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Rethinking how brands reflect modern multicultural realities: Lessons from Canada's BIPOC Inclusion Hackathon

The BIPOC Inclusion Hackathon in Canada aimed to explore how brands can better reflect the country's increasingly diverse audiences through practical strategies for inclusion.

- Despite the changing demographics in Canada, many brands still approach inclusion primarily through communications, leaving many consumers feeling unseen in product offerings and marketing strategies.
- Four teams of strategists and marketers were tasked with understanding modern Canadian identities and how brands can authentically connect with them, leading to insights that emphasised the importance of integrating diverse perspectives earlier in the marketing process.
- The winning team proposed "The Inclusion Council," a structured workshop system designed to incorporate diverse perspectives into product development and strategy, highlighting the need for lived experience to inform decision-making.

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Why it matters

The everyday Canadian is changing, with evolving cultural implications. How marketers engage with this population should be informed by these evolving realities and lived experiences. Demonstrating inclusive thinking earlier in strategy can strengthen relevance in a changing cultural landscape. Brands that design for increasingly diverse audiences as a core strategy rather than a checkbox will be better positioned for sustained growth.

Takeaways

- Assumptions about the “general market” often reflect narrower lived experiences than the audiences brands aim to reach. Brands can incorporate broader cultural and economic perspectives when defining audiences, stress-testing assumptions, and including diverse viewpoints earlier in strategy to avoid these assumptions.
- When marketing reflects everyday realities, audiences are more likely to see themselves represented in ways that feel credible and relevant. Reliance on shorthand cultural signals can create distance rather than connection.
- Brands should consider expanding how inclusive work is evaluated. Incorporating qualitative insight and lived experience into measurement frameworks can help ensure work connects meaningfully with intended audiences.

Many organizations still approach inclusion primarily through communications decisions, such as casting or cultural moments. Yet as populations become more diverse, many consumers remain unseen in the products, experiences and assumptions shaping marketing. This tension formed the backdrop for the second BIPOC Inclusion Hackathon in Toronto, hosted by the Account Planning Group of Canada in partnership with People of Colour in Advertising and Marketing, with support from industry partners including dentsu, Omnicom, Publicis, IKEA, Coca-Cola, Tangerine, Leger, Synqrinus, Barrett and Welsh, Fuse Create, Tulong and McMaster's DeGroote School of Business.

Four teams of strategists and marketers, each assigned to retail, CPG or financial services, were challenged to respond to a central question: *who are Canadians today, and how can brands more authentically connect with them?* Research from Leger and Synqrinus highlighted how identity is increasingly shaped by shared values such as multiculturalism and openness, alongside lived realities such as affordability and evolving household structures.

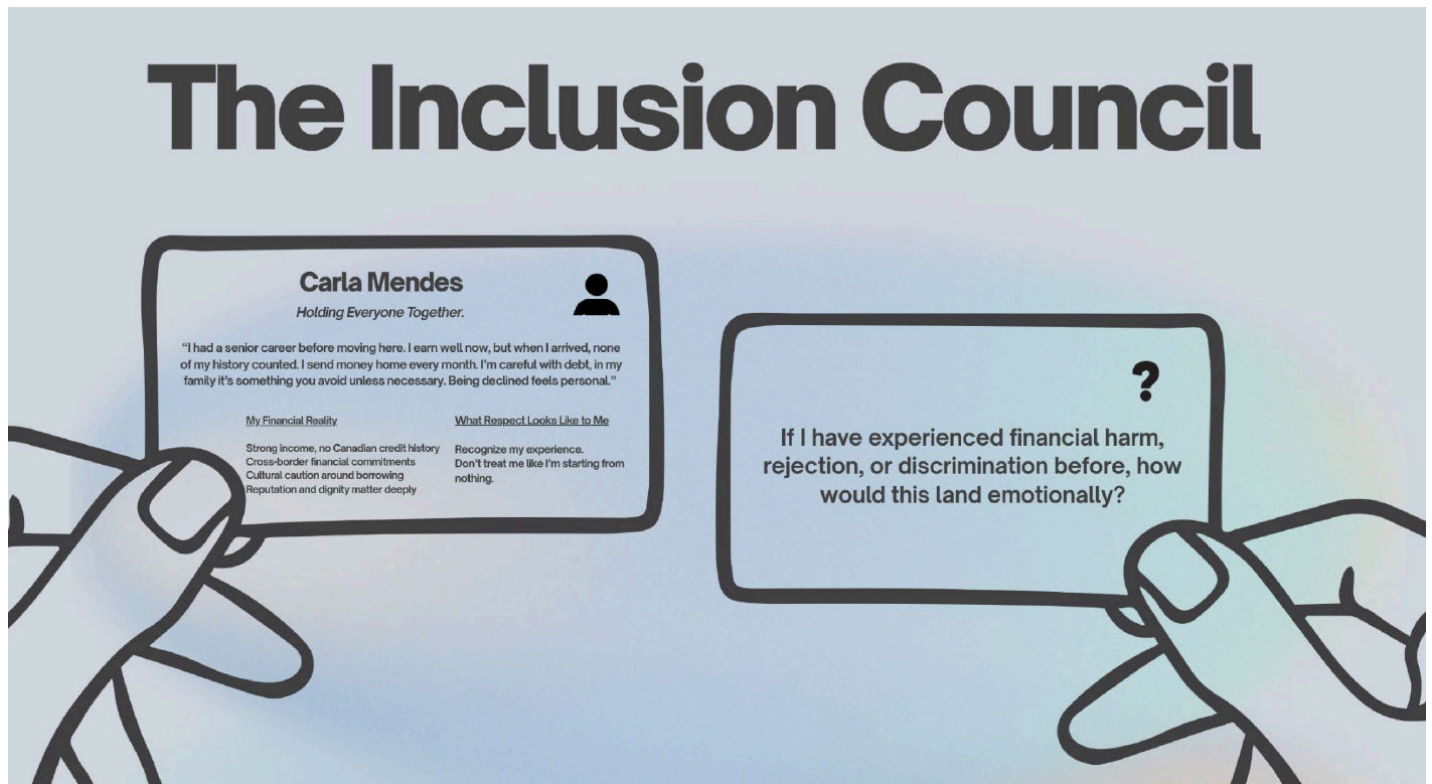
Across the presentations, participants explored how inclusion can be considered earlier in the marketing process, influencing how audiences are defined, insights are gathered and relevance is built. A recurring theme was the gap between inclusive messaging and everyday consumer realities.

The winning team, tasked with the financial services industry, featured Lauren Russ-Constant, Strategist and Founder of Selfhood, June Findlay, Senior Strategist at Little Kernel Communications, and Serra Pinto Avimlah, Product Marketing Lead at Tulong. The team translated that gap into a structural solution called The Inclusion Council, a workshop-based card system designed to bring diverse perspectives into product development, strategy and communications.

The team identified that while financial advertising increasingly reflects diversity visually, many financial products still assume uniform levels of access, trust and financial literacy. Their proposed council model creates structured collaboration between organizations and diverse communities, helping ensure lived experience informs decision-making earlier.

"We call them councillors intentionally because it signals lived expertise and wisdom," explained Lauren Russ-Constant. "We created them for the competition, but hope it inspires agencies and organizations to create their own. The goal is to support better conversations and help teams build confidence discussing difficult topics."

"One of the challenges today is that there's often one person expected to speak for an entire perspective," added June Findlay.



Pictured above: An example of a councillor card from the financial services team.

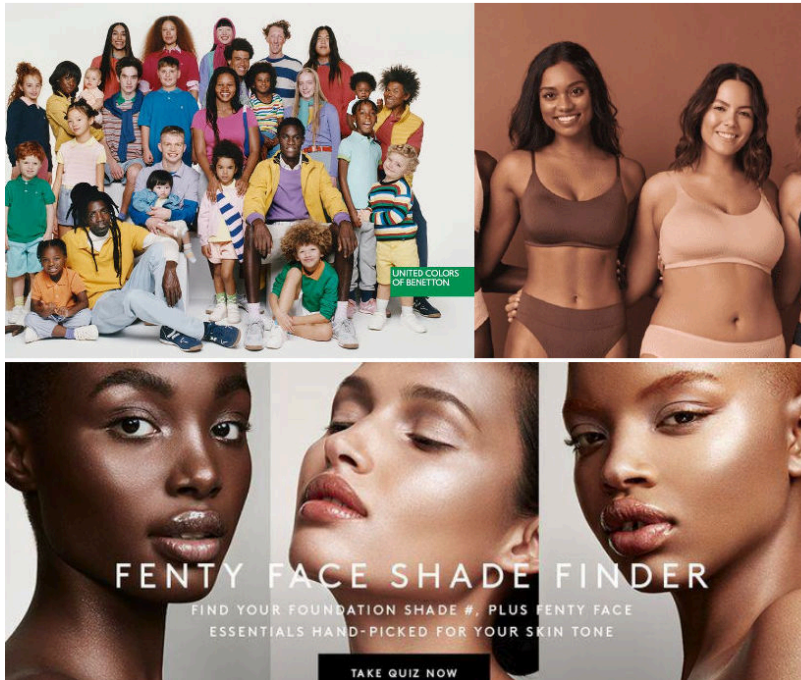
Across all four teams, several consistent themes emerged, pointing to three practical shifts marketers can apply now.

Three takeaways marketers can apply now

1. Integrate inclusive thinking earlier across functions

Teams emphasized expanding the perspectives informing decisions beyond communications alone, influencing product design, service experience and planning. Assumptions about the "general market" often reflect narrower lived experiences than the audiences brands aim to reach.

What Structural Inclusion Looks Like



- Casting diverse models, across race, gender, and age
- Aligning with major cultural moments and festivities
- Fenty set a new industry benchmark by making competitors expand their ranges
- Positioning diversity as central to brand DNA, and not a seasonal messaging
- Redefined universal beauty and aesthetic standards in their respective industries

Pictured above: The retail team's provocation on why identity isn't a trend.

Implication for marketers: strengthen relevance by exploring structured ways to bring diverse perspectives into decision-making stages that shape customer experience. Incorporate broader cultural and economic perspectives when defining audiences, stress-testing assumptions, and including diverse viewpoints earlier in strategy.

2. Reflect lived realities alongside cultural identity

Research reinforced that identity is shaped as much by lived experience as by cultural heritage. When marketing reflects everyday realities, audiences are more likely to see themselves represented in ways that feel credible and relevant. Reliance on shorthand cultural signals can create distance rather than connection.

Implication for marketers: evaluate whether brand messaging reflects how audiences live today, including economic context, family structure and cultural nuance. Stronger relevance comes from understanding the lived nuances that shape how people experience the world.

Advertising & Media: Creative Strategy

How can *'third culture'* narratives drive an authentic mass media presence?



Bridge traditions into the mainstream, not the margins



Create a **cultural collectible** for every Canadian fan (FIFA '26)



Showcase **culture** as the norm in media

Pictured above: One CPG team's proposal on shifting from "Made in Canada" to "Made with Canada", reflecting lived realities.

3. Measure inclusion through relevance, not visibility alone

Across the presentations, teams surfaced a common challenge: inclusion is often evaluated based on visible representation or episodic cultural activations tied to specific moments, rather than whether the work resonates meaningfully with intended audiences. Representation alone does not guarantee relevance if messaging, tone or product assumptions do not reflect lived realities.

Implication for marketers: consider expanding how inclusive work is evaluated. Incorporating qualitative insight and lived experience into measurement frameworks can help ensure work connects meaningfully with intended audiences.

The Inclusion Score Model

Shift from Performance Inclusion to Operational Inclusion.

Project	Representation (25)	Relevance (25)	Reach (25)	Resonance (25)	Total (/100)
Campaign 1	18	12	9	15	54
Campaign 2	20	15	10	15	60
Total	38	27	19	30	

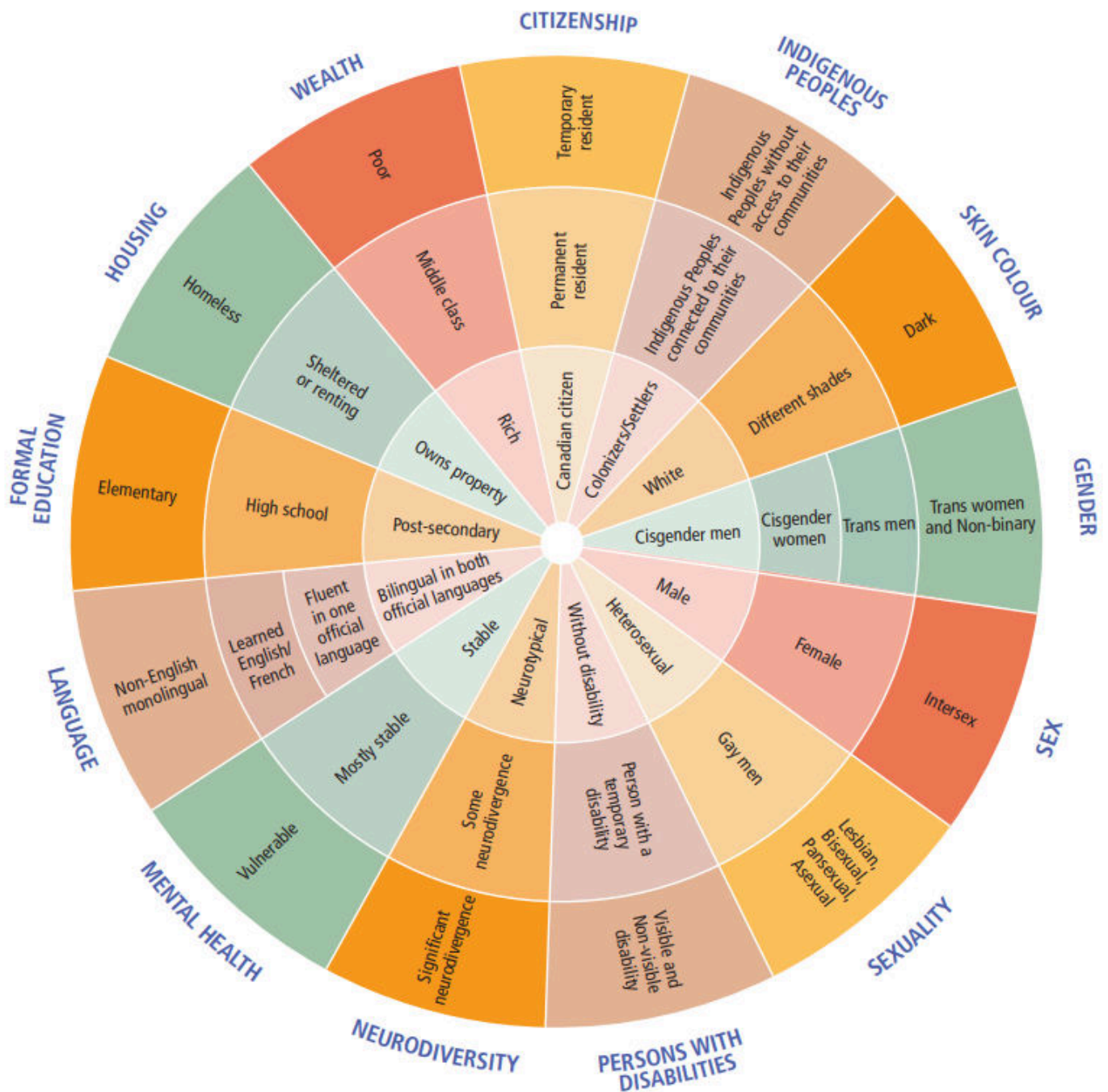
Each pillar scored out of 25. Total score = 100.

Pictured above: The other CPG team's Inclusion Index Model scorecard to help guide brands in decision-making.

Gavin Barrett, Vice-Chair and Co-Founder of POCAM, Founder of Barrett & Welsh, and co-host of the event, reflected on the broader challenge facing the industry:

"We like to think of ourselves [in advertising and marketing] as progressive, but in many ways, we are still working from an outdated understanding of Canada. The population has changed, culture is evolving, but we're still stuck in the past."

Anik Karimjee, Executive VP, Insights at Leger, highlighted a helpful self-assessment tool, the Wheel of Privilege and Power. "It's a tool I continue to use as a reminder to better understand where other people might be coming from and understand their circumstances," noted Karimjee.



In her closing remarks, Ishma Alexander-Huet, Chief Design Officer at Omnicom Media Canada and POCAM board member, emphasized the responsibility advertisers and marketers hold in shaping representation:

“Media is one of the most powerful contributors to unconscious bias. It’s not just what you see, it’s who gets to see it and who doesn’t. As companies that put billions of dollars into the Canadian market, we’re choosing who sees things and who doesn’t. That’s a big responsibility. I love superheroes, I will say it, “with great power comes great responsibility”, that’s something that I keep in mind all the time.”

The BIPOC Inclusion Hackathon continues to create space for industry practitioners to explore how marketing can better reflect increasingly diverse audiences. This year's ideas demonstrate how integrating inclusive thinking earlier in strategy can strengthen relevance in a changing cultural landscape.

This is not only about representation and relevance, but business impact. Brands that design for increasingly diverse audiences as a core strategy rather than a checkbox will be better positioned for sustained growth.

As Michelle Lee, Executive Board Member of APG and co-host of the event, noted:

"I'm impressed by the level of thinking in each deck, particularly the practicality of the tools and frameworks that teams can start using tomorrow."

By making these resources publicly available, the organizers aim to encourage broader adoption across the industry, helping brands build work that reflects the full breadth of modern audiences and contribute to ongoing progress. After all, we as advertisers and marketers have great power, and with it comes great responsibility.

Tagged topics

[Diversity & portrayal in advertising](#) | [Canada](#) | [Behavioural economics](#)

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