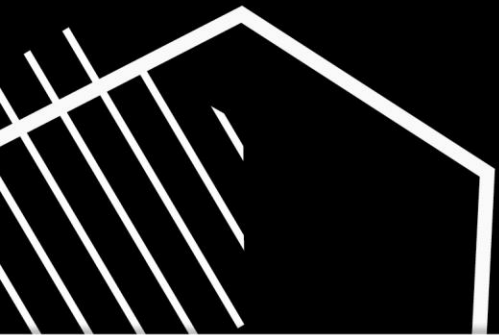




MIRROR ON Neurodiversity



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4 Editors



Rebecca Hollister
Senior Research Exec



Sam Cannons
Research Manager



Katya Des-Etages
Senior Research Exec

Co-created by
MATERIAL+

Supported by
PURPLE



At Channel 4, we've been running our award winning '**Mirror on the Industry**' project for 5 years. This is a study that audits TV advertising to see how diverse and representative it really is.

We are now building on the project with the '**Mirror on...**' series. A series of individual reports that take a closer look at some of the topics we evaluate in the wider study and dig deeper into the feelings and perceptions our audiences.

In 2022 we looked at Body Diversity and Women's Safety. The next topic we're exploring in this series is **Neurodiversity...**

We want to better understand the importance and challenges of representing neurodivergent individuals and explore practical solutions for addressing them. We hope you find this report interesting, and for those of you who are time poor, you'll also find a teaser video and one pager on the 4Sales website.



***A note:** We are using pale blue colours and backgrounds, and less imagery as a conscious design choice in order to make this report more visually accessible to neurodivergent individuals.*



Who we spoke to

4 YOUTH

We used our **4Youth** (16-24s) community to speak to people about their perceptions and experiences of neurodiversity, along with exploring opinions on the current portrayal of neurodiversity within the media and the role brands can play in increasing awareness, understanding and shifting perceptions. Our sample featured a mix of neurotypical and neurodivergent respondents, enabling us to get wide ranging views on the topic.

We supplemented this with supporting research from 'The Real Britain Series: Designing for Disability Inclusion' study, OMD UK's proprietary research programme, focussed on driving deeper understanding of marginalised communities. It uses a robust mixed qualitative and quantitative approach to generate applicable insight for the industry. We also used resources from Neurodiversity Celebration Week, in partnership with Lexxic.



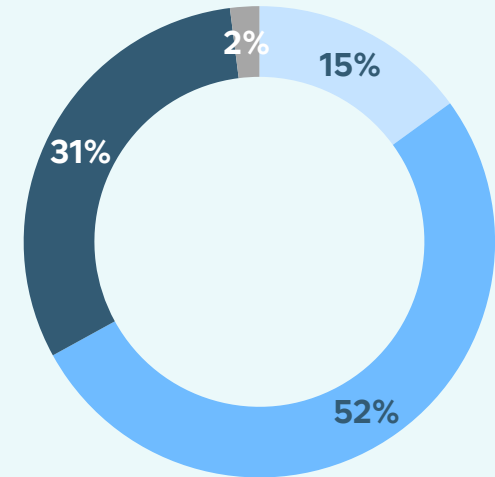
the
Real
Britain
series



Neurodiversity
Celebration
Week



4Youth proximity to neurodiversity



- I am neurodivergent
- Someone I know is neurodivergent
- No one I know is neurodivergent
- Prefer not to say

Summary

- 01.** The disabled community is currently under-researched, stigmatised and under-represented, particularly in relation to **non-visible disabilities** and specifically **neurodiversity** - highlighting the need for brands to consider disability across a wider spectrum.
- 02.** Neurodiversity refers to the different ways a person's brain processes information; underlining everyone's unique way of thinking, interacting and experiencing the world. It is an umbrella term used to describe **alternative thinking styles and neurological differences**, such as Autism, ADHD or Dyslexia - offering unique skills or talents.
- 03.** Despite positive steps being taken in reframing neurodiversity, **discrimination is still rife** through societal barriers, stereotyping and lack of understanding. Improving education at all levels of society is essential to making true progress.
- 04.** The **media is an instrumental tool** in raising awareness, shifting perceptions, and increasing understanding of neurodiversity, and we're not currently doing enough to improve the representation and portrayal of neurodivergent people. There are simple steps ads can take for great commercial and societal benefits.
- 05.** Brands need to **better design for disability inclusion** - not only through accurate representation, but also by achieving **accessibility at a holistic level**. This should include a consideration for how they can authentically include, represent and engage with the neurodiverse community in other forms outside of advertising.
- 06.** Vanish's 'Me, My Autism & I' campaign was successful in **shifting perceptions, raising awareness and boosting understanding of autism**, particularly amongst women and girls. The campaign also resulted in a positive impact on Vanish as a brand, with it praised for its commitment to shining a light on such an under-represented group.

01

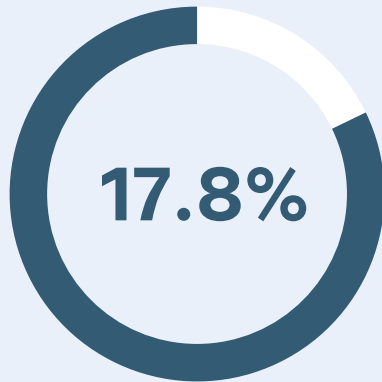
The Current Landscape:
Disability in the UK

What is disability?

Definition of disability

Disability is functionally based and covers any **physical and cognitive impairments** including chronic health conditions that have a **substantial negative impact** on normal daily activities and are **long-term** (have lasted or are expected to last over 12 months).

Disability is not niche...it is a community that we all may join at any point across our lives, and most of us do at some point if we are lucky enough to live into older age.



In 2021, across both England and Wales, the proportion of disabled people was 17.8% (10.4 million)

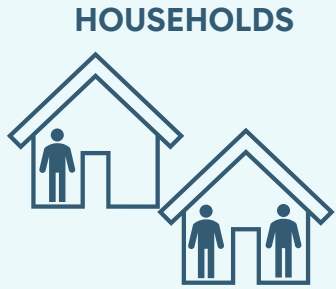
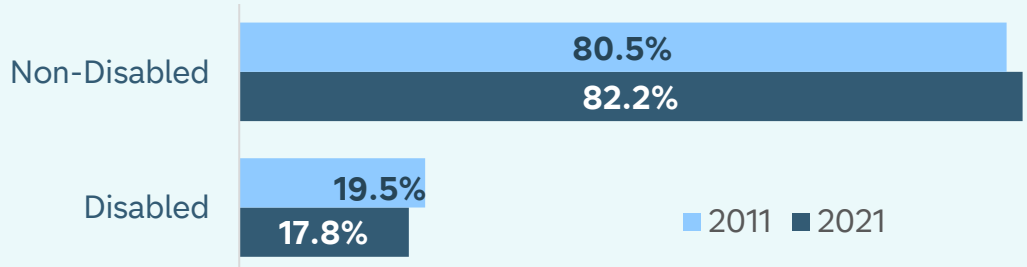
Better understanding the disabled community helps us **better understand our society**. It is a large community made up of many individual communities that are valuable, growing, diverse and currently under served.

Disability is one key characteristic that differs significantly across our population. There is incredible diversity within the disabled community, in part due to the **type and nature** of the disability, **when it was acquired** and **how the individual identifies with it**, and has **adapted** to it.

The community also varies significantly by the many other characteristics that make up whole, richly layered, wonderful humans; our ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, stage of life, socio-economic status, attitudes, beliefs, connections and experiences.

Census Data 2021 - Disability

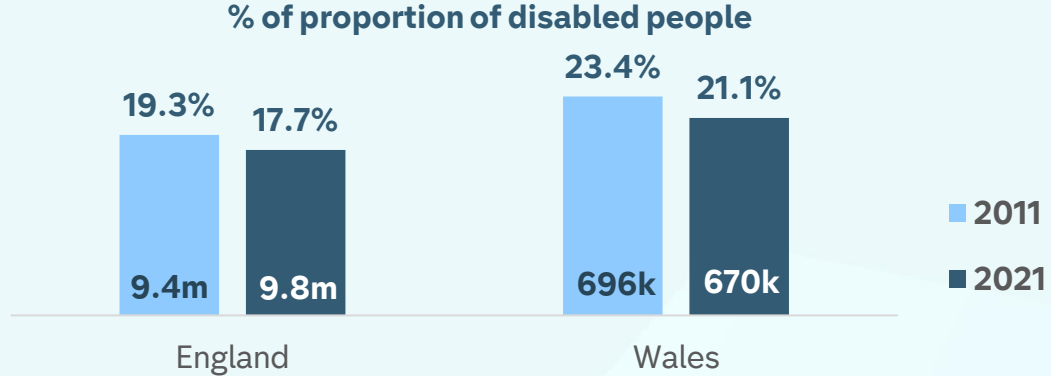
The 2021 census found that the proportion of people that are disabled has decreased 1.7 percentage points from 2011, when it was 19.5% (10.0 million). The question was to assess people whose day-to-day activities was limited by long-term physical or mental health conditions or illnesses. We think this decrease is down to question type and data collection issues during COVID, rather than an actual decrease.





HOUSEHOLDS

In England, **25.4% (6mil) include one disabled member**. 6.6% (1.6mil) include 2+ people who are disabled.

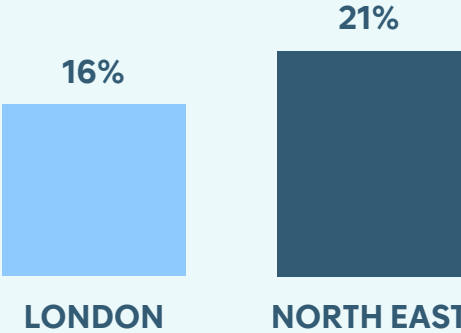
In Wales, **29.5% (397k) include one disabled member**. 8.4% (114k) include 2+ people who are disabled.



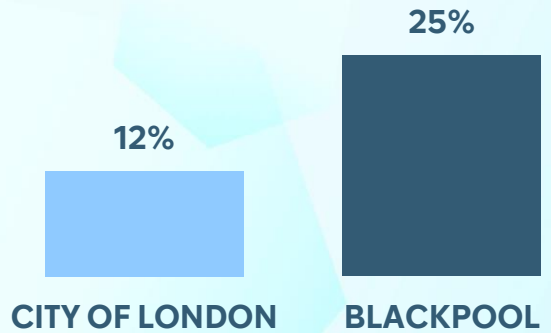
 In England a **smaller proportion but larger number** of people were disabled compared with 2011.

 In Wales a smaller proportion and a smaller number of people were disabled compared with 2011.

Lowest vs highest proportion of disabled people – **by region**



Lowest vs highest proportion of disabled people – **by local area**



Whilst disability is becoming increasingly better understood, identified and categorised, there is still a long way to go as a nation to achieving equality for the disabled community

The disabled community is **marginalised, historically stigmatised, under-represented and under-researched.**



“People are still far too uncomfortable speaking about neurodiversity, I’ve had experiences of people avoiding talking to me about it because they’re so **scared to say the wrong thing**, or worried about learning something that makes them think, ‘**maybe I have some internalised ablism that I need to kind of counteract and deal with.**”

Female, 23, Neurodivergent



Learning about the disabled community offers perspectives that can improve our understanding of ourselves in addition to **better understanding other peoples’ diverse lived experiences**, whether or not we currently identify as disabled.

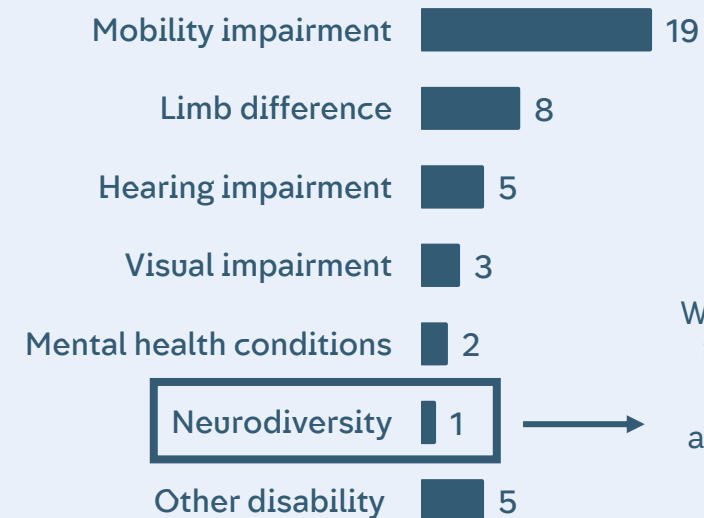
Better understanding disability inclusion and exclusion highlights how the way we interact with each other can improve lives, deepening and broadening our genuine personal connections, in addition to delivering solutions that are more equitable, sustainable and valuable.

Representation of visible disabilities in adverts is much higher than non-visible disabilities

Mirror on the Industry Pt. 3 found that physical disabilities tend to be more frequently represented in advertisements – see chart below. However, this was unsurprising, as physical disabilities often have visual cues that instantly allow the audience to recognise the inclusion.

There is a **greater creative challenge when representing non-visible disabilities**, which will we go into more detail on later in this report. We have a great opportunity as industry not only to create a more inclusive viewing experience for our audiences, but to give society an insight into the lived experience of the vast spectrum of disabilities.

COUNT OF ADVERTS WITH EACH DISABILITY



Whilst the research highlights an increase across the board for different forms of disability in advertising, there is still a **clear under-representation of neurodiversity**.

Only 46% of disabled people have mobility impairments.

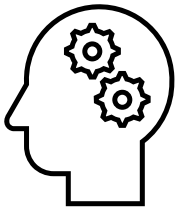


“I’ll park with my blue badge and I get dirty looks, no-one can see my hearing aid and they will make snide comments like ‘what’s he doing there’ or ‘how is he disabled?’. **Not all disabilities are visible**, and people are quick to judge others in my opinion.”

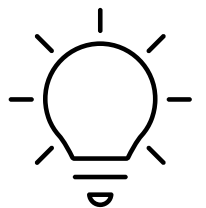


The term disability spans a wide spectrum of conditions, not just physical

This clear **under-representation** of invisible disabilities in adverts, tied with a lack of research, is why we’ve chosen to focus this report specifically on **neurodiversity**.



Our aim, through this report, is to shine a light on this currently marginalised, excluded and commonly stereotyped group; **highlighting the importance and need for advertisers and brands to go beyond physical disability**.



02

What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity refers to the different ways a person's brain processes information

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term used to describe **alternative thinking styles and neurological differences** such as Dyslexia, DCD (Dyspraxia), Dyscalculia, Tourette Syndrome, Autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

When it comes to inclusion, neurodiversity refers to a world where **neurological differences are recognised and respected as other human variations** such as gender, race or sexual orientation. Instead of labelling people with 'deficits' or 'disorders', neurodiversity takes a **balanced view of an individuals unique strengths and challenges**.

Everyone's brain is wired differently, and they have their **own unique way of thinking, interacting and experiencing the world**.



It is estimated that around **1 in 7 people** (more than 15% of people in the UK) are neurodivergent

"Neurodiversity may be every bit as **crucial for the human race** as biodiversity is for life in general. Who can say what form of wiring will be best at any given moment?" **Harvey Blume, The Atlantic, 1998**

It is important to understand and use the correct language and terminology surrounding neurodiversity

When we talk about neurodiversity as a word, we are primarily talking about a **biological fact**. Neurodiversity is **not a perspective, an approach, a belief, a political position, or a paradigm**.

When an individual diverges from the dominant societal standards of “normal” neurocognitive functioning, they don’t “have neurodiversity” - they may use terms like **neurodivergent, neurodistinct** or may refer to having a **neurodifference** or **neurotype**.

Neurodiversity is **not a trait that any individual possesses** or an exclusive club that only some people can join.

Key terminology & definitions

Neurotypical, neuromajority or NT

- Neurotypical, often abbreviated as NT, means having a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of “normal.”
- Neurotypical is the opposite of neurodivergent.
- Neurotypicality is the condition from which neurodivergent people diverge.

Neurominority

A neurominority is a population of neurodivergent people about whom all of the following are true:

1. They share similar forms of neurodivergence.
2. The form of neurodivergence they share is one of those forms that is largely innate and that is inseparable from who they are.
3. The form of neurodivergence they share is one to which the neurotypical majority tends to respond with some degree of prejudice, misunderstanding, discrimination, and/or oppression.

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term used to describe alternative thinking styles and neurological differences

Neurodiversity can take **many forms** – whilst we talk about specific neurodifferences such as Autism and Dyslexia, the reality is that these can **co-occur**.

The following neurodifferences have all been recognised by Employment Tribunals as disabilities: ADHD, autism, dyspraxia, dyslexia and dyscalculia – yet **neurodiversity is not generally seen by the community as the same thing as disability**. Most people with neurodifferences will not label themselves “disabled”. Each case will depend on the facts.

Neurodifferences are **often misdiagnosed as mental health conditions** – opinions differ on whether mental health conditions come under neurodiversity, but because of the impact of exclusion and discrimination on mental health, the two are **often linked**.

Did you know that climate change activist **Greta Thunberg** is autistic and has ADHD?

Did you know that **Billie Eilish**, one of the most successful singers and songwriters, has Tourette Syndrome?

Here are some of the most common forms of neurodiversity:

ADHD

About 4% of the population have ADHD. ADHD affects a person’s ability to focus - it can cause inattention, hyperactivity and impulsiveness. People with ADHD can be some of the most creative members on a team, bringing energy and new approaches to their projects.

Autism

About 2% of the population is autistic. Autism affects how a person perceives the world and interacts and socialises with others, making it sometimes challenging for them to pick up and interpret social cues. Autistic people can be sensitive to lights, noise, touch and smells and are often highly logical and good at absorbing and remembering facts, attention to detail, and recognising patterns.

Dyslexia

About 10% of the population are dyslexic. Dyslexia impacts the way the brain processes information such as reading, writing and spelling. It can cause challenges with processing information quickly, organisation, sequencing, and spoken language. Dyslexic people can be very good at creative thinking, problem solving and verbal communication.

Dyspraxia

About 6% of the population are Dyspraxic. Dyspraxia affects your physical coordination. It can also affect your gross motor skills, such as being able to catch and kick a ball, run and ride a bicycle. Dyspraxic individuals are often creative, determined and really good at developing their own strategies to overcome challenges.

Dyscalculia

About 5% of the population have dyscalculia. Dyscalculia affects an individual’s ability to acquire and use mathematical skills. People with dyscalculia often have strengths such as intuitive and strong strategic thinking, are very creative and have a love of word.

Tourette syndrome

About 1% of the population have Tourette Syndrome. Tourette Syndrome (TS) can cause sudden, uncontrolled, repetitive muscle movements and sounds called “tics”. Stressful situations can make the tics more frequent, prolonged and more pronounced. People with TS can be faster at assembling sounds into words (phonology) and are often high-achieving, creative and empathetic.

People with neurodifferences sometimes possess unique skills and talents, which can vary from person to person

Neurological differences in the way that our brains are wired mean that those who are neurodivergent may find some things challenging that come naturally to others.

However, because of that ability to think differently, they may also find other things easier, or have **unique strengths**, that other people face challenges with.

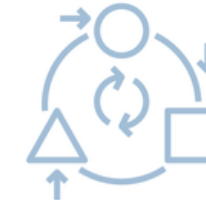
Neurodiversity is about recognising that there is a **wide range of neurological variations in the human brain**, instead of viewing these variations as being “abnormal” or “deficits”.



Hyperfocus



High Energy



Adaptive



Strategic Thinking



Great Sense of Humour



Passionate



Enthusiastic



Love of Words



Detail Orientated



Great Memory



Academically Smart



Intuitive Thinking



Punctual



Reliable



Logical Thinking



Hard-Working

03

Identity//Experience//Challenges

As general awareness increases people are becoming more confident in self-identifying as disabled

In modern times, identifying as disabled is now a way to build community, fight stigma, educate and increase visibility.

There is a now a real movement towards disability (and neurodivergence) being seen as a common human variation like hair colour, and not a 'bad word' to evoke sympathy or fear. Whilst there is significant variations between individual communities, **a key driver of this new confidence has been the move away from person-first language towards identity-first.**

This stems from the Social Model of Disability, which recommends **language that puts the onus on the barriers constructed by society**, rather than implying disability is caused by the person themselves.

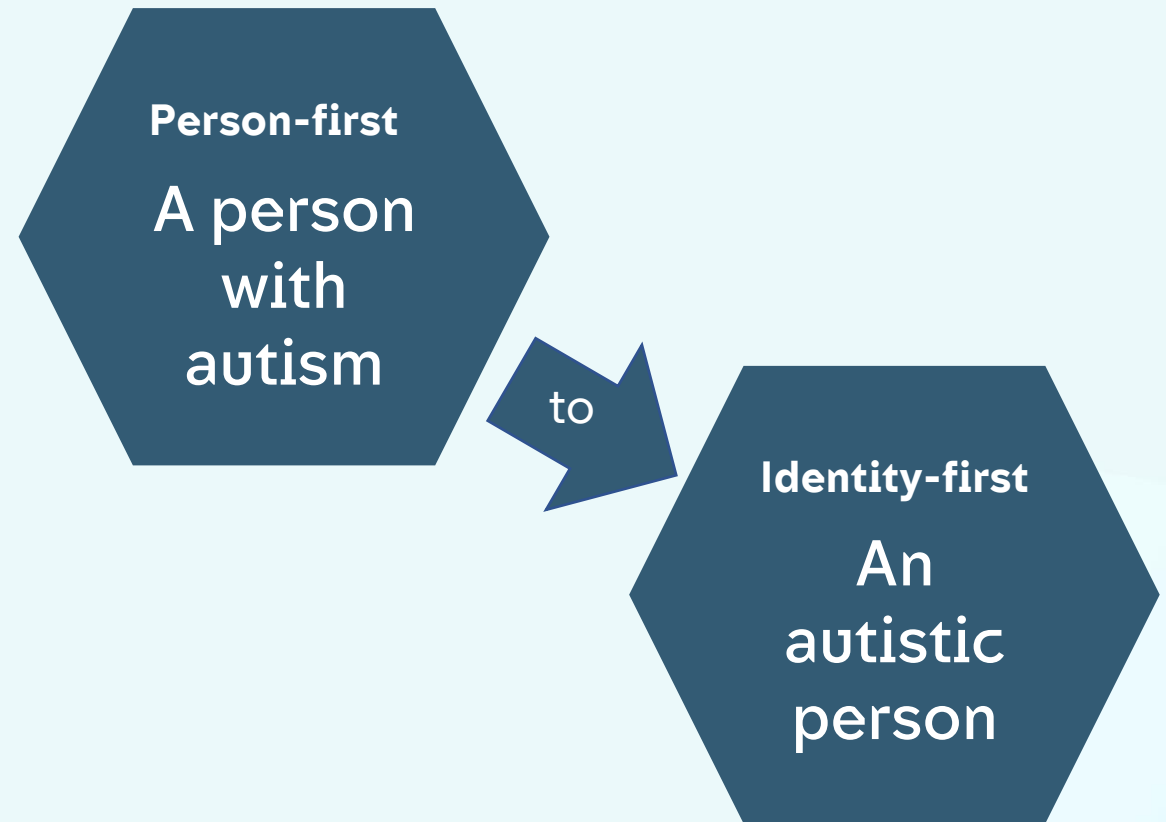
"I do use autism in my identity. I am autistic, not 'a person with autism."

Male / 31 / Autistic / ADHD, Dyslexic / Mental health condition

Language is so important in this space, and identity-first descriptions have been essential to reframing neurodiversity and driving positivity

“Being autistic can be disabling, but changing **the way we talk about neurodivergence can inspire confidence**. “Being autistic” rather than “having autism” **promotes the idea of difference, rather than disability**. You can be diagnosed “as autistic” without needing to use the word autism at all, in my view.”

Nick Ransom, journalist and founder of the Neurodiverse Media Community




Despite positive steps, discrimination surrounding neurodiversity is still rife, often in ways that are disregarded by society as a whole

91%

of our youth community sample said there was a **discrimination issue** for neurodivergent people, with 11% stating it's a major problem


Those who are neurodivergent or know someone who is are **10% more likely** to see discrimination around neurodiversity as a **major problem** in the UK

This discrimination can come in many forms and from many places, usually where people are ignorant of people's lived experiences and feelings. Examples of this identified in our youth research include:



Institutions

Assessment centres and exams feel restrictive often causing neurodivergent individuals to underperform




Bullying

Often invisible to the eye, neurodiversity attracts a lot of torment within schools, with labels such as 'weird' or 'strange' perpetuated



Jokes

Individuals often 'jokingly' use terms such as OCD or autistic to describe themselves or others without considering the real-life experiences of this



Over-stimulation

Society is filled with never-ending stimulation, particularly with the rise of digital media. This overstimulation can be troubling for neurodiverse people

Those who are neurodivergent find society is not built for them in many ways

"I think it mostly just affects me in knowing I'm different and people telling me all my life I'm weird. Also, at school and university I struggled more with the studying part of it."

Female, 22, Neurodivergent

"It has impacted me throughout my life, which as a child was very obvious in social situations. My friends and family understand and (now) appreciate how I can view the world differently than themselves."

Female, 23, Neurodivergent

Most societal constructs are based on the experiences of neurotypical people, which can mean situations that appear to be to be the everyday norm can be a struggle when you are neurodivergent. Our youth community identified three key areas in which this is the case:



Relationships

Building relationships can feel like an uphill battle due to social misinterpretations by others



Education and employment

Processing information differently results in struggles in school and at work



Life responsibilities

Some describe feeling clumsy, or forgetful or feeling overwhelmed by what others deem as ordinary tasks

Neurodiversity negative impact frequency:
(Amongst those neurodivergent)

63%

69%

69%

Stereotyping is also a large contributing factor to the discrimination neurodivergent people face

Stereotyping is a prevalent problem across all minority groups. Our Mirror on the Industry research found that whilst some positive steps had been taken to portray disabled people in advertising in a more positive 'everyman' way, often **portrayal resorts back to the tired old tropes of hero or victim** (if the representation is there at all). With these **stereotypes still being prevalent in media, it's no wonder that they're a big problem in wider society.**

Our youth research identified that those who are neurodivergent or know someone who is are **36pp more likely to think that peddling of stereotypes is a significant contributor to lack of understanding on neurodiversity.** There is therefore **a real perception gap between this group and those who don't know anyone neurodivergent** – they don't encounter these experiences regularly and therefore do not know they're a problem. This allows stereotyping to prevail, and progress in creating a more inclusive society for all to be slow.

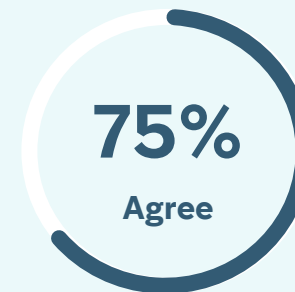
"Stereotypes promote an **outdated understanding of neurodiversity** and often paint neurodivergent people in a negative light. Stereotypes can mean neurodiverse people are socially isolated as some people may make the assumption they do not have the desire for social connections."

Female / 21 /
Neurotypical but knows someone neurodivergent

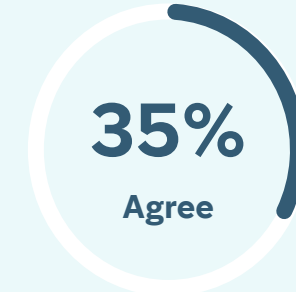
"I've had a lot of **awkward conversations** with people who actively **tell me I'm not autistic** because I don't move or speak in a particular way that they are **prescribed to recognize.**"

Female / 23 /
Neurodivergent

Stereotypes as a contributing factor to poor understanding



Those who are neurodivergent/
know someone who is



Those who aren't neurodivergent
/ don't know anyone who is

Young neurodivergent people are keen to change perceptions and move away from common stereotypes

When discussing the damaging effects of stereotyping, the respondents in our youth research picked several common stereotypes regarding neurodiversity that they would like to see debunked and disregarded in the future. The widespread nature of these stereotypes illustrate how far we need to go to educate society on the true lived experience of neurodivergent people.

Neurodiversity only occurs in boys

DEBUNKED

Whilst everyone presents differently, gender differences can exist in the symptoms that are typically prevalent. E.g. in ADHD, girls are more likely to experience inattentive symptoms than hyperactive behaviours which are more commonly overlooked¹.

People who are neurodivergent are all the same

DEBUNKED

We all sit on a cognitive spectrum. Whilst some people may share the same diagnosis, they will face barriers that are ultimately unique to them² and present in their own unique way. The clue in the word 'diverse'.

Autistic people are socially awkward

DEBUNKED

Autism is a wide spectrum; some autistic people are socially aware (i.e., interested in people, popular culture etc.) whilst some aren't, just like some are good with language and others aren't³, the range of experiences is no different to that of neurotypical people.

People with ADHD are lazy

DEBUNKED

Those with ADHD are not lazy. They will often exert the same, if not more, effort to complete a task than a neurotypical person. Their capabilities can however sometimes prevent them from getting to the finish line first.⁴

People who are dyslexic cannot be academic

DEBUNKED

Those with dyslexia are often no different academically than those who are neurotypical. The difference lies in the fact that reading, writing and remembering tasks can be harder⁵.

Stereotyping also often means that **intersectionality is completely ignored**

“People often have a certain idea of what an autistic person should look like and it’s not usually an adult, definitely not a black woman,”

Female / 28 / Neurodivergent /
Ethnic minority / LGBTQI+

This tendency to stereotype neurodivergent people, and the wider disabled community, means that **intersectionality is often completely ignored**. There are many different identities which combine to inform how a person understands and defines who they are, and for neurodivergent people this is no different – except **society often tries to stereotype them in one way, ignoring other valid lived experiences**.

For example, neurodivergent people come from all ethnic and cultural backgrounds, but this often does not meet what society expects to see, as the quote on the left illustrates. This lack of understanding and consideration can actually lead to further discrimination as the intersection of disability and ethnicity leads to exclusionary behaviour from others.

Ignoring intersectionality means not understanding true lived experiences

“People have made it sound like my partner is some sort of hero for being with someone that is disabled. And people have told me how lucky I am to have a partner because of my conditions.”

Female / 32 / Neurodivergent / Mental health condition / LGBTQI+

Another key example where stereotyping and lack of understanding of intersectionality is prominent is sexuality. Disabled people are often **falsely represented as uninterested in sexuality**, or a burden to their partners. This does **not truly reflect their lives and the rich experiences they have of sexuality and relationships**.

Instead, stereotypes and preconceptions lead to **thoughtless comments, a lack of representation and role models** in society and further feelings of being stigmatised and excluded. Whilst studies suggest more people in the LGBTQI+ community identify as disabled in comparison to heterosexual people, spaces in the UK designed to be inclusive for the LGBTQI+ community **often don't take into account accessibility for disabled people**.

Societal barriers, stereotyping and lack of understanding around neurodiversity leads to feelings of exclusion

The discrimination, societal barriers and lack of understanding of people's everyday lives and experiences that we've highlighted in this chapter all contribute **to an overall feeling of exclusion, isolation and guilt** for many neurodivergent people. They feel forgotten about, underrepresented and deliberately excluded by society – many believe it's an active choice to not make something accessible to all in this day and age.

“I feel forgotten about by society, I feel that they don't care.”

Female / 25 / Neurodivergent / Ethnic minority

75%

of our youth community who are neurodivergent spoke about **feeling isolated** in society. Some mentioned **feelings of guilt for not being able to 'keep up' with others**

“It's a feeling of being unwanted. There are lots of ways to include someone, so exclusion feels like a deliberate choice”

Male / 31 / Autistic / ADHD / Dyslexic

At its core, it's a lack of education that perpetuates discrimination and stereotyping

85%

of our youth community sample said that **lack of education** was a **contributing factor** to society's poor understanding

Over half said lack of education was it was the **main factor**

"In my opinion, the route of ALL issues is lack of education. If people don't understand fully about neurodiversity, then how can they expect to facilitate it?"

Female, 21, Neurodivergent

Although society has made some progress, our youth research has highlighted that there is still **long way to go** and **education is key**. Lack of, or inaccurate media representation, misdiagnosis and lack of institutional visibility were all listed as other contributing factors to society's poor understanding of neurodiversity, but the most common one by far was education.

We found there was a big perception gap between those who were neurodivergent or knew someone who was, and those who weren't and didn't know anyone. With limited education or first hand experience, it's hard to really understand the situation – after all you don't know what you don't know. This is where increased and improved education across society is really key.

Education needs to be improved on many different levels to make a true difference to society

78%

of 16–24-year-olds think that education can have a large impact in people's understanding of neurodiversity

"I think that education is extremely important when it comes to things which affect society. There are millions of neurodivergent people in the world, so why don't we know about it? Why aren't we taught in schools about empathy, respect and love towards one another as a society? It doesn't make any sense to me"

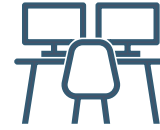
Female / 23 / Neurotypical but knows someone neurodivergent

Our youth research uncovered the strongly held belief that education on neurodiversity and the experiences of neurodivergent people should permeate all aspects of society, beginning with **five key areas**:



SCHOOL

"Looking back to when we were in school, if we had education on neurodiversity, whether in school or from our parents or on TV or in a book, I think there would be a **lot less bullying** and a **lot more compassion** towards neurodiverse children."



WORKPLACE

"We should also ensure that employers are **aware of their responsibilities** when it comes to protecting the rights of neurodiverse employees and providing them with reasonable adjustments where necessary."



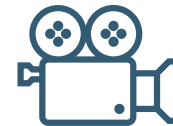
INSTITUTIONS

"Diversity at an institutional level in decision making is **less likely** to produce discriminatory systems."



PERSONAL

"At the individual level, **we can all do our part** to learn more about neurodiversity, challenge our biases and assumptions, and treat neurodivergent individuals with respect and understanding."



MEDIA/BRANDS

"The **media and brands have a responsibility to not feed into stereotypes** and to **inform the wider population** about how people who are neurodiverse experience life differently."

04

Representation in Advertising:
Importance // The Creative Challenge

The media is an instrumental tool in raising awareness, shifting perceptions, and increasing understanding of neurodiversity

The media, and advertising in particular, are widely regarded as being **especially powerful in reflecting, educating and shaping the perceptions of society**. The ad industry therefore has both a **social responsibility and a real commercial opportunity** to do better at representing the experiences of neurodivergent people and create real change. Our youth research found that 3 in 4 young people are more likely to spend money with brands that are diverse and inclusive, so there are tangible benefits to doing so.

95%

of our youth sample who are neurodivergent or know someone who is believe in the **importance of media** in raising awareness and shaping our perceptions vs 80% of those not in this group

“Media is one of the **most immediate and impactful ways to influence our views on societal norms...it can reinforce the message that [disabled people] matter.**”

Madeline Di Nonno, CEO of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

88%

of our youth sample agree the **media** has an **important role** to play in raising awareness, shifting perceptions and increasing understanding of neurodiversity

Representation in media is so important in increasing understanding

For over 7 in 10 young people, representation in TV and film and influencers/celebrities sharing their own personal experiences with neurodiversity has a significant impact on their understanding of it. On top of this, nearly half of our youth sample think brand communication and social media output is significantly impactful. This **really emphasises how important it is that the media devotes time and resource to increasing and improving representation and portrayal** of neurodivergent people.

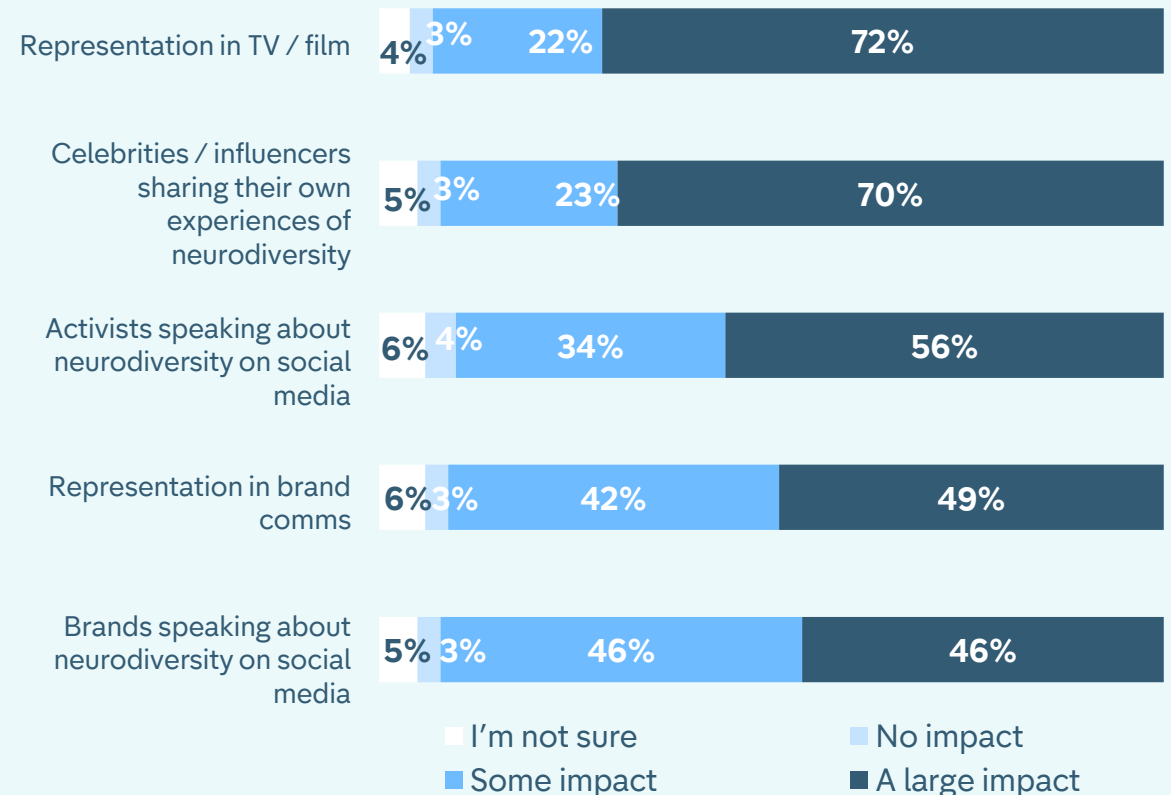
“People’s stories are **humanised through the media**. It’s alright telling people what autism is but until they see an autistic person living and exploring life through that lens, they won’t get it “

Female / 21 / Neurodivergent



of our youth sample agree that **most brands can do more** to raise awareness, shift perceptions and increase understanding of neurodiversity

Impact on understanding of neurodiversity:



It's clear we're not currently doing enough to improve representation and portrayal of both the wider disabled community & neurodivergent people

Our Mirror on The Industry research, which takes an audit of 1000 TV ads in order to measure how well represented minority groups are in TV advertising, **highlighted that disabled people, and particularly those who are neurodivergent, are currently drastically underrepresented**, both in general and in lead roles – meaning there are very few brands leading the charge in this space. Research from OMD also uncovered that 45% of disabled people felt that disability representation was invisible within advertising. Our youth research respondents discussed **how any representation that exists is very limited**, showing only a small snapshot of the vast range of experiences and stories there are to tell. Unsurprisingly, less than 1/3 of these respondents said that the media currently does a good job of representing neurodiversity.

Disabled people
feature in...

4%

of ads

...and play a
lead role in

less than

1/2

of TV ads
they appear in

Neurodivergent people
feature in...

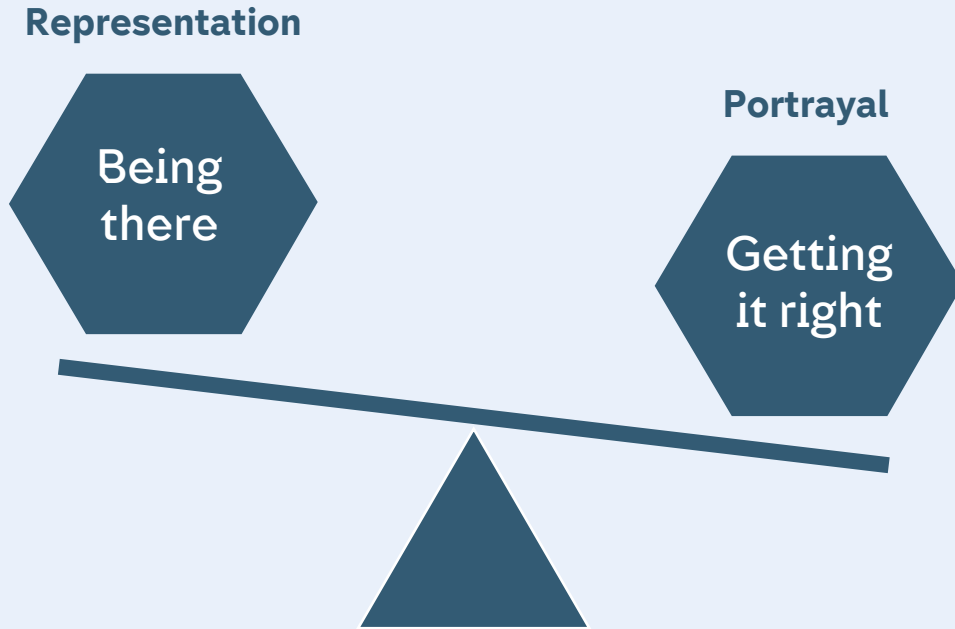
1

single ad

“Neurodiversity is a whole spectrum but really **you only ever see a small snapshot** of a couple of diversities and not a more rounded representation. There's often also a case of it has to be the most extreme case whereas a lot of people have manageable conditions, but it still impacts them, and I don't think you see much representation on that”

Female / 21 / Neurotypical but knows someone neurodivergent

Authentically portraying neurodivergent people is a creative challenge



Accurate portrayal and representation is key - inappropriate representation keeps **exclusion normalised** despite increased visibility.

It's also important to acknowledge this problem is two fold - it's about improving representation **and** portrayal. Representation is simply being there in an ad at all, whilst portrayal is getting it right, and being authentically inclusive.

As highlighted in the previous chapter, tired stereotypes and tropes prevail when it comes to representing neurodivergent people – and this points to the creative challenge that arises when trying to portray neurodiversity in ads. Portraying invisible disabilities is difficult - how do you authentically portray someone's lived experience in a 30 second ad without the ability to use quick visual cues?

Stereotypes aren't always intended to be negative - they're shortcuts and point to a collective understanding of something. However, when it comes to neurodiversity, the common stereotypes are tired, overused and point to poor understanding and a lack of knowledge.

"Their (advertisers) role in representing neurodivergent people is essential because an ad that is properly done with the right images and participation of neurodivergent people can change the way you see things."

Female / 22 / Neurotypical but knows someone who is neurodivergent

Just because it's hard doesn't mean we can shy away from it - it's seen as our responsibility as an industry to improve and embrace D&I

Our Mirror on The Industry research highlighted how ads are no longer expected just to sell products - **they are expected to look at the cross section of our society and show and help drive compassion, empathy and unity.** In fact, nearly half of all our quant respondents and the majority of our minority groups agreed that ads could play a major role in healing the divisions in our society, by representing the unrepresented.

Stating that it's hard, or a creative challenge, is no longer a valid excuse – we are seen as the creative people who should know how to do it. Therefore, **doing nothing is not seen as the acceptable neutral option.** By doing nothing ads are seen as accepting the status quo, reinforcing existing privileges and exclusions – we must instead try hard to push boundaries, and work harder to reflect the full extent of society.

“Different brands play a crucial role for neurodivergent people. They influence the public perception. Also, they teach to the public what it means for a neurodivergent person and show different perceptions and attitude towards neurodivergent individuals.”

Male / 21 / Neurotypical but knows someone neurodivergent

70%

of our youth sample agree
'I usually notice when there is neurodiversity within adverts'

“Look in more depth at the makeup of our society - show more compassion, empathy and unity. Represent the unrepresented.”

Attempting to lead the way and create change in this space can be daunting, but there are steps we can take

The fear of getting it wrong and an ad being met with backlash is a **big blocker to progression in this space**. It's important to remember that even if you've done your utmost to ensure a campaign is nailing representation and capturing the most authentic portrayal, you're never going to please everyone. However, there are some **simple steps we can take to feel confident in our ads** and the good progress they're trying to make:

1

**Anticipate,
don't avoid**

We need to anticipate backlash – rather than just avoiding taking part. Brands and agencies need to anticipate, not just react to, any backlash through a full strategy and decide in advance how they will approach negative publicity.

2

**Account for
the
extremes**

Brands should not be deterred by 'extremes'. Generally the loudest people on social media are often the most extremes, which is why sometimes it feels as if we are more divided than we actually are.

3

**Action
insight &
test
execution**

Work with the right teams, build on insights and test executions. Having diverse team, working with relevant experts, investing in consumer insights, selecting the right creative agencies, and testing executions with target audiences can avoid costly mistakes.

If you get it right, the results can be great

In 2021, McCain partnered with the charity Family Fund to shine a spotlight on families with disabled children and the importance of mealtimes together. The ads showcased Sensory Processing Disorder in an authentic and sensitive way, by following a little boy called Kai, which resulted in an extremely successful campaign with lots being raised for Family Fund.

When we tested the ad with our youth community they praised it for:



Relatability

The heart-warming storyline wasn't only focused on Kai's experience but also on home, family and sharing meals, which everyone can connect with



Inclusivity

The portrayal of different experiences such as Kai's sensory processing disorder allows more people who haven't been seen to be seen



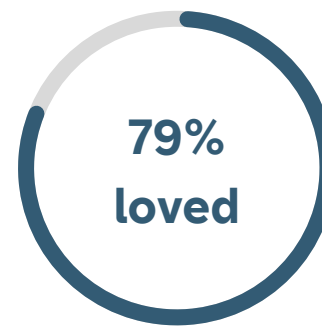
Getting to the point

The ad felt fresh as it was short and sweet



Staying on brand

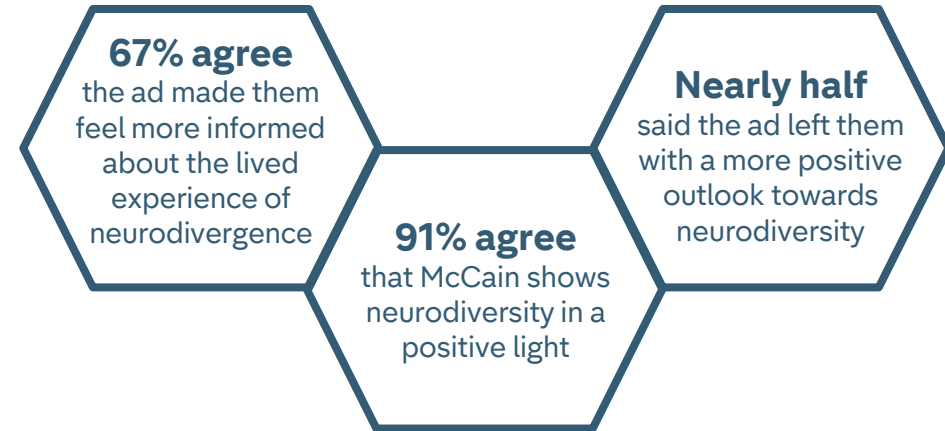
The partnership between the charity and brand felt genuine as McCain's main demographic is probably families and so felt true to the brand's ethos



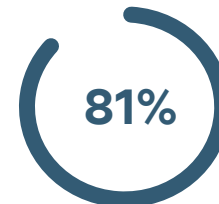
The campaign had a hugely positive impact on our youth community, with **79%** loving the ad.



The campaign highlights how well good ads can **educate** and shift **perceptions**:



The strength of the ad **also improved perceptions towards the brand**, showing the commercial benefits of embracing D&I as well.



agreed the ad gives them a more positive view of McCain

"I liked how it **showed something positive** that McCain are doing instead of just showing a product. It felt **authentic** and **showed real people** rather than actors"

05

What Brands Can Do

Brands need to better design for disability inclusion

Designing for disability inclusion is critical from both societal and commercial perspectives. **Advertising needs to ensure that everyone can perceive** (read, see or hear) all the key messages that are important to the potential customer. This is often not the case on television or when any videos are used as marketing material, and they are not made accessible.

In OMD's Real Britain Research, participants gave feedback about being excluded by design or by advertising and marketing. Respondents talked about the following:

1. **The format of advertising not being accessible**
2. **Communications having barriers they experienced**
3. **The aspect of representation in advertising**



ONLY
1 in 5
disabled experiences of buying or using media are fully inclusive

"Very few TV adverts contain any form of audio description, many don't even mention the products name, so **I am often oblivious as to what is being advertised.**"

Ignoring disabled audiences or getting representation wrong will come at increasing cost to businesses



"Ask disabled people 'what do you need from our store?' **if you exclude us you exclude our money as well**"

Female / 65 / Long-term condition / Mobility impairment / Mental health condition / LGBTQI+

Consumer expectations around inclusive considerations are rising, both within the disabled community and beyond it. This is increasing demand and consumer desire to be able to more easily differentiate genuine inclusive features. This is being supported on the supply side by falling costs and increased speed and ease of creating needs-aligned inclusive solutions and services.

91%

agree...

'If I have a negative experience in connection to my disability or access needs, I will **actively avoid** using a business or brand again'

To get it right, brands need to engage with neurodiversity and achieve accessibility on a holistic level

Whilst media representation is key to driving inclusion and increasing understanding of neurodiversity, brands also need to consider how they can engage with the neurodiverse community in other forms, at an overall level.

Our youth community felt brands should focus not just on marketing but also on **achieving accessibility at all levels** throughout their business, including...

- ✓ **Inclusive product design**, factoring the needs of all types of people e.g. Nike's hands-free shoes
- ✓ User-friendly websites, **ensuring digital accessibility** for everyone e.g. Patagonia.com
- ✓ **Inclusive hiring and work policies** e.g. P&G

*"Brands should have inclusion employees and **inclusion policies to ensure people who are neurodivergent are represented** within their organisation. If brands are only interested in representing neurodiversity to be accepted in the political climate or to make money then it's not an authentic pursuit of change." - Female, 24, prefers not to disclose"*

79%

of respondents in OMD's research said that they have had experiences they deemed not fully accessible over the last 3 years

OMD found that core agency categories' interactions with disabled consumers are currently not where they need to be.

"Disabled people deserve the same chance as everyone else to look and feel good. But **inaccessible products, shops, and websites – along with a lack of representation – mean disabled people can end up forgotten** by the fashion ad beauty industry."

Warren Kirwan, Head of Communications at isability quality charity Scope

But despite this...there are some **examples of brands getting it right:**

Diverse Representation

Adidas partnered with model and down-syndrome advocate Ellie Goldstein for their Impossible is Nothing initiative (Ellie has also modelled for Gucci, Vogue Italia, Victoria's Secret, and other popular brands)



Authentic Support

Proctor & Gamble celebrated neurodiverse talent with the hashtag #uniqueandunited underpinning their recruitment initiative to globally hire more neurodiverse individuals and create a more inclusive workspace.



Case Study: Lucy & Yak

Following on from their popular 2021 campaign and ongoing work with neurodivergent creators, they wanted to keep the conversation going with a collection that resonated with their community, and a platform that inspired people to share their own stories over Neurodiversity Celebration Week and beyond.

They call it: **Everybody & Everymind**, a celebration of neurodivergent experiences within their community – curated, created and inspired by our neurodivergent customers, creators and staff.

They invited the community to shape the collection with feedback on everything from the fabrics and shapes to the colours and fits of existing Yaks – to make sure the collection contained the most **sensory-friendly clothes** possible.

Resident artist and upcycler Sarah Caulfield (who herself is neurodivergent), then worked her magic, creating around 20 illustrations that each **touched on a different neurodivergent experience** such as **overstimulation, masking and burnout**.

Half of the profits from the collection will be donated to ADHD Foundation, the neurodiversity charity, the UK's leading neurodiversity charity.



They are also introducing **sensory friendly shopping sessions** across their network of shops. On the 17th of every month, each space will be adjusted to create a welcoming shopping atmosphere for neurodivergent customers, from sensory friendly lightning to more considered music choices and more.

Comfy Fits, Expressive Clothes And Inclusive Culture

Free your mind

A much-loved design used in our previous campaign championing Neurodiversity Celebration Week 2021, with a refreshed rainbow palette.

Spaced out

Inspired by the ADHD experience of 'zoning out'.

Temporarily out of service

Bringing to life the feeling of autistic burnout – a state of mental, physical and emotional exhaustion.

Oversharing

The neurodivergent mind communicates differently. It's often known to interrupt, go quiet, monologue/info dump, over-explain, and not read some contexts. It likes to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, which can be said to anyone in any situation.

A different kind of magic

'Different not less'. Being neurodivergent simply means thinking differently to the dominant neurotype, and despite the stigma, this difference is something to celebrate.

"We hope customers will be able to **resonate** with the collection, **feel seen** and **be uplifted** by it."

Sarah Caulfield, Lucy & Yak House Artist & Designer



Case Study: Monzo

In 2022, Monzo commissioned a survey of people living with ADHD across the UK, to learn more about the extra costs caused by their condition and how it affects the way they manage their money, in a bid to better support such customers and become more inclusive and accessible.

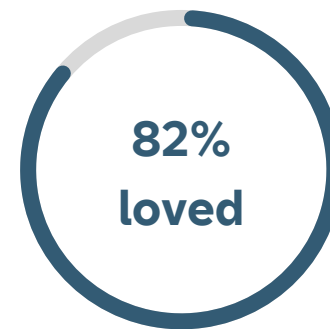
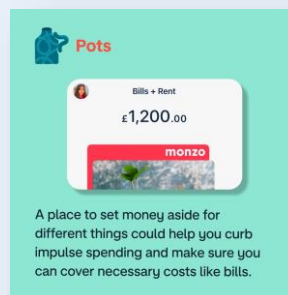
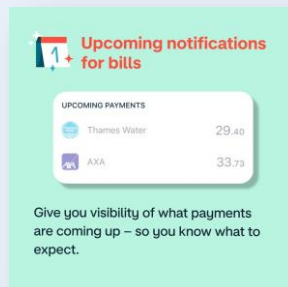
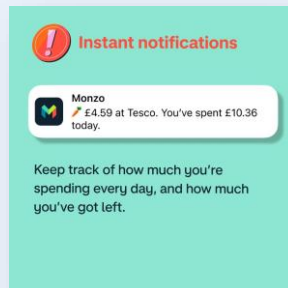
Key Findings

If you have ADHD you're 4x more likely to frequently impulse spend. Mobile banking features like instant notifications and seeing your balance update in real time can help, simply by giving you more visibility over what's happening with your money. 79% of people living with ADHD we spoke to rated the ability to bank on their phone as very helpful or helpful.

If you have ADHD, you're almost three times more likely to miss bill payments. Setting calendar reminders and having bills that automatically renew can be helpful, but it can also be handy to have visibility on future payments in case you need to move money around in time. 77% of people with ADHD said they found banking app notifications about upcoming bills very helpful or helpful.

The difficulties that people with ADHD can face with impulse spending and managing bills can lead them into debt. 76% of respondents with ADHD said that having a place to set aside money automatically, like a Pot, is very helpful or helpful.

If you have ADHD, you're twice as likely to suffer from anxiety as a result of managing your personal finances. The extra costs of living with ADHD don't just affect your wallet. 76% of respondents said that being in debt and feeling out of control of your spending it causes them mental health issues, compared to 38% of those without ADHD.



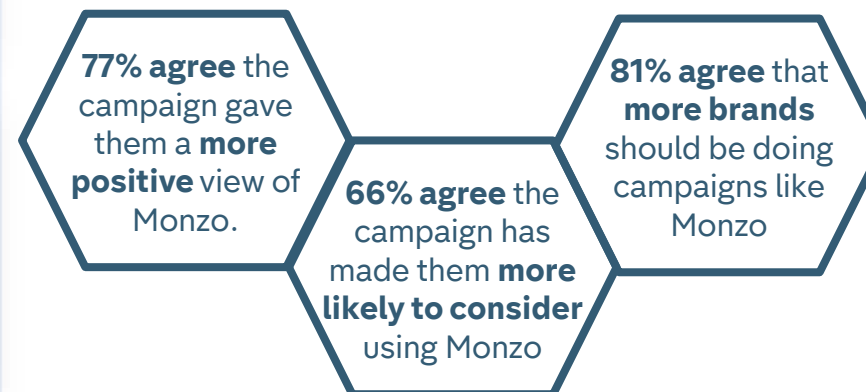
The campaign had a hugely positive impact on our youth community, with **82%** loving the ad and over **61%** agreeing that the campaign made them feel better about the world and more informed about the lived experience of neurodivergence.

The campaign was praised especially for its **accessible design** and **clear solution-driven/high level information**.

The campaign left **2 in 5 with a more positive outlook** around neurodiversity. Those who don't have personal experience with neurodiversity were **23%** more likely to be left with a **positive outlook toward neurodiversity** having seen the campaign.

58% agree... The campaign has made them **more informed about the lived experience of neurodivergence**

"I didn't realise that ADHD had struggles with money, perhaps keeping track of it and knowing what's coming up. I think these instant notifications and upcoming bills could be really helpful for someone with ADHD" – Female / 20 / Neurotypical but knows someone neurodivergent

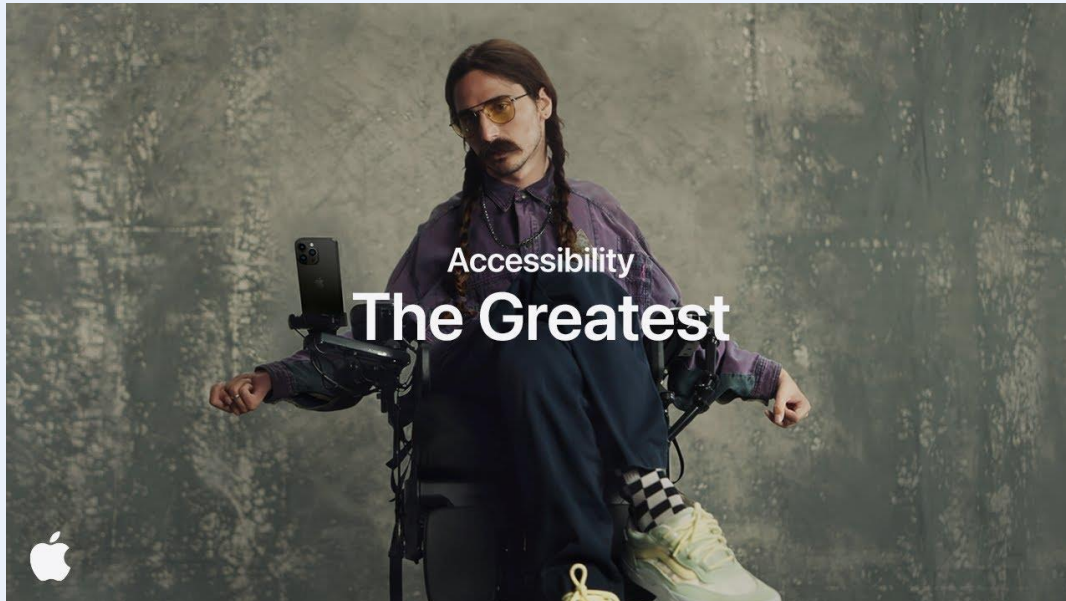
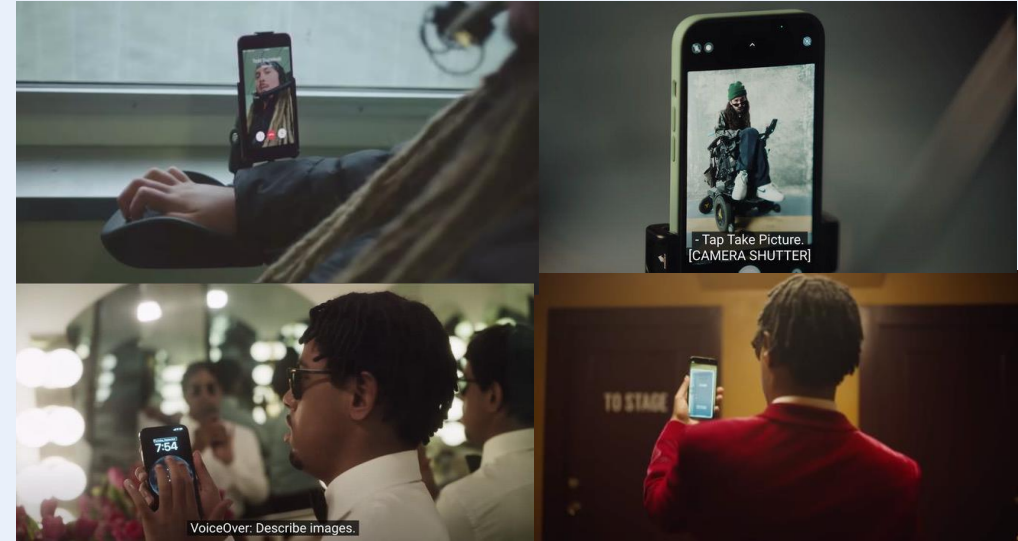


"Although I don't have lived experience with ADHD, I think it's great how Monzo would look into offering advice for people with ADHD. **I haven't seen any other brands doing so**" - Female, 24 / Neurotypical and doesn't know anyone neurodivergent

Case Study: Apple

In November 2022, ahead of International Day of Persons with Disabilities (3rd Dec), Apple kicked off a powerful new ad campaign that **aimed to empower users with disabilities** and highlight how Apple products make life easier for people across the world every day.

The tech giant unveiled a new ad titled **'The Greatest'**, designed to spotlight the various accessibility features of its devices, including screen reading and screen magnifying capabilities, noise recognition features, door detection and Siri voice commands.



“A positive example of brand representation including neurodivergent people is an Apple ad [...] I think that ad was **one of the most inclusive ads I’ve ever seen and I** and it was also well promoting the brand

I think that to represent neurodiversity positively, **more ads like this should be done**, where **neurodivergent people are seen as regular people with just different ways of coping with life’s problems”**

– Female / 22 / Neurotypical but knows someone neurodivergent

It is extremely important for brands to outwardly demonstrate their authentic connection to neurodiversity

Our youth community said that they **notice** when brands are engaging authentically and **7 in 10** can tell the difference between a brand that truly stands for something versus one which simply does the bare minimum.



*It's important for brands to represent neurodiversity **actively** and **accurately** in their communications*



"I think in general more representation of neurodiversity is positive and can **increase education** and **access to resources** that might make people aware of their own neurodiversity. However, I think it's really important **not to use the representation of neurodiverse people to sell a product** - that feels **tokenistic** and a bit uncomfortable, like virtue signalling." – Female / 17 / Neurotypical but knows someone neurodivergent



"It is very important for brands to represent neurodiversity in their ads and campaigns because it makes people who are not usually represented **feel seen** and that the product is for everyone. It also gives a **more positive view of the brand** as it works towards equality. If people agree with a **brand's values**, they are more likely to buy from it so it **benefits consumers and the brand itself.**" – Female / 23 / Neurotypical but knows someone neurodivergent



"I think brands play an important role in **shaping public consciousness**. When a wider variety of people are represented in brands it can help to address and **normalise** their place in society. The key area of improvement would be to try and convey more **meaningful representations.**" – Female / 19 / Neurotypical but knows someone neurodivergent

OMD's Real Britain Research highlights the need for frequency in designing more inclusive comms planning. Brands should allow disability representation to become the norm in comms and part of creative approach every time. Brands should **not just 'tick a box' and move on.**



06

Case Study //
Vanish & "Me, My Autism & I"

Winner of Channel 4's Diversity in Advertising Award 2022

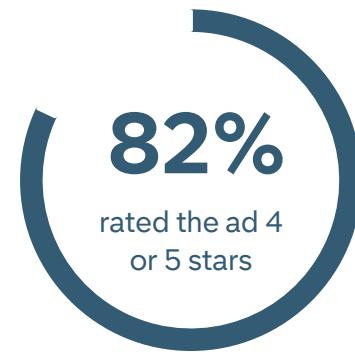
The Channel 4 Diversity In Advertising Award offers an annual £1 million airtime prize for a brand who best responds to a creative brief encouraging greater representation of diverse communities in advertising.

The 2022 brief encouraged brands to tackle the on-going lack of authentic portrayal and representation of Visible or Non-Visible Disabilities, to which Vanish & creative agency Havas London responded with a powerful and moving idea, created in partnership with charity Ambitious about Autism, to help girls be seen as part of a broader public understanding of autism. The **'Me, My Autism & I'** campaign, shot by Oscar-winning director Tom Hooper, launched on Friday 31st March 2023, as part of World Autism Acceptance Week.



73%¹ of autistic people rely on familiar clothing to regulate their senses and help them navigate the world. The campaign follows a day in the life of a 15-year-old autistic girl Ash – cast alongside her real family and best friends – and her elemental relationship with her favourite hoodie, which was central to the bespoke script. The aim of the campaign was to nurture a conversation that breaks down myths and broadens the public's understanding of autism through sharing powerful personal stories and presenting an authentic and evocative portrayal of living with autism.

Further to this, it shines a light on autistic women and girls to increase awareness of the gender gap in autism diagnosis. **Currently autistic girls are three times less likely to receive a diagnosis than boys**².



The campaign had a hugely positive impact on our youth community, with **82%** rating the ad 4 or 5 stars (5= I loved it).

It also landed really positively amongst those who identify as neurodivergent* - **"I felt so seen** in this ad as an autistic person [...] I'm so glad people recognise our needs and are starting to see them **in a less negative light.**" – Female / 21 / Neurodivergent

The ad was praised for its informative, eye-opening, unique and inclusive nature. Respondents felt that through its accurate and realistic portrayal, the ad was successful in raising awareness of autism, helping to break stereotypes/reduce stigma and liked how it normalised neurodivergent lifestyles and experiences.

"I really liked the ad. It was a great way to showcase neurodiversity and **bring attention** to this idea. It is something that **doesn't get much recognition or awareness** and not enough people are aware of it." Female / 21

"I thought this was a **really powerful ad**, it demonstrated the everyday struggles or those with autism in a **natural** way. Not only showing those impacts on the individual themselves but on those around them." Female / 21 / Knows someone who is neurodivergent



"It's quite **subtle** but still shows the everyday difficulties for someone with autism. The sensory overload and the need for familiarity, and just the general overwhelmingness of life. It just **told it really well** and was **hard-hitting but in a good way**" Female / 21 / Neurodivergent

The campaign was successful in shifting perceptions, raising awareness and boosting understanding of autism, particularly amongst women and girls

Over half of our youth community said the ad changed their **outlook towards autism in a positive way**, largely due to the **portrayal of autism in a realistic and positive light**. Respondents felt that the campaign offered **accurate insight** into the reality of an autistic person and was subsequently **eye-opening**, leading to **increased understanding and education** around autism.

The campaign was particularly praised for its **focus and representation of autism in women and girls**, with many feeling that this is something that is under-represented in the media.

"I like how it looks at autism in girls as this is **not something I have seen before in an advert** and is not spoken about much in general." Female / 17

"I realised that **Autism in girls is probably a lot more prominent than I ever realised.**" Female / 20 / Knows someone who is neurodivergent

"It made me feel happy to see autism awareness in young girls because it's **something we don't see often** especially amongst women who are harder to diagnose." Female / 17

"I love that that it actually **bought awareness to autism with females**, because this has been something that has **not been shown in the media and there is not enough awareness around girls autism.**" Female / 19 / Knows someone who is neurodivergent

79%
of our youth community agreed that **the ad made them more informed about the lived experiences of autism** – with 47% strongly agreeing

"It teaches you a lot about **different signs of autism** but from the perspective of the autistic person so I could see how many triggers she had and how chaotic normal things can seem to her." Female / 19 / Knows someone who is neurodivergent

"I like how the advert **explained how Autism can affect females** and show in what ways this could be. For example it could be **overstimulating, removal of familiar objects, aggressive outbursts or mood swings and cleverness.**" Female / 21 / Knows someone who is neurodivergent

"I like the advert makes me know the experiences of people with a neurodiversity such as autism, **how things as simple as not getting a garment to dress them out of control, how noise can stun them, how the art of drawing calms them down, it's good these ads make us live the reality of autism.**" Male / 20 / Knows someone who is neurodivergent

"I can do more to help people if I am **aware of their needs.**" Female / 20 / Knows someone who is neurodivergent

Our youth community felt that the **'tense' tone** and nature of the ad helped to raise awareness and further increase understanding of autism, by **"helping the viewer to better understand the difficulties people with autism and their families experience."**

Respondents also **felt inspired** by the ad, indicating that it **encouraged self-reflection, a shift in mindset** and the **desire to want to learn more about autism in girls.**



"I felt **inspired to learn more about autism in girls** and to be more receptive of this in people around me." Female / 20 / Knows someone who is neurodivergent



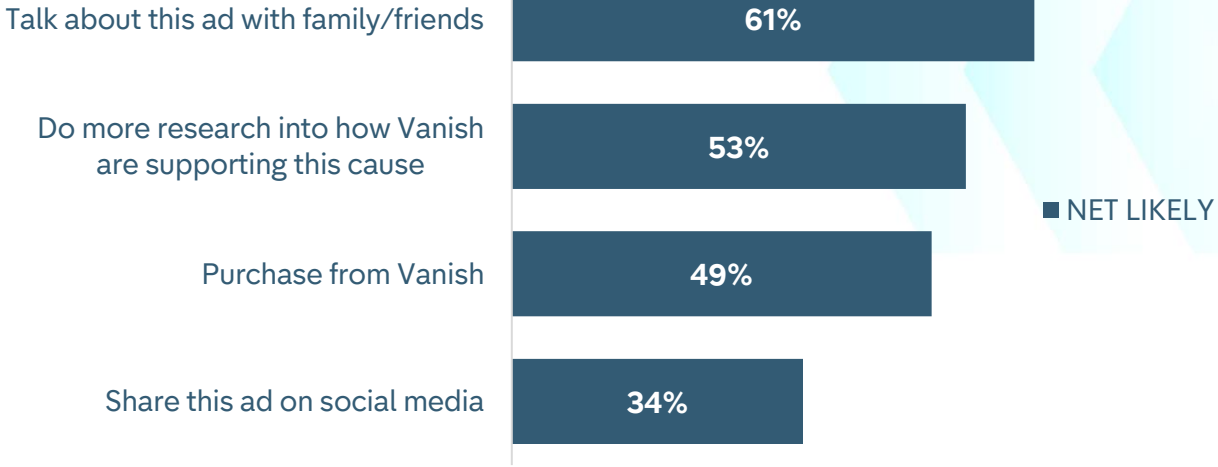
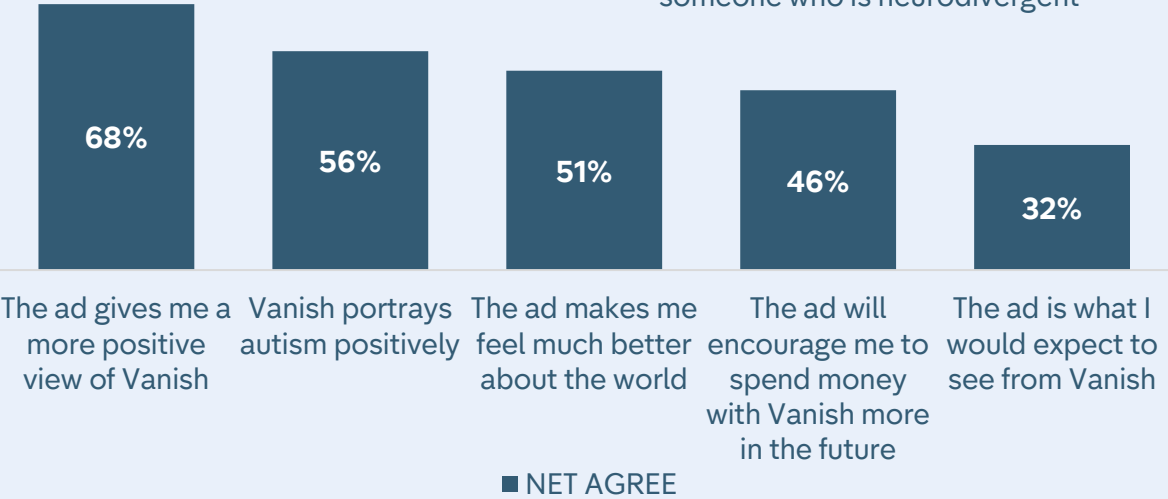
The campaign has had a positive impact on Vanish as a brand

Overall, **68%** of our youth community agreed that the ad had given them a more positive view of Vanish, with over a third (37%) strongly agreeing. Many praised Vanish’s commitment as a brand to shining a light on an under-represented group, along with helping to boost understanding and raise awareness of neurodiversity and autism in particular.

“I feel more positive **knowing that this brand is helping people with neurodiversity and helping to educate the population.**” Male / 20 / Knows someone who is neurodivergent

“It’s good to see **brands using their platforms for good.**” Female / 19 / Knows someone who is neurodivergent”

“I like to know that **there are brands concerned about including and educating about autism.**” Female / 19 / Knows someone who is neurodivergent



The ad proved a **talking point** for our youth community amongst family and friends, with over a third (34%) saying they are **likely to share** the ad on social media.

Positive brand actions also emerged, with 49% of our youth community likely to **actively purchase from Vanish** as a result of seeing the ad and over half likely to do **further research** into how Vanish are supporting this cause.



Key takeaways for brands

Representation Matters

Media Is Powerful

Media and brands play an important role in raising awareness, informing the wider public and changing perceptions.



Diversity Broadens Consumer Base

75% of our youth community are more likely to support brands that value and prioritise **diversity** and **inclusivity**.



Beware Of Stereotyping

Representation needs to be **holistic**. The experience of the neurodiverse community are multi-dimensional - both be joyful and challenging, and thus brands must be mindful of how they are portraying minority groups of people and avoid portraying stereotyped **tropes** and **fragments** of the people's real lives.



*This [neurodiverse representation] would get them **more business** and give a wide variety of people **more choice** in what/where to buy from as they can **see themselves** represented in the brand's customer base.*

- Female / 21 / Neurotypical and doesn't know anyone neurodivergent

Authenticity Matters

Beware Of Performative Activism

Our youth community can tell when a brand is acting with genuine intentions or woke-washing. Therefore it is vital for representation to be grounded in **informed storytelling** and **authentic voices**.



Inclusivity Means Targeting All

Brands shouldn't necessarily focus their advertising on the *few*, but make sure it's suitable for **ALL**. Develop products that are inclusively designed and assessable by all - at the end of the day, **everyone is a potential consumer**.



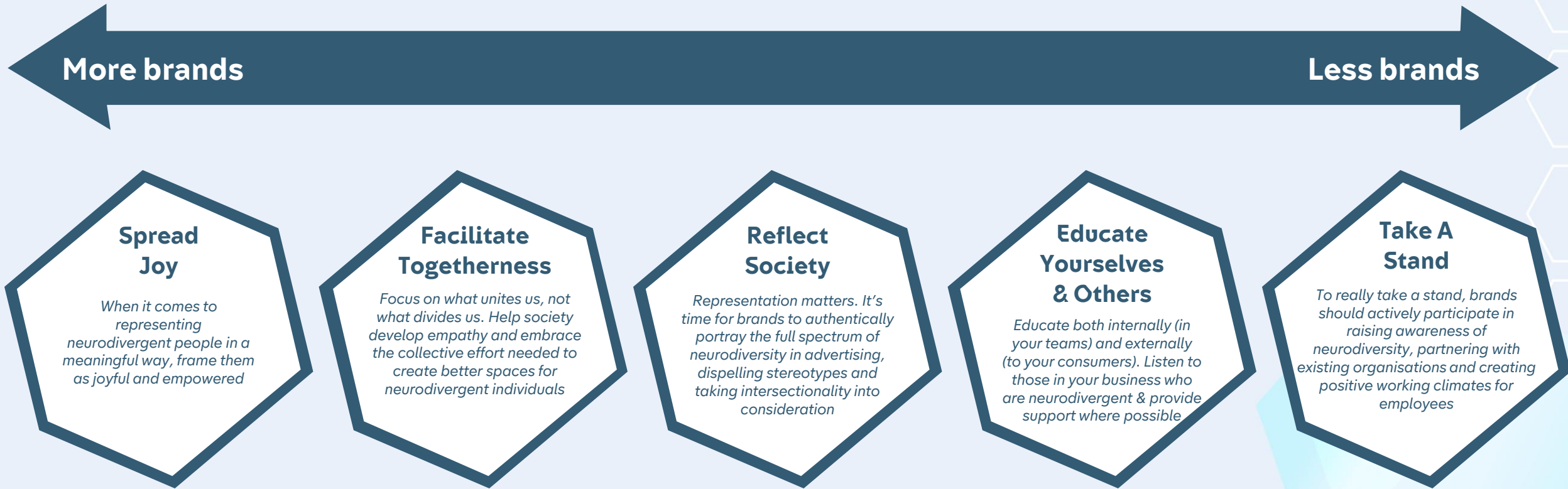
Reflect Values In Business Operations

Customer loyalty and strong relationships with brands are built on authentic **shared values**. This extends across all parts of a business, beyond public-facing communication. In a competitive landscape, this is an opportunity for brands to **distinguish themselves** through inclusive & diverse employment opportunities, workplaces, policies, products, websites etc.



What does this mean for brands?

At Channel 4 we have a marketing with meaning spectrum, to help brands who are considering creating more purposeful advertising on that journey. So how does everything we've learnt about neurodiversity impact brands, and where on the spectrum could brands get most involved?



Thank You

For more information please contact:

Rebecca Hollister: rhollister@channel4.co.uk

Sam Cannons: scannons@channel4.co.uk

Katya Des-Etages: kdes-etages@channel4.co.uk

For more resources & support please visit:

<https://www.channel4.com/4viewers/help-support>

For more information on OMD UK's Real Britain Series please contact:

Laura Rowe: laura.rowe@omd.com

