

How can advertising get diversity right?

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Since the death of George Floyd and BLM protests in 2020, the representation of diversity in ad campaigns has soared. But Black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups still find that diversity in media entrenches rather than dismantles stereotypes. In 2022, how can brands get diversity right?

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UNITED KINGDOM

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EXPERTS

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 01** Non-White consumers still feel that brands are failing to reflect their lives and need a more nuanced approach when aiming for better representation
- 02** Consumers have come to expect diversity in brand advertising and trust in brands more when they embrace it
- 03** Boosting the diversity of creatives working behind the scenes can have a major impact on authentic messaging and storytelling

DATA

- Minority ethnic groups are three times more likely to feel underrepresented or not represented at all in brand advertising
- 71% of consumers now expect brands to reflect diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)
- Over 12% of creative agency staff are now minority ethnic but that dips to 4.5% at boardroom level

SCOPE

For the first five seconds of [Hey Car's latest TV ad](#), the intent is ambiguous. A tall, Black man stands, silently staring at a White man next to his car, somewhere in suburbia. But as the irresistible hip-hop track kicks in and the ad descends into fun, smiles, and rapping, the feel-good factor cranks up. There's nothing out of the ordinary about this 2022 advert, apart from the fact that the majority of the cast is Black and that's a shift that's been driven by the world-changing events of 2020.

Following the murder of George Floyd and consequent BLM protests, the advertising industry went into overdrive. US brands spent \$1.6 million on social messaging – more than five times the social messaging spend of 2018 and 2019 combined. [1] In the UK, this new awareness prompted an uptick in the number of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic faces on TV. In the space of one year, the number of non-White faces on screen jumped to 20.9%, and nowhere was that more visible than big brand campaigns. [2] Everyone from [Argos](#) and [John Lewis](#), to [Ikea](#) acknowledged the new mood and stepped up their diversity drives. But not everyone is convinced by these changes. In fact, despite skyrocketing on-screen diversity, minority ethnic groups are still three times more likely to feel under-represented or not represented at all in adverts. [3] And at least 50% felt that discrimination or degrading representations were potentially damaging. [4]

Although [stereotypes in advertising](#) (not including last year's marketing mishap for [The Ivy's](#) new Asian restaurant in Chelsea), are far less racist than they used to be, the awareness and approach has some way to go. Although blatant

stereotypes have gone, they've been replaced by a more subtle stereotyping that still generalises and causes damage. For example, the stereotype of Black people as rappers and jokers – something the Hey Car advert manages to reinforce. [3] Likewise, there are nearly 450,000, 30-something Asian women in the UK, yet the inclusion of a hijab in adverts now seems to represent them all. [5] And although 34% of Black, Asian, and ethnic consumers agree that advertising has improved over the years, it suggests that brands still have a lot to learn if they want to create messaging that truly reflects society. [6]

But by doing so, both brand and consumer can benefit. Nearly 69% of brands with representative ads saw an average stock gain of 44% and can have a real effect on broadening consumer appeal. [7] Over 60% of Black consumers said that they were more likely to buy from brands that reflect race and ethnicity, positively. [8]

DIVERSITY IS AN EXPECTATION

"They've decided to cast a Black family rather than just a family," said one [Twitter post](#) following the broadcast of [Sainsbury's 2020 Christmas advert](#), and they weren't alone in their [outrage](#). Tweets ranging from 'Christmas in Nigeria,' to 'absolutely sickening', flooded the supermarket's feed whenever the [ad](#) aired. But such views are in a minority, and brands are finally beginning to understand that 71% of consumers now expect them to reflect diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). [9] This is particularly true for the 70% of Gen Z consumers who trust in brands more when they embrace diversity, and the 49% who refuse to engage with brands that don't represent their values. [10]

Often, however, brands misinterpret this demand for diversity as a call to boost numbers, and that's not enough, says Kyla Jones, a diversity strategist from the US agency, Rapp. "If you're only showing race and ethnicity, you're not really diverse, you're just showing race and ethnicity. You have to show that intersectionality, of how people show up beyond just the colour of their skin, or how they identify with a particular culture." [11] Brands like Amazon have recognised this in their latest campaign, [Love Has No Labels](#). By posing the question, what is love, it emphasises inclusivity and commonality rather than just diversity.



Glossier came under fire after employees exposed racism they'd experienced

@outtathegloss | Instagram (2020)

BACKLASH TO WOKEWASHING

“It was the global reaction to witnessing racism in its most insidious form that prompted the industry to respond,” says Tony Snow, founder of [Snowmedia](#). “It wasn’t the first such barbaric act, and it won’t be the last – agencies are in the business of reading moods and trends.” [12] Snow was sceptical of the 900 brands who rushed to social media after George Floyd’s murder, many who’d either ignored racism until then or been accused of it. [13] When L’Oreal showed their support for BLM, for instance, people reminded them how quick they were to sack the model Munroe Bergdorf three years earlier for doing the same thing. And, similarly, Glossier’s online empathy for BLM prompted former employees to expose the racism they’d repeatedly experienced at the company. [14] Such switches can be seen as wokewashing, or superficially connecting to a cause to please customers. And with 58% of consumers buying or advocating products on the basis of shared beliefs and values, brands recognise that this is becoming an essential part of customer loyalty. [15] But if exposed, this lack of authenticity about beliefs and values can be seen as hypocritical, and very damaging. Glossier discovered this when a former employee launched the anti-Glossier Instagram account, [Out of the Gloss](#). It gained over 11,000 followers and triggered a backlash that the brand is still struggling with. [16]

This has been a wake-up call, not just for Glossier, but for others too. In an attempt to make changes, both McDonald’s and Nike have tied executive bonuses to hitting internal diversity targets, and fashion heavyweight, Ralph Lauren, recently teamed up with historically Black American universities, Morehouse College, and Spellman to kickstart the kind of uncomfortable debates the world of fashion should be having, say DEI experts. [17][18][19]



Sainsbury’s 2020 Christmas ad caused outrage for being tokenistic

Sainsbury’s | Youtube (2020)

REPRESENTATIVE STORIES AND FORWARD-THINKING CREATIVITY

Taxi drivers, shop keepers, sports people, musicians, and jokers are how Black, minority ethnic people think they are portrayed in advertising. [20] But with 42% identifying as more than one minority, it’s clear that brands need a more nuanced approach when aiming for better representation. [21] ITV’s D&I director, Ade Rawcliffe, highlights Nike’s inclusion

of a heavily pregnant Black woman in the ad, [Toughest Athletes](#), as an image that spoke to her strongly. “I rarely see Black pregnant women on screen represented like this – in such a bold and authentic way.” [22]

[Fuja Communications](#), a diverse PR company believes that the industry is already changing and we’ll start to see this reflected on screen. “The pandemic has been a turning point,” says the company’s PR Ozten Ali. “Brands have started to realise the value of the Black/Brown/Asian/Middle Eastern pound and the fact that non-Whites are more readily willing to seek out and support non-White-owned brands, even if that means paying a little extra.” [23] But the diversity of a brand’s output is only as good as its input. Over 12% of creative agency staff are now minority ethnic but that dips to 4.5% at boardroom level, which is part of the problem. [24] “When the creative minds which drive campaigns and strategies from across the equalities and diversity spectrum, the outputs will inevitably sort themselves out,” says Snow. [12]



Nike featured a heavily pregnant Black female athlete in a recent ad

Nike | Youtube (2021)

INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

MEANINGFUL ACTIONS OVER GOOD INTENTIONS

At a time when [anti-Asian racism](#) was rife, last year’s [Domino’s Pizza](#) advert seemed particularly misguided. Focused on three women ordering a takeaway, the line “anything but Chinese!” was instantly picked up on as racist and insensitive. [25] Although unintentional, it’s a marketing fail that brands such as Nordstrum and the charity Shelter have managed to avoid. Nordstrum created their own DEI influencer marketing campaign to promote the Black-owned products they sell, and Shelter has partnered with influencers like [Archana Dankar](#) and [Zara Azii](#). [26][27] Both approaches aimed to create more meaningful and authentic representation. But brands can also demonstrate real commitment to under-represented communities by measuring their progress and creating structural change. Snowmedia’s forthcoming Accountability Index aims to help creative agencies monitor and manage their DEI objectives, while [AAR](#) runs seminars with the same aim.

DIY CULTURE IS INSPIRING BETTER REPRESENTATION

“What we’re witnessing is the new creator economy,” says Alice Ophelia, founder of the newsletter on Gen Z internet culture, [High Tea](#). “People are really starting to see the benefit of moving away from established institutions that have dominated the publishing industry.” [28] With 45% of 16- to 20-year-olds wanting to see ‘more accurate’ representations of themselves in media advertising, a thriving DIY culture is allowing them to tell their own stories in their own way. [29] [Word on the Curb](#) created a diverse, Gen Z platform to ‘over represent, misrepresented young people’ and now draws over 20 million views per month, and sex blogger and influencer [Oloni’s](#) open conversations with women like her now attracts a 15,500 following on Instagram. Groups, start-ups, and entrepreneurs representing themselves in this way are making it harder for brands to tap into younger audiences, but initiatives such as [Brands Share the Mic](#) offer a way forward. By sharing their social media with young, Black creatives, brands can gain real insight and understanding.

BRANDS NEED TO CHANGE THE NARRATIVE

“Younger brands are much more reflective in terms of diversity and cultural appropriation,” says Ali. “They’re better aligned to the needs and wants of their target audience.” [23] With only 15% of Gen Z storytellers confident that media and advertising represented their ethnic heritage properly, more established brands need to understand the importance of changing traditional narratives, no matter how small. This was recently highlighted when Chidiebere Ibe’s medical illustration of a [Black baby in the womb](#) went viral, and Bumble’s [My Love is Black Love](#) campaign for Black History Month, attracted attention for something rarely seen. But brands should be mindful of normalising these stories rather than showcasing them as cultural event one-offs each year. [Aesop](#) managed to get the balance right in their support of LGBTQ communities. As well as participating in Pride each year, they continue to partner with a number of charities throughout the year to give underrepresented voices a platform. [29] And [Hallmark cards](#) have recognised the importance of giving different communities a voice by launching a new collection of cards written for, and by, Black creators.

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SOURCES

1. CNN (March 2021)
2. Variety (March 2022)
3. ASA (February 2022)
4. The Drum (February 2022)
5. ONS (December 2021)
6. Marketing Week (February 2022)
7. ImpactPlus (October 2021)
8. Spiralytics (April 2022)
9. Marketing Dive (March 2020)
10. Microsoft (July 2020)
11. Restaurant Dive (November 2021)
12. Interview with Tony Snow conducted by the author
13. Vox (June 2021)
14. Fortune (August 2020)
15. Edelman (2022)
16. Refinery (February 2022)
17. CNN (February 2021)
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24. Media Reach (March 2021)
25. We Are Resonate (January 2021)
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28. Dazed (March 2021)
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