

Inclusive Design: A Practical Guide

Diversity in marketing is talked about. Inclusive design is practiced.
We show you how to tell the difference.



**Every visual
you publish is
telling someone
whether they
belong in the
story or *not*.**



Featured Experts

Nefise Tasdelen

Founder of Social Island UK



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INCLUSIVE DESIGN: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Real inclusion isn't a campaign. It's a perspective.

A thought leader's take on what separates performative representation from the kind that actually reshapes how audiences imagine possibility.



Social Island

Nefise Tasdelen

Founder of Social Island UK



The biggest difference between a company pretending to be diverse and one that genuinely cares is **intention** — and **consistency**.



Nefise Tasdelen
Founder of Social Island UK



When a company is **pretending**, diversity appears as a visual gesture — a campaign, a photoshoot, a moment designed to signal awareness.



When a company **genuinely cares**, representation becomes part of the narrative of the brand itself.

WHERE TO LOOK?

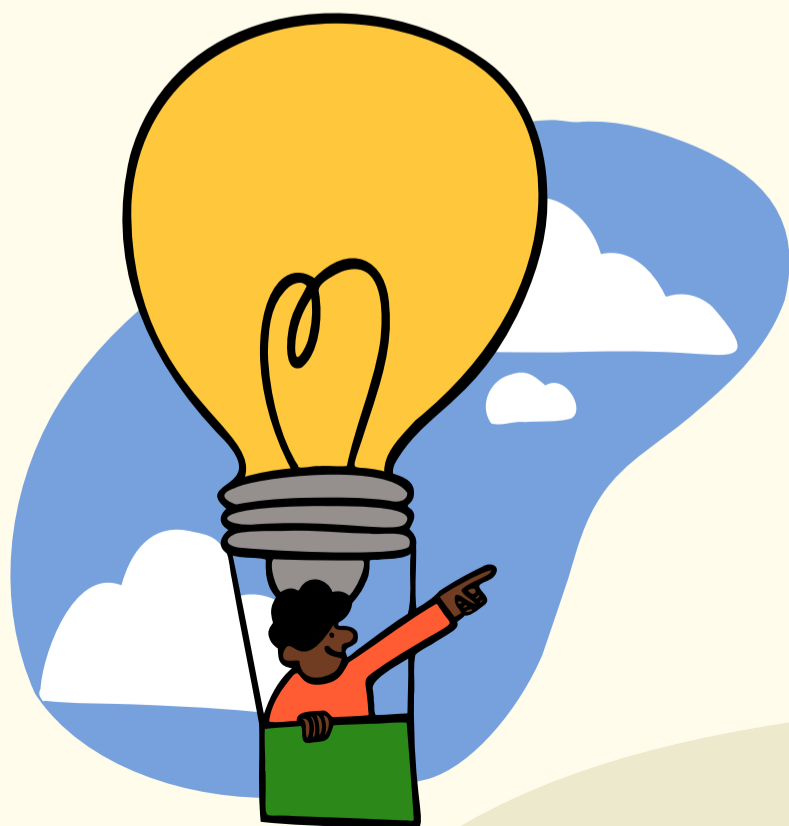


- ★ **Who is positioned as a leader?**
- ★ **Whose voices are quoted as experts?**
- ★ **Whose perspectives are shaping the story?**

What stands out is when representation moves beyond visibility — and into **authority**.

Many campaigns include diverse faces. But they are often shown as **supporting characters** rather than decision-makers.

When someone from an underrepresented background is portrayed as the strategist, the founder, the expert driving the story forward — **that challenges the subtle narratives we often see in media about who holds knowledge and leadership.**



Nefise Tasdelen

Founder of Social Island UK



When a campaign positions someone as an expert rather than simply part of the background, it reshapes how audiences imagine possibility.

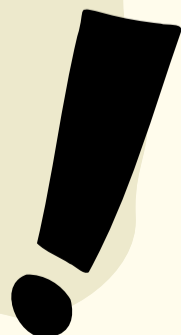
People from multi-cultural or immigrant backgrounds are too often represented only through **narratives of hardship or survival.**

Those stories are real and important — but they shouldn't be the only lens through which a community is portrayed.

Communities are also spaces of creativity, ambition, leadership, humour, and innovation.

WHAT MEANINGFUL REPRESENTATION REFLECTS:

The **successes**, the **aspirations**, the **everyday moments**, and the **leadership** that exists within those communities — *not just the hardship.*



Nefise Tasdelen

Founder of Social Island UK



As someone who grew up navigating different cultures and environments, I know how limiting it can feel when stories about your community only highlight struggle — and not the full spectrum of possibility.



Performative inclusion is revealed when representation feels disconnected from the rest of the brand's identity.



Nefise Tasdelen
Founder of Social Island UK

If inclusion appears only in one campaign but isn't reflected in the brand's leadership, storytelling, or the people positioned as experts — the message quickly feels **surface level**.



Audiences today are incredibly perceptive. They can sense when something is designed to signal awareness rather than reflect genuine understanding.

WHAT AUTHENTIC INCLUSION LOOKS & FEELS LIKE:

- ✓ Quieter.
- ✓ More integrated.
- ✓ Not announced.
- ✓ **Embedded in the way a brand thinks and communicates.**



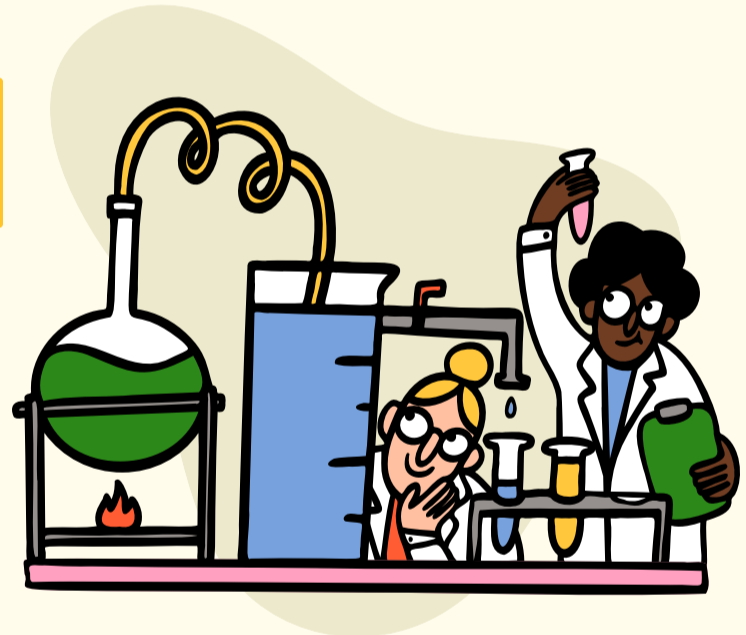
Representation shouldn't stop at visual presence. It should show people as active participants in the story.



Nefise Tasdelen
Founder of Social Island UK

WHAT RESPECTFUL REPRESENTATION MEANS IN PRACTICE:

Portraying individuals *not only* as part of a demographic — but as professionals, leaders, creators, and decision-makers.



WHERE IT COMES FROM:

Curiosity and research.

Designers who take the time to understand the communities they are portraying are more likely to avoid stereotypes — and more likely to create visuals that feel authentic rather than assembled.

The more diverse the perspectives involved in shaping a design, the more likely the outcome is to resonate with a wider range of people.



Nefise Tasdelen
Founder of Social Island UK

THE SHIFT THIS REQUIRES:

Moving inclusion upstream — into the creative process itself, not just the final output.

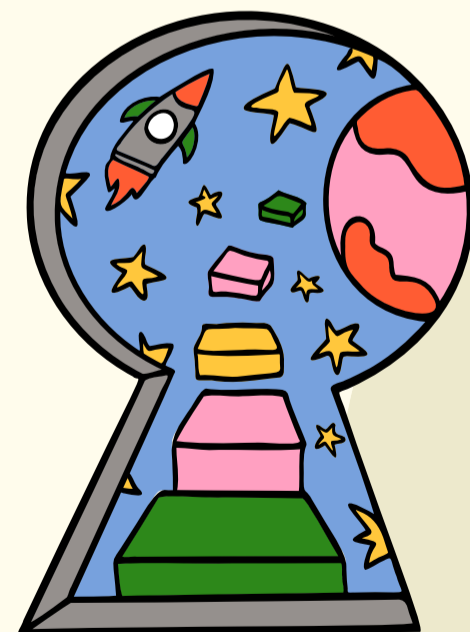
When different lived experiences shape the work from the beginning, representation becomes less about ticking boxes and more about telling stories that feel real and meaningful.

THE BROADER OPPORTUNITY:

Inclusive design encourages brands to think more carefully about who their audience truly is — and whose experiences might still be missing from the conversation.



When communities are represented with complexity and care, audiences see themselves reflected not just in the image — but in the possibilities the story suggests.



Inclusive design is not only a design practice. It's an opportunity to **build deeper trust with the people a brand hopes to reach.**



Nefise Tasdelen
Founder of Social Island UK

When representation reflects the complexity of people's lives — their leadership, their aspirations, their everyday moments alongside their struggles — it does something *more than look good*.

It signals to audiences that a brand truly understands them.

And that understanding is what trust is built on.



Images are incredibly influential. They persuade, invite, entertain, and inspire.

Part of that power is representation.
And that power cuts both ways.



Sabrina Deal

Lecturer, Advertising & PR



Representation is empowering and affirming. But many people never share this experience.

Rather than seeing themselves represented and supported, they receive the **opposite message**.

WHY PHOTOGRAPHY SPECIFICALLY MATTERS:

Using colorful illustrations does not counteract this the way that inclusive photography can.



Sabrena Deal

Lecturer, Advertising & PR



Inclusive imagery sends a message to potential employees and stakeholders about your organization's priorities and values.

If you don't see people like yourself in the media you consume, you must somehow be unimportant.



Sabrena Deal

Lecturer, Advertising & PR



Dr. Nicole Martins describes this experience as **symbolic annihilation** — the idea that absence from media sends a message about who matters.



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR ORGANIZATIONS:

Inclusive imagery quickly establishes whether minority experiences are important to you.

It also sets the tone for whether there is **a place of influence** for people from a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives in your organization.

When selecting a visual, look for representation of **more than just race and gender.**



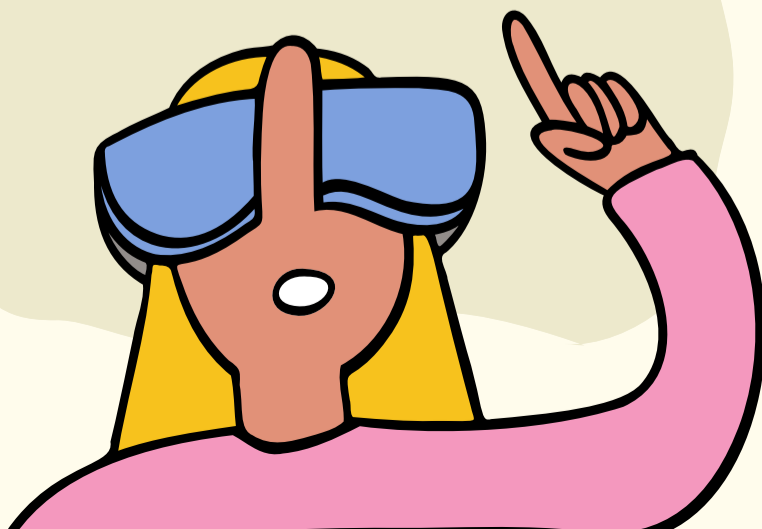
Sabrena Deal

Lecturer, Advertising & PR

Inclusive visuals go beyond representation — how people are positioned, who stands in the foreground, and where gazes fall all carry meaning. True belonging is built in these subtle details.

WHAT ELSE TO LOOK OUT FOR:

- ★ Use of assistive technology
- ★ Limb differences
- ★ Diversity of body shape and size
- ★ Religious affiliation
- ★ Body language & positioning



Rather than a checklist of things to include, I'm often looking for stereotypes that limit — rather than highlight — the authentic experiences of people.

Consider the **body language and positioning** of the people inside the image.



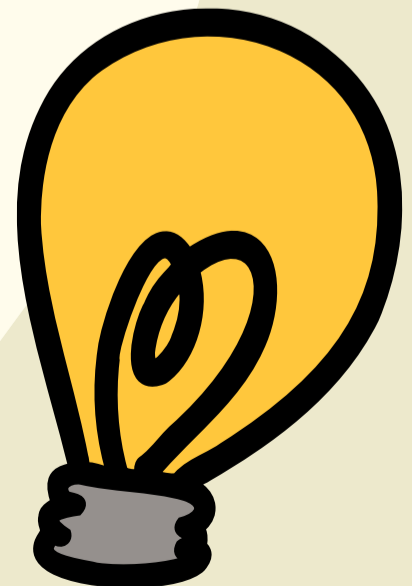
Sabrena Deal

Lecturer, Advertising & PR

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- ☆ Who is placed above or below the midpoint of the image?
- ☆ Are there layers of people? If so, who is in the background or foreground?
- ☆ Where are the people looking in the frame?
- ☆ Are they all looking at one figure? If so, what is the implication of that person as the subject?

These are important signals, especially to underrepresented groups. We need to be mindful of all the layers of meaning in an image to build trust and belonging.



**Honest
acknowledgement
is more powerful
than performative
representation.**



Sabrena Deal

Lecturer, Advertising & PR

👉 Audiences can tell when images are inauthentic. 👈



The best way to handle a lack of inclusive pictures of your organization is to **acknowledge the need for improvement.**



An **expressed commitment to improvement** is much more effective than promoting stereotypes or resorting to tokenism.

Inclusive imagery is about trust and belonging — built through every layer of meaning in every image.



Sabrena Deal

Lecturer, Advertising & PR

Images are incredibly influential.

Inclusive imagery quickly establishes whether minority experiences are important to you — and whether there is genuinely a place of influence for people from a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives.



**Share this with your design team.
Start with one image.
Ask what it's really saying.**

Visuals are often the first emotional touchpoint a person has with a brand.

Before anyone reads a single word, they've already formed a feeling. Here's what that means for how brands show up visually.



Jelena Burcer

Marketing & Content Strategist



Before anyone reads a single word, they've already formed a feeling based on what they see.

When people recognize themselves — their lifestyle, their reality — in a brand's visuals, something *shifts*.

The brand stops feeling like a company talking at them and starts feeling like something that actually **understands** them.

This isn't about aesthetics or trends.

It's about showing real people, real contexts, and real diversity in experiences — so audiences feel seen, not just targeted.



Jelena Burcer

Marketing & Content Strategist



The brands that do this well don't just look good — they feel relatable.



When a brand consistently reflects only a narrow version of its audience, the cost is subtle — but **significant**.



Jelena Burcer
Marketing &
Content Strategist



People may not actively think about it, but they quickly sense when something doesn't include them.

Over time, that creates distance — and that distance shows up in three ways:

In a crowded digital landscape, relatability is often the difference between someone scrolling past — and actually feeling connected.

REACH



Audiences are less likely to engage with content that doesn't feel relevant to their reality.

TRUST



Limited representation signals that a brand's understanding of its audience may be **outdated or superficial**.

LOYALTY



People form stronger relationships with brands that make them feel recognized.

There's usually a noticeable difference between visuals that perform well on paper and visuals that **resonate emotionally.**



Jelena Burcer
Marketing &
Content Strategist

THE GAP:



Content that performs on paper generates impressions and clicks.



Emotionally resonant visuals create a different kind of response entirely.

HOW DO YOU KNOW ITS WORKING?

☆ **Comments become more personal**

☆ **People share it because it reflects something about their own experience**

☆ **The conversation moves beyond design or aesthetics**



Audiences don't just acknowledge the content — they identify with it.

That emotional response leads to stronger community engagement and longer-term brand affinity.

A good starting point is **curiosity and **listening** — not the visuals themselves.**

Before reaching for images, start by understanding the people the brand is speaking to.

Audience feedback, community behavior, and real customer stories can reveal perspectives that might currently be missing from the visual language entirely.

Representation  becomes less about checking boxes — and more about reflecting reality.



Jelena Burcer
Marketing &
Content Strategist



It helps to approach this as an ongoing creative practice rather than a single campaign decision.



Jelena Burcer
Marketing &
Content Strategist

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE:

Consistently asking *whose perspective might not yet be visible* — and making small adjustments over time.

Not a rebrand. Not a diversity campaign.

Just a steady, honest creative habit.

WHY IT MATTERS:

The result feels far more authentic.

And authenticity compounds — each small, intentional choice builds toward a visual identity that genuinely reflects the diversity of the people a brand serves.

Audiences can usually tell when something is done purely for optics — but they can also recognize when a brand is **genuinely trying.**



Performative representation doesn't land.

People sense it. But genuine effort - while imperfect and evolving - reads differently.

It builds trust in a way that polished but hollow imagery simply can't.



Jelena Burcer
Marketing &
Content Strategist



When a visual strategy is truly connecting, audiences don't just acknowledge the content — they identify with it.

**Marketing
feels human
when it shows
real people,
real contexts,
and real diversity
in experiences.**



Jelena Burcer
Marketing &
Content Strategist

THE TAKEAWAY:

It's not about a single campaign or a trend.

It's about building a consistent visual practice rooted in genuine understanding of your audience — so that over time, the people you're speaking to don't just notice your brand.

They feel recognized by it.



**Share this with your creative team.
Ask whose story isn't visible yet.**

INCLUSIVE DESIGN: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Visuals aren't just about who appears in the image. It's about who holds authority in the frame.

One thought leader's perspective on representation, AI, and the choices designers still have to make.



Audrey Chia

Founder of Close with Copy



A lot of times, **unconscious bias** is already in the visual.



Audrey Chia

Founder of Close with Copy



Think of a doctor
— who do you picture?



Think of a nurse
— Who do you picture?

These aren't
conscious choices.

They're patterns
absorbed from
what we've
consistently seen.

★ Community members
take different roles,
have different passions,
and are at different
stages of life.

★ Design needs to reflect
that, not reinforce the
assumption.



When someone sees a
person like them depicted
as the expert or the person
leading the conversation, it
sends a powerful message.

AI models learn **patterns** from the data they're trained on.



Audrey Chia

Founder of Close with Copy

If most images historically labeled "CEO" or "doctor" online look a certain way, the model learns that pattern and reproduces it.

It's not making a judgment. It's reflecting what already existed.



AI is often reflecting the past, not necessarily the world we want to build.



AI outputs should be treated as a **starting point**, not the final output.



Audrey Chia
Founder of Close with Copy

Designers still have an active role:



Writing intentional prompts



Reviewing outputs critically



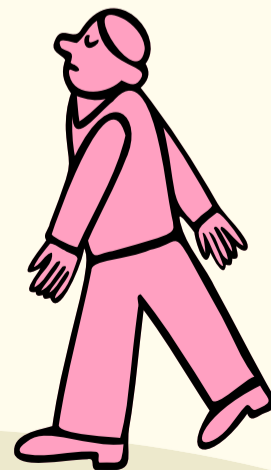
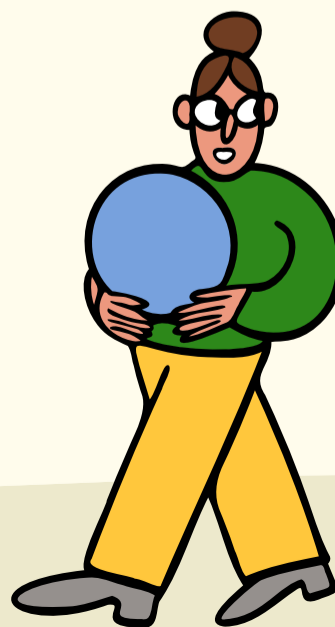
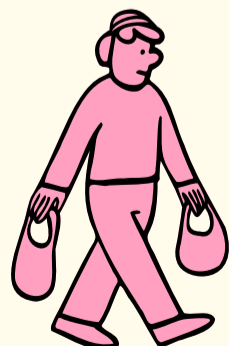
Curating visuals that reflect a broader reality

AI speeds up the creative process.
But humans still decide the story the design ultimately tells.

Generic diversity usually happens when tools try to be neutral. But real inclusion is actually **very specific.**

People experience the world through **real identities** i.e. culture, age, profession, life stage, ability, and lived experience.

Without those details, visuals end up feeling **generic**, even when they technically include different faces.



Audrey Chia

Founder of Close with Copy



Real inclusion is actually very specific.

Use AI primarily for speed and exploration, but don't treat the first result as the **final representation.**



Audrey Chia

Founder of Close with Copy

The questions worth asking:



☆ **Who is this image meant to represent?**



☆ **What would authentic representation look like in this context?**



☆ **Are we showing people with credibility and agency?**



Thoughtful design comes from intentional human choices about who gets to be visible and how they are portrayed.

Visual design shapes how people understand **who belongs in positions of authority.**



Audrey Chia

Founder of Close with Copy

THE QUIET EFFECT:

When the majority of images consistently show the same type of person as the founder, the expert, the leader – **that becomes the mental default.**

Not because anyone decided it should be. Just because it was repeated enough.

WHEN REPRESENTATION SHIFTS:

People start to see new possibilities for themselves.

That's not about optics. It's about what people **believe is possible**, for themselves and others.



Inclusive design is about expanding the stories people see about who can lead, contribute, and shape the future.



Audrey Chia

Founder of Close with Copy

FINAL THOUGHTS

Visual storytelling is one of the most powerful tools we have to do that.

And it starts with the intentional choices designers make about who gets to be visible and how.

**Share this with a designer.
Start the conversation.**



INCLUSIVE DESIGN: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Whatever you allow into the world will eventually be regurgitated back.

A working designer's perspective on stereotypes, visual authority, and what it actually takes to get inclusive design across the finish line.



Michelle Chin
Graphic Design Lead



Clarify the intended message when neutral, faceless icons are requested.



Michelle Chin
Graphic Design Lead

If the goal is to resonate with their target audiences, the conversation can be framed around the **value of incorporating visual characteristics** that reflect their demographics, whether that be age, gender, and/or ethnicity.

Other details can still convey inclusivity. Elements such as clothing, hairstyles, or subtle props (canes, glasses, wheelchairs) can act as visual cues that reflect diverse audiences while maintaining a neutral design style.



We can discuss what other details might still convey inclusivity, even within a neutral design style.



AI image tools tend to regress to the mean, defaulting to stereotypes.



Michelle Chin
Graphic Design Lead

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE:

Stock photos that depict women in positions of power are often sexualized, or portrayed as overly rigid or unapproachable.

These are the kinds of visuals that require **careful review and due diligence** before they make it to the finish line.

THE RULE OF THUMB:

Whatever you allow into the world will eventually be regurgitated back.

Creators, AI systems, and audiences will reshare and recirculate these visuals, reinforcing stereotypes that further displace underrepresented groups.



It's important to be mindful of which visuals will ultimately make it to the finish line, including the context they carry.



Michelle Chin
Graphic Design Lead

THE WORKING DESIGNER'S CHECKLIST



Is this person positioned with authority or as a supporting character?



Does the image carry contextual baggage that perpetuates harmful group stereotypes?



Would this visual, reshared and recirculated, reinforce or challenge a stereotype?

With invisible disabilities, the default is often to highlight pain points and struggles. But it's just as important to represent progress, resilience, and accomplishments.

Neurodivergence, for example, is frequently portrayed through children, often associated with vulnerability and a lack of independence.

Representation should also include adults — people who have learned to **navigate, manage, and thrive in their everyday lives with these conditions.**



Michelle Chin
Graphic Design Lead



Representation is more than a single snippet. Isolated portrayals can reinforce preconceived biases.

Step back and focus on communicating the broader journey, **not just one moment in it.**



Michelle Chin
Graphic Design Lead

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE:



A single image of struggle is not representation.



Neither is a single image of triumph.

Authentic representation of lived experience, especially for invisible disabilities, reflects the arc: the navigation, the resilience, the everyday reality, and the accomplishment.

THE REMINDER:



Isolated portrayals, however well-intentioned, can reduce complex lived experiences to a single, simplified signal.

Inclusive design isn't just what makes it into the final visual. It's everything that gets caught before it does.



Michelle Chin
Graphic Design Lead

FINAL THOUGHTS

The finish line isn't publication.

It's what the image carries into the world after i.e. what gets reshared, recirculated, and quietly normalized.

That's why the review matters as much as the creation.

And why the details — the props, the positioning, the context, the arc of the story — are never small decisions.



