A way to go

Diversity, equity and inclusion in WA's marketing industry

Prepared for the Western Australian Marketing Association
by Edith Cowan University

WAMA and ECU acknowledge that we live and work on Whadjuk Noongar Boodja. We pay our respects to the Whadjuk Noongar people, and their Elders past and present. We recognise the continuing connection they have to the lands and waters, and the vital role that First Nations people continue to play within our communities.

Acknowledgement

We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to all the participants of this research for your willingness to share your stories and experiences. Your invaluable contributions are critical to our understanding of diversity, equity and inclusion in the WA marketing and creative industries. Thank you for lending your voices towards making our collective vision of a more inclusive marketing landscape a reality.

Publication of this document reflects commissioned work from Edith Cowan University (ECU) on behalf of the Western Australian Marketing Association (WAMA).

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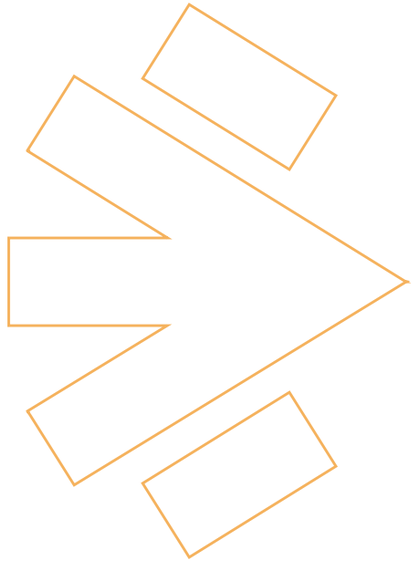

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Glossary

Disability

Disability includes long-term physical, mental health, intellectual, neurological or sensory differences which, in interaction with various attitudinal and environmental barriers, may hinder full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

Diversity

Diversity includes differences based on gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnic/cultural background, religion, physical disability, mental health and neurodiversity.

Inclusion

Inclusion refers to embracing differences and creating an environment where all individuals, regardless of their diverse identities or backgrounds, feel welcomed, valued, and respected.

Equity

Equity refers to fairness, recognising that individuals do not all start from the same place, and making adjustments to ensure opportunities are provided for all.

Neurodivergent

Neurodivergent is a non-medical umbrella term that describes people with variation in their mental functions, and can include conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or other neurological or developmental conditions such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Note to reader

We acknowledge the limitations inherent in using acronyms such as CALD and LGBTQA+. While these terms serve as useful frameworks for drawing comparisons with larger datasets, they inherently fail to capture the rich diversity and nuanced experiences within these communities. Moreover, we recognise the absence of insights for underrepresented communities, including First Nations peoples, various ethnicities, abilities, religions, sexual orientations, and gender identities. Due to small sample sizes or complete lack of representation, our project team was unable to draw conclusions for these underrepresented populations. We are committed to continually improving our data collection methods and striving for greater inclusion in our analyses.

Reflections from WAMA

WAMA and ECU began having conversations in the latter part of 2022 about doing this important piece of work. The goal was to establish a benchmark for representation and lived experiences of people working in the WA marketing industry. Even in those early days, we felt the magnitude and importance of this project. 18 months later, we finally have rich and insightful findings for our community to learn and grow from. It's an exciting step in our collective DEI journey as an industry. We hope that marketers from all over the state will take in the learnings and see it as a positive first step. The recommendations at the end of this report outline some of the work that still needs to be done, and this is something that WAMA will continue to enable.

While there is DEI data for the global and national advertising industries, this inaugural survey is the first of its kind in Western Australia. Our goal was to understand the state of inclusion in the WA marketing industry, capturing both agency and in-house experiences. Some of the insights are sobering and uncomfortable, but we must face the research head on and take considered action towards real change.

Accessibility versus branding

WAMA is committed to creating a digital report that is both visually captivating and accessible to the widest possible audience. Nevertheless, balancing brand integrity and accessibility requirements was at times challenging. Working closely with our partners at Nani Creative, who designed the report, we hope that we have found a good balance between ensuring the report is accessible to as many people as possible, while maintaining a strong visual identity throughout.

Why inclusion matters for our industry

We live in a country where half of the population have an overseas-born parent, around one in five live with disability, and an estimated 11 percent identify as part of the LGBTQA+ community. Our industry does not reflect this rich diversity and, for the small percentage of marketers from underrepresented groups, it can be a challenging experience to navigate a career in this environment. We have the privilege of doing work that reflects or shapes the world around us, and we are missing the diverse voices and perspectives we need to do justice to this work. It is time for our industry to not only reflect the broader population but offer career pathways that are equitable and inclusive for all current and future WA marketers.

Next steps

The WAMA team will be building on the recommendations provided by the ECU research team, found at the end of this report, supporting our community of WA marketers to make progress in their teams and workplaces.

Thank you again for lending your voices to capture the experiences of our marketing community. This is only the beginning of the journey, and we look forward to making progress together.

Executive summary

This report provides rich insight into the state of diversity and inclusion in the West Australian marketing and commercially creative industries. While most respondents say that diversity and inclusion is important and should be a business priority, the discrimination and exclusion experienced is still substantial.

There is a significant difference in views between people working in agencies compared to in-house marketing roles. More in-house marketers see their workplaces as diverse and inclusive and say team members and senior leadership value DEI, compared to those in agencies. While 82% of in-house marketers say people can succeed at their workplace irrespective of background, this number drops to 66% in agencies. **21% of all respondents do not agree that diversity and inclusion should be a business priority.**

The findings highlight nuanced experiences, with many respondents facing or witnessing discrimination, and some have reported feelings of exclusion.

This study found that discrimination is not limited to certain marginalised groups and feelings of exclusion can be widely experienced. Working conditions, management, and leadership significantly impact employees' sense of inclusion or exclusion in the workplace. Personal beliefs of inclusion, equal opportunities for growth, social connectedness, and diversity in the workplace hold a critical influence on individuals' perceived inclusion.

The report emphasises the importance of support, training, and education within the marketing industry, with call out for a genuine long-term authentic commitment to inclusive workplaces as opposed to tick box policies and initiatives.

This research has led to the development of seven key recommendations for organisations to improve diversity and inclusion in their workplaces.

Improve experiences in agencies

Strengthen social connections

Develop active allyship and advocacy

Educate and grow awareness

Adopt inclusive recruitment strategies

Practice inclusive leadership

Improve transparency in career opportunities

Introduction

Diverse teams bring together different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. This leads to diversity of thought - fostering creativity, innovation, and comprehensive decision-making. Research shows that an organisation with a diverse workplace is more likely to experience greater financial returns, employee engagement and retention.

However, diversity is not enough - success depends on providing an inclusive work environment. This includes equitable pay and representation, and for everyone to feel that their opinions are sought, heard, and valued. Despite the growing discourse on the importance of diversity and inclusion, a 2023 global survey of marketing professionals[1] shows high recognition of industry efforts, but no improvement in measures of inclusion in the past two years.

To focus on what this looks like in the WA marketing and commercially creative industries, an online survey was developed by Edith Cowan University (ECU) researchers in 2023. 573 completed questionnaires were collected, with data that indicated discrimination and biases continue to perpetuate throughout the industry. Diversity in this study includes differences based on gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity/ cultural background, religion, physical disability, mental health, and neurodiversity. The findings indicate evidence of discrimination across all these areas.

While standards for workplace conduct in Australia are framed by legislation and policies, this study highlights the importance of social conditions in the workplace and fairness and equity in career development. The findings from this study highlight the need to create supportive environments, remove stigmatising language, and provide transparent and equitable career advancement opportunities.

While advancements have been made in some contexts in creating diverse and inclusive environments, persisting discrimination, biases, and marginalisation prohibit progress of the industry.

This report provides recommendations for organisations and the industry to drive change and foster a culture that prioritises the wellbeing of all employees, promoting a healthier and more productive work environment.

[1] World Federation of Advertisers. (2023). The Global DEI Census 2023. Retrieved from https://wfanet.org/knowledge/diversity-and-inclusion/the-global-dei-census/2023

Who responded

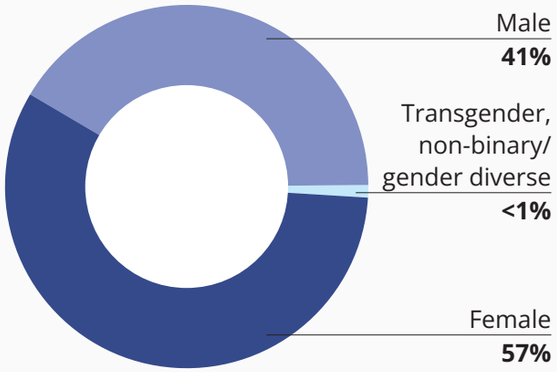
This online survey was distributed to people working in WA marketing and creative industries.

573 respondents completed the survey, spanning a range of demographics.

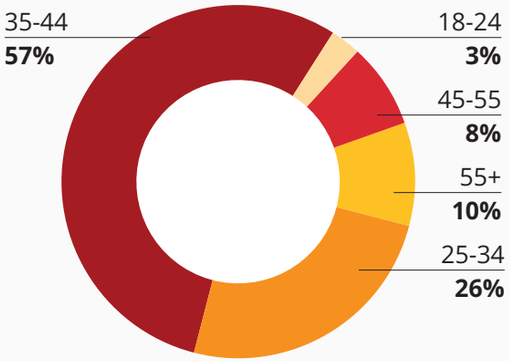
573 respondents

Table 1: Key Sample Demographics
Overall sample: 573

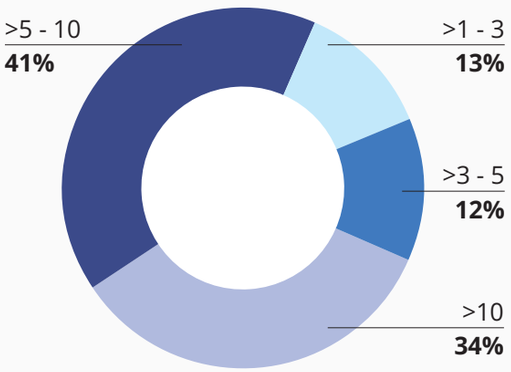
Gender



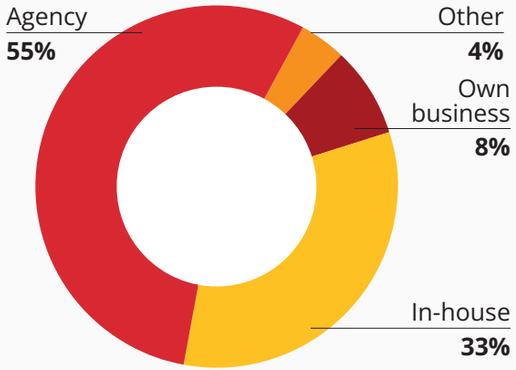
Age



Time in industry (years)



Place of work



Note for ease interpretation percentages have been rounded up.

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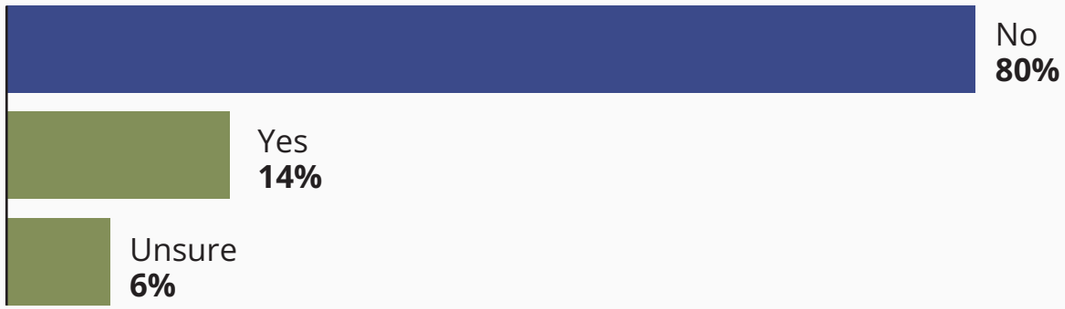
Disability

Neurodivergent



14% Mental Health Condition

3% Physical Impairment

3.5% Both

Ethnicity

78% Identify as Anglo & English-speaking background

22% Identify as CALD

LGBTQA+ Status

10% Identify as LGBTQA+

90% Identify as Heterosexual

Note for ease interpretation percentages have been rounded up.

State of play

DEI in the workplace

More in-house marketers view their workplace as diverse and inclusive compared to those in agencies. In-house respondents also perceive their workplaces, team members and senior leadership to value diversity and inclusion more so than their agency counterparts.

Most survey participants (77 percent) say that diversity and inclusion is important to them in the workplace, with 43 percent strongly agreeing. Digging deeper, more nuanced findings come to light.

Understanding DEI perspectives

Gender plays a significant role in shaping attitudes towards DEI. 83 percent of female respondents say a diverse and inclusive workplace is important, compared to only 68 percent of males who share the same sentiment. While non-binary/gender diverse respondents represent less than 1 percent of the sample population, they unanimously agree on the significance of DEI.

Age is another factor influencing perceptions. While 88 percent of under 35s champion DEI as crucial, this figure reduces to 67 percent among 35–44-year-olds. Encouragingly, 92 percent of respondents over 45 years affirm the importance of DEI; however, it's important to note that they make up roughly 1 in 10 of the sample population.

DEI as a business priority

A resounding 78 percent of respondents believe that DEI should be a business priority. However, this belief resonates more strongly among women and non-binary/gender diverse individuals, with 85 percent and 100 percent respectively in agreement, compared to 70 percent of male respondents.

Workplace realities

While 70 percent of respondents see their workplaces as diverse, a nuanced picture emerges when examining different segments. Notably, around 1 in 4 respondents in marketing agencies feel their workplaces lack diversity, a sentiment less prevalent among in-house marketers.

Similarly, 71 percent of respondents agree that their workplaces value DEI, though discrepancies arise between agencies and in-house roles. While 80 percent of in-house marketers affirm their workplaces' commitment to DEI, only 63 percent of agency workers share the same perspective.

> ***I feel that other companies I am aware of and have worked at promote their support for 'Inclusion and Diversity' within the workplace and in social media but care little for the people who actually work for them.***

> *Companies I have worked at that flog 'Diversity and Inclusion', get accreditation and go for (and win awards) for it - I am exceptionally cynical of such companies - the proof is in the pudding, I have worked at some awful places that treated their staff horribly while winning accolades for 'Inclusion and Diversity'.*

Challenges and opportunities

A quarter of agency respondents express dissatisfaction with their workplaces' progress towards greater DEI, compared to 17 percent of in-house marketers. Furthermore, perceptions regarding opportunities for career progression vary between agency and in-house settings, with in-house roles perceived as offering more equitable chances for success.

> ***I was once made redundant after announcing I was pregnant. Not able to speak about it as they paid me $20k to not share the situation with legal or media.***

> *I was overlooked for my annual appraisal and not given the standard annual pay increase (which every other employee received) because I was on maternity leave.*

I have sat in meetings with senior team members - where businesses have been discouraged from hiring women as they 'will just go on maternity leave'. When I took maternity leave at that company, my junior male colleague was promoted over me.

Key takeaway

If the WA marketing industry is to improve the current state of diversity and inclusion, further progress and change in workplaces is needed. Respondents say this change needs to be visible and meaningful in the organisation, not just used as an external branding mechanism.

Personal experiences

Almost a quarter of marketers have experienced discrimination in the workplace. The WA marketing industry remains rife with discriminatory behaviour and language, and survey responses reveal distressing accounts of sexism, harassment, and inequity.

It's important to hear the actual lived experiences of people in the WA marketing industry. While most respondents view DEI as important in the workplace, comments reveal personal experience or witnessed accounts of discrimination, highlighting the ongoing problems and challenges in the industry.

Respect at work

3 in 10 agency workers feel they aren't treated with respect in their workplace.

For many, this sentiment cuts deep, revealing disparities in workplace dynamics based on gender, age and length of tenure.

A sense of connection

Amidst the challenges, there are glimmers of hope. Over 70 percent of respondents report a positive sense of connection with their colleagues. In-house marketers have an advantage with only 7 percent reporting feelings of disconnection, compared with 26 percent of those in agencies.

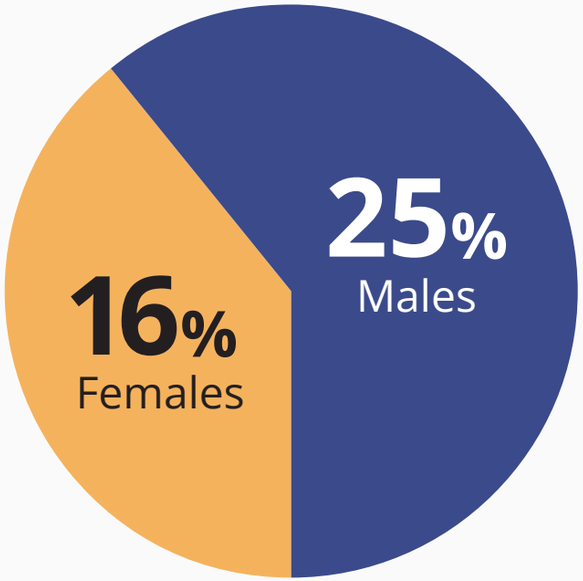
However, the path to connection isn't linear: a sense of connection for respondents early in their career (82 percent) drops dramatically for those who have been in the industry for five to ten years (57 percent), before climbing again after ten years (89 percent).

It is possible that people without a supportive network and sense of connection leave the industry at the five-to-ten-year mark.

> *Being a mum, I can't go to afterwork events since I have the kids and often that makes me feel left out and excluded.*

> ***I'm senior female leader, my manager would regularly invite my (male peers) to his office for drinks on a Friday but exclude me. They would also arrange to go for drinks after work without inviting me.***

Those who do not feel respected

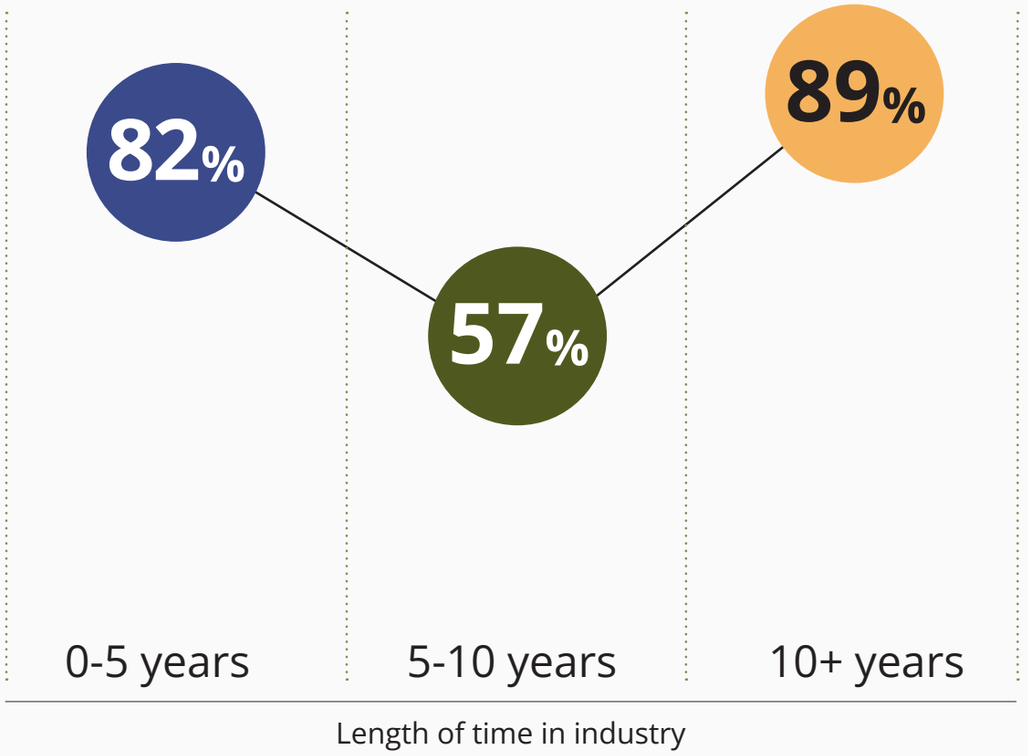


0% non-binary/gender diverse

31%
35–44
year olds

37%
of those with
5-10 years of
experience

Those who feel connected



Discrimination and departure

A quarter of participants have experienced discrimination, with comments highlighting persistent issues of sexism, harassment, and marginalisation. Data suggests a correlation between experiences of discrimination and intentions to leave the marketing world. It's a sobering reminder of the tangible consequences of workplace inequity, emphasising the need for a renewed commitment to fostering inclusive and respectful work environments.

> *I am a woman of colour. I had a negative experience working at a particular agency where the women had no say other than to agree and support the white man's ideas. Women always had to clear the boardroom of cups and glasses, get the printouts ready, do all the manual tasks. Bad examples are shown to junior male execs who think this is okay.*

> *I identify as a disabled man. I have worked in the disability sector for many years and have seen many and varied changes. Some of the changes have been great, some have been abysmal. As someone who is now predominantly self employed, I consult with people who want to further their knowledge and expertise in how to work with people with disabilities... I have also worked in places where no PWD have been employed and I was forever feeling that the majority of other staff were "treading on eggshells" around me. That became very uncomfortable very quickly.*

My current employer is conservative and religious. I would never share my LGBT+ status nor are there any LGBT persons working in my office.

At no employment am I comfortable disclosing or discussing my neurodivergence.

Jovial comments have been made about my height despite my discomfort with the topic being talked about. I have also found clients less inclined to take me seriously as a leader due to my physical appearance.

A call to action from the project team

Within the discomfort of these sobering findings, lies opportunities for growth and transformation. Our industry teems with tales of resilience and camaraderie, where individuals stand as beacons of change amidst adversity. We implore you to start the necessary conversations needed to make real change.

Key takeaway

This study found a nuanced reality of working in the WA marketing industry, with participants sharing varied and opposing experiences. While many comments highlight marginalisation, others note inclusive and supportive environments. The coexistence of positive and negative experiences presents an opportunity for organisations to look past surface-level diversity and inclusion and address deeper inequities.

Experiences of exclusion

The findings suggest a resistance to DEI efforts, with contrasts between groups who have felt excluded and groups who have been discriminated against. Formal reporting of discrimination remains low.

Feelings of exclusion

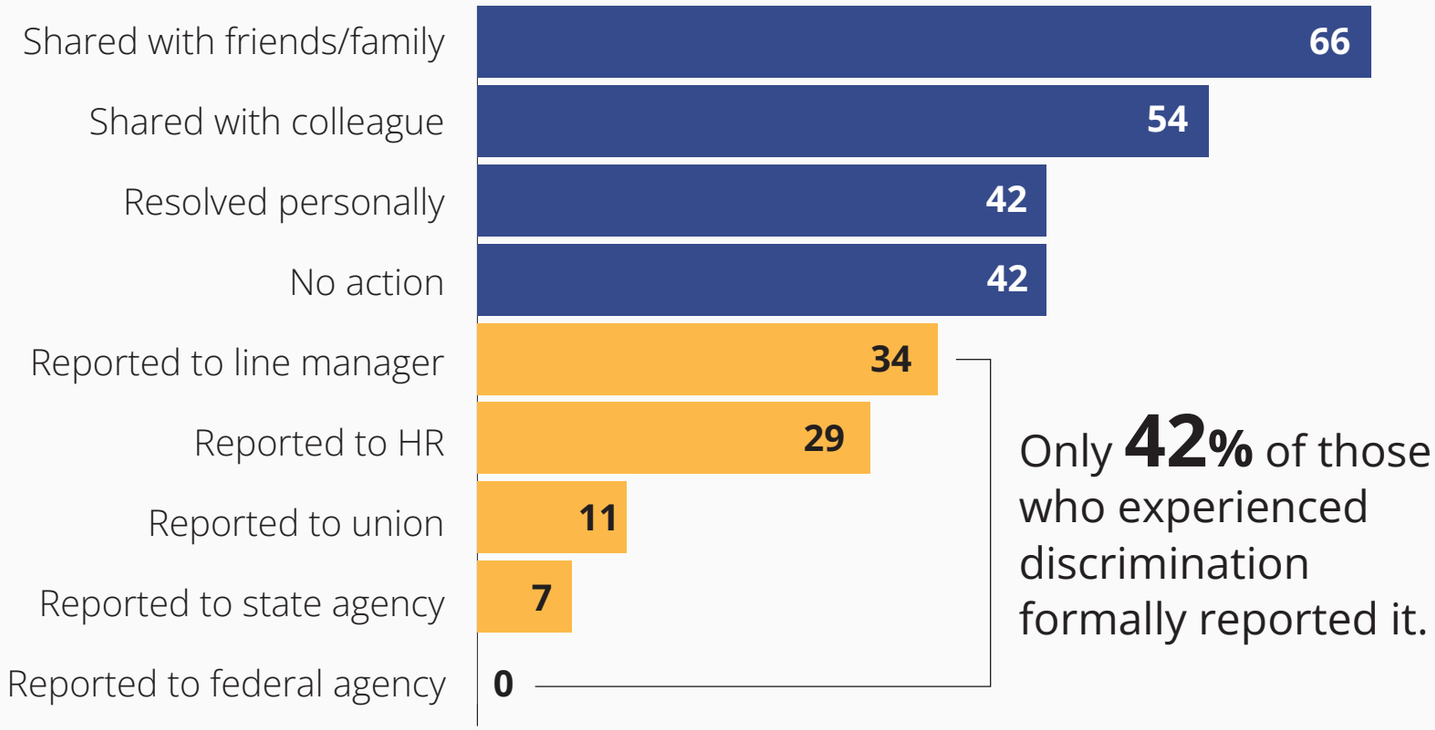
The quantitative data on perceived exclusion contrasts sharply with accounts of discrimination from historically marginalised groups. From this sample population, more males (61 percent) feel excluded than females (38 percent). Some groups, such as heterosexuals and those without disabilities, express lower levels of inclusion (only 50 percent for both groups). Most Anglo and English-speaking respondents (56 percent) report feeling excluded.

These results suggest a resistance to diversity initiatives from groups who have been historically centred, and feel that DEI practices may be unfair to them.

Accounts of discrimination

In comparison, a quarter of participants have experienced discrimination. Despite this, only 42 percent of those who experienced discrimination formally reported it. Reasons for underreporting include fear of retaliation and doubts regarding ability to properly address issues. Many respondents reported taking informal actions such as sharing with friends/family, sharing with a colleague, or resolving the matter personally.

Action taken



Note respondents could select multiple options in this question.

Accounts of discrimination

I worked as the marketing manager for a company for 3 years on 6-month contracts that needed to be renewed every 6 months. My manager, who was the CEO did not want to give me a permanent contract as the two marketing managers before me left the company after 6-7 months due to pregnancy. It was very clear he didn't want to offer a permanent contract as he did not want to offer me maternity leave should I have needed it. When I finally left, his next hire was a man.

Extreme religious discrimination and ethnicity discrimination. Especially for internal promotions, there is no way to prove systemic racism but it's definitely a virus, disadvantaging extremely talented people... why are all top exec white? It's not a true representative of our society especially with increasing migration.

Reasons for staying quiet

I've had junior marketing females tell me that they have been uncomfortable with sexist comments from very senior leaders (male) but did not want to 'rock the boat' escalate it.

Larger corporations do good work appearing to care, but all the training sessions and morning teas in the world don't really matter if the actions the business takes contradicts its alleged values. (i.e. HR covering up / protecting abusers / threatening victims out of fears it will cost the business money).

The team I operate in has a very old school 'boys club' feel. I feel like I can speak out because I am confident but I know others who feel intimated and don't speak up so their voices aren't heard.

There is a power imbalance, it is very hard to call out unethical behaviour because of the risk to your employment/ the way you are treated at your workplace.

A call to action from the project team

In our efforts to establish a benchmark, it is prudent to recognise that we can only measure what participants are prepared to share. We must make space to ponder what we failed to capture and why.

Key takeaway

It is vital to understand perceived exclusion versus real experiences of discrimination. When adopting DEI practices, we must also consider how to navigate resistance from groups who may see it as unfair to them. It is imperative that people understand that DEI is not a zero-sum game. Achieving equity does not take something away from a group that has historically enjoyed privilege. Rather, the inclusive environment produces better results and happier people, and all people in the organisation benefit.

Influences on inclusion and exclusion

Results indicate that having a diverse workforce doesn’t necessarily mean a higher sense or level of inclusion in the workplace. Factors such as personal beliefs and perception of workplace inclusion and discrimination, opportunities for career advancement, and feeling connected and socially integrated at work greatly impact feelings of inclusion.

Having a diverse team doesn't always equate to feeling included in the workplace. Rather it is the **social conditions in a workplace** and fairness and equity in career development that indicate true inclusion.

The survey revealed five key influences on inclusion in the workplace.

Perception of opportunity

Opportunity knocks, but for many, that door remains firmly shut. Career opportunities becomes a more pressing inclusion issue after 3 years in the industry. The crucial time for intervention appears to be at mid-career level, where maturity and career advancement are likely to be more prominent.

> ***As someone with 20 years of experience I am excluded from professional development opportunities. Only young people are offered this.***

> *Not given career opportunities as I was nearing stereotypical age people have children as I 'would get knocked up and go on maternity leave'.*

> *Office is Melbourne. I am based in Perth, therefore required to work remotely. This has completely stopped career potential and I am excluded from all social activities.*

Personal beliefs

Inclusion isn't just a policy; it's a mindset. While 78 percent of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) respondents champion inclusion, only 44 percent of their Anglo and English-speaking counterparts echo the sentiment.

> *I often see patterns of a 'not my problem' mindset - particularly among older generations in the industry who firmly agree that diversity and inclusion are important and valuable but are also unwilling to proactively pursue these causes. E.g. people who are happy to undertake training if it's put in front of them, but otherwise (even unintentionally) continue to speak and behave in ways that undermine the inclusivity of the workplace. It feels like workplaces could be drastically improved with meaningful, honest training from presenters they respect; especially if there is a certification for the agency to promote at the end of the training.*

Workplace diversity

Diversity isn't always the silver bullet we hope for. It's not just about who's in the room but how they feel once they're there.

> *Being in a workplace that doesn't value diversity and inclusion makes me feel like I will be safe and comfortable if I don't disclose my mental health challenges, neurodiversity, progressive beliefs or sexual orientation to senior leadership, but I find this draining and phony.*

> *Working at an agency, a lot of neurodivergent people typically work there. Despite this the workplace is not very neurodivergent friendly, but I think it comes from a lack of education.*

Feeling connected

Connection is the lifeblood of any workplace. Yet, for many, social isolation looms large, with mental health challenges exacerbating feelings of exclusion.

> ***Mental health is a big issue for me (high anxiety and suspected ADHD) and that has made others not want to talk to me.***

> *As media relies on relationships with clients, a lot of the people working on the media owner side are English-speaking Australians and it does make it hard for anyone of diverse background to make headway in this space, as it is somewhat cliquey and can be all about being "cool" within Australian social culture. This is something that is slowly eroding, but for the most part, is still very prevalent.*

Possibility of exclusion

From missed opportunities to subtle biases and outright discrimination, exclusion in all its forms is a harsh reality for many. While the sample size for these segments were small, there is evidence that CALD marketers feel less included in both agency and in-house teams, while marketers with disability working in-house may have feelings of exclusion.

> *In a previous employment I was bullied as a gay man along with being made to not attend meetings with religious organisations due to my sexuality. The business made out they were protecting me when in fact they were hiding me away. They made it difficult for me to do my job resulting in me leaving.*

> *Being a younger female in a predominantly middle-aged male management team comes with its challenges. You are not taken seriously or opinions are heard but never actioned until it is someone else's idea.*

I am aging out of the industry. I no longer have the drive to compete with those coming up.

Key takeaway

As we dissect the data and narratives, one thing becomes clear - true inclusion isn't just about surface-level box ticking; it's about fostering a culture where every voice is heard, valued, and respected. One thing is abundantly clear; true inclusion isn't just a goal – it's a mindset.

Summary

This research sheds light on the ongoing DEI challenges in the WA marketing industry. Findings show differing perspectives on the importance of diversity, with disparities between genders and workplace types.

Agencies, often lacking in diversity and robust human resource infrastructure, contrast with in-house environments that exhibit a stronger commitment to embracing diversity.

A notable proportion of respondents are sceptical of the importance of diversity and inclusion, potentially stalling the momentum towards more inclusive workplace cultures. Discrimination and feelings of exclusion reverberate across demographics, underscoring the imperative for heightened awareness and support mechanisms. Leadership attitudes and workplace conditions emerge as key influencers of employees' sense of inclusion. The study emphasises the importance of targeted engagement and support, especially for the 35-44 age group.

Progress demands more than mere token gestures. It necessitates a genuine, enduring commitment to fostering a culture of belonging and social inclusion.

Let's applaud organisations that prioritise diversity, equity, and inclusion, for they pave the way towards a brighter, more equitable future.

As one participant aptly observed, our workplaces must intentionally embrace diverse backgrounds and perspectives, and put inclusive practices in place.

Together, let's bridge the perception gap, champion diversity, and usher in an era where every voice is heard, valued, and respected.

> *My current workplace has taken the time to hire people with the right fit for a positive team culture which embraces and celebrates diversity and inclusion. Our team comes from many different cultural backgrounds and we ensure fair representation in the work we produce. As a team, we are working on ways in which this can be improved.*

Recommendations

So where to from here? There is a noticeable desire for change within the marketing industry and different strategies can be employed to support workplace inclusivity. There are seven key recommendations for the WA marketing industry:

Improve experiences in agencies

Agencies need to commit to a long-term DEI strategy, holding themselves accountable for progress.

Strengthen social connections

Build stronger social connections and inclusive team norms. Promote understanding and respect for colleagues' backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives.

Develop active allyship and advocacy

Establish clear guidelines on how to actively support colleagues from marginalised groups and call out bias and discrimination.

Educate and grow awareness

Offer learning opportunities that your team is ready for, considering the needs of mid-career staff and those who might see DEI efforts as unfair to them.

Adopt inclusive recruitment strategies

Develop a recruitment process that prioritises shared values to ensure you are seeking to culture add, rather than culture fit.

Practice inclusive leadership

A focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion comes from the top. Leaders must be the change they want to see in their workplace, taking the lead to educate themselves, assign budget to DEI efforts, and fuel the conversations, inside and outside the office.

Improve transparency in career opportunities

Improve fairness, transparency and equitable access to professional development and career opportunities.

These seven impactful recommendations can pave the way for real change. By prioritising career development, fostering social connections, and embracing diversity, organisations can create environments where every employee feels valued and supported. Not only does this attract top talent, but it also fuels innovation, creativity, and overall job satisfaction.

Collaboration over competition is key.

Let's establish networks, share resources, and celebrate the success of organisations prioritising diversity and inclusion.

Together, we can build a stronger, more inclusive industry where everyone can thrive.