

When will advertising embrace diversity, gender and race equality, and start reflecting the real world? Critically discuss and respond.

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Ai Statement

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image illustration list

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Introduction

Advertising agencies mostly reflect a vision of a world different from reality. This essay explores campaigns that seek to reflect a better more equal world than the one we live in currently. The advertising industry is plagued with problems that make it difficult for adverts to show hope. The current landscape in advertising studios appears to be predominantly male dominated. According to Grow & Deng (2015) “Women make up only 20.3% of all creatives in advertising globally. Furthermore, women represent only 14.6% of all creative directors, making them tokens in a man's world” (Grow & Deng, 2015) so, without representing a world that isn’t hopeful, there are many limitations on the success of advertisers. This could mean that they are forced to create campaigns that don’t reflect the real world. Advertisers do this by harnessing the power of the limited diverse voices available. While there has been a global shift where advertising that mocks or condemns minorities or ethnic groups is no longer tolerated, there is still a long way before diversity is valued in the industry with more improvements required. (Perry , 2017) At present, advertising practice has not yet produced work that substantively challenges conventional assumptions about its intended audience. The evidence examined in this essay suggests that the industry may be approaching a pivotal cultural moment, one that will determine whether advertising can authentically represent the complexity of the real world and meaningfully reflect diverse identities and experiences.

The Advertising Industry

Advertising agencies are aware that diversity is seen as favourable to their audience.

(Beardsworth, 2021) There are still however, many problems in the advertising industry.

The representation of certain minority groups is still limited with some categories of diversity having little effect on consumers. The shocking truth that since surveys (Grow & Deng, 2015) have been carried out the number of women in leadership roles and represented through the whole creative team has decreased is contrasted with the increasingly diverse voices at conferences. For a recent conference where advertising professionals from around the globe gathered there were far more women than there were men (Warren, 2025). This could be because the prominent voices in the advertising industry have been male lead for so long that the impact of female voices creates such a strong challenge and contrast that their insight is sought in a more active way. Looking across the world, it is shocking that the countries which have the biggest problems with diversity are often the countries with the largest advertising agencies. Also, it is surprising that they are predominantly agencies in the west. A significant problem that is faced by those who try to combat this lack of diversity is the lack of mentors and role models in leading positions. Some people in the industry however say it is not as simple as creative directors giving advice. Kathryn Finney (2016) says everyone likes to give advice. But it is another thing to walk someone in, advocate for them and put your name on the line and say “you should invest in her, you should hire her” (Finney, 2016) . For some people in minority groups, it can seem like the advertising industry does not value them because the majority of creative director roles have been held by white collar men.

It could be argued that this has created a lack of diversity in the adverts that have been produced, with men far more likely to be seen in adverts and factors like age and disability very poorly represented. However, inclusion can sometimes create a feeling of tokenism in the workplace. Some women have said that tokenism and being hired based on their gender is a reason they avoid this vital industry, while others suggest it is only by having women hired because of who they are that they will be able to change the industry (Gallop 2016). According to Gallop (2016), “Women regularly say to me about positive discrimination, ... “I don’t want to be hired just because I am a woman.” I say to them get over that – all around you are mediocre men who just got hired because they are men. So get hired as a woman and then prove, in the role, how bloody brilliant you are as yourself (Gallop, 2016) .Some agencies are right to fear creating adverts that show diversity because when the story told is not one that represents the company or the people telling the story, the tokenism can be easily seen by the advert’s audience and the advert can face extreme opposition. This can have a powerful impact on advertising. Although the last five to ten years could be seen as a shift, the industry is definitely lacking the diverse voices that make it stand out from the crowd. In conclusion, it could be suggested that bold thinking is what drives successful advertising campaigns. The campaigns examined in this essay demonstrate how diverse voices can successfully show topics that are not usually considered and created campaigns that can overcome criticism.

Case Study 1 Burger King



Figure 1 Burger King Advert (Felipe Guimaraes, 2025)

Burger King has recently partnered with *BBH London*, an advertising company (2025) to create a campaign to advertise its burgers to people who may especially need burgers. *BBH* has carried out surveys partnering with *Burger King* and *Mumsnet*. This has resulted in a recognition of September 26th as the day when most babies are born. This campaign had a far reach with *Out Of Home* (OOH), (2025), print and a social media film. An activation accompanied the campaign, where mothers could call in a hotline known as the *Grill Line* to receive a free *Whopper* meal direct to their hospital bed after giving birth just for the day of the 26th of September. The social media video featured copy saying “over a third of mums surveyed wanted burgers after birth. That’s why we’re on call for them.” (BBH London, 2025) [fig 1].

An aspect of this campaign that shows diversity is that the photos and videos were of real people who had just given birth. This gives the campaign and survey prompting it authority as the examples used were authentic people rather than actors. Furthermore, the adverts show a range of people in different hospitals sourced over the last few years. This is evidence of advertising reflecting the real world as it presents a diverse range of people. A fascinating element of this campaign is the way that the only information learnt about these real people with real lives is that they have just given birth and the time that Burger King arrived.

The ad reached over 300 million impressions. The social media film had lots of criticism in relation to diversity and equality. One criticism is the way that the Burger King advert uses text message visuals to suggest that the negative comments are mostly coming from male voice. This creates a narrative of competition between female empowerment and a set of voices that says that women should not behave in such a way after giving birth as they are in a position of responsibility (BBH London, 2025) . Another criticism of this advert could be whether Burger King is promoting something that is unhealthy as the first meal after giving birth. Such an occasion could be seen as one where extra precaution to health should be given, but BBH argues that it is the choice of the mothers to have what they want most after something that is a great challenge.

All the photos look different with different types of women. This shows the authenticity of the photographs and also reflects the ethnic diversity in Britain. However, some people were shocked that in many photographs, the baby cannot be seen, implying that the burger is more important than the babies. Many people argued that the baby should be more prominent. A counter argument to this could be that the babies are being

protected from social media as they cannot consent to sharing their photo. This is due to a data protection law. Another important point is that it is a Burger King advert, so the burger should be more prominent. The important factor is that the people in the ad campaign are not actors. In some cases, people submitted the photos a year after giving birth showing that the desire for Burger King is not just for one day. One area of diversity that has not been represented in this advertising campaign is the trans community as it only features mums, which is ignoring trans men and non-binary people who are biologically capable of pregnancy but do not identify as women. Dads, non-birthing parents and women who have struggled with trying to have children may find this a difficult campaign to connect with as it is expressing a moment in time that can only be shared by the people who were in that position.

An interesting element to consider is that the creative team behind the advert is made of a larger amount of men than women, but the Executive Creative Director (ECD) is a female who has a strong voice across her work in senior positions at lots of leading creative agencies. The Chief Creative Officer at this studio is a male and the Deputy ECD is a man who is a father (Guimarães, 2020). As such he could have some experience of what is being portrayed in this campaign. Despite having a larger proportion of men than women in the creative team, Burger King has had a history of representing diversity in their advertising campaigns over the past 10 years suggesting that they are a brand that is setting the trend for adverts that reflect the real world.

The Dad Shift



Figure 2 The Dad Shift Campaign (2025)

Campaigning to make a difference this OOH advert from former Saatchi & Saatchi creatives for the charities *The Dad Shift* and *Pregnant then Screwed* (2025) explores a real problem. The creative director Gemma Phillips has worked with the charity Pregnant then Screwed several times before on campaigns with a powerful impact. This campaign looks at how the major surgery of a c-section affects women. One way is the paternity pay leaves many women alone with a new child when they still need more time to rest. This would suggest that advertising is an ideal ahead of the real world. This campaign accepts that the limited time of paternity leave creates a society where there is a gender pay gap (The Dad Shift, 2025). It also shows that this current world is still forcing parents to have certain responsibilities based on gender. This campaign's main success is the way that it shocks the people who see it, making people want to know

more. The facts in this campaign is why it is shocking because most people would expect that the UK is not the best country for paternity but for the UK to be the worst in Europe is surprising. Another possible aspect to consider is that the country is facing a birth rate crisis (Houston, 2025). It could be argued that the government's priority should be encouraging childbirth, not placing obstacles. This campaign also questions whether maternity and paternity leave are equal with both charities suggesting that it is essential for men to have the same amount of time with newborn children for their bonding and to reduce the impact of post-partum depression on mothers.

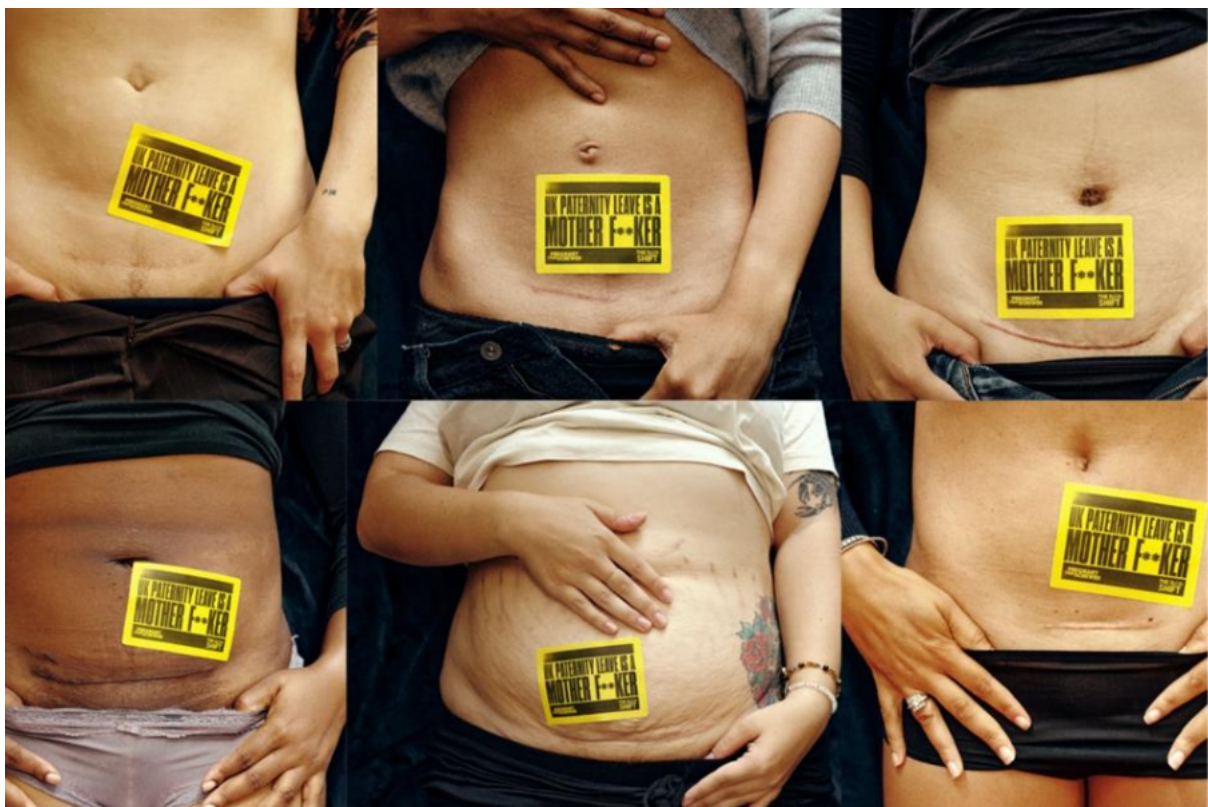


Figure 3 Dad Shift Campaign c-section photos (2025)

Another aspect of this campaign is the striking photography by a leading photographer who has worked heavily on projects focusing on equality. This use of photography could be seen as similar to the photography used in the campaigns for United Colours of

Benetton. (Toscani, 1990)



Figure 4 United Colours Of Benetton (1990)

This photography aim is to create uncomfortable impacts by showing several women who have had c section surgery. It is possible that these families have been failed by the government and society as they are expected to be back in work within 6 weeks while 4 of those weeks, they are alone with their partner forced to work with only 2 weeks paternity leave. From the perspective of the dads and non-birthing parents they are not valued in this outdated model of how families should function.



Figure 5 The Career Shredder (*Pregnant Then Screwed*, 2025)

These campaigns are part of a series from the *not for profit Pregnant then Screwed* who are hoping to impact the employment rights bill that is set to be passed in 2026. While there is a far bigger struggle for women after they give birth especially around employment the discrepancy between the way that the impact of dads is seen by the government and society is a big challenge and the impact of this campaign is important as very few charities appear to be challenging this and the visual campaign is a method that has a powerful impact.

A further challenge that this campaign must consider is that the creatives behind the campaign can only bring their own experience. In an interview about the campaign the creative director has said how she prefers working with clients where she can speak to

the founders and really get to know the vision. (Phillips, 2025) the photography work for this campaign was done by a photographer Sane Seven who is known for photographing many famous women and has exhibition series captioned women shaping our world. This puts the creative team in a position where they really understand what they are campaigning for. However, it has to be questioned that if this campaign is being focused from a women's perspective how do they consider the impact on dads?

Conclusion

Advertising is an industry with a clear purpose and showing diversity in campaigns is a great asset. Advertisers have a need to reach as many people in the target audience, as possible in order for their clients to be recognised. The adverts considered in this essay have been billboard adverts with other applications of the campaigns considered briefly leaving the focus on *Out Of Home* advertising. With these adverts being seen outside in public areas there is opportunities for a diverse range of people to see them and also a greater possibility of criticism. While the advertising industry is not perfect in who it gives opportunities and voices to, this exploration of some of the adverts from people who could be minorities in the industry show that there is more effort being spent in trying to reach groups of people who are often overlooked and marginalised. The creatives who see things differently and are bold to speak out about issues are able to express how our world currently is not ready for the level of diversity that some people falsely believe we already have and others are hopeful that we could achieve soon. Living in a time where adverts like this are becoming more common and more voices

are being given a chance, it seems likely that the advertising industry can affect the society, not conform to the way that society looks.

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