

Dismantling stereotypes to drive equality

Children and adolescents are exposed to a barrage of media messages daily, on and offline. Some are directly targeted at them; others are seen by them. The quantity and quality of messaging seen by children can shape their perception of what society is or could be.

Since the COVID-19 epidemic, children and adolescents are increasingly spending time online, exposed to an expanding variety of advertising, product placement and influencer content which is often inappropriate for their age. Societies around the world are increasingly sensitive to how children of all backgrounds are portrayed and represented, and it is critical the marketing and advertising world keeps pace with this change.

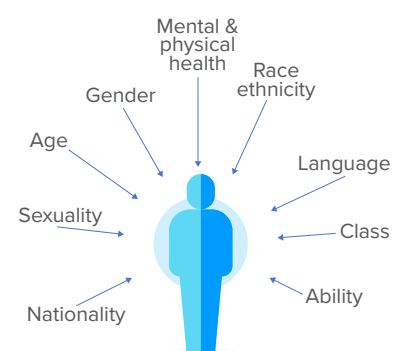
The business of advertising and marketing continuously touches the lives of children and adolescents, directly and indirectly, and is a significant influence in creating and transforming identities and behaviours. Private companies, though promoting positive representation and avoiding stereotypes in the content they produce for children can contribute to diversity and equal outcomes for all.

Content from film, TV, computer games and streaming services, the toys they play with and the books they read, influence children's role models and perceptions of themselves. Product research, design and marketing is often gendered, with separate categories online and in retail space for boys and girls, reducing choice and reinforcing stereotypes. New technologies are not necessarily progressive: there are some serious issues with digital content, the gendered and racially biased impact of which is beginning to emerge.

It is not just gender stereotyping that touches children: discriminatory stereotypes around race and ethnicity, disability or family structure, among others, also create negative impacts for children. Compounded with gender stereotyping, this means children may face different kinds of discrimination and stereotyping. An intersectional approach, acknowledging the different perspectives and experiences of children is always needed.



Intersectionality is the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage



Creating diverse content for children: why it matters

IMPACT OF HARMFUL STEREOTYPING ON OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

STEM Gap: Negative stereotypes around girls' participation in Science, Technology, Engineering & Math subjects in early years results in lifelong impact on career choices for women, a gender digital divide and large-scale economic impact.

Barrier to education and choice of profession: Racial and ethnic discrimination against children has been linked to lower achievement in education, higher school dropout rates, and reduced ability to surpass their parent's economic status, especially among girls of colour. In media, this effect may be prompted by discriminatory portrayals, for example, women and girls of colour shown mostly as servants, domestic workers or assistants.

Denies children the benefit of positive role models: Having role models who reflect a child's identity can inspire the child towards higher achievements. A study in the United States of America, for example, found that when Black students were randomly assigned at least one Black teacher in kindergarten through third grade, they were 13 per cent more likely to graduate high school and 19 per cent more likely to enrol in college compared to their peers in the same cohort and school.¹

Breadwinners v Homemakers: Harmful stereotypes about women's role in the home and a man's roles as 'the breadwinner' perpetuates discriminatory gender norms around housework and childcare. This impacts potential of parenting roles and can impact career and life choices and children's development. Harmful stereotypes around parenting roles can mean father-child bonding is limited and children are deprived of positive role models for shared family responsibilities.

Low self-esteem, body confidence and mental health: Unrealistic beauty norms and pressure to be perfect can impact children's perceptions of self, which can lead to confidence issues, mental health problems and self-harm. Unrealistic body image can lead to unhealthy eating habits and disorders among both boys and girls.

Underrepresentation of children and youth with disabilities contributes to stigmatization and strengthens the notion of 'ableism', i.e., discrimination in favour of people who are able-bodied. It is vital that the world's 1.3 billion people who have a disability are adequately represented and heard.

Harmful masculinities and men's health:

Gender norms related to dominant masculinities may increase the pressure boys face to drop out of school to help provide for their families, to engage less with health systems and preventative care and to participate in risky or violent behaviours. Harmful masculinities restrict how boys and men express emotions and may encourage them to participate in gendered forms of violence.

Violence towards racial and ethnic groups normalized: Movies, TV shows, books, video games and other media featuring indigenous people as 'uncivilized' enemies or darker-skinned people as criminals are two examples of stereotypical roles that can have a negative impact on children in indigenous and other non-dominant groups and can lead to violence and/or bullying against them.

Families are not all the same: Positive representation of many different types of families and caregivers enables children to see their own realities reflected. This helps them to understand that not all families have the same structure, and that caregiving comes from all kinds of parents, other family members and friends of the family. Socio-economic background can have an impact on children reaching their full potential. Allowing children to see and access routes to social mobilization is important.

Inaccessibility and universal design: To ensure that they are disability inclusive, a universal design approach needs to be taken, adapting existing products to make them more accessible or accessible to more people with disabilities.



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Focus on gender: What does gender socialization & stereotyping mean?

Achieving gender equality requires the dismantling of negative gender stereotypes to realize the equal rights for women and girls. The issues around gender socialization and stereotyping also provide a useful model for defining how to address other forms of inequality.

Gender norms are informal, deeply entrenched and widely held beliefs on gender roles and expectations within a community that govern human behaviours and practices.² The process of gender socialization means expected gender roles are learned from birth and re-intensified through childhood and adolescence with messages received from society. Children learn to 'do gender' in accordance with gender norms – for example girls are more likely to be praised for their looks and given toys to encourage caregiving while boys are praised for their physical strength and given toys to develop cognitive and physical skills.

The impact of gender stereotyping is widespread and can be harmful, affecting confidence and aspirations, health and opportunities. Girls may restrict their education or educational choices because of gendered expectations or avoid non-typical careers in mathematics, engineering and computing. Online, girls may feel pressurized by sexualized and unrealistic beauty norms set by the use of high levels of filtered images and influencer content. Boys often feel restricted in displaying traits such as being caring, emotional and nurturing as these are characterized as 'feminine'. They may internalize messages about 'masculine' behaviours and ideals that can drive them to act in risky ways to live up to gender expectations.

By promoting positive gender socialization, UNICEF seeks to explicitly address discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes and achieve equitable outcomes for boys and girls in all their diversities. Gender norms can change, and change is most likely to be achieved by exposing children and adolescents to positive gender norms as early as possible.

UNICEF works to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which calls for gender equality and to empower all women and girls. Promoting positive gender norms and socialization is critical for achieving this goal and the private sector can effectively contribute to reaching it through both financial and non-financial investments.³

Advertising and marketing as for force for change

UNICEF calls on the advertising and marketing community to use their power for good by dismantling harmful gender stereotyping and promoting positive gender portrayals. By avoiding the use of harmful stereotyping and instead promoting positive social norms in marketing and advertising we can give children and adolescents the opportunity to realize their full potential and encourage a way of thinking that includes the perspectives of all, leading to better outcomes for everyone.



What can companies do?

- **Analyze internal policies, guidance and tools** for addressing harmful stereotyping throughout the creative value chain in marketing and advertising directed at children.
- **Audit in-house creative content** to understand gaps to address: use the [UNICEF D&I playbook](#) as a starting point.

- **Build the research and evidence base** on how children view and perceive advertising in terms of representation, particularly on digital platforms and assess the impact of 'unstereotyped' marketing.
- **Raise awareness, advocate and provide thought leadership** on the impact stereotyping in marketing has on equality outcomes for girls and boys in all their diversity.
- **Join with UNICEF to understand more about the impact of negative stereotyping on children and how to promote positive representations become a champion for children. For every child, equality.**

UNICEF's response

Advocacy & Thought Leadership:

UNICEF works with industry associations, such as the Unstereotype Alliance, the World Federation of Advertisers and the International Advertising Association to advocate for dismantling harmful stereotyping in marketing and advertising and to promote positive gender portrayals. We also work with leading companies to raise awareness of the issues, help understand the impact on children and encourage companies to take a transformative approach for advancing children's rights and be a champion for gender equality, diversity and inclusion.

Case Study: the LEGO Group

Children learn about roles, identities and behaviours from a very young age. Play is crucial to how children develop and learn about the world. The toys they play with are key agents of socialization and particularly powerful drivers to change perceptions. Toys that have positive impact let children see the diversity of the world reflected in their world of play and enable them to believe in their ability to achieve their full potential, unconstrained by harmful stereotypes. To inspire future generations through diverse and inclusive role models, in 2020 the LEGO Group joined forces with UNICEF to leverage their influence, resources, business expertise and assets to bring about social change. Deconstructing and dismantling harmful gender and other social stereotypes across products will impact positively on children's perception of social and gender roles and help the LEGO Group portray progressive and empowered characters that have an affirmative influence on girls and boys.

Research & Evidence: More research is needed to understand the impact of stereotyped advertising on children and adolescents, particularly in the digital space. UNICEF works with partners such as the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media to add to the evidence base and encourage companies to audit their content, track representation, set targets and monitoring change.



Case Study: Gender Bias & Inclusion in Advertising in India

UNICEF partnered with the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media to analyse the top 1,000 advertisements viewed on TV and online in India during 2019. This

was the first public study to systematically analyze gender representations in ads in India and serve as a benchmark for making advertising more gender-sensitive in the country. The findings show that although female characters are prominent in advertisements in India, they are still highly stereotyped: less likely to be shown in public spaces and in paid employment; more likely to be selling domestic products and food to other women as well as responsible for childcare and shopping. The research also highlights some problematic issues in advertising around colourism in India, with advertising presenting characters with lighter skin as more physically attractive than characters with darker skin. Recommendations are given to content creators for driving an advertising landscape that promotes equity as well as positive and empowering gender norms. UNICEF's India Country Office is working with the India Chapter of the IAA and other partners to address these issues.

Guidance and Tools: UNICEF has

developed a playbook to help business develop their in-house guidelines and tools for tackling issues around representation.



Case Study: D&I Playbook

Inspired and supported by the partnership with the LEGO Group,

UNICEF released a playbook for business audiences to provide starting points for defining the different types of stereotyping in advertising that can have a harmful impact on a child's well-being and development. 'Promoting diversity and inclusion in advertising: a UNICEF playbook', provides tools for businesses to create guidelines and strategies, along with a multitude of examples from companies that demonstrate diversity and inclusion in their creative content and products for children.

Some Key Facts

- Global toy sales reached €95 billion in 2020ⁱⁱ while the global spend on children's advertising is estimated at \$4.3 billion in 2019 with digital advertising accounting for more than one quarterⁱⁱⁱ.
- While female gamers now estimated to make up 44% of gamers, an analysis of gameplay segments from sessions with the top 20 Twitch streamers showed that among all characters, male characters outnumber female characters four-to-one while female characters are nearly five times as likely to be shown with some level of nudity than male characters. Seven-in-ten male characters are shown engaging in stereotypically masculine activities (i.e., taking risks, engaging in violence, getting angry, etc.).^{iv}
- A recent study of girls and women who posted selfies online found that they reported feeling more anxious, less confident, and less physically attractive after posting selfies, even when those photos were edited.^v
- 2020 findings from the Unstereotype Metric, developed by Kantar in partnership with the Unstereotype Alliance, indicate that the more progressive the advert, the higher prospect it has for driving sales.^{vi}
- The COVID 19 pandemic is in danger of rolling back gains made on gender equality worldwide with durable impacts on women's lives and careers. The impact experienced to a greater extent by women, add up to create significant overall inequalities between men and women^{vii}. Ensuring that stereotypes, especially around care giving and domestic violence are not perpetuated, and that women and girls are also shown as leaders in decision making and planning, as well as collecting gender and sex disaggregated data is more important than ever.^{viii}
- According to research conducted by the Unstereotype Alliance, progressive depictions of women in advertising have slowed since March 2020, with ads being less likely to show women in speaking roles or working, and more likely to cast women in traditional gender roles.^{ix}
- A recent study across seven markets using implicit reactions showed that parents encourage daughters to engage in activities that are performative, artistic, and domestic or related to the dramatic arts, while they encourage sons to engage in activities that are related to STEM, physicality, and activities that engage exploration and curiosity. Parents also imagine a man in the vast majority of creative professions, regardless of whether there is a daughter or son in their household; children share these impressions.^x

1. Gershenson, Seth, et al., The Long-Run Impacts of Same-Race Teachers, Working Paper 25254, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, Mass., November 2018 (revised February 2021), accessed 30 June 2021.
2. <https://odi.org/en/publications/social-norms-gender-norms-and-adolescent-girls-a-brief-guide/>
3. <https://data.unicef.org/sdgs/goal-5-gender-equality/>

- i. <https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/10630/the-long-run-impacts-of-same-race-teachers>
- ii. <https://www.toyassociation.org/ta/research/data/global/toys-research-and-data/data/global-sales-data.aspx>
- iii. <https://www.superawesome.com/kids-digital-media-report-2019/>
- iv. <https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/ads-that-defy-stereotypes-also-perform-better-new-research-shows/reportejane.org/research-informs-empowers/double-edged-sword-of-online-gaming/>
- v. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1740144517305326>
- vi. <https://www.unstereotypealliance.org/en/resources/research-and-tools/unstereotype-metric-2020-findings>
- vii. <https://unric.org/en/sdg-5/>
- viii. <https://www.unicef.org/documents/promoting-positive-gender-roles-marketing-and-advertising-context-covid-19>
- ix. <https://www.unstereotypealliance.org/en/resources/research-and-tools/unstereotype-metric-2020-findings>
- x. <https://seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/lego-creativity-study/>

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