However, an issue does arise when ethnic affinity is used to advertise housing, employment, or credit advertisements. Using ethnic affinity to narrow the advertising of housing or employment is potentially a violation of the [Fair Housing Act of 1968](#) and the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#). [Section 804\(c\)](#) of the Fair Housing Act makes it illegal to, “make, print, or publish . . . any notice, statement, or advertisement, with respect to the sale or rental of dwelling that indicates any preference, limitation, or discrimination based on race, color, religion . . . or any intention to make any such preference, limitation, or discrimination.” [Section 704\(b\)](#) of the Civil Rights Act prohibits, “print or publish . . . any notice or advertisement relating to employment . . . indicating any preference, limitation, specification, or discrimination, based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin”

One possible reason why Facebook’s use of ethnic affinity has avoided violating anti-discrimination laws is the way ethnic affinity is generated. Facebook has stated that ethnic-affinity is [not the same as race](#). Because ethnic affinity is generated based on a user’s activity such as page likes and group memberships, among other activities, it is possible for someone who is not Hispanic to have the ethnic affinity of “Hispanic.”

However, Facebook has decided to [disable ethnic affinity](#) as a tool for housing, employment, and credit advertisements. Facebook also stated that they will be taking further actions to automatically detect and disable discriminatory housing, employment and credit advertisements.