

adapt

Digital Marketing:

The Age of Diversity?



Introduction

The consumers of today, especially younger ones, buy from brands whose values align with their own. Demonstrating that you are a diverse, inclusive and ethical brand is now a core component of achieving success, particularly in the retail space.

And it isn't superficial – an exercise in good PR. These are important considerations across the supply chain and partnering with an agency that shares your brand values and understands the importance of diversity and inclusivity is essential.

About Adapt

Adapt Worldwide is a multilingual digital performance marketing agency. We work with brands to expand their global reach across markets and platforms in more than 250 languages, supported by our parent company, Welocalize – one of the world's 10 largest localization providers.

Our digital performance marketing services encompass paid search, SEO, programmatic, paid social, content marketing, conversion optimization, and web analytics.

Get in Touch

+44 (0) 20 8068 1139

hello@adaptworldwide.com

Trusted by...

LUSH

vue
BIG SCREEN ENTERTAINMENT

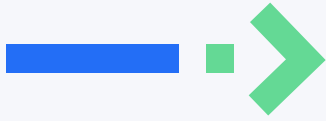
Panasonic

BAM
BAMBOO CLOTHING



**National
Trust**

Foreword



Today, creating a stellar product or providing a first-class service is not enough. Customers care about the ethics behind your brand more than ever before and will make purchase decisions based on factors like diversity and sustainability.

Brands need to show they are inclusive, take a stance on issues impacting minorities across the globe, and demonstrate the actions they are taking to help create a new world founded on equality.

Unfortunately, the marketing world is falling short. Inequality based on gender, race, sexuality, and disability is still apparent in digital marketing, and we're not openly addressing these problems or thinking of ways to combat these issues.

We at Adapt want this to change.

This guide has been created to spark these sometimes-difficult conversations, open the door to discussion and begin implementing the necessary changes to create a marketing world that celebrates diversity and is inclusive for all.



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Sexism in AI & Advertising

Do the AI and advertising industries have a gender bias problem?

It's an issue that's been brought to attention numerous times, but all too often these conversations are dismissed and soon forgotten.

While gender bias may not always appear overt, sexism still exists within the advertising industry, and we need to tackle this to achieve gender inclusivity.



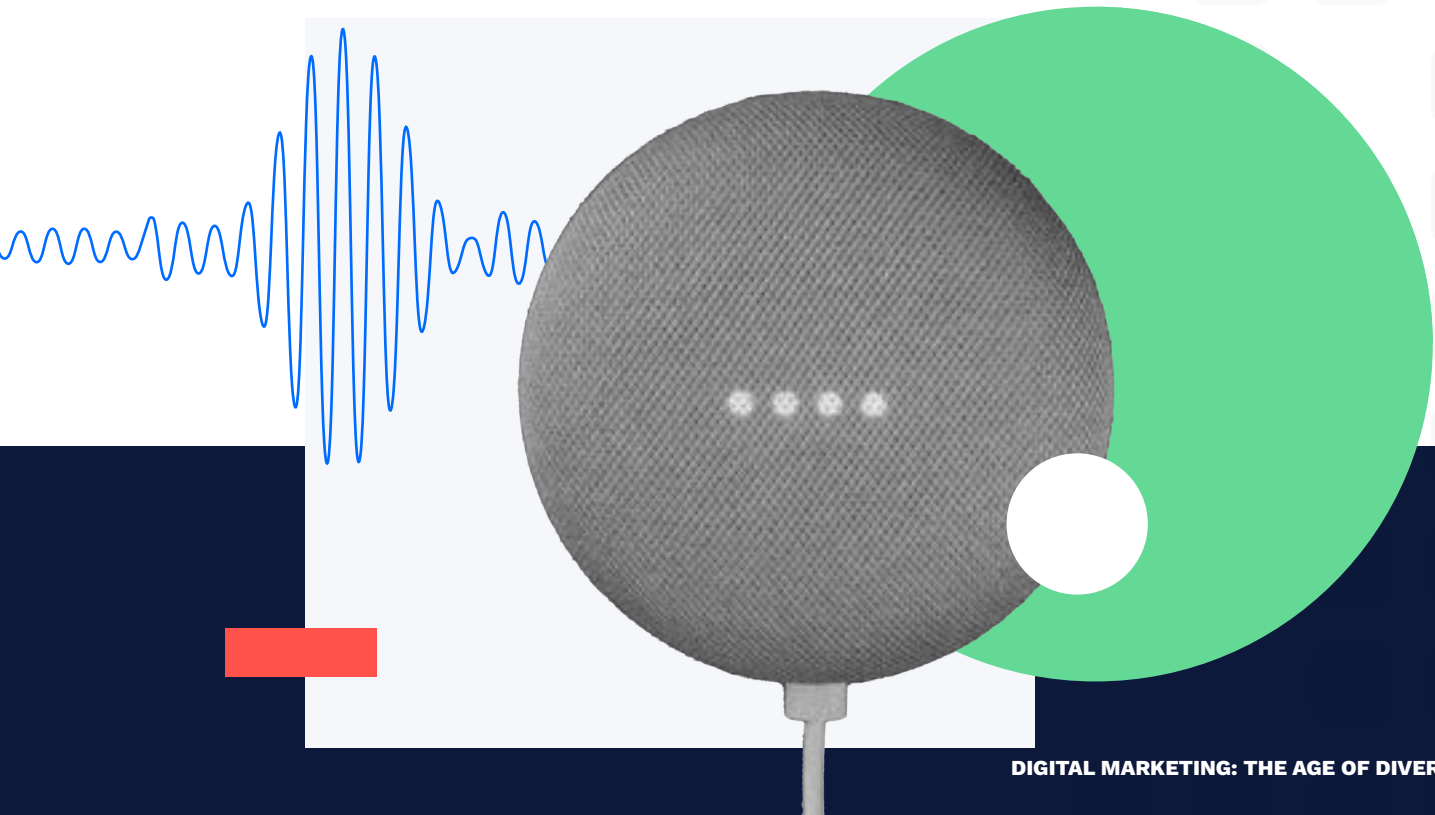
Gender Bias in AI

Voice Assistants Have a Gender Bias Problem

Voice assistants are increasingly a part of our daily lives.

[Almost 3 billion people are currently using voice automated software](#) to assist with setting their alarms in the morning, to find a nearby takeaway or to check the weather for the weekend.

And while the benefits of using the likes of Alexa, Siri, Cortana and Google Assistant are substantial, the creators of these voice assistants are [facing criticism for opting for female voices](#). This is because, in many cases, they reaffirm the outdated social construct and gender bias that women are subservient, quiet, polite and here to “assist” others.





Why Are Voice Assistants Female?

We Prefer Female Voices

There are an overwhelming number of studies that suggest humans prefer the sound of a female voice. Some even theorise our preference for [female voices begins when we are fetuses](#), as these sounds would soothe and calm us in the womb.

However, this preference has been heavily disputed. There's even proof that women can receive complaints about their vocal tics.

And you can see this for yourself by conducting a Google search. Type into Google Search “women’s voices are”, and the top suggested search will finish this sentence with the word “annoying”.

There's No Data for Male Voices

Over the years, text-to-speech systems have been predominantly trained on female voices. Because we have such rich data for female voices, companies are more likely to opt for them when creating voice automated software as it's the most time- and cost-efficient solution.

Female voice recordings date back to 1878 when Emma Nutt became [the first woman to be a telephone operator](#). Her voice was so well received, she became the standard all other companies strived to emulate. By the end of the 1880s, telephone operators were exclusively female.





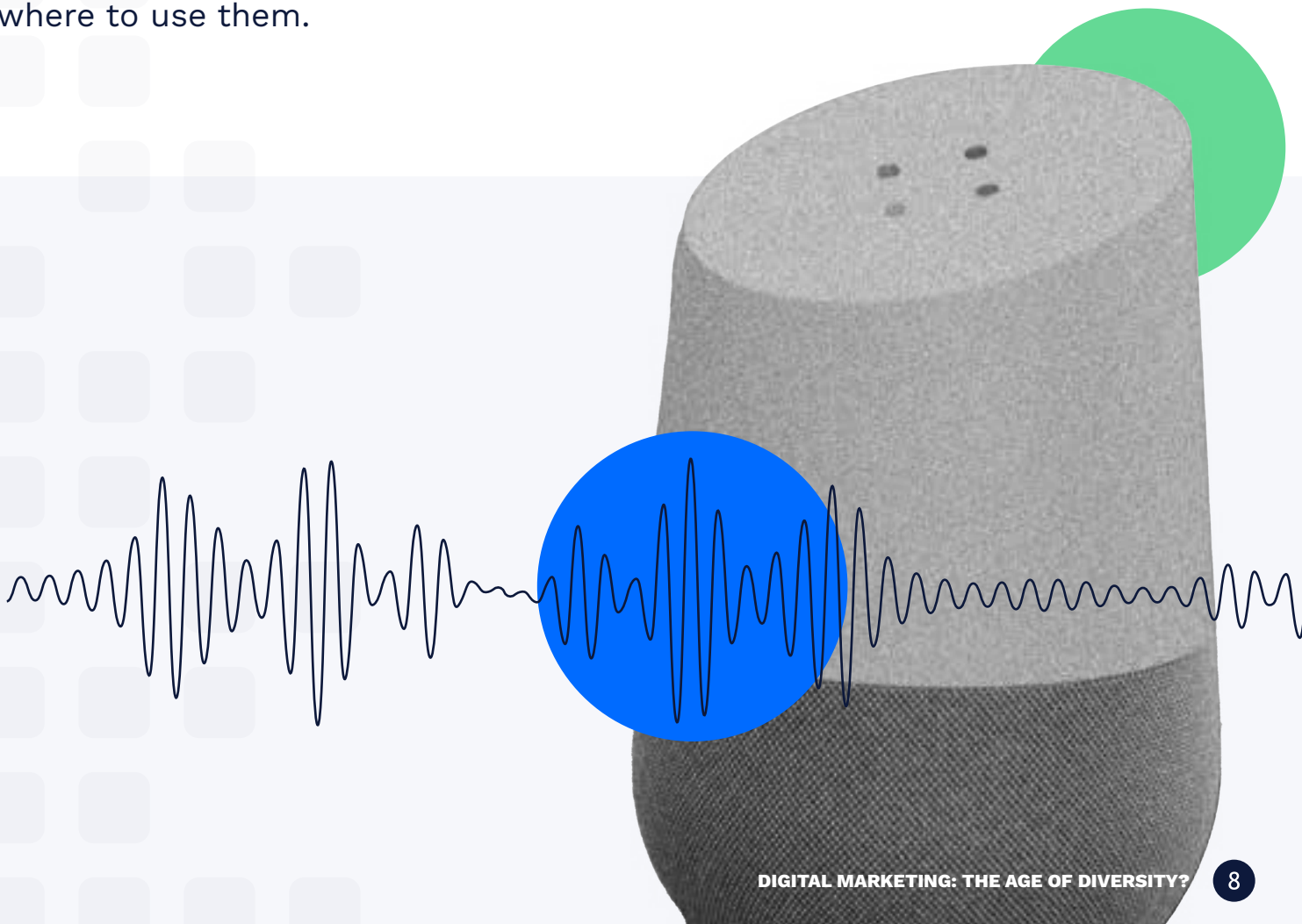
Tackling Gender Bias in Voice Automation

Invest in Machine Learning Technology

With new machine learning technology at our disposal, like Google and DeepMind's algorithm, [WaveNet](#), text-to-speech systems are becoming more advanced and are now more able to create naturalistic male and female voices for AI.

Set AI Standards

There are still no industry-wide guidelines based on the humanization of AI. So, take the time to define what “female,” “male,” “gender-neutral,” and “non-binary” human voices sound like, their characteristics, and when and where to use them.



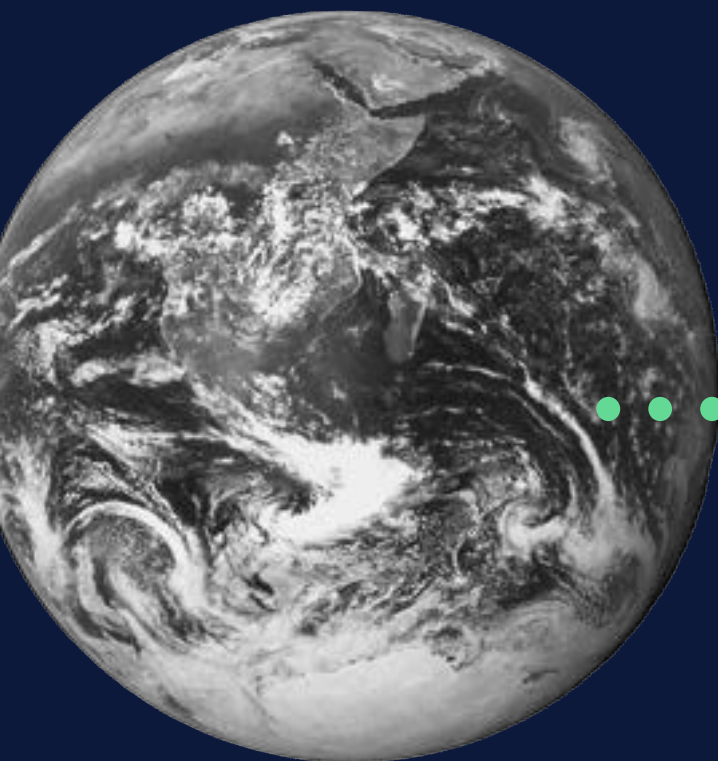
Transparency in Data Collection

Disclose any research findings including user preferences for voices, as well as any research on gender-neutral AI voices. All this information is vital as it can help us understand the relationship between technology, AI and gender bias and find new solutions to this problem.

Inclusivity for the AI Industry

Currently, [“women make up an estimated 26% of workers in data and AI roles globally, which drops to only 22% in the UK”](#). If we want our teams to be more diverse, we need to set up strong educational foundations that are inclusive to all.

We can achieve this by increasing the number of learning channels available to students from secondary school level onward, and have female, transgender and non-binary individuals take an active role in development of AI course materials.



26%

of workers in data and AI roles globally are women

SNEAKY SEXISM:

Why Sexist Advertising Still Exists

In the 21st century, many companies understand the importance of depicting women as strong, confident, and independent. Advertising is no longer overtly misogynistic.

But sexism, as you're probably aware, persists in advertising. It's just not quite as obvious. The term for this type of covert sexist advertising? Sneaky sexism.

What Is Sneaky Sexism?

Sneaky sexism is a term coined by Jane Cunningham and Philippa Roberts, former members of the leadership teams at Ogilvy and DDB, London, and now founders of PrettyLittleHead (PLH) – a research company that helps marketers better understand female audiences.

Cunningham and Roberts published the book [‘Brandsplaining: Why Marketing is \(Still\) Sexist and How to Fix It.’](#)

Cunningham and Roberts explain that “sneaky sexism” is where advertisers sneakily slip forms of sexism into their marketing campaigns, so they remain relevant to their audience and avoid the dreaded cancel culture movement.



Here brands – largely unconsciously, it has to be said – play out the same old sexist ideas but in a way that’s faintly disguised, or subtextual, or implicit rather than explicit.

Jane Cunningham and Philippa Roberts, Brandsplaining



What Does Sneaky Sexism Look Like?

This form of sexist advertising is implicit rather than explicit.

Sneaky sexism can be seen in how certain product descriptions are phrased. Diet pills or weight loss programs are advertised as “wellness” products, and anti-ageing creams are now branded as “ageless” or “age-defying.”

One final example to look out for when it comes to sneaky sexism is the way brands phrase the “fix it” narrative. Instead of brands telling women they need to change their body, hair, or make-up to be externally beautiful, brands are now saying women need to fix their behaviour.

Telling women to be braver, bolder, more outspoken, or stronger is still criticism, and can be equally damaging.



Why Is Sneaky Sexism Important Today?

Cunningham and Roberts spent 15 years researching femvertising, surveying 14,000 women in 14 countries across four continents to understand their attitudes and beliefs about marketing and advertising.

Results from their study showed that marketing is still representing women as “vacant and dumb”, and only [3% of ads displayed women as funny](#) or doing something that required any form of intellect.

Misrepresentation is not the only problem when it comes to sexist advertising, it's the lack of women in advertising. Only [37% of those who appear in ads are women](#), and if they are cast they are usually featured in stereotypical roles like housewives.

3%

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37%

of those who appear in ads are women



4 Ways to Avoid Sneaky Sexism

1. Hire Women into Creative Roles

As it stands today, only [3% of creative directors at ad agencies are women](#). So, we need to work on creating a balanced gender workforce and provide opportunities for more women, in particular, more older women and more women of colour into the world of advertising.

If the majority of global ad agencies are predominantly made up of young, white males, then a female point of view will most likely be missing from future advertising.



2. Talk to Women

If you're not sure what women want to see throughout your marketing, then there's a simple solution... talk to them.

Create online questionnaires or set up focus groups and ask for feedback, or ask them what they would like to see in upcoming campaigns. Make sure these groups are diverse and include women of different ages, sexualities, and ethnicities to ensure you're gaining detailed insight into how women want to be portrayed.

3

3. Be Constructive, Not Critical

Avoid using language about physical appearance, or suggestions that women aren't good enough. In the research conducted by Cunningham and Roberts, appearance [doesn't make the top 10 of their](#) list of characteristics that women want to be associated with.

Intelligence and sense of humour were at the top. So, think of using words that focus on a woman's wit and smarts, rather than her external beauty.



4

4. Cast Women in Decision-Making Roles

Showcasing women in progressive, decision-making roles can improve the overall performance of your marketing.

Kantar's [AdReaction study, 'Getting Gender Right'](#), found that adverts that featured women in positions of power or demonstrated intellect performed better. So, when casting women, feature them in higher-level roles such as business directors, lawyers, or doctors.

Discrimination in Advertising

Think back to advertising in the 1950s. Women were depicted as perfect housewives, sexy, slim, with perfect hair and makeup. BIPOC, LGBTQIA+ communities and people with disabilities were nowhere to be seen.

Today, representation in online advertising has changed dramatically. However, that's not to say that sexism, homophobia, and racism have vanished from advertising – they just aren't quite so obvious.

So, where does discrimination still exist in advertising?



Defunding Diversity in Advertising

In 2022, brands care about their corporate social responsibility. And, as such, generally want to buy media ethically, from a diverse range of creators.

On the other hand, businesses understandably don't want their advertising to feature alongside content that's harmful to their brand.

Where Does the Problem Lie?

The problem lies with over-blocking.

Many brands and agencies - possibly a majority - are using a blunt-knife approach to brand safety. The result of this is the unintentional exclusion of safe, often suitable, content - typically in channel blocklists and negative keyword lists.

With terms related to race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation often regularly featured on industry-standard blocklists it's no surprise to hear that...



“

Industry standard advertising practices [are] unfairly penalizing content creators within various groups, including the LGBTQ+, BIPOC and API communities, as well as content relating to important aspects of the human experience, including social issues, mental health and wellness and identity.

[Taken from [Channel Factory](#), Conscious Project, 2021]

”

Killing Reach & Monetization

Back in 2019, CHEQ's [‘How Keyword Blacklists are Killing Reach and Monetization’](#) report looked at content excluded from an industry standard blacklist of 2000 keywords.

The report found that 57% of safe articles were being flagged incorrectly and blocked from serving ads due to the negative keyword lists and blocklists that agencies and brands are putting in place.

While that doesn't hinder advertisers, it massively impacts creators and publishers who are then unable to monetize their content.

The study also found that...



73% of safe LGBT news related content was blocked due to keywords like “gay”, “lesbian”, “bisexual”, and “same-sex marriage”



75% of safe history related news content is being blocked



65% of content relating to movies and TV is being blocked



How to Achieve Diverse Advertising

Review Brand Safety Processes

Brands and agencies should review current brand safety processes. Rather than shying away from what you're excluding, challenge your brand safety strategy, and work on developing a new process focusing on inclusivity.



Whitelist Creators

Brands should actively seek out creators and channels that they align with and want to support. By adding them to a whitelist, they can help monetize positive content from a diverse range of creators.



Review Blocklists Regularly

Blocklists and negative keyword lists should be bespoke to each brand and reviewed regularly. Too often these are seen as things to be added to rather than edited.



Brand Safety Partnerships

Lastly, there are also third-party brand safety and brand suitability partners that can help deliver brand safety. These often use human input to ensure that content is categorised fairly.



PERFORMATIVE ACTIVISM:

The Problem with Rainbow-Washing

When June comes around, you may notice a wave of rainbows across the web and social media. These colours are for Pride Month, which celebrates the [LGBTQIA+ community](#), their pride, their rights, and their ongoing struggles in society.

More and more brands have been participating in this celebration, by creating rainbow versions of their logos, bringing out Pride-themed product lines, and decorating their shops with bright colours. Go too far and these attempts to showcase your brand as inclusive and supportive of equal rights can harm your brand image.

You're rainbow-washing.



What Is Rainbow-Washing?

Rainbow-washing is a term for a marketing tactic where brands use performative activism for commercial gain. Brands will commodify their support for the LGBTQIA+ community during Pride Month, without taking any further action to demonstrate their support.

To clarify, creating a rainbow version of your logo isn't a bad thing in and of itself. You just need to back that action up with something concrete and meaningful.

It is this follow-up that is more important now than ever – consumer psychology has changed dramatically in recent years.

Why Has Consumer Psychology Changed?

Customers today pay much more attention to the ethical side of brands. People want to know they are aligning with the brands that adhere to their own norms and values.

In a survey conducted by [Small Business Trends](#), 83% of Millennials said they purchase from companies that align with their beliefs. And 62% of those Millennials surveyed also believe buying from companies that support their own political and social beliefs is important.





How Can You Avoid “Rainbow-Washing”?

Get Informed

Before you begin the creative part of the process, you need to take the time to understand the history of LGBTQIA+ rights and the difficulties this community is facing. This is extremely important, as different countries or locales will face different issues.

Make a Long-Lasting Commitment

“Showing” support for this community should not be used for your own financial gain. Be a supportive ally all year round. You can do this by donating to an LGBTQIA+ charity or highlighting local activists or organisations. If you’re not familiar with any local organisations, find someone in your team that does, or contact local groups.

Reconsider Limited Edition Merchandise

Brands that create Pride-themed products that are nonsensical and don’t donate a portion of their profits to an LGBTQIA+ charity tend to end up with a surplus of merchandise. Instead, pick a product and highlight on the label or online description that a percentage of the profits will go towards an LGBTQIA+ charity.

Normalise Instead of Stereotype

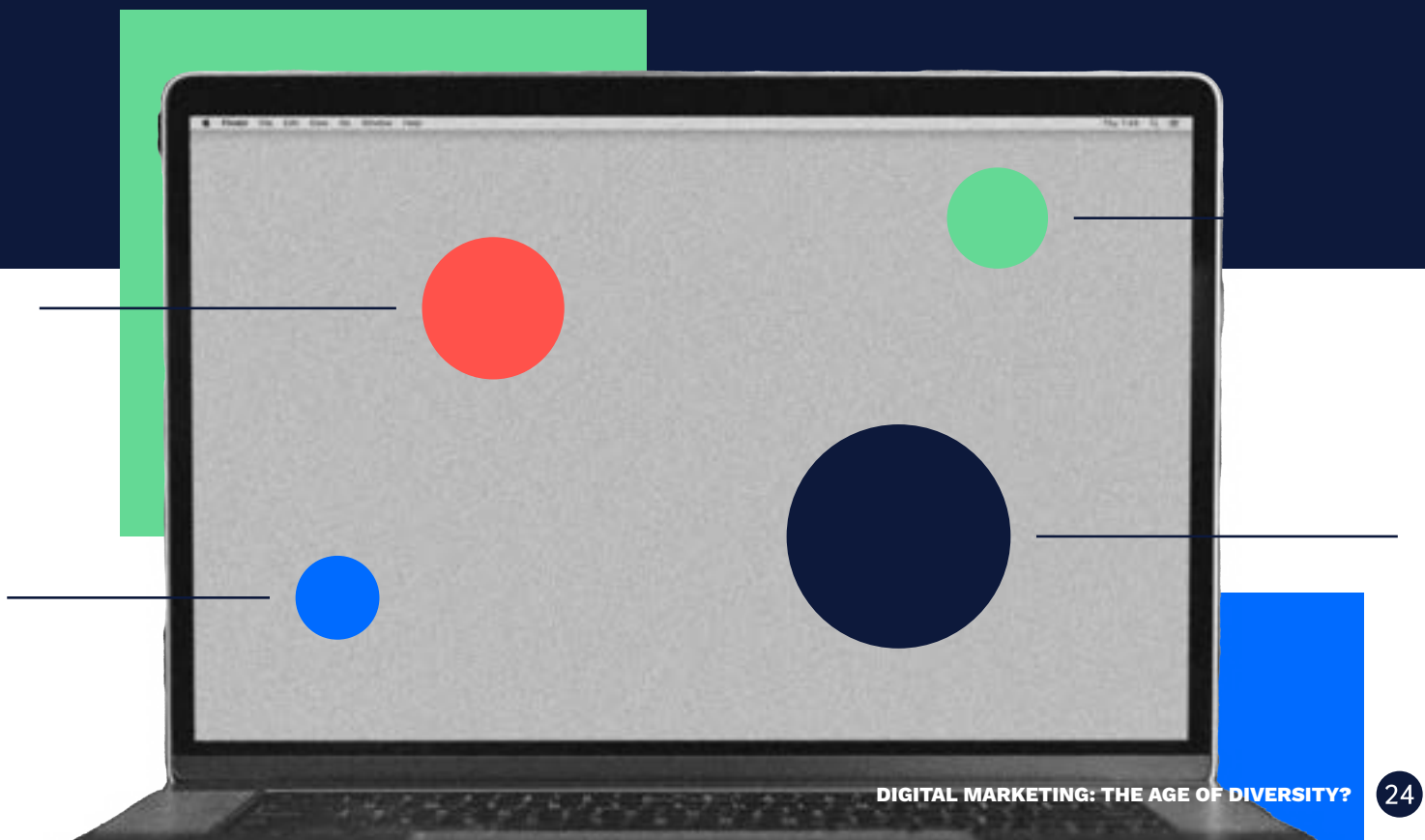
Find ways to include LGBTQIA+ people in your marketing throughout the year, be it influencers, celebrities, or even your own employees if they are happy to do so.

Is the Internet Truly Accessible?

Billions of people every day use the internet to buy clothes, book holidays, play games, watch videos or search random trivia.

For a lot of people around the world, navigating the world wide web can be done with a simple touch of a button. However, there's a huge proportion of the population that can find this navigation process a lot more challenging.

Online accessibility has become a hot topic in recent years, and rightly so, but just how much has been done to ensure the internet is accessible for everyone?



How to Make Your Website More Accessible

Website development has a “one-size fits all” problem”.

Every day, around 500,000 new websites are created globally. And the vast majority of them are “inaccessible”, which prevents the world’s [one billion disabled people](#) – 15% of the global population – from enjoying an easy online experience.

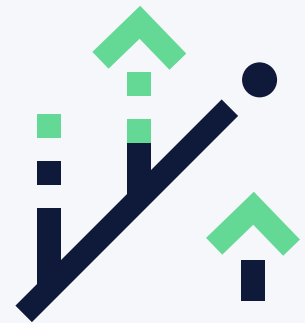
And while the trend is for cleverly designed websites, with bright colours and brand-defining fonts, following that trend means excluding a large number of potential customers.

Today, a huge [70% of all websites](#) do not meet the basic [WCAG](#) (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) principles, set back in 2017.

Everyone deserves to enjoy an easy user experience, but we’ve yet to reach this important milestone.

500,000

new websites are created globally every day



70%

of all websites do not meet the basic WCAG principles



The Benefits of Creating an Accessible Website

Ethics aside, creating an accessible (disability-friendly) website can strengthen your overall brand identity and build brand trust for the foreseeable future.

If we look at this from a strictly commercial perspective, businesses with websites that are not accessible are failing to maximise their market potential.

Let's look at the United States as an example. According to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#), around 54 million people are living with disabilities in the U.S. This represents approximately \$1 trillion in aggregate income, which translates into more than \$220 billion in discretionary consumer spending power.

54M

people are living with disabilities in the U.S.



\$220B

in discretionary consumer spending power



7 Ways to Make Your Website More Accessible

1. Include People with Disabilities in the Design Process

If you want to create an accessible site, then you need to reach out to the community and learn of the problems they face when navigating your website. To check the overall accessibility of a website, we recommend [Siteimprove](#).

1

2. Use Alt Tags

These are great for someone who has a visual impairment and needs to use a screen reader - a program that reads website text aloud. These tags allow you to add further detail to your site, but you should make sure the descriptions are accurate and reflect your brand's identity.

2

3. Choose Your Font Wisely

Sans Serif fonts are much easier to read and distinguish from images and coloured backgrounds. For easy readability, we would suggest a minimum size of 16 pixels for a Serif font and 14 for a Sans Serif font.

3

4. Choose an Accessible Colour Palette

To check the contrast of your colour choices, you can use [WebAim](#). This tool helps you choose colour palettes based on usability rather than personal preference.

4

5. Make Navigation Seamless

Make sure your whole website is keyboard-friendly, this will allow users to access every part of your site with ease. Visual indicators are essential when using tabs as this will help users know where they are on each landing page.

5

6. Create Subtitles and Transcripts

Subtitles are a great help to those with hearing disabilities. They are also helpful for people with ADHD as they give them something to focus on and make it easier for them to understand and enjoy.

6

7. Make Links Descriptive

It's much more beneficial to write a descriptive link, as it will help users understand the content of the next page. For example, it's better to write *“to learn more about our job opportunities, check out Adapt’s careers page”*, instead of *“to learn about our job opportunities, click here.”*

7

What is Adapt Doing?

As part of the Welocalize family, Adapt is on a journey to put in place good business practices that positively impact both our colleagues and clients.

Our performance teams have processes in place to avoid the defunding of diversity through the exclusion of words, phrases, or languages that could minimize minority groups. And we are continually challenging and developing as an agency.

Working with our parent company Welocalize, our diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) team works daily to ensure people from all walks of life and backgrounds feel respected, supported, and empowered to thrive and develop – while being their full selves at work.

To ensure quality in our DEI development, we partnered with JBC, a certified woman-and-LGBT-owned strategic leadership and diversity consulting firm.

We then completed the following:

- 1.** An independent DEI assessment
- 2.** Feedback from multiple employee focus groups
- 3.** Executive stakeholder interviews
- 4.** Identification of immediate needs & actions
- 5.** Benchmarking for DEI initiatives

Everyone is valued. No one is “less than.” We have an extremely diverse workforce of employees and talent from every corner of the world.



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