

## Dismantling Stereotypes

### Taking an Inside-Out Perspective to Building Better Representation in Advertising for Unilever

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*Equality, inclusion, and representation are increasingly acknowledged as core tenets of prosperous countries, cities, and organizations. We know that equality is essential, and we also know equality must be enacted on all fronts. Brands and other social organizations are increasingly recognizing their role as social stakeholders, committed to building a society in which both people and their businesses can thrive in the long-term. Quantum Consumer Solutions and Unilever have partnered on this program of four projects to understand and reduce stereotypes and improve representation. We used a mixed-methods approach, including semiotics, qualitative research, expert interviews, springboards, and internal organizational change to improve inclusivity in communications, pack, and products. Readers can expect to learn why we recommend an 'inside-out' approach that combines organizational change with external initiatives, why we need to approach change from a place of complexity and why we need to bring multiple perspectives to cultural change.*

#### BACKGROUND

Resilient societies are those in which everyone can thrive. In addition to being a moral good, equality strengthens economies (Kabeer & Natali, 2013). Increasing equality is therefore central to the idea of increasing resilience. The *Unstereotype Initiative* demonstrates Unilever's commitment to resilience: evolving to better reflect the society of tomorrow through improving inclusivity in communications, pack, and products.

Adverts are often considered through a business lens; however, they are a powerful medium in which diversity, equality and inclusion can be enacted – or ignored. Adverts are part of culture and shape our identities through the stereotypes they communicate. Unfortunately, adverts do not always represent people well. Despite global increases in life-expectancy, only 6% of adverts feature people aged 65+ (Kantar, 2021). Across the world, 5% of people identify as LGBTQIA+, but only 1% of adverts feature explicitly gay or lesbian characters (Kantar, 2021). The same is true for the disabled; only 1% of adverts show disabled people, despite 15% of the world's population having a form of disability (Kantar, 2021). This issue goes beyond mere representation, with broad-ranging and sometimes insidious stereotypes appearing across advertising – broadcasting unspoken messages about how people should look, think, and behave. This phenomenon is well-known in some areas, such as the over-representation of women in laundry advertising (Kantar, 2019). However, there are other, subtler depictions of power, aspiration and norms that send equally reductive messages around, for example, the life a grandparent might hope for or the value they might offer to society. As a result of these stereotypes, three-quarters of people think adverts are out of touch in the way they portray people and there is increasing pressure to change (Kantar, 2019). The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) found that many people believe harmful stereotypes in adverts reinforce prejudice and can trigger past traumas (ASA, 2022).

Organizations have a responsibility to represent people ethically in adverts, in addition to providing products that meet a broad, inclusive, and representative set of needs. Poorly designed products create smaller and more challenging worlds for people with disabilities. In terms of communications, research proves stereotypes lead to harms such as stereotype-confirming behavior and reduced self-concept (Wheeler et al, 2001; Ertl et al., 2017). Put

simply, people conform to the expectations the world has for them. Addressing advertising is an important aspect of addressing stereotypes at large. Adverts are fast-moving, attention-grabbing, and loud. Consumer products furnish the worlds in which we live. We must be mindful of the messages these products and adverts are communicating, both explicitly and implicitly. We must implement guardrails to ensure they are an active part of shaping a fairer and more equal future.

## WHY UNSTEREOTYPE?

As a multinational company, Unilever have a significant role to play in their approach to commissioning advertising. As such, Unilever committed itself to creating positive representations of marginalized groups, through the cross-industry *Unstereotype Alliance* and its internal *Unstereotype Initiative* (Unilever, 2017; Unilever, 2016). Unilever have been developing this initiative since 2016, launching *Act 2 Unstereotype* in 2021 as part of a renewed commitment to systemic change and end-to-end inclusivity in marketing (Unilever, 2021b). Across the last three years, Quantum and Unilever have partnered to better understand stereotypes and how best to reduce them.

Throughout this case study, we will cover four projects which offer a snapshot into Unilever's multi-pronged approach to reducing stereotypes across multiple markets. We will highlight three tensions in representation and inclusivity, which this program of work successfully addressed to deliver sustained impact, build deep understanding, and grow fairer, more equitable and more resilient social ecosystems.

## TENSIONS IN REPRESENTATION

### Tension One: How Do You Speak to The Culture That Exists While Creating a More Inclusive Future?

It is important to apply cultural nuance to inclusion. We did this in three ways:

1. Through applied semiotics. Semiotics allow us to decode the unspoken and subconscious codes that frame the cultural context of stereotypes, so we can recode them in a culturally relevant and progressive way.

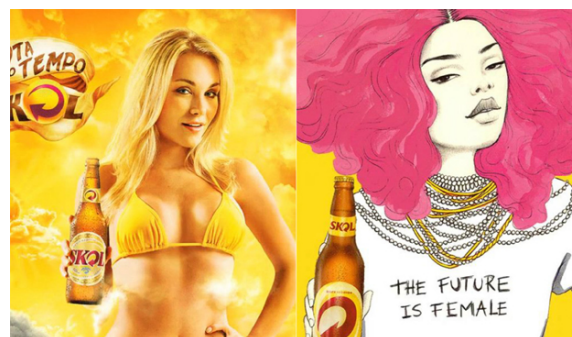


Figure 1. Perry, 2019.

In representation, brands sometimes have the chance to do this in particularly exiting ways. *Skol*, for example, a Brazilian beer brand have hired female artists to remake their old, sexist adverts in more empowering ways (Perry, 2019). Their

campaign acknowledges their past culture and actively recodes it to better represent the sort of company they now wish to be.

2. Through taking an intersectional perspective. We need to approach change from a place of complexity. Stereotypes are complex and multi-faceted. Taking an intersectional perspective moves us closer to understanding the lived experience of stereotypes.
3. Through a multi-pronged approach. Stereotypes are often implicit and unspoken. It is challenging to implement a single set of guidelines to successfully improve representation. As such, Unilever's longitudinal *Unstereotype Initiative* is well-suited to delivering genuine change. Our multi-pronged approach leveraged a range of powerful methodologies to create targeted and sustained impact.

### **Tension Two: How do Global Brands Create a Coherent Push for Better Representation in a Diverse Range of Markets, with Diverse Needs, and Diverse Groups of Stakeholders?**

'Consumers' cannot always tell us how to create a better future, but a purely systemic lens can be too 'top down'. We need to take an 'inside out' approach: change must come from within. In the context of *Unstereotype*, this axiom guided our approach in two ways.

1. Firstly, we included local market experts, activists, and thought leaders – in addition to building in the voice of the consumer throughout. This shaped our work around the needs of the communities it sought to represent. We wanted to use these people, not just as sources of information, but as collaborators to help frame our thinking and iterate our work using the cutting-edge of local market conversations around inclusivity and representation.
2. Secondly, we matched our external work with an internal change program within Unilever, to shift hearts and minds. Through our commitment to purposeful work, Quantum understand that sustained change needs networks of devoted stakeholders. As such, raising awareness, engagement, and excitement within Unilever was an essential part of creating momentum.

### **Tension Three: How do Global 'Everyman' Brands Credibly Speak to Representation in Polarized Societies?**

"It's absolutely a knowledge problem in Turkey. They don't see [sexism] as a problem. They don't even see it. The education part is very important." (Turkish Gender Expert)

We used principles from behavioral science to identify different roles a brand can play in challenging stereotypes. Many approaches to inclusion recognize the need to educate people, but do not go beyond this. We used the *Behaviour Change Wheel* to identify a series of different paths to change, including education, but also empathy or direct action (Michie, van Stralen, West, 2011). We used this to guide our analysis and frame our market-specific recommendations. In Turkey, for example, education was highlighted as a barrier to change (see: left). Acknowledging different approaches, from 'increasing knowledge' to 'using shock tactics', gave every brand a lever to pull.

Moreover, it is impossible to credibly improve representation without having built a diverse, deep, and representative sample of the audience in question. As such, diversity was

an integral element of this program of work. Throughout our qualitative recruitment, we worked with demographic data to ensure our consumer sample was truly representative and reflected the intersectional nature of stereotypes (e.g., black women experience racism and sexism in a unique way). Across the markets, we spoke to black men and women, but also identified groups like Latinx in the USA or colored (multi-ethnic) individuals in South Africa. We also used moderators that were the same ethnicity as the interviewees to reduce bias. Collaboration was also important. We worked with a network of stakeholders within Unilever to ensure our approach was tailored to a range of business contexts. This collaborative approach was, perhaps, most visible throughout our expert recruitment, with Unilever connecting us with their own advertising agencies in *Unstereotype Experts* to hear about the challenges they face when trying to create more representative work. This built a shared understanding of the complexity within cultures.

## **UNSTEREOTYPE: CREATING CULTURE-LED CHANGE**

This submission will cover four phases of our *Unstereotype* program, which use a range of methodologies to improve the representation of marginalized people in Unilever's advertising and create more inclusive products/pack design.

### **SUMMARY OF APPROACH**

Across *Unstereotype*, Quantum and Unilever leveraged mixed methods to unlock different aspects of unstereotyping. We have conducted four projects, to date, to address different elements of stereotyping. In 2019, we wanted to understand the lived experience of stereotypes, how they were manifesting around the world and how to dismantle them. *Unstereotype Mapping* used semiotics to provide nuanced, country-specific, intersectional guidance on dismantling gender and racial stereotypes (e.g., in the UK, the need for society to make space for the voices of marginalized groups rather than speak on their behalf). In 2020, we wanted to influence internal conversations around stereotypes and representation. *Unstereotype Internal* leveraged organizational change. In 2021, we wanted to create specific 'levers' advertisers could target to improve representation. *Unstereotype Experts* used expert interviews to identify pivot points or areas of tension where advertisers could lead progressive change (e.g., addressing the 'mental load' of managing housework for women in France). Most recently, in 2022, we wanted to create a more inclusive R&D pipeline and advertising strategy for Sunlight. *Unstereotype Sunlight* used Inclusive Design principles to support Sunlight in shaping their pipeline to fit the needs of the silver generation and disabled women.

Phase	Business Objective	Research Question	Methodology	Markets	Key Outcome
Unstereotype Mapping (2019)	To understand racism and sexism	What is the human experience of sexism and racism? How are they perpetuated in culture?	Consumer interviews, experts, semiotics	UK, US, Brazil, South Africa	A semiotic code map; key principles and ‘cheat sheets’ for unstereotyping; a bespoke Unstereotype framework to support inclusive advertising
Unstereotype Internal (2020)	To change hearts and minds within Unilever	How do you change internal attitudes around D&I?	Workshops, Org. Change	Global	The establishment of a Champions Network
Unstereotype Experts (2021)	To make Unilever advertising more inclusive	What should brands do to improve portrayals of sexuality, gender, race & disability in ads?	Expert interviews, desk research	France, Brazil, Vietnam, Turkey	A set of country-specific ‘Change Levers’ to guide advertisers
Unstereotype Sunlight (2022)	To adapt Sunlight products to better suit the elderly & disabled	What do women with disabilities and 60+ women need?	Consumer interviews, springboards	Vietnam, Indonesia	Springboards to demonstrate opportunities to develop more inclusive pack/product design and advertising

## APPROACH

Across the four projects, we used a range of methodologies to build nuanced perspectives around three key areas:

### Understanding Lived Experiences

To understand stereotypes, we needed to take a human lens. We used *Qualitative Interviews* to bring the lived experience to *Unstereotype Mapping* and *Unstereotype Sunlight*.

#### *Qualitative Interviews*

Speaking directly to consumers allowed us to understand the reality of discrimination, prejudice, and stereotypes. We wanted to zoom in on how stereotypes made people feel: for example, the pressure experienced by some black individuals in America to achieve perfectionism and prove stereotypes wrong. Speaking to consumers directly – and inviting the Unilever team to attend interviews or watch recordings to hear people express their experiences first-hand – brought human understanding and cultural sensitivity to our work.

We worked to build a representative sample that went beyond quotas to reflect the human reality of marginalized groups. To represent, for example, lived reality of marginalized groups, we identified individuals who experience intersectional marginalization around both age and disability in Vietnam and Indonesia.

Moreover, beyond simply seeking to understand their perspective, we also engaged our participants in the product development process through showing them early-stage product concepts in *Unstereotype Sunlight*. This allowed us to identify strengths and weaknesses, to adapt, iterate and shape our communications going forward

## **Decoding and Recoding Stereotypes**

Beyond the human cost of stereotypes, we needed to understand how stereotypes were enacted; the specific way in which stereotyped representations were communicated in each market. We did this through talking to experts and through semiotic analysis.

### *Activists and Experts*

When society changes and adapts, the most radical shifts are often imagined at the grassroots level. In terms of stereotypes, it is often those from within marginalized groups who can understand and visualize the social changes that need to occur to build fairer, more resilient, and more productive societies. In *Unstereotype Mapping* and *Unstereotype Experts*, we identified pioneering experts and activists who were actively working towards building the future we also sought to understand. Speaking to activists who are working towards representation and breaking stereotypes positioned us at the forefront of the movement. Their pre-existing experience gave us access to the cutting-edge of the conversations occurring around representation. Moreover, these experts were able to speak to hard-to-reach communities from within, rather than without. They helped us mitigate understanding gap and bias that can influence research with marginalized audiences, even when using a diverse interview panel. Their activism and insight allowed them to bridge different perspectives and highlight nuances that might otherwise have been missed. For example, in Brazil, we spoke to a media expert (see: left) who challenged our framing of ‘good representation’ by stating that advertisers should stop aiming for ‘aspirational’ representations of race.

“I hate this word. What is aspirational? We shouldn’t look to aspirational. We should look to identification. Every time aspirational comes to the table, white people come to the table.” (Felipe Simi)

Moreover, we used our experts to guide our semiotic analysis. Our network of experts pointed us towards the most culturally resonant examples of advertising, film and other media, to ensure we were identifying what was genuinely relevant, meaningful and progressive at a grassroots, community level. Through using experts as the backbone of our research, we were able to work from within – rather than from without – and identify spaces we might otherwise have missed. In Brazil, for example, we were directed to think about the experience of black masculinity, which one of our experts cited as an underexplored area.

### *Semiotics and Cultural Analysis*

Given that many stereotypes are communicated beneath the surface, it was important to develop a deep understanding of how stereotypes were being communicated in advertising.

In *Unstereotype Mapping*, we used semiotics to analyze the explicit and implicit ways stereotypes were manifesting, visually and verbally, by exploring a range of media material: advertising, television, film, and broader popular culture. Semiotics gives a clear vision of the world so we can understand how organisations are communicating and what consumers understand deeply but often can't communicate (see below).

Semiotics is **the study of signs and symbols**. We would typically use three lenses...

**WHAT IT IS**

The common sense meaning



A Fenty *SavageXPride* advert

**WHERE IT TAKES YOU**

The cultural associations attached



'00s – '10s *Teenage Dream* pop aesthetic

**WHAT THAT MEANS**

What this tells you



Carefree, inclusive femininity

Figure 2.

In *Unstereotype Mapping*, our semioticians used deep and lateral analysis to uncover a wide range of specific, actionable codes and themes, in addition to building country-specific semiotic maps to demonstrate the different narratives being told around race and gender. This clearly demonstrated where the conversation around inclusivity and representation sat in every market and how Unilever should communicate to drive the movement forward. The best brands understand they do not operate in a vacuum but draw their meaning from culture, and in some cases lead cultural movements.

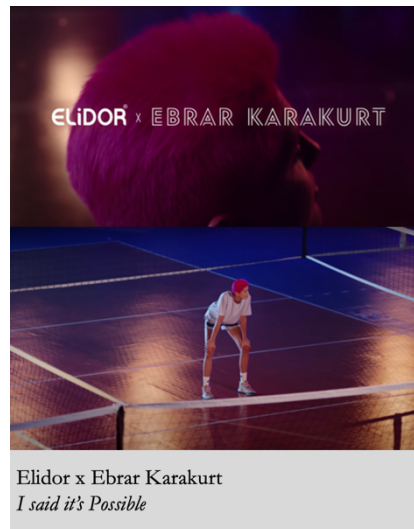


Figure 3.

In *Unstereotype Experts*, we also analyzed the media landscape of the countries covered. As we were working to identify culturally informed levers brands could pull to dismantle stereotypes, we knew it was important to provide case-studies of where brands had succeeded – and where they had not. This ensured our work was rooted in a deep understanding of the specific media context in each market and allowed us to communicate complex ideas through powerful examples rather than broad and generalized statistics. We can see an example of good practice in Elidor’s *I said it’s Possible*, featuring Ebrar Karakurt. Ebrar Karakurt is a Turkish volleyball player who has recently faced homophobia for being in a public relationship with a woman. In this advert, the key message is that anything is possible, whether it’s volleyball success or a shampoo advert featuring a woman with short hair. It stands out as the only advert to be mentioned by every single expert as a seminal example of good representation. Showcasing positive role models is an important way brands can shift the cultural conversation.

## **Organizational Change, Research & Development**

### *Innovation Springboards*

Resilience is rooted in the interconnections between highly complex and interdependent systems, spanning products, communities, policies, services, organizations, and communications. As such, it was important to take *Unstereotype* to R&D in order to design better products and, as Aline Santos, Unilever’s Chief Brand Officer and Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer states, help to ‘create a generation free from prejudice’ through systemic change (Unilever, 2021).

*Unstereotype Sunlight* takes consumer insight into disability and age and builds that into innovation in product design and communications. We are creating actionable springboards to highlight opportunities for tangible action, through demonstrating core unmet needs or problems to be solved. We will also build in early ideas emerging from consumers (e.g., visual language, possible formats & features, communication concepts) to ensure these opportunities to innovate represent genuine problems to be solved within marginalized communities.

### *Organizational Change*

Transformative change happens when hearts and mindsets shift. We therefore needed to take *Unstereotype* into the workplace. *Unstereotype Internal* focused on two primary routes to achieve organizational change.

1. External Provocation

We invited experts to internal sessions attended by 100+ employees. We hand-picked experts on race, gender, and ageism in collaboration with the Unilever teams and sought to go beyond public speakers to find artists, creatives, and genuine cultural leaders with provocative and progressive perspectives. Talks included *Race & The White Illusion* by writer Ekow Eshun and *A Manifesto Against Ageism* by award-winning writer Ashton Applewhite.

2. Internal Storytelling

To unlock internal attitudes, we invited leadership teams to talk about their D&I journeys through a ‘stories from within’ initiative. This was important as, even in the UK, which has a relatively democratic working culture, behavioural science tells us



cultural norms are influenced by those at the top. We aimed to humanise marginalised groups and normalise active inclusion through the oldest and, arguably, most powerful cultural touchstone: stories. However, we also know that stories are most powerful when they are embedded, retold and reinforced. As such, we created a Champions Network to set goals, build learnings and keep momentum.

## OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

As a multi-year program of work, *Unstereotype* has had broad-reaching outcomes across eight different countries, multiple different teams and two different business areas (advertising and product/pack design). The work has helped shift perspectives within Unilever, with insights including:

*"[Taking action on] representing people from marginalised groups – showing more realistic vs heroic portrayals"*

And

*"I'll be more conscious of the way I communicate with others, being more conscious about being uncomfortable and not being afraid to call others out"*

Our key outcomes include:

- A detailed, country-specific semiotic code-map to communicate the cultural nuance of stereotyping in four countries (the UK, the US, South Africa and Brazil)
- A bespoke framework to demonstrate different facets of stereotypes (e.g., somebody's social role) to consider within adverts
- Key principles for success and 'cheat sheets' to guide advertisers in their decision-making
- Country-specific 'Change Levers' to highlight the cutting edge of inclusivity in advertising (in four markets (Brazil, Vietnam, Turkey, and France), where we should change an aspect of representation to dismantle stereotypes
- A Champions Network to maintain momentum
- A series of exceptionally well-attended Activation Sessions
- A set of Springboards to guide Sunlight's R&D and communications strategy

*Unstereotype* has delivered, and will continue to deliver, powerful change for marginalized communities across diverse geographies. Unchallenged, stereotypes are a vehicle that allows inequality to travel into the future, through their ability to shape self-belief and influence what we expect, and therefore allow, others to do and become. This project is being used within Unilever to shape their Brand Charters and establish measurable strategies to improve representation. It is part of the foundational understanding and direction Unilever needed to establish what must change and how changes should be measured. Finally, it is being used by *Sunlight* to shape their R&D pipeline and communications strategy. As such, it will improve the products available to marginalized communities – and their representation in the media landscape of tomorrow.

Brands and public sector organizations aiming to create more inclusive advertising can learn from the scope of this work. Not only did this include an internal change program, but also took learnings from advertisers Unilever works with. This allowed us to develop

recommendations grounded in reality. Moreover, combining human insight into how stereotyping makes people feel with clear and tangible examples of how stereotypes manifest (and what good looks like) gave both emotional impact and practical guidance.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. We need to create change from a place of complexity  
The Unstereotype programme is a powerful example of best practice in understanding diverse, marginalised and minority communities. Our multi-pronged, longitudinal approach is crucial to sustained change as it reflects the complex, interconnected, and evolving nature of both stereotypes and social change. Through taking an iterative, sustained approach that built on previous learnings and expanded along several paths of change, we were able to hear a wide range of voices and build genuine, considered, and dedicated momentum.
2. We must work from ‘within’ rather than from ‘without’  
Our inside-out approach has been essential to creating real change. We have worked collaboratively with Unilever throughout, with a network of cross-company stakeholders able to create broad and authentic interest. Through incorporating organisational change, we have created deep commitment to this process from a broad group of stakeholders. Furthermore, including experts and working in an iterative, flexible manner has allowed us to co-create a process that builds a genuine, grassroots representation of the media landscape of a given culture.
3. There is never one answer  
Genuine resilience acknowledges tensions between continuity and change; growth and heritage; one perspective and another. Throughout this process, we have encountered optimism and pessimism; realism and hope. An interdisciplinary, cultural and, crucially, human approach allows us to navigate these tensions through deep understanding, humility, and respect. Consolidating different perspectives and using case studies demonstrating where brands had succeeded and failed before, let us bring a rich range of recommendations, which included moderate vs. ambitious tactics. In doing so, we created a realistic roadmap towards social change which offered multiple routes to our shared vision of an inclusive and resilient future.

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## NOTES

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