# Turning intent into action: three ways representation could be quantified through creative data

*Despite women being featured in advertising more than ever before, new analysis reveals women still lack unbiased representation in advertising in 2023.*

A smiling housewife placing dinner on the table just as her husband returns from the office was a common scene in ads from the 1950s but is unfathomable today. But while gender biases and representation issues within advertising might be less overt in 2023, they are by no means non-existent.

The industry expresses good intentions to build more representative content, and yet struggles to achieve change at scale. We have an opportunity to drive change in an area that we as marketers fully control: creating more representative advertising.

Change can only be driven from a point of understanding. Underlying our analysis was creative data - which can unlock insights from our ads that demystify the casting and storytelling choices we're making and help us pave the way towards making the type of content that reflects our society at large and where we're heading. Creative data can be used as a compass in a storm for brands seeking to make change - translating positive intent into measurable action.

The first step towards representative content is connected to presence: how often are different groups of people being featured in your marketing?

Some groups still struggle to achieve any kind of representation (accurate or otherwise) in advertising. [Extreme Reach's study](#) found that while non-Hispanic white people comprise 59% of the US population, white actors accounted for 72.5% of people who appeared in TV and digital video ads in 2022. This was a YoY increase of 6.9% from 65.6% of people in 2022.

The second step is concerned with context: in what environment are these groups being shown?

Ads continue to present women and marginalized communities with unrelatable, and often problematic, representations. A [Unilever study](#) found that over 40% of women do not relate to the women shown in adverts. [Kantar research](#) revealed almost one in two people from marginalized groups felt they had been stereotyped in some way through advertising.

The final puzzle piece is ad spend: how much media budget is going behind progressive representation of different groups?

Our analysis of over 10,000 ads supported by more than $110M in ad spend from 2021-2022 indicate that despite a more balanced presence among gender in advertising, equitable portrayals, and ad spend against diverse content remain low, particularly for intersectional

identities.

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Continued issues around representation within ads reflect the need for more wholesale change within the advertising industry. The latest [#Inclusive100 survey from She Runs It](#) found women are leaving advertising roles, at both the entry and executive levels. This survey correlates with our research about diverse and progressive portrayals of women (especially intersectional women), underscoring that an inclusive workforce makes inclusive content. Without equitable representation among those making ads, any chance of future change is reduced.

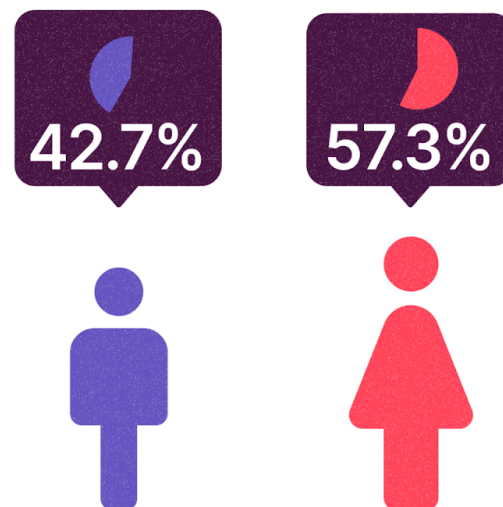## Using creative data to explore representation in advertising

CreativeX's AI technology was used to analyze 10,885 ads featuring over 20,000 people from leading CPG, Food and Beverage, Healthcare, and Alcohol brands, supported by over $110 million in ad spend over 2021 and 2022. The insights are available to download in full, but selected highlights are explored in more detail below.

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### Presence of women in advertising

Bucking the trend of [other studies](#) into representation within advertising, our dataset revealed that women appeared more frequently in ads than men. Of all unique individuals identified in ads from 2021-2022, 57.3% were women, and 42.7% men.

Ads featured 34% more women than men.

42.7%   57.3%

The higher frequency of women is most likely connected to the industries included in the study. A 2017 study from the Geena Davis Institute found that women appeared more often than men in ads from Healthcare and CPG brands.

Despite women proportionally featuring more in ads, this visibility did not extend to women with darker skin tones. Across all of the dataset, women with darker skin tones (type v and vi) featured 80% less than women with the lightest skin tones (type i and ii).



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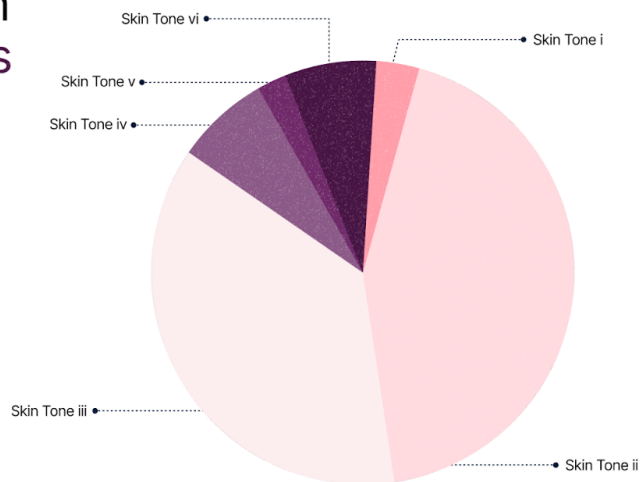
creativex SOURCE: "GENDER IN ADVERTISING 2023 REPORT, CREATIVEX"
DATA SET: 20,526 UNIQUE CHARACTERS OVER 10,000 ADS FROM 2021-2022.
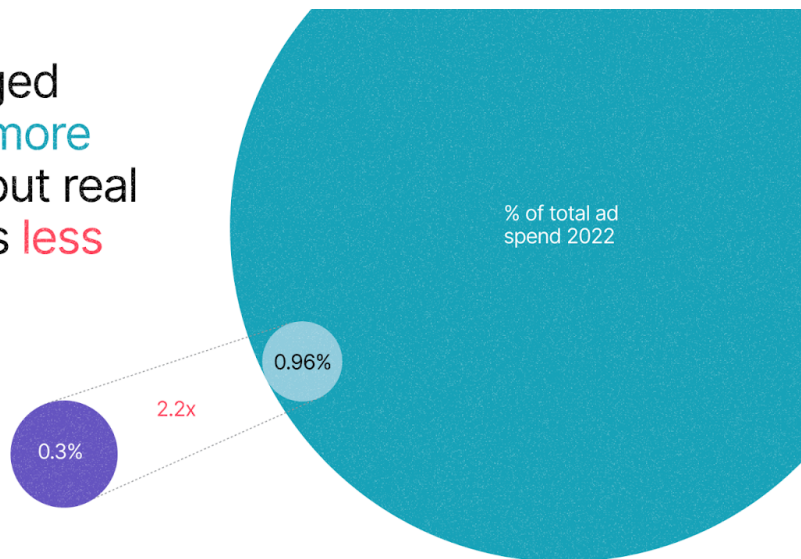
This lack of representation echoes findings from other studies over the past decade, despite heavy criticism. Report titles are indicative of a systemic, and unresolved, issue: "Advertisers are failing in portrayals of Black women - and need to embrace intersectionality" (WARC, 2019), "Why Black representation in the media industry is about more than the numbers" (Advertising Association, 2021), "ASA publishes findings on racial and ethnic stereotyping in ads" (ASA, 2022).

Ad spend on gender inclusive advertising

Measuring appearance and casting only speaks to one part of the puzzle when creating representative content. Inclusive ads that fail to receive sufficient ad spend will not be able to compete with inequitable content in an ever more crowded ad space.

For example, while our research demonstrated that ads featuring women aged 60+ received 221% more ad spend in 2022 compared to 2021, this was still only equivalent to less than 1% of total ad spend.

# Ads with women aged 60+ received 2.2x more ad spend in 2022, but real term spend remains less than 1%.

% of total ad spend 2022

0.96%

2.2x

0.3%

The lack of ad spend behind this group is in step with other studies looking at age in advertising. Perhaps the biggest tell that advertising fails to represent older women is the level of interest in ads that 'dare' to spotlight them, especially in the retail and beauty sectors. But failing to adequately feature, and fund, older women in campaigns represents a huge missed opportunity for brands. Women over 50+ were labeled 'super consumers' by Forbes, with over $15 trillion in purchasing power "they are the healthiest, wealthiest and most active generation in history."

## Intersectionality in advertising

Individuals at the intersection of multiple historically marginalized identities, such as gender and race, face compounded disadvantages. This is evident when considering representation in advertising.

Our research demonstrated that ads with lighter-skinned men in professional or leadership roles received as much as 4x more in ad spend as compared to ads with darker-skinned women in the same roles.

**Darker skinned women appeared 58% less in professional settings than lighter skinned men —** ads with these portrayals received **30% less** ad spend in 2022.
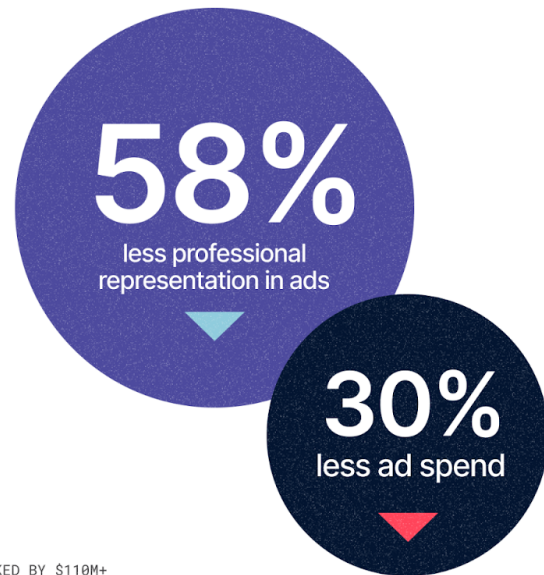
**58%**
less professional
representation in ads

**30%**
less ad spend

Previous studies have considered the context in which men and women appear in ads. Unilever's research found that just 3% of advertising featured women in leadership roles, and only 2% showed women as intelligent. But adding multiple lenses of identity in analysis helps to identify the areas which the industry needs to address most urgently.

Despite being among the most educated group in the US, women of color make up just 4% of C-Suite executives, and black women make just 63 cents for every dollar earned by white men. Lack of representation in advertising exacerbates these real-life inequities.

## Why is representation in ads important?

The question of why brands should create more representative content might seem obsolete - in 2023, the importance of representation within all facets of society has been well-established. But for advertisers in particular, creating representative campaigns is important not only for social impacts but also for their bottom lines.

A Geena Davis Institute study of 2.7 million YouTube ads found that women-led and gender-balanced videos yielded 30% more views, Ipsos similarly demonstrated that ads positively portraying women positively impacted long-term brand relationships and short-term purchasing behavior. Conversely, the Female Tribes Initiative found that 66% of women will switch off media (including ads) when it stereotypes women negatively.

More broadly, a Deloitte study found that brands with more representative ads saw a 44% average stock increase over two years and 69% better business performance. A Think With

[Google study](#) found consumers are more likely to consider, and purchase, a product after seeing an ad they consider to be diverse or inclusive.

## Why does the advertising industry have a representation gap?

Undoubtedly, representation within advertising remains an issue in 2023. But addressing this problem will require the advertising industry to look inwardly. Adland may have moved away from Mad Men, but recent research suggests that diversity and inclusion within the space are lagging in critical ways.

The most recent [#Inclusive100 study from She Runs It](#) demonstrated that women are leaving the advertising space - comprising just 35% of the marketing, media, and ad tech sector (down from 46% in 2021). On average women within the advertising space are also [paid 16.5% less than their male counterparts](#), which increases to almost 20% at the executive level. And despite representation of Black, Latine, and Asian employees improving, the vast majority of those promoted from 2021-2022 were white.

When considering age, an [IPA report](#) found that the average age of employees in UK advertising agencies was just 33.9, with just 6.2% of the industry workforce made up of people aged 50+.

As long as those creating adverts fail to accurately represent the wider population, it follows that the content they produce will not be representative. But addressing issues surrounding representation is also dependent on marketers being able to objectively gain insight into how representative the content they currently produce is. Establishing a baseline to improve from empowers those creating content with a data-forward approach to addressing issues of representation.

## How can we create more representative ads?

Creative data provides measurable insights on video and image content - it is applied here to better understand representation within advertising by analyzing the age, gender, and skin tone of present characters, as well as their situation.

Equipped with more information, the ad industry is better placed to confront its realities and drive meaningful change. Despite the issues identified through our research and other studies, there remains a strong belief in the potentially positive impact of advertising. [66% of consumers believe that ads have the power to change the world.](#) Translating this belief into reality represents an opportunity advertisers can't afford to miss out on.

→ [Download the CreativeX 2023 Gender in Advertising Report for additional insights](#).