THE HOPE GAP

How businesses, marketers and media can create social acceptance in 2025

THE UNMISTAKABLES®

Asad Dhunna, founder and CEO
The Unmistakables

Executive summary

This paper is a collaborative effort between The Unmistakables, business leaders and ED&I practitioners across sectors to address 'The Hope Gap.' We define this as the gap between the promise of social acceptance we know is possible in the future, and the reality of what we see happening in our lifetimes.
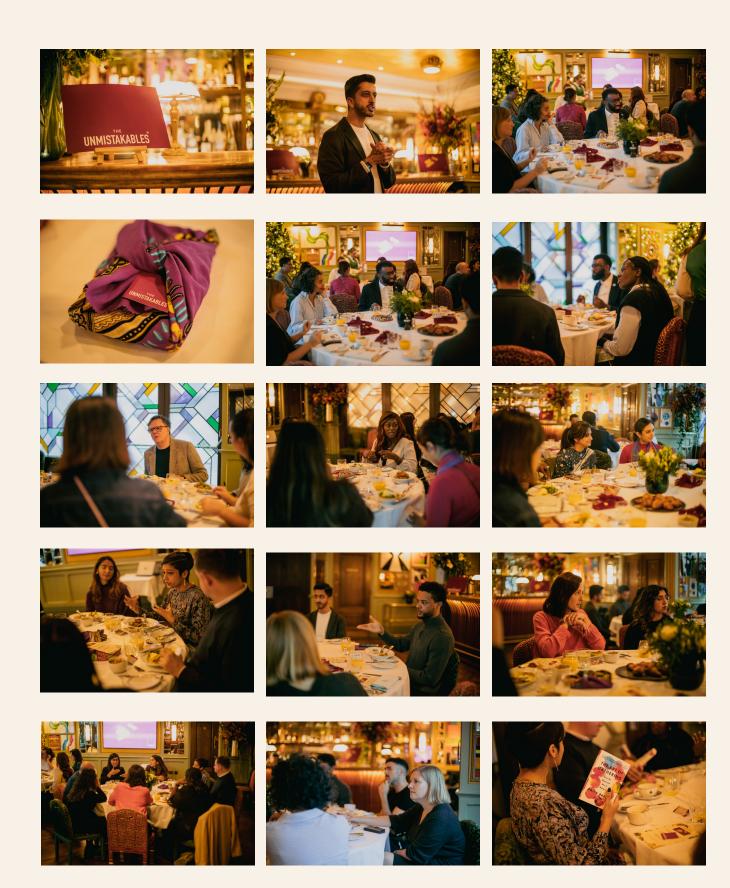
We have explored The Hope Gap through three lenses: business at large, the marketing and advertising industry, and the media industry. These are all big players in society that shape what we see and how we see ourselves. By bringing together members of all three areas we have sought to co-create a path forward.

Together we have identified ten practical ways to close The Hope Gap across sectors:

1. **Question what people know and respond accordingly**
2. **Know what it takes to be proactive**
3. **Create long-term strategic frameworks**
4. **Address the marketing industry's reputation issue**
5. **Develop client-agency standards and charters**
6. **Role model inclusive behaviours at leadership levels**
7. **Bespoke the onboarding process**
8. **Reassess the 'attention' business model**
9. **Take a closer look at the norms and power holders**
10. **Amplify positive portrayals to drown out the negativity**

These have all been set out in more detail in this report.

We *hope* you enjoy reading it as much as we have enjoyed co-creating it.

C O N T E N T S

"I hope you're well".
Thousands of emails are sent with this opener every day. But do we really hope the other is well, and is hope something we should be striving for in 2025?

Hope is defined as 'a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen.' And across the country, people are willing for different things to happen on the regular. Whether it's living a healthy life, getting the grades, finding (and thriving in) a job, falling in love, bringing children into and up in the world, buying a home, or enjoying retirement - we all have expectations and desires for our lives.

It appears that our feelings around these expectations are mixed. Health outcomes are impacted by the systemic underfunding of the NHS. Skills taught in schools are not necessarily futureproof for a world of AI. Attainment gaps and pay gaps impact academic and workplace progress. Finding a partner seems increasingly difficult. And rising house prices and the cost of living leaves the opportunity of wealth accumulation and prosperity in the hands of the few.

A quick segway to Greek mythology before we go on. Pandora was given a box by Zeus to punish Prometheus for his rebellion. She opened the box and released the evil within it out into the world, but hope remained inside. From this story, some say that hope can be used for good or evil - it's a powerful ally in difficult times, but can sour if we live in hope of something, and then feel pain when our expectations aren't met in part because we may not have enacted the change ourselves.

A lack of hope is what many of us are grappling with right now. The old world paradigms of pollution, inequality and global power structures are being challenged by transparency, change and deglobalisation. Yet the new world promises of sustainability and equality seem far away. Over the last decade we seem to have made legislative and social progress on social acceptance and are at risk of taking a few steps back.

It is against this backdrop we have a new government in the UK, one whose leader argues that being in service provides the '[precondition for hope](#)'. Politics defines so much of our public discourse, and while there has been some change in 2024, we believe we are seeing a growing 'Hope Gap' that will grow in 2025…unless we do something about it.

The Hope Gap is the gap between the promise of <u>social acceptance</u> we know is possible in the future, and the reality of what we see happening in our lifetimes.

At The Unmistakables, we know that hope is central to what we do. It is the engine of the tireless activists who take to the streets and the corporate advocates pushing for change within institutions. Hope requires us to imagine and go about creating a future with no guarantee that it will occur within our lifetimes. The term 'cathedral thinking' encapsulates this: we plan and work on large-scale projects with long-term goals in mind, with the benefits of these projects primarily going to future generations.

In many ways, those who believe and seek to push for social change are like the architects behind the cathedrals of yore. Our work requires us to be pragmatically optimistic. It requires us to have confidence in a blueprint, or shared vision. And while we know what we're moving away from—social injustice, discrimination, pay gaps, and inequity—we need to be able

A lot of people talk about tolerance, respect, or even celebration when it comes to living amongst people of different backgrounds. We use the term 'acceptance' to refer to a society where people are welcomed as they are regardless of their identity characteristics (gender, ethnicity, disability, religion, socioeconomic status, etc) both on a systemic level, and on an interpersonal one.

There will inevitably be debates about the 'right term' to use - 'tolerance', 'respect', and 'celebration' were all debated as part of writing this paper. We landed on 'acceptance' for two reasons. The first is because it felt pragmatic given the time frame we are writing about. The second is because given the current polarities present in societies, we think this is the most achievable within our lifetime. Systemically, the onus is on institutions and groups who hold the power in society to accept marginalised groups as they are, rather than fearing their difference

to see and share the specific vision of what we are working toward.

While we've broken ground and built the foundations of our cathedral, there is still a long way to go. And we're not content to wait another hundred years to see the building take shape.

In this paper, you will read our 'state of the nation' reviews and

and pushing them to integrate in specific and demeaning ways. Interpersonally, knowing that people are complex and that holding a particular characteristic doesn't preclude us from being part of a wider societal issue (e.g. it's possible for women to be misogynistic), everyone must take individual responsibility for ensuring that we are an accepting society.'

our provocations for what it will take to make a difference in our lifetimes across three key sectors that have a large role in shaping social progress. These are:

- **BUSINESS AT LARGE** – as places where many of us spend the majority of our time, which shape the markets that we buy from, and that lobby governments.

- **THE MARKETING & ADVERTISING INDUSTRY** – as an ecosystem that creates, enforces, and can change societal norms on everything from what defines 'beauty' through to gender roles and expectations in the home.

- **THE MEDIA INDUSTRY** – as the gatekeepers of what we see on screens big and small…and as influencers of what we understand to be the current state of society.

At the Unmistakables, we believe that rigorous debate makes us stronger, and that equitable co-creation is the way to land on sustainable solutions. So in November 2024, we invited a group of DEI practitioners and business leaders from the above industries to share ideas and debate on the state of hope. We focused our discussion on what it will practically take to accelerate social progress in our lifetimes. At the end of each chapter, you'll find some of the practical solutions we agreed were part of the way forward.

CHAPTER

THE HOPE

GAP BUSINESS

01

By Simone Marquis and Amani Saeed

Imagine you're a manager who, for the last six months, has been focusing on building a product development team to power the organisation's next innovation bet. The company doesn't have to work on its employer value proposition and brand, because word of mouth is speaking for itself. This is a company which genuinely values the texture and breadth of perspectives and backgrounds that people can bring -- so accessing talent from the widest available pool is no issue. People want to come and be part of it.

And when they arrive in the team, the respect is automatic. You know this because your team tells you through the engagement survey. You can see it in meetings, too – questions are abundant, people feel free to challenge perspectives in a considerate way, and there is an atmosphere of fun and care, as well as performance-orientation. As a manager, this gives you joy and fulfilment; you're building a brilliant team who are rallied around the goal, who work collaboratively to create and challenge each other to get to an optimal result.

There is so much cultural intelligence in the team that it feels easy to get along - conversations about a weekend stag do, a henna party, caring responsibilities, and the upkeep of braids are all commonplace. The rewards of working in this way are felt by everyone: the team, who are building friend-ship as well as colleague-ship. Customers, who are experiencing high quality product innovation. Your organisation, whose leaders know that high engagement and inclusion leads to better performance, greater innovation, and distinctiveness in the market.

Just how far away are we from this world?

The impact of business on social acceptance is immense. Whether it's a start-up or a FTSE company, they are the places where we spend the majority of our time, which shape the

products and the markets that we buy from, and that lobby governments for legislative change. They have the power to shape policies and practices that mean that new fathers can take a meaningful amount of parental leave, or restrict hybrid working practices that end up being punitive to people with caring responsibilities. They have the capital to invest in and design products, whether these are smartphones with better accessibility features, or batteries that require rare minerals and the use of child labour in order to be profitable. And they have the lobbying power to push for better protections for safeguarding children on social media, or for loosening the definitions of free speech.

However, our hope for what business could do is not new. It's the same, straightforward thing unions, activists, networks, colleagues, and leaders have been asking for for decades: create and maintain equity in power, pay, and opportunity for all colleagues, from facilities to the apprentices and grads, to the middle managers to the board members. Ensure the workforce is intentionally representative, whether that is of the national or local population. Make conversations about embedding equity a standard part of ordinary meetings and product design processes rather than being an afterthought or 'nice to have.'

Ultimately, putting good practice into actual practice is not a 'commitment'; it could be the norm, and expected as part of good organisational leadership. So let's look at the current state of business when it comes to driving social acceptance.

Businesses as incubators of inclusive cultures

We often point to the more nebulous concept of 'an inclusive culture' as a crucial factor in social acceptance, both in terms of how colleagues in a business are treated, and in terms of the kinds of outputs businesses create. However, DEI is hugely process-driven. There are hard and fast rules, grounded in behavioural science and project management. Almost all of these are straightforward, such as:

- **Having consistent processes that bake DEI considerations in as early and regularly as possible. This means really thinking about the outcomes that we are trying to achieve, considering who will be positively impacted and who could be left behind. This could be about who we attract with a job description, the internal policies we write, or a product or service that we develop.**
- **Testing our thinking and assumptions with a diverse set of stakeholders–and making the time to meaningfully consider and incorporate their feedback.**
- **Planning sufficiently so that we have time to think and debate, as biases are more prone to kick in when work moves quickly.**

While the other parts of shaping an inclusive culture are more complex, such as creating psychologically safe spaces for colleagues to share honest opinions, these are also things that can be helped through proper processes. For example, we advise our client partners to:

- create and use ground rules to set the tone for meetings, particularly ones where healthy debate will be encouraged
- help people to improve their emotional and cultural intelligence through repeated and dedicated learning opportunities
- incorporate nudge-style good practice prompts when performance reviews come around to avoid the [common pitfalls marginalised groups face](#) when receiving feedback
- invest in line manager capability building, recognising the more exaggerated impact a line manager has on the overall experience of individual and team inclusion.

These are just a few examples, all of which are tried, tested, and discussed by the likes of credible sources: the Harvard Business Review, the Business and Insights Unit, etc.

However, the hope gap for businesses is simple. We know what we should be doing– we're just not doing it.

Take a commonplace example where business leadership and HR continue to make a choice that is at odds with equity: asking women who have been sexually harassed at work to sign an NDA as they leave.

There is only one reason to do this. It's to protect the harasser–usually a man, who is quietly allowed to slip out the door with his pension and bonus intact – and the reputation of the company. The equitable thing to do would be to fire the harasser, reinforcing a zero-tolerance approach that companies so often have on paper but rarely seem to put into practice.

Sadly, we don't need to look very far to find examples. In 2024 alone, there have been a multitude of cases exposing the uses of NDAs for this sinister purpose. It has also been the year that the UK government **refused to ban** the use of NDAs in all harassment cases in the financial services sector. And, at time of writing, we are learning about the horrors, not so much hidden, but suppressed and silenced, during **Al-Fayed's Harrods reign**.

Here's another measurable example that gets more boardroom airtime: pay gap reporting, whether this is on gender, ethnicity, disability, or another characteristic. There are some tried and tested interventions to closing these kinds of gaps, reinforced by reputable bodies such as the UN, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and multiple national governments. And yet no FTSE100 companies have managed to achieve gender pay parity. Instead, the focus is on reporting, which follows a predictable format: why the company hasn't managed to improve over the past year, downfaced comms about wanting to do better, reaffirming a 'commitment' to change.

Here's a question: instead of letting pay gap reporting fall into a corporate Communications vacuum, what would happen if companies focused their energy, effort, and resources on actually implementing equitable pay methodologies? Or implementing any of the other tried and tested interventions that result in actual impact?
Here's the answer: we'd start to close the hope gap. So here are a few things we think we'd see in a business that is not just 'committed' to DEI, but is actively driving social acceptance.

Rebalancing power

Because of the geo-social-political-economic power structures that have coded how organisations are wired today, 'equity in power' feels like an unattainable, utopic aspiration. But rebalancing power looks like the rigorous assessment of who is round the table in decision making roles. For too long, the focus has been on building up the entry level 'diverse' talent pipeline. But representation needs to exist at the top, with real power to have voice, to shape and create, and to make strategic and operational decisions.

However, as the **Parker Review 2024** demonstrates, the tide is turning. Senior level appointments in the UK have more ethnic representation than ever before. This is of course because race & ethnicity has had the spotlight on it, particularly following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. There is more to do across the broad spectrum of representation in areas such as socio-economics and disability, too.

At the same time, power is rebalancing in the transparency that platforms like TikTok create through showcasing the reality of working cultures and conditions. Where the power once lay solely in the corner office, it now starts in corners of the internet.

Pay progress

Gender Pay Gap Reporting becoming mandatory in the 2010s has held UK businesses to account for tracking, highlighting, and taking action on equal pay (across the binary of men and women). But despite progress, the **gap is set to close in 130+ years globally** and will take at least 20 years in the UK alone, according to our current trajectory.

The likely introduction of mandatory reporting of ethnicity and disability pay gaps is certain only to highlight what is already hypothesised - that there are significant collective business challenges around pay equity. When the effort is deployed more into addressing the gaps than reporting (or justifying) them, we will start to genuinely address the systemic inequities that value 'some people' as being worth more than others.

Give 'best for the job' a rest

Of course, so much is rooted in the systemic equity of opportunity, or lack thereof.

As societies that believe in equal fairness, we have collectively hedged bets on pursuing 'equality' as the goal: the idea that everyone should have the same resources, opportunities and chances regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, or lifestyles. Despite the good logic here, it just hasn't made a significant enough shift. This is because of the lack of recognition of unique and individual starting points and the barriers to resources, opportunities and positive outcomes that some face. In 2022, KPMG published [ground-breaking research](#) that socio-economic background has the strongest effect on an individual's career progression compared to any other diversity characteristic. Yet in many countries, including the UK, socio-economic status is not even recognised as a protected characteristic under the law.

Whilst KPMG's research may have been centred on partnership roles in a Big 4 consulting firm, we know that this trend transcends industries. We also know that when intersectionality (the overlap of multiple identities that might multiply the challenges and effects of discrimination for an individual) is considered , much more is to be done than reverting to the frankly lazy adage of 'best person for the job'. 'Best person' has never been in question. However, the coding of this phrase suggests a meritocracy that simply doesn't exist equally, for all.

The need now is to re-frame what 'best' is. Surely a team make-up that is more representative of society and of an organisation's customer base in addition to being competent is going to make for better, more relevant business operations?
In terms of some of the specific interventions that businesses might take in order to close the Hope Gap:

- Begin to rebalance power by doing the things we know that work in terms of changing processes across the employee lifecycle, such as:

    ○ Widening the gate on talent searches, moving beyond 'tried and tested' routes and considering who could genuinely transform how the team operates to help you stay relevant
    ○ Accepting that biases keep us stuck and get in the way of making fair, equitable decisions. Invite others into the process to challenge and to help you to navigate your own perceptions and what might be influencing them
    ○ Being resolute about who is in decision-making roles. They are a

representation of where we operate, and the people that we serve. Businesses won't delay for a second in making decisions when it comes to customer experience, and have the muscle to make change happen quickly. So it's really a choice when leaders decide to stick with poorly representative teams - or decide that they won't stop until they find the talent that is needed in order to be truly representative.

- Begin to generate equity in influence by broadening the decision-making and definitions of leadership from the people sitting at the top. It's about genuinely enabling anyone to take a stand and making a choice to move forward and make progress, from middle managers, to HR policy bods, to ERG leads. Whether influence is about the people we're hiring, the products we're developing, or the communities we're engaging with, there are spheres of influence where anyone in a psychologically safe organisation can challenge the norms we're used to and think more equitably about who we reach, and how accessible we are. 'Psychologically safe' is key - within their own spheres of influence, those pointing out the say/do gap or saying 'this is wrong' need to be able to challenge without getting their job, promotions, or pay threatened, directly or indirectly.

Roundtable discussion

Attendees:

- **Adam Mack, Hope & Glory**
- **Anjana Gupta, English Heritage**
- **Anouschka Rajah, More in Common**
- **John Clegg, Whirlybird Comms**
- **Kelsey Williams, Burberry**
- **Vanessa Vidad, ISBA**

How we can close The Hope Business Gap

- **Question what people know and respond accordingly.** While the premise of this chapter is that 'people know what to do, they're just not doing it,' what we learned is that many people don't know

what they should be doing to create more social acceptance.

However, leaders don't always understand the scale of the solution required - which encompasses both systems change and widescale behaviour change. So while tried-and-tested interventions are in the public domain, the sole DEI lead or inevitably under-resourced team has to first focus on influencing people across HR, comms, and leadership teams. They will often convince them that they need to take responsibility for how DEI lives in their part of the organisation, and then usually also help upskill them in doing this within their respective functions.

Knowing that one senior person can often make a substantial difference within an organisation, focus should be targeted at raising the awareness and capability of those at the top. Assume that leaders do not have a full understanding of the issues yet, and present both facets—the problem and the solution— to them within the specific context of the organisation.

There is a balance to be struck in presenting the severity of the issue, as well as showing how the issue can genuinely be solved, to help empower them rather than overwhelm them.

- **Know what it takes to be proactive.** It was noted that after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, many ERG leads and newly-created heads of DEI were pushed to the point of burnout trying to roll out reactive interventions and solutions. One of the key

reasons for this was the knee-jerk reaction from businesses, many of which did not have robust DEI measures in place prior to 2020. These businesses wanted to be able to share the work they were doing to both an employee and a consumer base that demanded accountability. This had the dual effect of potentially hasty interventions that were not always impact focused, as well as a decline in the mental health of those who are also likely

After the election of Donald Trump in 2024, DEI practitioners are learning lessons and refusing to give into the pressure to move reactively. Acknowledging that centuries of institutional racism, sexism, and other -isms can't be fixed with a workshop or five-year strategy, they are instead giving themselves time to breathe, grieve, and think before responding. We discussed how grief is a powerful access point for hope, and that tenderness and kindness are not 'woo-woo' or 'nice to have,' but are key centrepoints for DEI practitioners who work at the centre of an emotions-driven agenda. Taking the time to grieve has anecdotally allowed for better mental health outcomes, as well as the headspace to create more measured and proactive interventions. Giving DEI practitioners the teams, resources, and senior backing to do their jobs well is also a common-sense approach.

- **Create long-term strategic frameworks.** While there is a real pressure to move quickly, organisations should be more focused

on moving effectively. One key method of doing this is considering their 'right to play' (see the Marketing chapter for more detail),' or the specific reason a business cares about DEI. This builds on the traditional 'moral/business/legal cases' to consider the unique 'why DEI' within a business, and acting accordingly.

This could include internal, agreed-upon frameworks such as knowing when to publicly comment on an issue, donate to an organisation, or reference an issue in advertising vs. when to take action internally. Using the gender pay gap as an example, there is more impact and integrity in an organisation focusing on promoting senior women, quality assuring their bonus processes, creating policies that complement women's life stages, and building their internal talent pipeline than to continue considering how to justify their gender pay gap report and creating the occasional ad that focuses on women's rights.

While thoughtfully building these frameworks takes time, they allow businesses to move more effectively as well as quickly once they are in place. These frameworks could also be a topic of discussion across businesses, to leverage learnings and potentially mobilise more powerfully as a cohort rather than as individual organisations.

CHAPTER

GAP MARKETING
THE HOPE

02

By Shilpa Saul

Imagine you've landed your dream job as an assistant brand manager for a well-known brand. As part of your induction process, you're introduced to the agencies who work on the brand. All the agencies have a team of people with varied backgrounds, cultures and perspectives. Sitting in meetings with them, you see they challenge each other's ideas constructively and with grace. The campaigns they create are fresh, innovative and authentic. They're seeking the right input at the right time from the people and communities they don't necessarily understand, because they're committed to getting campaigns right.

You meet with the Brand Director who lays out their expectations of you. They want you to embrace inclusivity at every level, from concept development to execution, so that you are directing agencies to deliver campaigns that connect deeply with audiences and drive brand loyalty.

You begin to work with your team and agencies and really hone in on what is being asked of you. You see your friends loving the brand partnerships and social content, organically sharing posts on social media. You feel proud that you work for a brand that focuses on authentic representation of different cultures, genders, abilities and identities. Not to shock or be woke. But just because people aren't all the same.

Just how far away are we from this world?

It is no secret that the marketing industry has always played an influential role in creating, shaping and reinforcing societal norms on everything from what defines 'beauty' through to gender roles and expectations in the home. As national demographics shift, globalisation continues, and the digital marketplace evolves, the industry has had to adapt

- **By 2030, 1 in 6 people in the world will be <u>over 60</u>**
- **The number of Gen Zers in the workplace will raise to <u>35%</u> by 2033**

to meet shifting consumer needs and expectations.

This includes everything from the visual diversity of families to the portrayal of who cooks dinner and cleans the home. In particular, these changing global dynamics–including but not limited to people living longer and the next generations entering the workplace– raise questions around how the industry is going to intentionally and deliberately evolve to attract and retain the right talent. And by 'right talent,' we mean the talent needed to deliver campaigns and activations that resonate with aforementioned evolving audience needs.

Let's begin by looking at the 'state of play' over the past couple of decades - going back to the late 90s when I first entered the world of marcomms, agency side, through to 2020 when I left an in-house Head of Communications role. During that time, the agency teams I worked for and with were almost entirely homogeneous, as were the assistant brand managers/ brand managers/ brand directors and CMOs client-side in marketing roles. As a client myself, I recall encouraging agency teams to go beyond their traditional lists of White influencers to attend events. I came up against resistance when asking where all the South Asians were in a global ad campaign for a cruise brand (I was 'jokingly' told they were busy cleaning the ships).

In my personal experience, 'successful' teams and certainly the big wigs tended to be White, well-educated men, with a sprinkling of well-groomed "ball-breaking" (whatever that means) yet ultimately compliant women. I certainly noticed a lot of pinkie rings and Oxbridge types in all-agency meetings back in the early 2000s.

Stereotypical? Probably.

True? Almost certainly.

Indeed, 25+ years on from my first forays in agency-land, the <u>IPA's All In Census (2023)</u>

demonstrates that the working class are significantly underrepresented (20% vs 40% general population) and the percentage of people in the industry who attended a fee paying school is 19% vs 8% of the general population. **ONS data** shows that young people from socioeconomically privileged backgrounds are five times more likely to make it in the creative industries than their less privileged counterparts.

For me, there seemed to be unwritten rules that I just didn't understand, despite a private education (coupled with socialising with friends from higher socio-economic backgrounds). Because that's the thing: there are some things that money just can't buy, true acceptance being one of them. Your name's either on the door, or it's not.

Over the last four years there has been a concerted movement in the right direction. The All In Census 2023 indicates that levels of discrimination, bullying and harassment of ethnic minorities were lower in 2023 than in 2021. And women in C-Suite positions increased from 39% in 2021 to 43% in 2023. However, just 2% of these C-suite positions were occupied by Black respondents, who also reported that they felt undervalued compared to colleagues of equal competence. And is the fact that discrimination, bullying and harassment of ethnic minorities were lower in 2023 really something to be celebrated, considering 11% of respondents from an ethnic minority had personally experienced racial discrimination at their current company? Moreover, despite a 4pt increase in women in C-suite positions, 29% of women surveyed believe that their gender hinders their career progression.

In the work we do with agency and brand team partners, we're hearing that although there's a 'will' to diversify teams, the 'way' has yet to be found. Countless schemes hunting for 'young Black talent' or prioritising searches for 'diverse' (read: non-White) candidates were put into place after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. The unifying experience being that agency-land wanted 'different' people - maybe for optics, maybe because the client told them to, maybe because they believed diversity of thought would lead to better outputs.

But once they had people who were 'culture adds' vs 'culture fits' (or in other words, people who added something new to the company culture vs people who shared the same behaviours and interests as the existing workforce), they had no idea what to do with them. Our CEO, Asad Dhunna, likens this to 'organ rejection' - people have been trying to add new organs in a bid for healthier companies, but the bodies haven't been prepared and

primed for new parts. In the rooms that we've been in, we have heard instances where the views of the global majority were dismissed due to their lack of experience in the industry. We've heard about the 'unwritten rules' that they knew nothing about. We heard how colleagues who are ethnically marginalised gave each other horrified looks when creative ideas were celebrated internally that leant on tropes and stereotypes of ethnically marginalised communities, while steadily avoiding eye contact with their White colleagues.

> ## "We even had one leader tell us last year, "we know we over-index on White, middle-class women joining us…but they're just more polished and able to hit the ground running" ".

We even had one leader tell us last year, "we know we over-index on White, middle-class women joining us…but they're just more polished and able to hit the ground running". In the context of young people feeling disillusioned as Eli speaks about in the next chapter, this has longer term implications for balance in marketing workplaces.

And this is where we're seeing the very real impact of the lack of diversity in creative output. Indeed, my colleagues and I have been in rooms and Zooms where we've had to explain to creative brand teams that it is simply not possible for the global majority to only take the 'good' from Victorian times and ignore the aspects relating to colonialism and slavery.

Take the recent **Bella Hadid x Adidas campaign** as a great example of the impact a lack of diversity behind the camera has. The campaign focused on the retro SL72 trainers, originally released for the 1972 Munich Olympics. The campaign aimed to revive the classic sneaker while leveraging Hadid's influential status in the fashion world. However, the campaign faced backlash due to Hadid's involvement, with the American Jewish Committee criticising Adidas for picking what they called a "vocal anti-Israel model", suggesting that Hadid's involvement was inflammatory and linked to antisemitic sentiments. In response, Adidas issued an apology, acknowledging that the campaign unintentionally connected to the tragic events of the Munich Olympics. This chain of events fell foul of a few key factors:

- the historical context: the Munich Olympics were marred by an attack where Israeli athletes were taken hostage by the Black September Organization, a Palestinian militant group, and,
- political sensitivities: Hadid, an American model of Palestinian heritage, has been vocal in her support for Palestine and critical of Israel. Her involvement in the campaign led to accusations that Adidas was conflating Palestinian identity with terrorism, especially given the historical context of the SL72 trainers.

This particular campaign highlights the need for both diversity of thought in teams as well as more thoughtfully inclusive processes, so that historical and political sensitivities are duly considered.

One could argue that this is an incredibly nuanced perspective– but we know there's also still a lot of work to be done on the 'basics'.

The very recent **Heinz campaigns** are perfect examples of how even the most basic mistakes are still being made. One campaign depicts a family wedding where the (Black) bride's father is notable in his absence - a case of reinforcing existing and harmful stereotypes about absent Black fathers. The other, apparently "intended to resonate with a current pop-culture moment" according to a Kraft Heinz spokesperson, is a classic case of the concept being created through a White lens and with initial examples featuring a White cast. The actual idea is fundamentally flawed, as we can see, as the image can only really feature White people - putting anyone from a marginalised ethnic group or with a visible disability renders it null and void. In this particular instance, casting a Black man has resulted in an image scarily similar to minstrel-esque Blackface.

Conversely, the **Burger King 'Bundles of Joy' campaign** - also not without controversy - is for us an example of a campaign that gives us hope. Because based on what we saw, we have the sense that the team had the right voices and lived experiences in the room to inform an insightful, inclusive, and clever series of images.

Marketing, of course, by its very nature is built on hope. So how do we close the Hope Gap in this glorious industry full of so much zest, creativity and noble ambitions? And how do we actively leverage the power of this industry to drive social progress? Whether you call it a 'rebrand' or just a different framing of DEI, it's really about authenticity, relevance and credibility (moving from Noah's Ark of two-by-two, paint by numbers representation to a

more nuanced, carefully considered narrative ARC).

Our societal landscape is changing. With that, the marketing industry needs to evolve to keep up, else it will die out. Not least because literally anyone can be a content creator today - and many of those who started in the industry are leaving to try their luck on TikTok - see Rob Mayhew. We can't keep applying old ways of thinking and doing things to new situations. So brands need to work harder at **authenticity**. Here at The Unmistakables, we believe authentic marketing campaigns are a result of brands having a clear 'right to play', or in other words the legitimacy, credibility, and authority to participate in or address a particular market, industry or social issue.

The 'right to play' ensures that the brand's involvement is accepted, relevant, and trusted by its target audience and helps to avoid campaigns being seen as tokenistic or performative. A fantastic example of a brand getting this right is Virgin Atlantic. Their consumer-facing TV spot celebrating LGBTQIA+ communities was accompanied with an internally-focused commitment to scrap gendered uniforms - leading to job applications doubling. A perfect demonstration of inclusion from the inside out.

Key indicators of an authentic campaign through the lens of inclusion include:

• A robust rationale for a specific community or communities to be featured in the campaign
• The representation of nuances that are pertinent to the community or communities being represented
• The campaign strongly resonates with the communities being portrayed

Audience relevance is of course nothing new, but brands can sometimes fall foul of understanding how to stay relevant against an ever-evolved backdrop, because they're stuck in their own echo chambers, often due to the in-housing of agencies and creative work as a way to keep costs low. Some suggestions to kick-start a focus on **relevance**:

- Review the end-to-end marketing process to ensure the right voices are involved - or at least consulted - from the brief through to the end deliverables to ensure your marketing is rationally and emotionally connecting with consumers, and honouring their lived experiences. For example, knowing that marketing starts with a product, our work with a global toy manufacturer is focused squarely on product development. Here, our advice is focused on ensuring that inclusion is considered from the very initial ideas at HQ and the subsequent design brief going out to agencies, through to testing with consumers, and the development of packaging and marketing materials. We ensure there are inclusivity checkpoints throughout the product development process to incorporate real-time insights in relation to global and local socio-political landscapes, overarching narratives, and even colour combinations.

- Take the time to research and understand the specific needs, interests, values, and cultural nuances of the communities you're targeting. Don't fall into the trap of thinking 'this is an everyday campaign, not a DEI campaign.' Everything has the potential for inclusion to be built into the strategy and creative execution. This will help you avoid unintentional stereotypes or misrepresentations. (Ref: *that* Heinz campaign).

Along with changing demographics comes changing expectations of brands and the need for them to be **credible**. There is an increasing reluctance of consumers to accept brand promises at face value and, particularly in our current economic context, marketers need to demonstrate a true understanding of the lives of their customers. Indeed, 69% of consumers believe brands should play a key role in the cost-of-living crisis, with the same research suggesting that financial pressures are contributing towards feelings of increased loneliness and isolation amongst 18-24 year olds.

Against this stark backdrop, brands - particularly in retail and finance sectors - are

demonstrating credibility by stepping in to freeze product prices, create loyalty and rewards schemes, and offer ongoing discounts. A wonderful example from 2023 is Co-op foregoing a traditional Christmas TV ad. It instead stayed true to its 'giving the gift of community spirit' tagline by asking customers to donate to local community groups, with Co-op matching up to £1m of funds raised.

Roundtable discussion

Attendees:

- **Kiran Bance, Omnicom**
- **Paul Kemp-Robertson, Contagious**
- **Priscilla Baffour, Unilever**
- **Rebecca Hall, Golin**
- **Valerie Holloway, Hope & Glory**

How we can close The Hope Business Gap:

Address the marketing industry's reputation issue. Linking directly from the previous chapter, in the same way we are adept at understanding brands' target audiences, we need to truly understand our own target audiences if we are to stand any hope of inspiring and recruiting fresh new talent into the industry.

During our conversation, we noted that award-winning work still predominantly comes from a limited talent pool, which in turn sends a damaging signal: that only certain voices are valued and promoted.

No wonder, therefore, that the next generation looks at our industry

and thinks it's not one for them. Anecdotally we have heard this countless times at industry events and conferences. There is a lot of great work going on to attract talent from working-class backgrounds, but is that enough? Ultimately, without an acceptable starting salary and clear, tangible career paths, entering the marcomms industry is still closed off for many people.

It goes without saying that our industry's ability to attract, retain and promote talent from diverse backgrounds directly impacts our ability to create inclusive campaigns that are authentic, relevant and credible. Campaigns rooted in narrow perspectives may win awards but will inevitably fall short of genuinely resonating with audiences.

Develop client-agency standards and charters. Agencies can help facilitate more inclusive ways of working in the short term by setting out what DEI means through the lens of their own agency's values and ways of working and how that will then impact both the team make-up and creative output.

The shared goals of wanting to create groundbreaking, award-winning marketing strategies and campaigns is a given - but it's how we get there that needs more alignment and more consistency. This is a matter of cultural confidence. Anecdotally, we've heard about clients pushing back on featuring people from 'diverse backgrounds' in their advertising or making unacceptable

comments in status meetings, leading to teams feeling demotivated by the work and let down by their organisation not taking a stance.

By discussing and setting out everything from setting clear working hours, defined expectations on agency responsiveness, principles regarding gathering audience insight and representation - and more - the client-agency relationship sets off in a mutually respectful manner, making it much easier to handle difficult conversations when (not if) they arise. Having set standards and charters is one clear way of getting making that possible.

Role model inclusive behaviours at leadership levels. Leaders play a pivotal role in creating the environments where diverse voices can thrive and contribute. However, without exposure to role models and structured training and coaching in inclusive practices, even well-intentioned leaders may struggle to foster genuine inclusion.

There needs to be a focus on dedicating resources, time and effort to helping leaders upskill in this area and then recognising and rewarding people who are doing this well. During the discussion, we heard of at least one organisation that has introduced dashboards to monitor representation and holds leaders accountable for inclusive progress.

Bespoke the onboarding process. To realise the benefits of hiring people from 'diverse backgrounds', agencies must ensure that every new hire has an equal opportunity to succeed, beginning with a tailored onboarding experience. Inclusive input requires dismantling barriers such as "unwritten rules" that can often exclude or alienate individuals.

A bespoke onboarding process explains implicit norms, fosters understanding, and empowers new hires to contribute their perspectives. When diverse voices feel supported and heard from day one, their insights enrich strategic and creative outputs, leading to more authentic and innovative campaigns.

CHAPTER

THE HOPE

GAP MEDIA

03

By Eli Keery

Imagine a world where journalists and commentators have cultural confidence and are supported by diverse teams that access a range of lived expertise. They operate with the right checks and balances to tackle stories with the nuance and care they deserve, even under tight deadlines.

Rather than focusing predominantly on negative stories, they reflect reality holistically, with the average front news page showcasing a cross-section of diverse human experiences—both the good and bad. The approach to journalism is free from corporate interests, political agendas, and the systemic pressures of oppression—racism, sexism, and more—that too often shape narratives.

Cultural confidence is the understanding of and/or ability to empathise with people from different backgrounds and ability to navigate interactions confidently.

Profitable journalism relies not on sensationalism and clickbait headlines, but on unbiased, fact-based reporting that resonates across the communities they are intended for. Reflexive reporting is the norm, with articles acknowledging potential gaps in available data instead of jumping to conclusions. Principles of transparency are upheld, clearly showing sources and indicating when pieces are based on opinion.

Just how far away are we from this reality?

Eight in ten (82%) 16-24-year-olds used social media platforms as their main source

In today's smartphone-heavy world, we are inundated with the news, whether that's a BBC alert, tweets, or infographics on Instagram. A constant battle rages between different platforms as they compete for our attention, clicks and the accompanying revenue. Subsequently, there is no shortage of clickbait or alarmist headlines. Given humans' natural negativity bias; the tendency to pay more attention to negative events as a survival instinct, it is no surprise that we feel the world is falling apart. This shapes our understanding of society's current state and impacts our optimism; the hope we have for things to change.

We define the hope gap in the news industry as a widening divide between the public's desire for trustworthy, balanced and inclusive reporting and the reality of biased, negative and sensationalist coverage, that subsequently leads to news avoidance and an erosion of trust.

We've felt these pains firsthand in our DEI work— especially when our industry makes headlines. The BBC has referred to DEI as a 'lightning rod for controversy,' capturing how matters like identity, civil liberties, and societal justice have been framed by mainstream news.

If you only read headlines, you may be led to believe that DEI is hated - we sometimes feel like this ourselves. So, how can we begin to bridge this hope gap from our unique vantage point in DEI? And what could be the role of the news in driving social acceptance?

What does the current news landscape look like?

In 2024, Ofcom reported that for the first time, online news reading surpassed TV watching as the main source of news consumption, with this trend only increasing among younger generations. In this digital era, with mobile phones heating our pockets and social media platforms flooding us with an unending stream of content, my earnest efforts to stay informed have edged closer to masochism.

Whenever I hear the BBC theme tune, I can't help but instinctively mutter "oh god, what now?" as the inevitable world-ending disaster announcement follows. Yet, I can't look away— a feeling that is seemingly shared by many in my generation, the dreaded Gen

Z. Amid the chaos of COVID-19 in 2020, journalist Karen Ho popularised the term 'doomscrolling,' referring to the endless consumption of negative news on social media. It was a term quickly embraced by many, adding a touch of dry humour to the exhausting reality of staying connected all the time.

I mention this to say that it is no secret that we are becoming tired of the relentless news cycle of negativity. A 2024 Reuters study showed that the proportion of people who feel worn out by the amount of news jumped from 30% in 2019 to 38% in the UK today. Globally, the number of people actively avoiding the news altogether hit a record high of 39%.

While I don't completely distance myself from the news entirely, I have noticed a steady decline in my own engagement. I often ponder how different my life would be if I removed myself from social media and news consumption entirely. I find it difficult to remove my own emotions when reading– and the constant stream of tragedy and scandal is both gut-wrenching and anxiety-inducing. Reading stories from the ongoing war on Gaza has been particularly harrowing, frequently depicting the death and destruction of civilians.

If I hadn't won the geographic lottery for where I was born, their struggles could've been mine, instead of a disturbing spectacle that I helplessly tune into every week.

Its coverage has been highly disturbing not just due to the content, but also the context. The difference in reporting on Israeli and Palestinian casualties has laid bare the biases within major publications and news networks, while social media has been pumped full of misinformation, from repurposed war photos to AI-generated ones.

I do believe that staying informed allows us to look beyond ourselves and gain further understanding of the world around us. But I can't help but feel that at times, the constant stirring of rage and fear in the news serves those who benefit from our momentary anger– and our subsequent apathy. It reaffirms the horrors life can bring, normalises pain, and ultimately desensitises viewers.

So I can't help but wonder:

What value does looking at the news regularly actually have for me?

I'm not alone in my scepticism. According to Reuters (2024), just 40% of respondents across 47 markets globally said they trust most news. Ofcom (2024) reported that among news platforms (TV, newspapers, radio, etc.) online sources and social media were seen as the least accurate and trustworthy— which is alarming given their aforementioned rise in popularity. Still, an overwhelming majority of people consume the news. 96% of UK adults say they access news in some form, and studies continue to demonstrate the impact news and other media have on moulding public perception.

In research we've undertaken with clients, we spoke to marginalised communities about how they feel about their demographic's representation by news platforms. We found that they feel particularly distressed, sharing that their stories are portrayed one-dimensionally and stereotypically. A common example that had similarly been demonstrated in another 2024 Reuters study was among Black participants. They felt that their experiences and portrayal always came through the lens of poverty, crime, and violence. These skewed narratives and selective representation reinforce negative perceptions of these groups. This impacts their social standing and how they're treated by others.

The profitability of fear has been at the core of what's widening the hope gap in the news. It feeds into biased reporting, misinformation, and the clickbait culture that affects our everyday lives. This has shown real-life consequences— dissatisfaction, fatigue, and misrepresentation— which only perpetuate harmful power dynamics that marginalise many within society.

To address this, newsrooms must reflect the people they serve, and adopt a nuanced and responsible approach that holistically represents them. Prioritising balanced, transparent, and fact-based reporting over sensationalism could help begin bridging the hope gap.

What does this all mean for DEI?

Fear has become a driving force behind many of today's news media narratives, but even more so for diversity, equity and inclusion. In a pendulum-like shift, following the global support for DEI following George Floyd's murder, the last 3 years have seen a growing wave of vocal detractors. This backlash has been especially pronounced in the US, which continues to influence global workplace norms. We've seen the rollback of affirmative action in 2023 and bans in Florida for state payments towards DEI programs at

universities in early 2024. These shifts have had ripple effects around the world, including the UK. Former Business Secretary and current Leader of the Conservative Party Kemi Badenoch is perhaps the most notable critic. Her March 2024 Inclusion at Work Panel report highlighted an increase in employment tribunals under the Equality Act, revealing instances where diversity efforts led to supposed discrimination against other candidates. Amid fears of litigation and the pressure to cut costs, organisations like Molson Coors, Lowe's, and Ford have scaled back their DEI commitments. Many businesses, wary of being targeted by vocal detractors in both online and traditional media, have begun to downplay their diversity policies or rebrand them - having DEI under a different name - deeming it too risky in today's political climate.

Despite the notable gains being made, the acronym 'DEI' has become a dog whistle for detractors, framed as a means for coercion and a threat to the status quo. To critics, DEI is exclusionary rather than inclusive, forcing ideological conformity and branding those who resist as intolerant.

DEI is often seen as an enemy to 'freedom of speech' in disguise. We have seen this framing over and over. Perhaps the most high-profile case is from Elon Musk, whose platform X (formerly Twitter) has become a self-proclaimed bastion for freedom of speech (apart from a couple of ideological lapses) and the most notable haven for outspoken disdain for DEI and the "woke agenda" that surrounds it. Figures like Musk, along with other controversial voices like Tommy Robinson, Andrew Tate and Robby Starbuck have used the platform to rally against diversity efforts, fueling division with real-world repercussions. In August 2024, riots erupted in Southport, UK, triggered by misinformation on X about a killer's identity, illustrating how these unchecked narratives can incite chaos. Social media platforms like X, where more than half of UK adults now consume their news, thrive on this exact kind of exaggerated and negative content. As Ed Saperia, Dean of the London College of Political Technology, points out, "controversial content drives engagement. Extreme content drives engagement." DEI, framed as a controversial agenda, feeds directly into this. Critics often argue that focusing on identity in DEI initiatives only deepens societal divisions. But, in reality, these divisions already existed.

DEI hasn't created them—it brings them to the surface so they can be addressed. Although not all measures are successful or well thought through, the ultimate aim is to dismantle systems of inequality like racism, sexism, homophobia etc. Which, ironically, are the

real threats to freedom of expression, and have been silencing marginalised voices for generations.

Dismissing DEI ultimately preserves a status quo that benefits those who already hold privilege and power through the varied intersections of our identities. For those who gain from these entrenched systems, acknowledging the barriers faced by others and actively working to dismantle them isn't appealing. Because it threatens their social advantages. Pursuing equity requires recognising these privileges and transforming the systems that sustain them to benefit a more diverse range of people.

People are increasingly recognising and valuing DEI, despite all of the high-profile criticism. A 2023 global study by **EY** revealed that 63% of workers would choose to work for a company that prioritises DEI over one that does not, with this number rising to 73% for Gen Z and 68% for millennials. If DEI is a core expectation for the workforce, the challenge for the media is to evolve beyond the outrage, sensationalism and misinformation, which seek to derail the progress and intention of these initiatives.

So how can we bridge these proponents of the hope-gap?

- Aim for holistic storytelling
  - Diversify newsrooms with representation from a variety of backgrounds that can collaborate finding and writing stories that represent a range of experiences for different identities.
  - Create increased emphasis on having balanced, positive and negative reporting
  - Challenge fear-mongering narratives
- Balancing the need for engagement with responsible journalism that enables viewers' critical thinking
  - Combat misinformation
  - Citing sources
  - Differentiating between fact-based reporting and opinions
  - Quick reporting on "hot" stories needs to take a backseat especially as it causes inaccuracies
- Engaging with audiences and their needs
  - Distrust and fatigue are rife, we need to listen to audiences

Roundtable discussion

Attendees:

- Ade Rawcliffe, ITV
- Nina Bhagwat, Golin
- Frank Starling, LIONS
- Lucy Barbor, We are Masterplan
- Jamie Searls, Tileyard Education

How we can close The Hope Business Gap:

- **Reassess the 'attention' business model.** The race to be the first to break a story, fueled partly by constant and instant updates from social media, often leads to bias and sensationalism. In this fast-paced environment, cutting corners compromises journalistic integrity, which in turn widens the hope gap.

  Grabbing and holding attention has become a business model, and newsrooms are on the frontline of this. We question just how sustainable this is in the long-term as younger generations question their social media usage, and as the need for digital minimalism and detox is on the rise.

- **Take a closer look at the norms and power holders.** We discussed how power is maintained by those with privilege: by not admitting to holding it, and not acknowledging those who face barriers. Systemic changes and challenges to that

privilege–such as calling for accountability–inherently threaten many within these groups, causing anger, sadness and defiance. This was seen shortly after our roundtable event with Gregg Wallace's comments covered extensively in the media.

Linked to this is the dubious position of masculinity in the current socio-political climate, particularly following the rise of movements such as #MeToo. In the face of valid calls for accountability and for gendered violence, sexism, and misogyny, the accompanying critique men are experiencing has caused a large cultural shift, particularly in countries like the UK and US. We have seen a marked backlash in recent years, rearing its head with the growth of 'inceldom' and the 'manosphere.' Communities seeped in sexist and misogynistic tenets act as a space for men who feel alienated or resistant to progressive changes.

Alarmingly, particularly as social norms are challenged and changed and male privilege is scrutinised, such spaces have become sources of guidance, especially for young men during the confusing and formative years of their lives. In their online search for answers to life's many questions, encountering media narratives designed to inspire fear and outrage, many fall into a pipeline to misogyny and sexism. Our group pointed to the uprising of characters like Andrew Tate in 2022 and Donald Trump's recent election as evidence.

It is unsurprising that these cultural shifts coincide with an ongoing male mental health crisis. Men often struggle to express emotional complexity due to pervasive stigma, which attaches shame and fear to displays of vulnerability and restricts emotional openness. More needs to be done to address and support men's ability to express complexity and the media needs to recognise its role in contributing to divisive narratives that contribute to men falling prey to harmful ideologies.

- **Amplify positive portrayals to drown out the negativity.** Storytelling, a powerful tool for connecting people and shaping perspectives, is often misused within the media landscape.

Instead of focusing disproportionately on negative stories that can stigmatise marginalised communities, we need to shift towards collaborative and community-focused narratives that include these diverse groups and cover them holistically. These stories, particularly the mundane, build communities across the barriers through empathy and relatability. One such example was E45's 'My Skin, My Story'. While it centred on skincare within the trans community, it was a relatable story for many others who felt that to-date skincare campaigns followed a tried and tested formula filled with stereotypes.

People have an innate bias that attracts them to negativity, which the media constantly exploits for engagement. Advertising campaigns and stories that include/ represent diverse and marginalised communities often have vocal detractors who, despite often being the minority, are amplified media coverage. Instead of giving such unhelpful narratives disproportionate attention, the media industry should adopt a more collaborative approach to covering / representing these communities, working with them to gain a better understanding of their needs and wants. This would broaden the range of stories covered by the media, cultivate understanding, and reduce harmful misrepresentation.

The broader marketing and media industries recognise that representation boosts relevance, especially as demographic shifts continue globally (and particularly the US). While representation has become politicised and often criticised as a symbol of 'wokeism' and leftist ideologies, **we argue that industry leaders "need grit and have to bear themselves until it is considered a normality."**

Over the last year, DEI and representation efforts have been undermined by tokenism, performativity and 'diversity washing' where change is limited to overt visual aspects like casting, diluting its potential impact. While one step forward is better than none ,

representation in media (all forms of creative media especially) needs to go beyond this, considering equitable compensation of actors and address other deep issues like classism and intersectionality.

Art is in a unique position being able to reflect generational sentiments and predict how reality could be. As such, representation plays a role in shaping how groups are perceived by others. **There needs to be a balance struck between projects that aim to reflect the general population as it is, versus those that challenge reality to project how it should be.**

THE GAP
HOPE

THE
UNMISTAKABLES®