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DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION 2023:
THE STATE OF GREATER MANCHESTER ADVERTISING AGENCIES

This study was conducted by
COUCH Health in collaboration
with Lancaster University.

Despite significant investments being made on inclusivity initiatives, the creative industry is yet to shake its reputation for lack of diversity. Which begs the question: **where is the industry going wrong, and what can be done?**

A Lancaster University and COUCH Health collaboration aimed to explore the capacity of advertising agencies in Greater Manchester to facilitate inclusivity in their recruitment processes and workplace culture.

As such, this research suggests there are seven key factors inhibiting Greater Manchester agencies from being inclusive:

1

A lack of consistent definitions of diversity and inclusion among agencies, and a lack of understanding as to who are considered to be 'diverse' groups.

2

An industry-wide lack of understanding of the benefits of a diverse workforce.

3

Less funding and flexibility in recruitment needs among smaller agencies.

4

Outdated and inflexible recruitment processes.

5

Education systems that lack in opportunities to learn more about the creative industry.

6

A lack of informed diversity and inclusion policies within agencies.

7

A lack of formal collection of employee demographic data, leading to factors such as religion, socioeconomic status, and neurodiversity being neglected.

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EXPLORING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION PRACTICES
IN GREATER MANCHESTER'S CREATIVE INDUSTRY

In an industry known for its significant lack of diversity and overrepresentation of White, middle-class men,[1] over £6 billion has been spent on initiatives to attempt to diversify the creative sector.[2,3] However, even industry-wide movements that pushed issues of underrepresentation into the spotlight, such as the impactful Black Lives Matter movement, have failed to substantially increase diversity in the workforce within advertising agencies.[4]

Greater Manchester is renowned for being a leading centre for culture and creativity, with its contributions to music, literature, theatre, art, and history recognised on an international level.[5] Due to its extensive history of migration from different parts of the world,[6] Manchester quickly became one of the UK's top cultural and creative cities.[7] Additionally, the LGBTQ+ community thrives in Greater Manchester, with the number of civil partnerships well above national average[8] and the city becoming known as the 'gay capital of the north'.[9] With such a renowned creative and diverse population, Greater Manchester was chosen for this research to explore diversity and inclusion practices in creative agencies.

This study was conducted by COUCH Health in collaboration with Lancaster University, to explore whether advertising agencies in Greater Manchester are currently able to facilitate inclusivity within recruitment and workplace culture.

This report sets out to summarise the key findings of the study, which set out to:

+ Assess the current state of diversity and inclusion in creative agencies in Greater Manchester.

+ Identify opportunities and methods to improve diversity within agency recruitment.

+ Assess any differences between agency policies and in-office policy enforcements, and how to overcome them.

+ Explore whether diversity and inclusion policies extend into the content produced by advertising agencies.

+ Investigate access to education efforts about careers in advertising and the potential impacts of this on diversity and inclusion.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE ADVERTISING INDUSTRY: PRE-REQUISITE TO ASSESSING DIVERSITY PRACTICES

Before assessing the diversity and inclusion practices of Greater Manchester creative agencies, it was important to understand the demographics of the advertising industry in comparison to the UK population.

All data on UK advertising agency demographics is taken from the All In report, commissioned by the Advertising Agency in 2021.[2] All data on Greater Manchester advertising agency demographics are taken from research undertaken by the Manchester Publicity Association (MPA) in 2019.[10] This research is currently unpublished, but can be requested from them directly. Unless stated otherwise, UK population statistics are sourced from the 2021 census in England and Wales.[11]
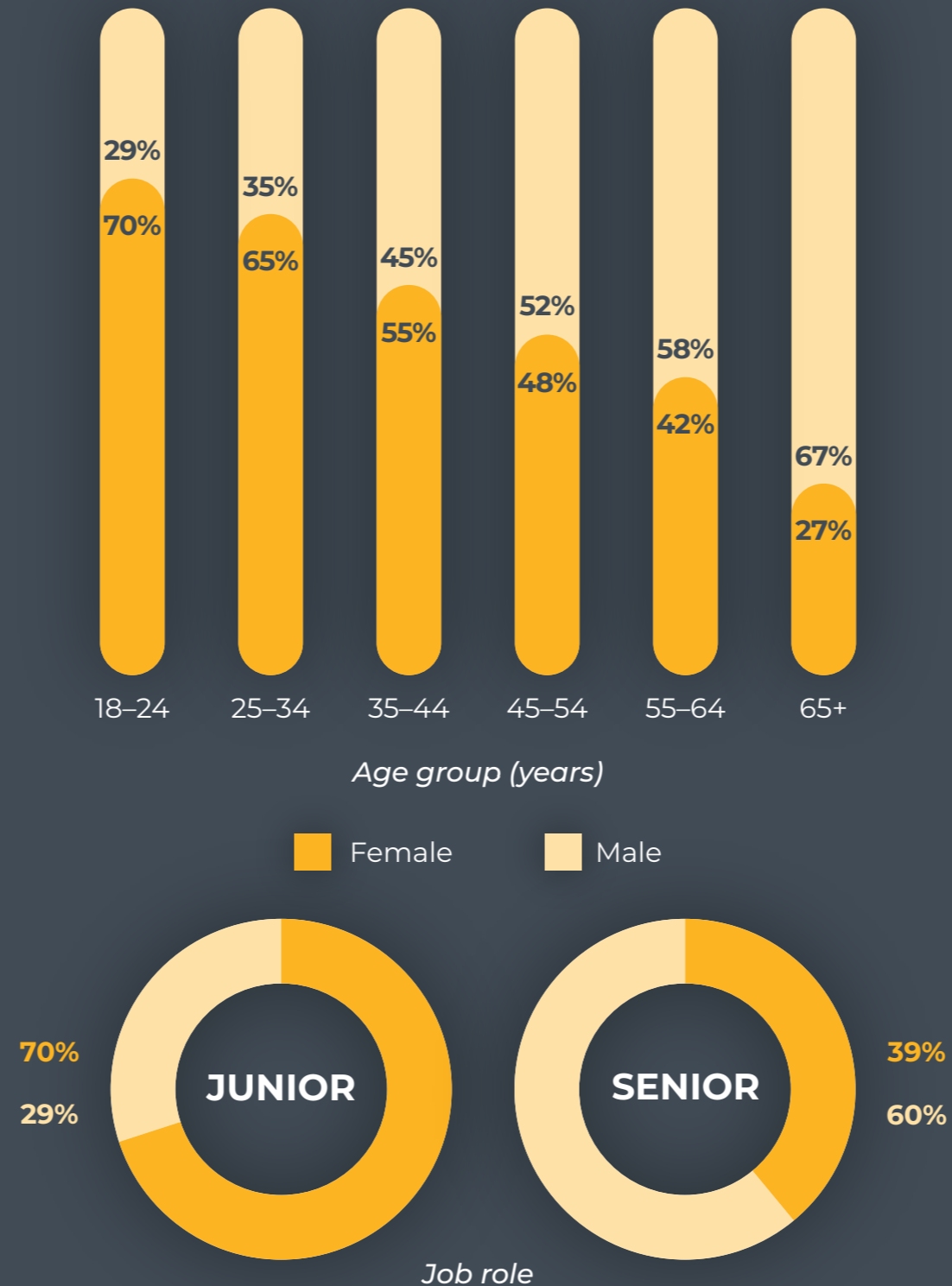
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AGE AND GENDER

39% of senior roles belong to women, in comparison to 60% of senior roles belonging to men (figure 1).[2] In addition to occupying a smaller proportion of senior roles, 53% of women in the industry felt taking maternity leave had disadvantaged their career,[2] and 65% of women surveyed in Greater Manchester reported experiencing workplace discrimination due to their gender.[10]

Furthermore, younger age groups have largely dominated the industry, with 25–34 year olds making up 23% and 44% of the UK population and UK advertising industry, respectively.[2]

Almost 75% of respondents fell between the ages of 24 and 44, making over 55s underrepresented in the industry as a whole, with 55–64 year olds making up 17% and 4% of the UK population and UK advertising industry respectively.[2] Of these respondents, 13% of over 55s reported age discrimination in the workplace.[2]

Figure 1: Representation of genders in the UK advertising industry by age group and job role.

18–24	29% / 70%
25–34	35% / 65%
35–44	45% / 55%
45–54	52% / 48%
55–64	58% / 42%
65+	67% / 27%

Age group (years)

■ Female   ■ Male

JUNIOR: 70% / 29%

SENIOR: 39% / 60%

Job role

Note: UK population data is from the All In report.[2]

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ETHNICITY

Overall, ethnic minorities made up 16% of the UK advertising industry employees, [2] the same proportion as the UK population overall. Yet, a pay gap of 11% from ethnic minority employees to White employees was observed.[2] Additionally, White people in CEO or CFO positions (C-Suite roles) were overrepresented, as were the Mixed ethnic group, with Black and Asian people being underrepresented in C-Suite roles (Figure 2).[2]

*Figure 2: The representation of ethnic groups in the UK advertising industry*
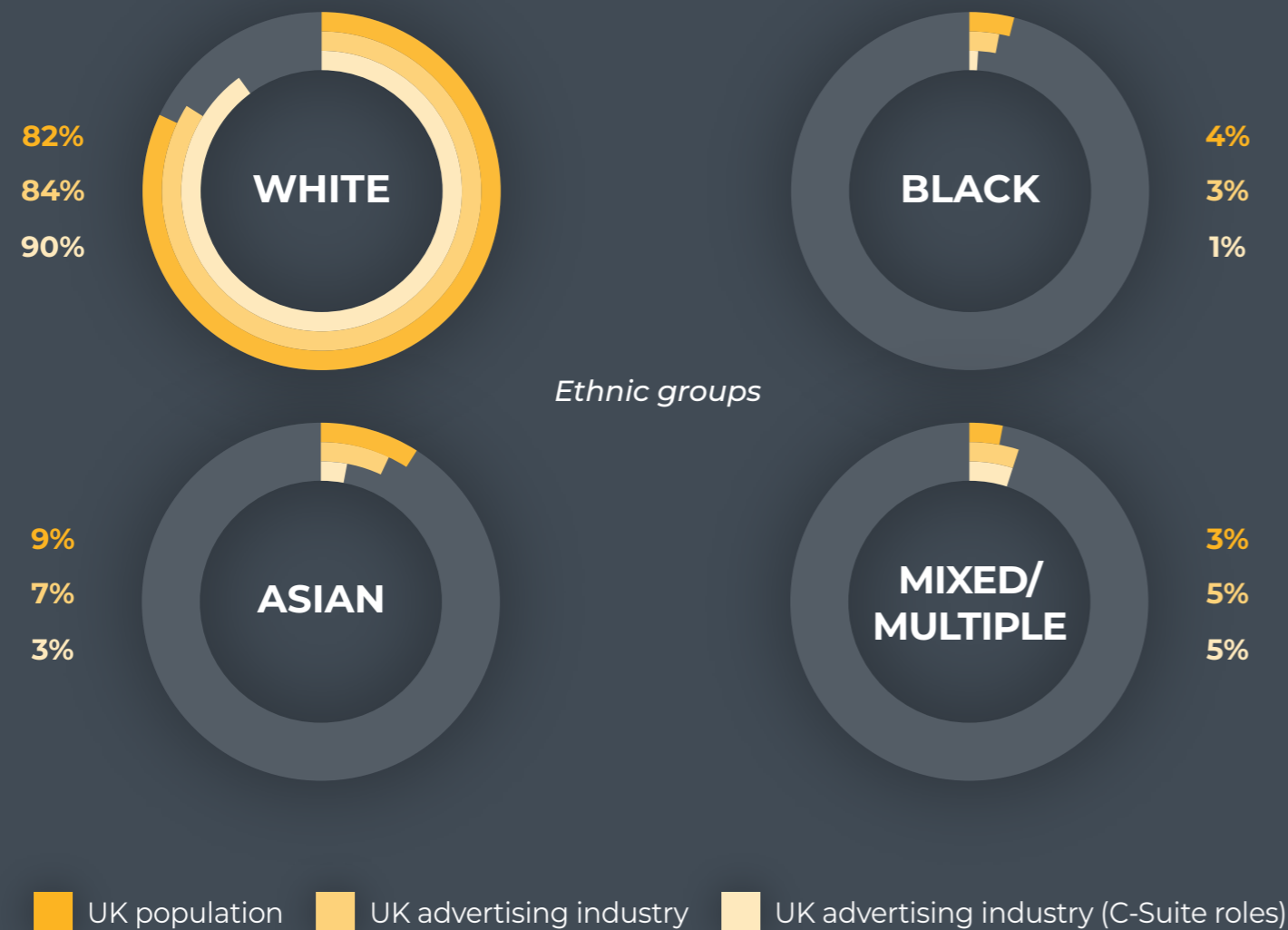
EDUCATION BACKGROUND

The UK advertising industry is overrepresented with employees from a fee-paying educational and university background.[2] In Greater Manchester, 82% of people working in the creative advertising industry are from a graduate background.

Figure 3: The representation of social classes in the UK advertising industry and Greater Manchester advertising industry
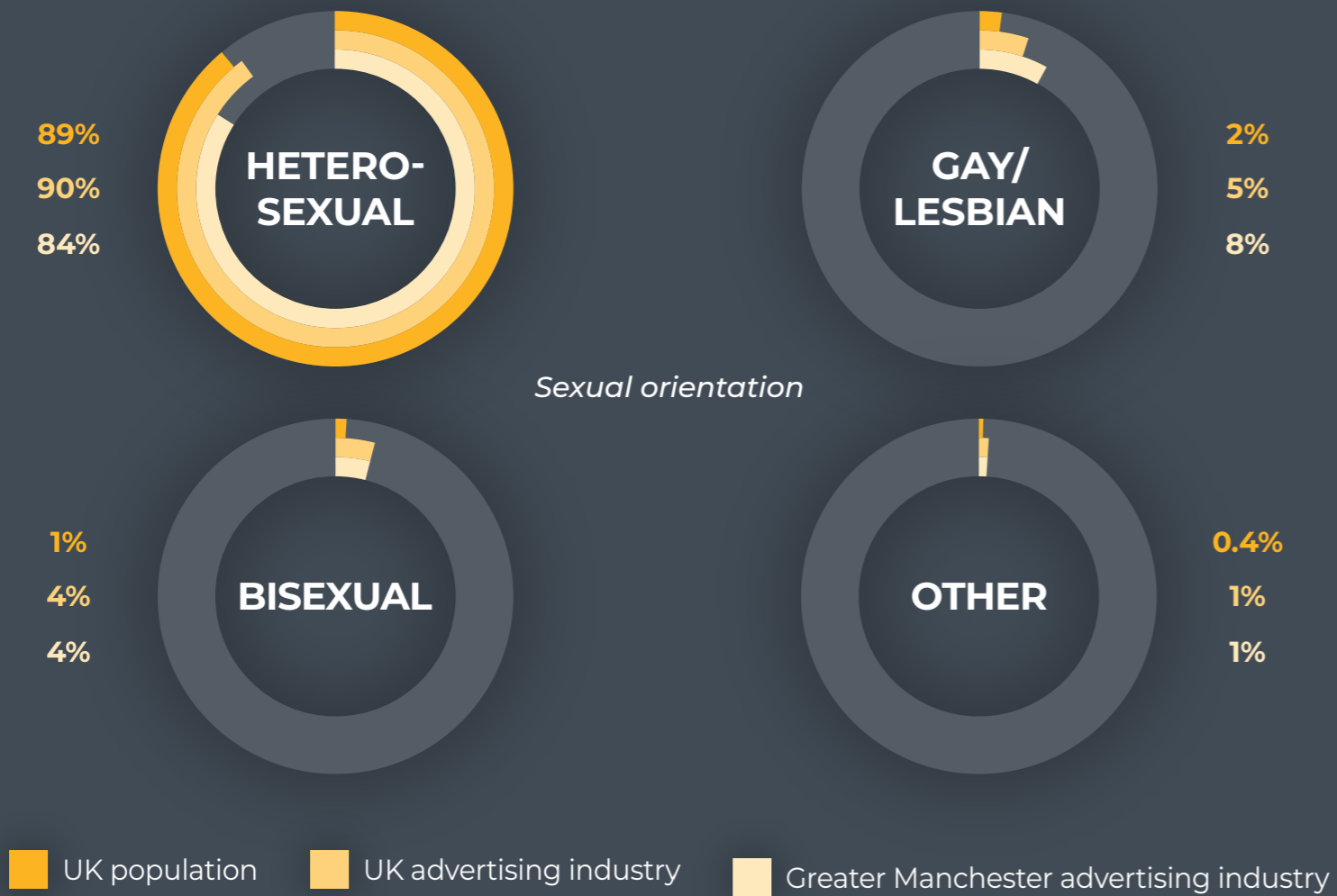
WHITE
82%
84%
90%

BLACK
4%
3%
1%

Ethnic groups

ASIAN
9%
7%
3%

MIXED/ MULTIPLE
3%
5%
5%

OBTAINED DEGREE
48%
72%
72%
82%

ATTENDED FEE PAYING SCHOOL
8%
20%
28%

■ UK population   ■ UK advertising industry   ■ UK advertising industry (C-Suite roles)

■ Greater Manchester advertising industry

Note: UK population data is from the All In report.[2]

■ UK population   ■ UK advertising industry   ■ UK advertising industry (C-Suite roles)
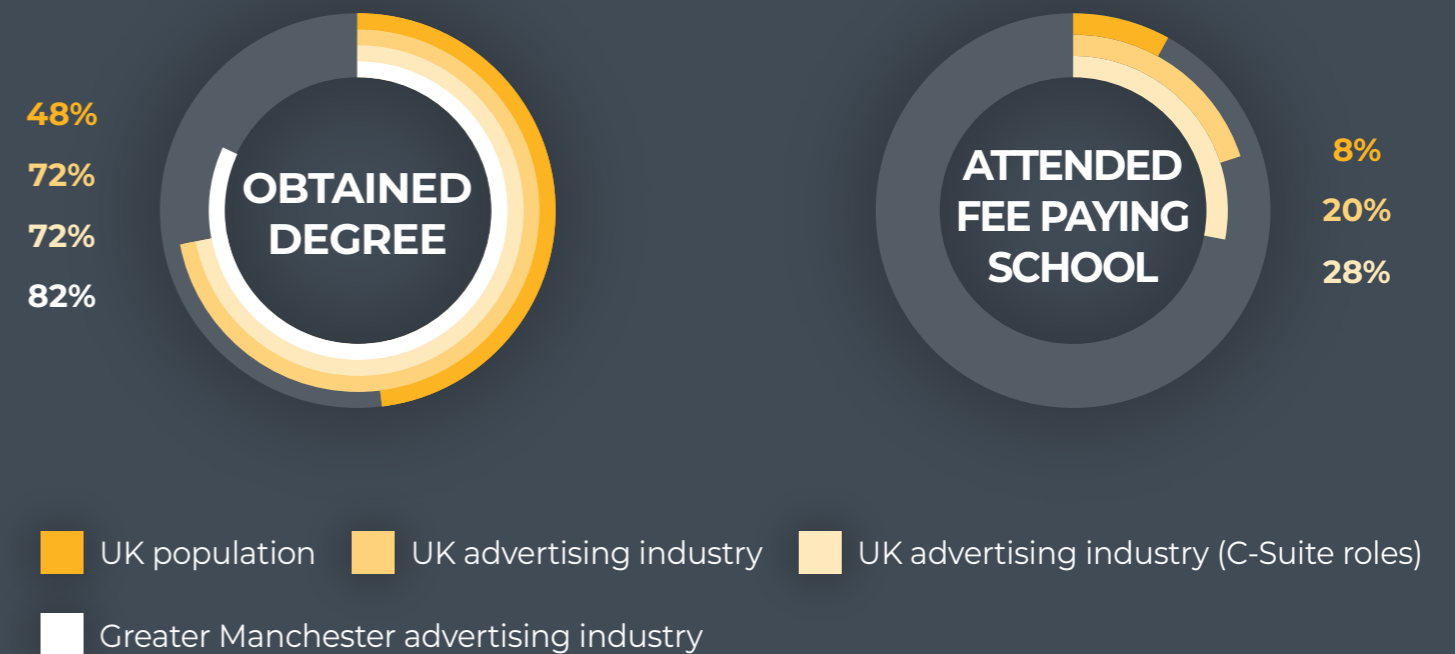
Note: UK population data is from the 2021 Census, released in November 2022.[12]

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

According to the respondents of the All In survey, LGBTQ+ representation is higher in the UK advertising industry than that of the UK population.[2] Despite overrepresentation in the industry itself, 38% of LGBTQ+ employees feel underrepresented in senior job roles.[2] In the UK advertising industry, up to 10% of respondents identified as LGBTQ+ (figure 4).[2] When focusing on Greater Manchester alone, this number increased to 13%. A total of 3% of respondents in Greater Manchester preferred not to disclose their sexuality.[10]

Figure 4: The representation of sexual orientation categories in the UK advertising industry and Greater Manchester advertising industry

89%
90%
84%

HETERO-SEXUAL

2%
5%
8%

GAY/LESBIAN

Sexual orientation

1%
4%
4%

BISEXUAL

0.4%
1%
1%

OTHER

■ UK population   ■ UK advertising industry   ■ Greater Manchester advertising industry

Note: UK population data is from the 2021 Census, released in January 2023.[13]

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DISABILITY

The representation of people with disabilities in the UK advertising industry in general is low, as people with disabilities make up 14% and 9% of the UK population and UK advertising industry respectively (figure 5).[2] This number decreases even further when focusing on Greater Manchester. In the Greater Manchester advertising industry, people with disabilities make up just 7% of employees.[10]

Figure 5: The representation of disability in the UK advertising industry and Greater Manchester advertising industry
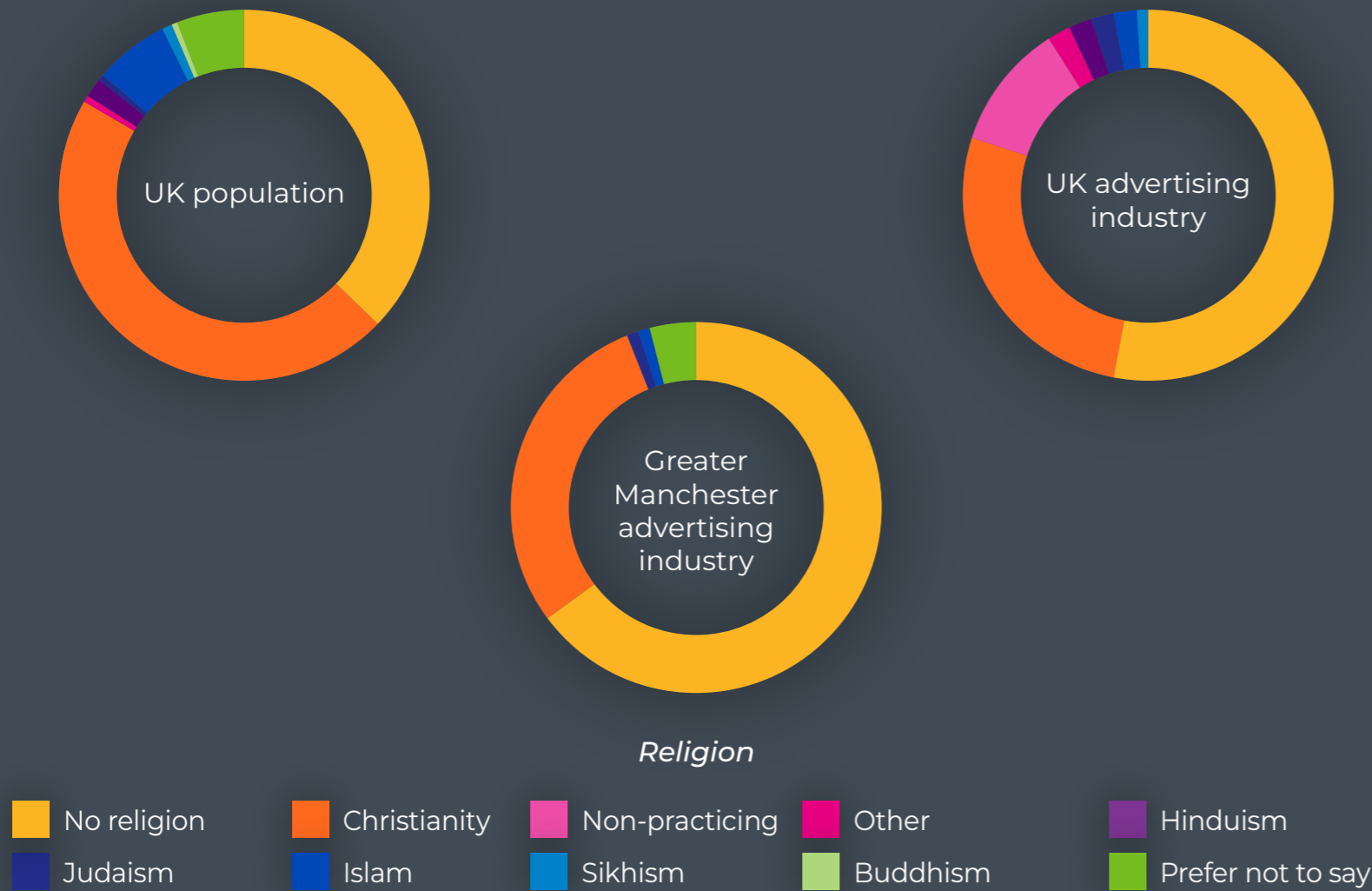

UK population	UK advertising industry	Greater Manchester advertising industry
18%	**9%**	**7%**

People with disabilities
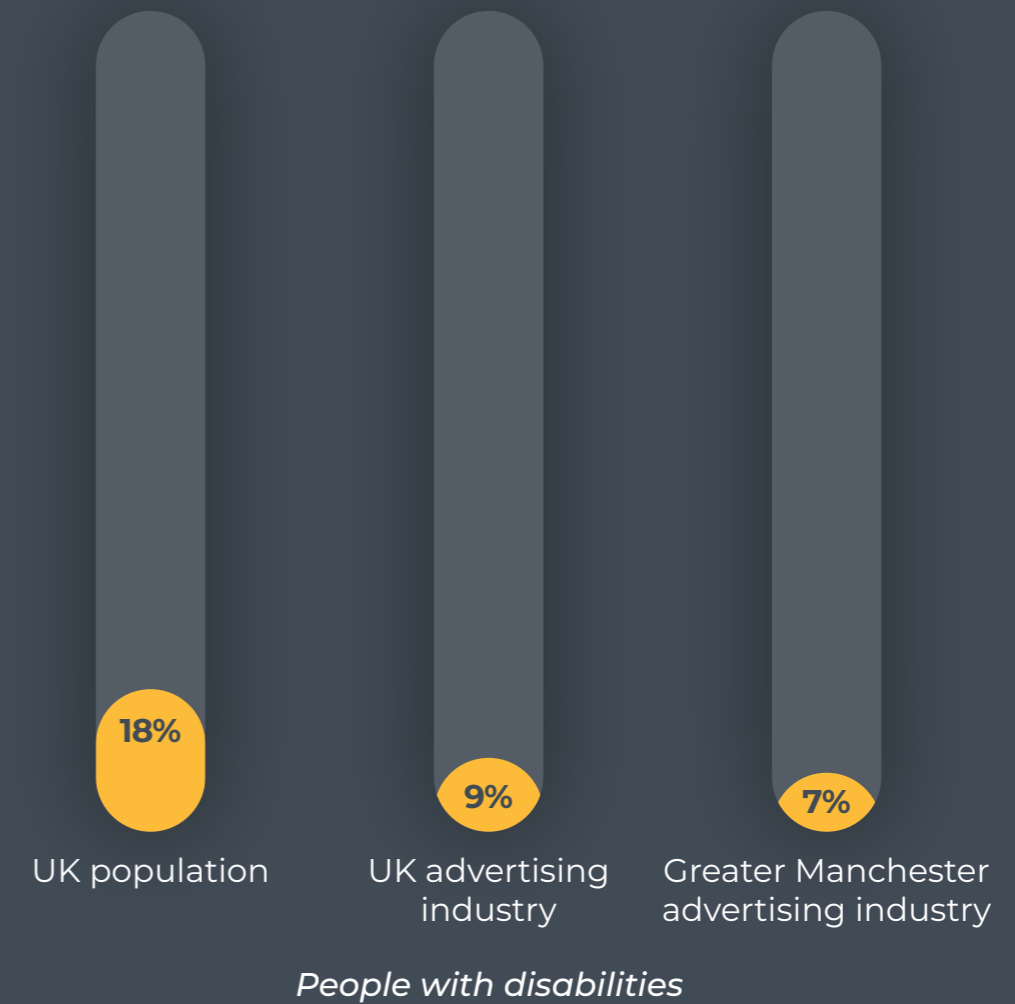
Note: UK population data is from the 2021 Census, released in January 2023.[14]

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RELIGION

In the UK advertising industry, people with no religion are drastically overrepresented in comparison to UK population statistics[2,15] (figure 6). This overrepresentation increases significantly when focusing on the Greater Manchester advertising industry, with 65% of employees having no religion. People who follow Christianity and Islam were also underrepresented in the industry as a whole.[2]

OVERVIEW

Overall, several primary groups were found to be underrepresented in both the UK and Greater Manchester advertising industry. Figure 7 gives a summary of the groups who are underrepresented.

*Figure 6: The representation of religion in the UK advertising industry and Greater Manchester advertising industry*

Religion

- No religion
- Christianity
- Non-practicing
- Other
- Hinduism
- Judaism
- Islam
- Sikhism
- Buddhism
- Prefer not to say

Figure 7: Summary of underrepresented groups in the UK and Greater Manchester advertising industry

Population groups

- UK advertising industry
- Greater Manchester advertising industry

Note: UK population data is from the 2021 Census, released in November 2022.[15]
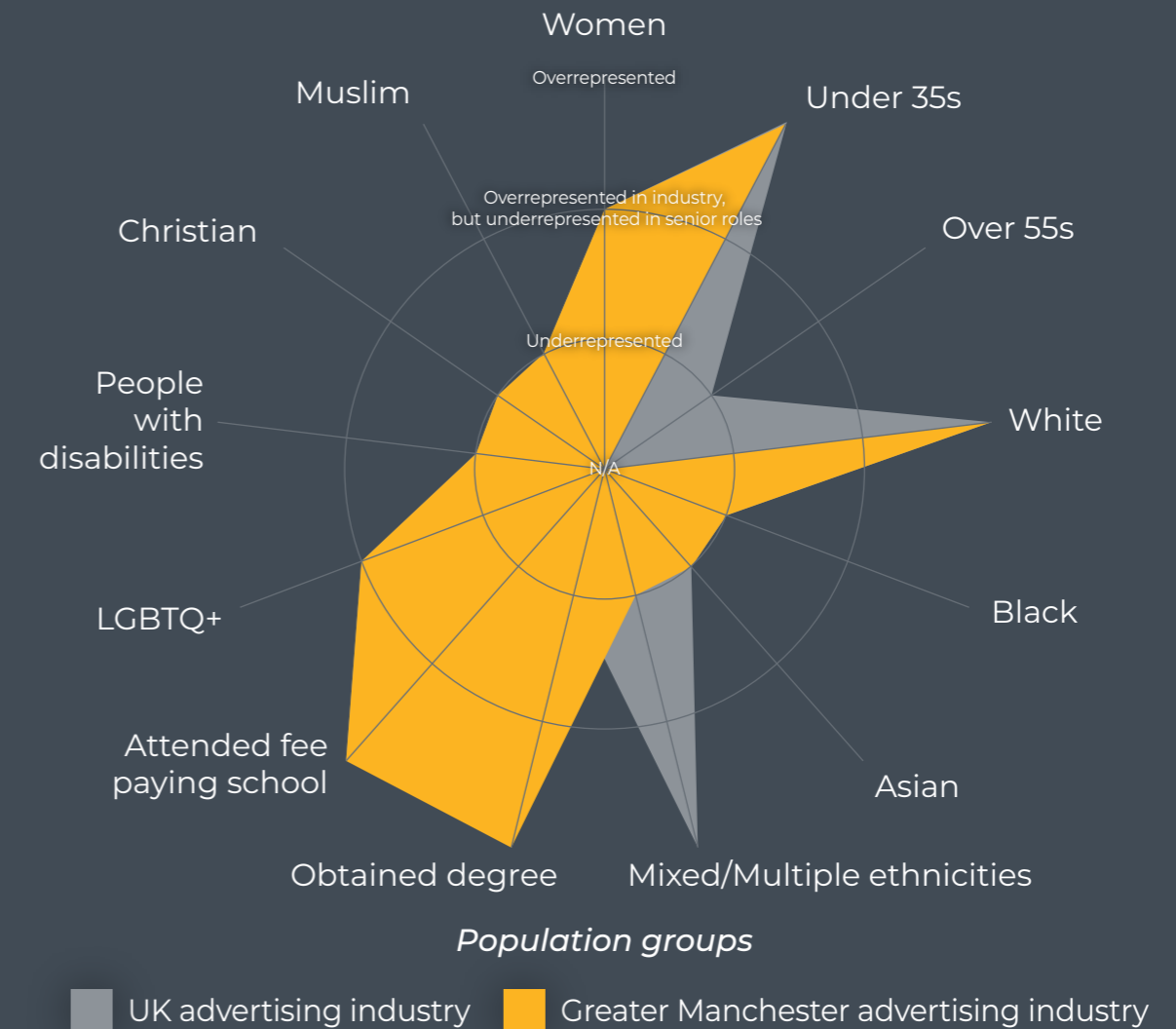
VOICES FROM
THE INDUSTRY

We wanted to find out how people in the industry saw the state of diversity and inclusion in Greater Manchester advertising agencies.

So, we conducted one-to-one interviews and one focus group, engaging a total of 17 participants. A thematic analysis was then undertaken, allowing for identification of key similarities and differences in participant responses. See below for the demographics of the participants.
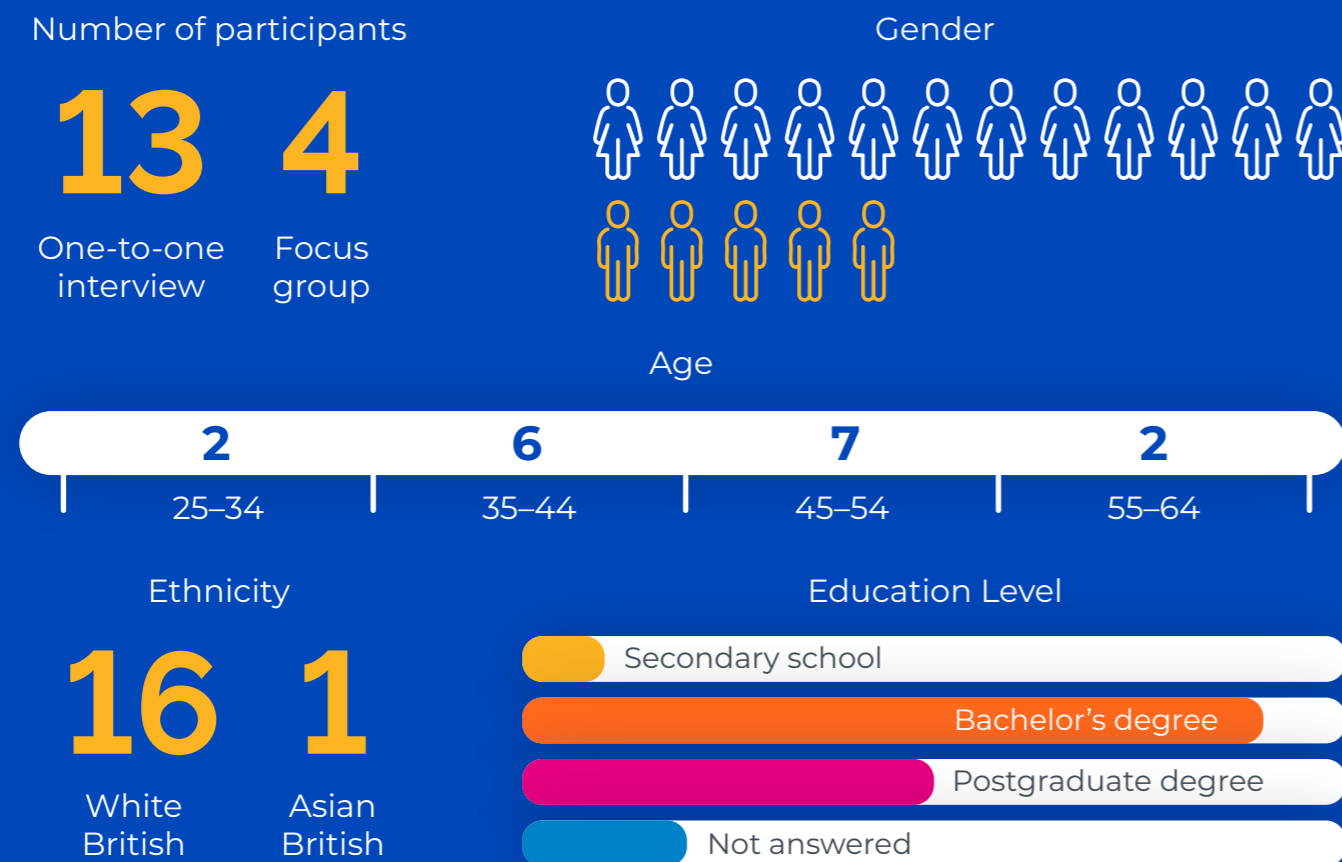
Research findings were divided up into four categories:

1 Industry employee perceptions of diversity and inclusion

2 The current state of diversity and inclusion in the industry

3 Reasons for the lack of diversity and inclusion

4 Methods of improving diversity and inclusion

Number of participants

13 One-to-one interview

4 Focus group

Gender

Age

2	6	7	2
25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64

Ethnicity

16 White British

1 Asian British

Education Level

- Secondary school
- Bachelor's degree
- Postgraduate degree
- Not answered

Research Finding 1

INDUSTRY EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

The vast majority of participants verified that diverse representation made for a better workplace culture and improved content, showing the need for diversity within the advertising industry.

Upon reflecting on past personal experiences of diversity and inclusion, many of the participants explained that work from as little as 10 years ago is already completely outdated and wouldn't be accepted in the industry now.

Comparing these experiences with those of today, participants agreed that diversity and inclusion is now a more openly discussed topic, with more diverse representation in content to meet increasing expectations from brands and consumers.

Yet, a number of participants felt that diversity and inclusion initiatives are not doing enough to increase representation in the industry, and that discrimination is still very much a challenge yet to be addressed. Participants also highlighted a perceived difference between the representation in northern agencies in comparison to southern agencies.

"The work you get out of a team is as diverse as what you put in, and so if you lack diversity in the makeup of your team, you are narrowing down the sources of inspiration."

Female, 35–44 years

"Looking back at what your 8pm Saturday night ad roll looked like 10 years ago... the representation now is a beautiful thing to see."

Female, 45–54 years

" We're in a transitionary phase of acceptance and building of what diversity and inclusion means. There's a huge cultural mindset shift."

Female, 45–54 years

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Research Finding 2

CURRENT STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

Participants were asked to describe the representation within their own companies. Agency employees tended to be of a similar demographic: employees were White, young, able-bodied, and neurotypical; there was little representation of older individuals, different ethnicities, or individuals with disabilities.

Similar to the findings of the secondary research, representation of gay and lesbian employees was high. Other sexualities, however, were typically underrepresented. Participant reports also matched the findings of the secondary research, as agencies appeared to have equal numbers of male and female employees — yet the number of women in senior roles was significantly less.

Participants were then asked about the existing diversity and inclusion policies within their agencies, to which many participants revealed that no such policies exist. Those who reported having policies in place suggested that it would make no difference to workplace culture or recruitment practices, and that highlighting 'diverse' individuals could do more harm than good.

"There's a good gender mix, a split between male and female roles generally, but at senior level we're very male dominated."

Female 45–54 years

"I think it's unnecessary and dangerous... I think you can start pinpointing for things that you don't need to."

Female, 25–34 years

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Research Finding 3

REASONS FOR THE LACK OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

First and foremost, participants identified a lack of awareness as a reason for the underrepresentation of a diverse range of groups in the advertising industry. This included a lack of awareness from industry professionals with regard to current levels of underrepresentation or the groups that are classed as diverse, and also from individuals in these groups themselves — stating that a lack of awareness of opportunities could contribute to underrepresentation in the industry.

When asked why industry diversity and inclusion issues were not being addressed, participants described that industry professionals may feel as if they are not contributing to the problem by not overtly displaying any biases or prejudices against different groups.

Some participants described that underrepresentation in the industry may also be the result of a cyclical narrative in which a lack of diversity amongst agency employees presents as a barrier to candidates wanting to join the industry — thus limiting any hiring of a more diverse range of candidates..

Further issues with recruitment processes were also highlighted. Current recruitment strategies were said to target young, university-educated individuals, with some individuals being rejected due to their surname, address, or gender indicating a diverse background. Such recruitment strategies have remained the same for long periods of time, resulting in the same candidate pool being hired. When asked whether they would hire someone based on their experience and life opportunities, or candidates from diverse backgrounds with less experience, the majority of participants said the former. Although sharing a desire to increase diversity, participants agreed that the 'best' person for the job (e.g., those with more experience) was always the chosen candidate, rather than giving someone with less experience an opportunity, thus limiting diverse representation.

Another factor that contributed to the lack of diversity in the industry was agency size, as larger agencies were identified as having the time and resources to create detailed policies and recruit a diverse range of candidates. However, it was also argued that smaller agencies represent a more close-knit culture and therefore create a more inclusive work environment.

Participants also displayed strong opinions towards the education system and its lack of encouragement for children going into the industry. Only one participant had personally experienced the mentioning of careers in advertising throughout education.

"I think, in my experience, amongst Afro-Caribbean young people, they simply don't know that advertising exists."
Female, 55–64 years

"[They think] if they don't actively discriminate against anybody, they aren't doing anything wrong. But by being an advocate, they could be part of the solution."
Female 35–44 years

"It becomes challenging when certain groups haven't had the opportunity to become the best person for the job. How do you break that cycle?"
Male 35–44 years

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Research Finding 4

METHODS OF IMPROVING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Many of the participants suggested that interacting with wider industry initiatives was a good way of improving diversity and inclusion within agencies. Suggested methods included:

+ Partnering with external organisations and providing staff training.
+ Interacting with diverse communities through projects and programmes.
+ Facilitating diversity and inclusion specialist talks and workshops.

When asked about ways to improve inclusivity in the workplace environment, participants suggested that the most important factor was a feeling of openness and awareness of others' backgrounds.

Recruitment processes were also discussed as an area for improvement, with suggestions including reassessing job descriptions, focusing on behaviour and personality rather than skillset and experience, and using organisations working with diverse groups to recruit.

In terms of education, it was suggested that programmes should be developed with the aim of providing children with valuable experience in the advertising industry. Participants concluded that these programmes should be introduced in either primary or secondary school, as the earlier careers options are available to them, the more likely they will consider choosing that career path.

Final improvements regarded the sincerity of diversity initiatives within a company. Although genuine reasons were preferred, some participants felt that recent advances from brands and agencies were based on disingenuous reasonings. Despite this, some participants felt that disingenuous reasoning for improvement was still a better alternative to no improvement at all.

"We want to make sure everybody feels safe when they come to work, fully welcomed, and encouraged to be as open and honest with us as they can be."

Male 35–44 years

"It's not actually essential that somebody has a degree to work in our environment. It is important that they have good communication skills or good creative abilities."

Female 45–54 years

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KEY **FINDINGS**

ESTABLISHING THE CURRENT SITUATION AND REASONS FOR THE FINDINGS

So, what is currently preventing agencies in Greater Manchester from having a diverse workforce? This study found the following factors to be substantial contributors to the lack of diversity within the creative advertising industry.

+ A lack of consistent definitions of diversity and inclusion, and a lack of understanding as to who are considered to be diverse groups.

+ An industry-wide lack of understanding of the benefits of a diverse workforce.

+ Smaller agencies with less funding and flexibility in their recruitment needs.

+ Recruitment processes that are outdated and inflexible.

+ Education systems lacking in opportunities to learn more about the industry.

+ A lack of enforced diversity and inclusion policies within agencies.

+ No formal collection of employee demographics data, and thus factors such as religion, socioeconomic background, and neurodiversity are neglected.

IDENTIFYING METHODS OF IMPROVING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Throughout the discussions in the focus groups and interviews, several key initiatives were suggested by participants for improving the lack of diversity and inclusion within the industry. The suggestions are as follows.

+ Agencies must interact with industry and external organisations that strive to improve diversity and inclusion.

+ Workplace culture and environment must be uplifted to be more inclusive.

+ Recruitment strategies should be adapted to increase hiring of diverse talent.

+ Education opportunities should be developed and presented to children early on in their education pathways.

+ Agencies must express genuine reasoning for improving diversity and inclusion.

ARE THERE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN POLICY AND IN-OFFICE ENFORCEMENT?

Many of the agencies that participated in this study were lacking diversity and inclusion policies, which make identifying any enforcement of such policies a challenge. The agencies that did have diversity and inclusion policies either had generic policies that included a diversity statement, or they had minimal policies that were never revisited after their creation. These results aligned with the secondary research — there is an absence of such enforced initiatives within the industry.

DOES AGENCY POLICY EXTEND INTO AGENCY CONTENT?

It was challenging to meet this research objective as there was a substantial lack of diversity and inclusion policies in place. However, employees from agencies without diversity and inclusion policies did feel that such policies would impact on content positively.

ARE ADVERTISING INDUSTRY CAREERS MENTIONED THROUGHOUT EDUCATION?

These results indicate that creative industries are insufficiently mentioned throughout education, and that the majority of participants had never heard of the industry before working in it. If children aren't educated on the opportunities offered by the industry, it is only the children who have informal links to the industry who tend to join — with these children being typically of a White and middle-class background, thus continuing the lack of diverse representation.

CLEAR DEFINITIONS, POLICIES, AND REPRESENTATION:
KEYS TO IMPACTFUL DIVERSITY INITIATIVES

For diversity and inclusion initiatives to be truly impactful, company policies must reflect actionable aims that align with the company's definitions of these terms. Without a thorough understanding of what it means for a company to be both diverse and inclusive, companies will fail to create successful initiatives and facilitate true representation in both their internal teams and their outputs. Although diversity and inclusion are often intertwined, they are not interchangeable terms. COUCH Health defines diversity and inclusion in the following ways:

DIVERSITY
The understanding that every individual is unique based on their psychological, physical, and social differences, and that these differences bring a positive value.

INCLUSION
The creation of environments in which any person or group can feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued without being discriminated against because of their characteristics.

On top of this, companies must also understand which groups to include in their initiatives. For example, some groups are commonly not considered to be underrepresented and are therefore left out of any plans to improve diversity and inclusion, including women, seniors, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, LGBTQ+ individuals, those with disabilities, neurodiverse individuals, and religious groups.

Further to this, research shows that there is significant benefit to having a diverse team, yet the positives of diverse representation can be poorly understood by employers.[10] First and foremost, a diverse workforce provides a wealth of skillsets, levels of expertise, opinions, and perspectives — aptly suited to the creation of 'productive tension' to fuel creative ideas and problem solving.[16] Studies have shown that companies with diverse representation at board level have up to 19% higher revenues than their competitors.[17]
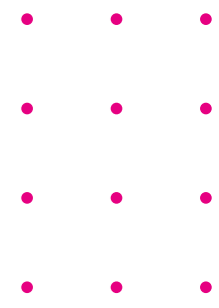
Further, companies with clear diversity within their team are significantly more attractive to potential job applicants,[18] and as such this helps drive appeal for team expansion. Finally, diverse representation can positively influence consumer behaviour by driving purchase decisions.[19] However, this change is only significant when company values toward diverse representation are perceived as genuine by consumers.[20]

Despite the numerous proven benefits of a diverse team, agencies in Greater Manchester are slow to make crucial changes to allow for more diversity and inclusivity within their companies. Although the findings of this study highlight the remaining work to be done by the advertising industry, several methods of improving diversity and inclusion were also identified. It is hoped that the findings of this study can be built on to create a more representative industry in the future.
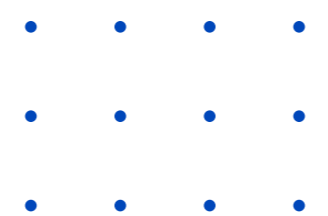
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