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SUPER BOWL COMMERCIALS REFLECT WANING DE&I COMMITMENT IN THE AD INDUSTRY

The majority of casts, crews and directors behind the 2023 Big Game commercials are white men, according to Ad Age's early analysis



By [Lindsay Rittenhouse](#). Published on February 10, 2023.



M&M's Super Bowl ad star is Maya Rudolph and the brand told Ad Age that 80% of its actors are diverse. Credit: M&M's

This story has been updated with additional details from Super Bowl advertisers.

As the ad industry's focus on commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion has waned, so too have Super Bowl advertisers' progress in representation both in front of and behind the camera.





For the second consecutive year, Ad Age asked every Super Bowl advertiser with plans to air national, in-game commercials, about how they prioritized diversity and inclusion in the creation and production of their ads. This includes how they approached casting, diversity within the agencies they worked with, and the makeup of those working on the production. Ad Age will continue to track this data as more advertisers reveal their in-game plans.

Some brands had very clear action steps and outlined ways they implemented these practices in the conceptual and production phases of their ads, but many did not provide specific details on the makeup of those who worked on their ads and their cast.

Others—including Squarespace, Procter & Gamble’s Downy, Anheuser-Busch InBev, Unilever’s Hellmann’s, Google, Molson Coors and E-Trade—only provided generic DE&I mission statements that essentially said they support the cause without disclosing specific details.

DraftKings, Web3 gaming company Limit Break, PepsiCo, Workday, Kia, Heneiken, Crown Royal and Uber did not respond to the survey. A Heineken spokesperson said that while “DE&I is an extremely important topic and lens for both Heineken and Marvel,” due to its ad being part of the Marvel franchise, “we are not able to provide further information.”

One of the biggest issues in attempting to measure diversity and track progress both in front of and behind the camera continues to involve guidelines that prevent requiring crew members or cast to disclose information about how they identify. Multiple brands, including Rakuten and Pringles, cited these guidelines as hurdles to providing detailed data.

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Diversifying casting

Not nearly enough has been done to move the needle on representation in front of the camera in Super Bowl ads.

Of the 74 celebrities Ad Age confirmed appeared in Super Bowl commercials, 25 identify as female, while 49 identify as male; 22 are Black, five are Hispanic or LatinX and none are AAPI. This analysis does not include those who appear in the ad who are not celebrities.

Male characters were featured nearly twice as frequently as female characters in last year's Super Bowl spots, according to analysis by CreativeX and the Geena Davis Institute on Gender Equality in Media, which also reported that 50% of characters in Big Game ads over the last seven years were white. The report also found that men with darker skin tones appeared twice as often as women with darker skin tones in Super Bowl spots in the last seven years.

A slew of this year's Big Game ads will star predominantly white men, including General Motors' and Netflix's joint 60-second ad with Will Ferrell; both of Pepsi's ads for its Zero Sugar variety, which star Steve Martin and Ben Stiller; Downy's mystery celebrity is Danny McBride; Dexcom's ad once again stars Nick Jonas; and FanDuel's ad stars former NFL tight end Rob Gronkowski.

General Motors said throughout its commercial, which shows Ferrell inside some of Netflix's most popular shows, 75% of the "key cast members" are diverse.

FanDuel said while Gronkowski is the star of its ad, almost the entire supporting cast is diverse. "We believe there are only three white males out of nine supporting cast members," a spokesperson said.

In terms of Black representation, this year's Super Bowl will feature stars including Kevin Hart for DraftKings in its ad where he hosts a star-studded house party (Hart's production company also worked on the ad); NBA star Giannis Antetokounmpo will be in Google's ad; Snoop Dogg will star in Skechers' commercial; Sean "Diddy" Combs is in search of a catchy jingle for Uber in its Big Game spot; tennis champ Serena Williams stars in Rémy Martin's commercial, as well as Michelob Ultra's; and Gary Clark Jr. will be featured in Workday's ad.



A spokesperson for Avocados from Mexico, whose ad features Anna Faris in the lead role, said its cast "looks exactly like the real world we live in and you will see it in our spot. We feature racially diverse talent and call for actors that can play the roles and intentionally replicate the world we live in with equity and fairness." The ad was created by Dallas-based and Hispanic-owned agency Lerma/.

'He Gets Us' strives for diversity

The two ads that will be airing in the Super Bowl from the Jesus rebranding campaign, "He Gets Us," have some of the more diverse makeups both on and off screen out of the brands that participated in this report. Lerma/ created the ads alongside marketing firm Haven.

Still, “He Gets Us” received funding for the ad from the Signatry/Servant Foundation, which also reportedly donated millions of dollars to the Alliance Defending Freedom, a nonprofit that has led policy fights to roll back abortion rights and allow businesses to discriminate against LGBTQ+ customers.

“Though the Signatry may have funded Alliance Defending Freedom, the ‘He Gets Us’ campaign is not backed, supported or funded by the Alliance Defending Freedom,” a spokesperson for the campaign said.

Lerma/ Founder Pedro Lerma said that “LERMA/ was founded on inclusivity and our work on this campaign reflects that.”

According to Haven, out of a production crew of 18 for “Kids,” one of the two ads, 56% were women, 28% were people of color, 6% were LGBTQ+ and 11% identified as having a disability. Out of the cast of 14 in “Kids,” 36% are female, 50% are people of color and 7% identified as having a disability.

“Confrontation,” the second ad, was made up of a crew of 60 people; 40% were women, 27% were people of color; 13% were LGBTQ+ and 6% identify as having a disability. The cast for that ad included 141 people including extras; 38% were women, 53% people of color, 11% LGBTQ+ and 7% identified as having a disability.

“All of our ads end with ‘He Gets Us. All Of Us.’ This was done with intention because we really do mean everyone,” Haven Founder and Chief Creative Officer Bill McKendry said. “This wording is especially important to the campaign, as many people feel left out or marginalized because of what they may have experienced, felt or seen. When we launched ‘He Gets Us’ in March of 2022, our first ad was called ‘Dinner Party,’ and it reaffirmed that Jesus was radically inclusive. His love ran counter to the cultural norms and religious expectations of his day, which reiterates why his message and example are relevant today.”

It was especially important to McKendry to have people with disabilities represented on and off screen, as he is partially deaf, both his parents were deaf, and he has a son and sister who are deaf. He said it was also important for both Haven, who started the “Jesus Gets Us” campaign in March 2022, and Lerma, to have a diverse cast and crew. Out of Lerma’s 37-person team, 17 were diverse, according to the agency.

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Brands film in Mexico and cast local talent

The NFL also made an important push in working to diversify the spot. It’s 60-second ad starred Diana Flores, quarterback for Mexico’s national flag football team; the first time the organization featured a female flag football star in a Big Game commercial. “We are fortunate to have one of the largest Latino fan bases of any sport in this country, so it’s important to us to continue to celebrate and elevate this rich and diverse community,” the NFL said in a statement.

While Google did not tackle representation head-on, the way it did in its Lizzo-led Big Game ad in 2022, it did lean into a diverse cast.

Google did not provide specifics on the makeup of its talent both in front of and behind the camera, but this year's ad includes comedian Amy Schumer, rapper Doja Cat and NBA All-Star Giannis Antetokounmpo, along with a diverse mix of non-celebrities.

"We make every effort to reflect the diversity of the world around us so that our overall body of work reflects the diverse, intersectional identities of people in the countries our marketing runs in," a Google spokesperson said in a statement. "We don't expect every ad to feature every demographic, as that would be inauthentic. But we were intentional about making sure the photos and talent featured in 'Fixed on Pixel' represented a broad spectrum of people, background and experiences."

DoorDash's ad stars Matty Matheson of Hulu's hit series "The Bear" and Raekwon The Chef of the legendary rap group Wu-Tang Clan.

"When casting, 'We Get Groceries,' we wanted to tap into the cultural zeitgeist and work with talent who are relevant, but who are also representative of what we think our audience looks like. At DoorDash, we want the work we do to reflect the audiences that we serve—and that happens to be the widest breadth of people across the U.S. We're proud to have had a diverse cast in our ad, from Raekwon the Chef to the casting of the Dasher, played by a female of color."

Planters' "Made to be Roasted" Big Game spot, in which Mr. Peanut is set to get roasted by eight comedians, including "roastmaster general" Jeff Ross, features four female and four Black, Indigenous, and people of color comedians. The account, creative, strategy and media team at VaynerMedia, the agency behind the ad, is entirely female, and two of the women are biracial, according to the agency.

Several brands filmed their 2023 commercials in Mexico, and noted the use of local talent both in front of and behind the camera.



Avocados From Mexico, whose spot stars Faris playing Eve in the Garden of Eden, was filmed in Mexico and featured local talent. TurboTax reported its spot was filmed in Mexico City with a Mexico-based production crew; plus one of its stars is of Latin background.

Pringles said its full ground crew in Mexico City was of Mexican descent, plus its editor was African-American and Hispanic. It said four of its lead talents are also of Mexican descent, which offers “crossover appeal for both our general market and Hispanic audiences. Two-thirds of the principal cast members are representative of various diverse backgrounds to ensure inclusivity and that a vast range of representation is realized throughout,” Pringles said.

Multicultural ad agency Alma CEO Isaac Mizrahi said the scant representation of Hispanic and LatinX celebrities in ads thus far this year is “sad” and will only lead to inauthentic advertising. He said the main problem he still sees is brands not doing a good job of accurately portraying different cultures in their ads.

“While representation is an important topic, we learned from diverse consumers that they not only want to be portrayed in ads but, most importantly, they want to see their culture and their stories reflected in these ads,” Mizrahi said. “Hence, casting diverse consumers to convey a story that is too generic or does not capture who they are or their culture may backfire.”

Women-led campaigns

Several brands made a bigger push in putting women center stage, both in front of and behind the camera.

For Rémy Martin’s first-ever Super Bowl ad, the alcohol brand strategically chose Williams to star. “Representation in casting is extremely important, and Rémy Martin took that into consideration when choosing Serena Williams as the star of the Super Bowl advertising spot,” the company said in a statement. The brand described Williams as “a champion for women everywhere.”

Booking.com’s female-led ad stars Melissa McCarthy showing off her pipes as she daydreams about traveling “Somewhere, Anywhere,” the title of the spot. “Specifically for the spokesperson, we wanted to feature a strong woman in the lead role, something that was a priority for us and the creative idea called for,” the travel company said in a statement.

Booking.com worked with director, photographer and filmmaker Alex Prager on the commercial. “Working with Alex was a very purposeful choice, not only because we felt her keen eye for detail and composition are what would set the ad apart, but we also wanted to tap a female powerhouse from Hollywood both in terms of our talent and our director, especially knowing that fewer than 10% of last year’s ‘Big Game’ spots were directed by women or a person of color,” the company said in a statement.

Alicia Silverstone reprises her iconic role as Cher Horowitz in the 1995 hit movie “Clueless” for Rakuten. The tech company said it also prioritized diversity throughout the rest of the cast, but did not provide specifics

“The classroom scene that we feature in our spot is one of the most iconic from the ‘Clueless’ movie. As we sought to recreate this scene for our spot we developed a cast that represented a diversity of backgrounds, while staying true to the world of ‘Clueless,’” a Rakuten spokesperson said.

M&M’s Super Bowl ad star is Maya Rudolph—who, in an apparent stunt, the Mars brand said is replacing its iconic spokescandies after receiving backlash to its earlier reimagining of the characters—and it said 80% of its actors are diverse.

“Casting was a very important consideration during the development and production of the M&M’s Super Bowl ad. In partnership with BBDO New York, we worked hand-in-hand to ensure that there was strong representation from start

to finish,” said a spokesperson for M&Ms



One area sorely lacking is Asian American Pacific Islander representation.

Jay Kim, former president and current board member for the Asian American Advertising Federation, said it was a missed opportunity for no marketer to use “Everything Everywhere All at Once” star Michelle Yeoh, who is nominated for the Best Actress Oscar.

Kim said Asian representation often gets left out of advertising and especially in Super Bowl commercials. By 2024, Asian American buying power is projected to reach \$1.6 trillion and last year, Asian American households spent 11% more annually on retail than the average U.S. household, according to [Advertising Week](#).

“Asian Americans are very good consumers,” Kim said. “They are very loyal; they spend the most on online shopping.” Still, he said brands “don’t pay attention. They don’t want to invest” in Asian representation.

Accessibility and representation of people with disabilities

Representation of people with disabilities has also historically been lacking in Super Bowl commercials.

In 2022, Toyota was the only brand to tell the story of a person with a disability, and even that one was met with some criticism from some disability advocates, who said it edged on “inspiration porn,” the portrayal of people with disabilities as being inspirational to able-bodied people.

Not much progress, if any, appears to have been made in front of the camera this year, but several brands including Procter & Gamble, General Motors, FanDuel and the National Football League said they were making their commercials more accessible to view by adding subtitles or closed-captioning (text explanations of what’s going on) and audio descriptions (or ads narrated through audio) for people who are deaf or partially deaf. The audio-captioned ads will appear on a separate channel.

FanDuel’s agency Wieden+Kennedy noted, “We have made a big and successful push with our client to close caption every spot we produce so our creative is accessible to all.”

A spokesperson for P&G also said it is adding captions to its YouTube versions and the ads airing after the Big Game.

Dexcom, a company that develops glucose monitoring systems, sought to help people dealing with diabetes feel seen. The 30-second spot stars Nick Jonas, who was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes at the age of 13, promoting the company's latest Dexcom G7 technology.

This is the company's second Super Bowl appearance after airing a similar commercial with Jonas in 2021.

Generally, though, Big Game ads rarely feature people with disabilities or those with chronic conditions, and the majority of commercials overall don't do a good job accurately portraying their lives when they do, said Storm Smith, a deaf creative consultant and creative director and a former producer and diversity inclusion accessibility lead for BBDO L.A. She said often brands go about portraying people with disabilities with pity when society should be past that.

"No, we're here," Smith said. "We can drink beer. We can laugh. We can go out with our friends. We deserve stronger storytelling about us. Not just in front of the camera but behind the camera, too. Who's writing it? Who's directing it? Are they just writing it based on their unpacked biases?"

She said good storytelling "does heal and challenge misconceptions" and if that's not being done, it's also a big missed opportunity for business. The total spending power in the U.S. of working-age people with disabilities is about \$490 billion, which is similar to that of other significant market segments, such as African Americans (\$501 billion) and Hispanics (\$582 billion), according to a 2018 report from American Institute for Research (AIR).

LGBTQ+ representation lags

Similarly, representation of the LGBTQ+ community within Super Bowl ads hasn't seen much progress.

GLAAD reported that the number of 2022 Super Bowl commercials featuring LGBTQ+ people was down 90% from two years prior. In 2020, there were 11 LGBTQ+ celebrities featured.

This year, nearly none of the brands surveyed provided specifics on how they are progressing as it relates to LGBTQ+ representation.

GLAAD has predominantly focused its efforts on on-screen representation and the storylines of the ads.

GLAAD Chief Communications Officer Rich Ferraro said the organization will be watching the Super Bowl again this year to analyze the ads for LGBTQ+ representation. The organization did host its second annual event on Wednesday with the NFL—"A Night of Pride with GLAAD and NFL"—to discuss the future of LGBTQ+ inclusion in professional sports and the NFL's commitment to its LGBTQ+ players.

This year's LGBTQ+ representation does not seem to be improving.

"And though we're in teaser season for brand presence and content, unless I'm missing something, no brands are foreshadowing a spotlight on LGBTQ+ stars or cultural themes in this year's spots," Graham Nolan, co-chair of Do the WeRQ, a platform for unlocking the creative potential of LGBTQIA+ talent in advertising and marketing, wrote in an op-ed for Muse by Clio. "(I thought we had one, but then remembered Mr Peanut isn't gay. Sigh.) I suspect this doesn't bode well for the volume of LGBTQ+ talent brought in behind the lens of the spots either."



Representation behind the camera

In order for the storylines on screen to be authentic, the people working on them behind the scenes also need to be representative. To this end, while some brands were willing to provide details breaking down representation behind the camera, too many did not provide that information to be able to make an assessment on progress.

Of the 37 commercials with directors confirmed, only five ads were directed by women and 32 ads were directed by men (one ad is directed by male director duo Will Speck and Josh Gordon). Several directors are on multiple spots including Bryan Buckley, David Shane, Rachel Morrison, Kitao Sakurai and Robert Jitzmark. Three directors identify as Asian American Pacific Islander and two identify as Hispanic or LatinX; none are Black, according to an Ad Age analysis.

Booking.com's ad was a majority female-led effort. The 13-person ad agency Zulu Alpha Kilo team that worked on the campaign was 54% female and 23% non-white. The company said the brand, creative and production teams altogether were 95% female. The director was Los Angeles-based Alex Prager from Arts & Sciences Dept.

Avocados from Mexico hired minority-owned Lerma\ for its spot and said the creative duo behind the idea are Hispanic.

Anheuser-Busch InBev—which will air national commercials for Bud Light, Michelob Ultra and Busch Light—did not share details on the makeup of its cast or crew outside of directors. Trey Edward Shults will direct the Anomaly-led ad for Bud Light; female director Rachel Morrison is behind the Wieden+Kennedy-created ad for Michelob Ultra; and Japanese-American director Kitao Sakurai is behind The Martin Agency-created ad for Busch Light.

For M&M's spot, its agency, BBDO, said roughly 69% of the team was made up of people from underrepresented groups, including women, individuals from the LGBTQ+ community, and people of color. The brand also hired female- and African-American-owned production shop Prettybird, and its executive producer, line producer, production designer, production manager, production coordinator, and casting directors were all women.

Intuit's TurboTax Super Bowl ad was also directed by a woman, Fiona McGee of Arts & Sciences. Wieden+Kennedy created the spot and the agency team was broken out as such: 9.4% Asian; 6.3% Black or African American; 3.1% Hispanic or LatinX; 18.8% of two or more races; 56.3% white; and 6.3% did not respond. The agency team was also 68.8% female, 25% male, 3.1% non-binary, and 3.1% did not respond.

FanDuel said 22 of the 31 people on the agency team at Wieden+Kennedy, which created its Super Bowl spot, are diverse. Its director of photography is also a female and person of color, its stylist and costume designer is female, its photographer is female, its on-set visual effects supervisor is a female and Asian/Pacific American, and its editorial and music companies are certified woman-owned.

For DoorDash, its agency Martin, said the core creative team was made up of all women.

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Planters' ad is being handled by VaynerMedia and its account, creative, strategy and media team is fully female, with two of the women identifying as bi-racial.

General Motors' commercial was directed by O Positive Films' David Shane, a white man, and its lead agency is minority-owned The Community, which was founded by brothers Jose and Joaquin Molla. The agency's team was 52% female and 63% were either Hispanic or Latino/a, LGBTQ+, or of two or more races. Its partner agency was McCann Detroit and that 14-person team's makeup is broken out as such: 35% people of color; 50% female; and 7% LGBTQ+. The automaker said its production crew included 150 people; 10% were people of color and around 40% were female.

The NFL's Super Bowl commercial was created by 72andSunny Los Angeles and 38% of the agency team was diverse, with 40% of them women. Of the production crew, 38% self-reported as diverse, with representation from Black, Asian, Hispanic, as well as those who identified as being of two or more races. The crew also included representation of those who identified as women or non-binary, the NFL said.

Rémy Martin's ad was directed by South African director Terence Neale for agency Fred & Farid New York. Of the agency's New York team, 70% are people of color and 70% are female. Xiaolong Liu, who is Asian-American of Chinese heritage, was the director of photography.

Dexcom said it used production company Little Minx—the women-owned company founded in 1998 with diversity and inclusion as a pillar—and the crew was 40% people of color. The company said its team was 17% racial diversity and LGBTQ+.

Speaking at Ad Age's Super Bowl Playbook virtual event on Tuesday, VaynerMedia Group Creative Director Katherine O'Brien, who worked on Planters' roast commercial, said diversity is of course important for the Big Game but it needs to be a year-round effort on the part of advertisers. And diversity needs to be a priority across everything including different perspectives, she said.

"The whole point of diversity of thought and perspective [is] we're creatives, we're in a creative industry why wouldn't you want as many different perspectives as possible?"

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CORRECTION: An earlier version of this story incorrectly described an affiliation between "He Gets Us" and Alliance Defending Freedom. Fiona McGee directed TurboTax's spot for Arts & Sciences.

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Special Report: Super Bowl



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