

Gender-neutral marketing

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Jess Jorgensen, director at Instant Grass International, has been announced as one of the speakers at the Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) Conference 2018 to be held at Vodaworld on 8 February. Jess and Paul White share their insights on gender-neutral marketing.

In the last few years, the world has seen a massive flux and relaxing in attitudes toward gender and its representation in the media. To put it bluntly, gender fluidity is becoming the new norm. This is being pioneered by the fashion industry, perhaps traditionally the safest space to play with androgyny. Consider Jaden Smith, an early poster-boy pioneer by posing in a skirt for Louis Vuitton.



And while we might expect boundaries pushed in the realm of fashion, they are also being challenged in the hip-hop world, where we might not traditionally expect them to be. Artists like US trans rapper Mykki Blanco blasting down boundaries with music videos like *Wavy*, or artists like Lil Yachty, whose newest album cover shows the rapper flashing his rainbow grill seated amid a spectrum of individuals that includes two young men kissing in the corner of the frame. Reactions across the internet were mixed: many praised Yachty for depicting a gay couple on the cover of a major hip-hop release, while others took to Yachty's Instagram comment section with homophobic remarks.

Nobody can deny the PC lingo is ever-evolving. "Trans" is still PC, and quite normalised, to the point where more gender-fluid terminology has now become a symbol of progression. Colin Nash of *Variety* magazine claimed: "Trans" almost feels like a couple of years behind for our audience.

We're seeing uses of gender terms such as: genderqueer, non-conforming, non-binary and gender-neutral, all of which are used to describe a form of self-expression outside the good ol' gender box of strictly man/woman or masculine/feminine.

To show how prevalent gender neutrality has become in mainstream media and brands, *Covergirl* launched their first male Covergirl model in 2016: James Charles, a YouTube makeup artist and model who has made huge waves in popular culture.

National Geographic created an entire special issue, calling our times "The Gender Revolution" - a great read and reference point for anyone struggling to keep up with ever-changing terminology. Locally, in May 2016 both Wits and UCT rolled out gender-neutral bathrooms, as have many restaurants and bars.

Brands are ditching the old stereotypes, too. But understandably, are not yet going as far as pop culture is currently pushing.

Within the advertising world, we see change as happening on a spectrum - from 'women belong in the home', to total gender fluidity, where anyone can be whomever or whatever they want. We've moved away from the arcane beliefs that women only belong in the home, but we haven't quite reached total freedom yet.

If we take a step back we can look at how advertising has both described and prescribed gender roles throughout history. Advertising has both reflected and created symbols and messages that shape our behaviour as individuals. Advertising of

the 50s and 60s shows how patriarchal advertising messaging was towards women and their roles in the home and society, with taglines like, “It’s a wifesaver!” advertising an oven or, “Blow in her face and she’ll follow you anywhere!” promoting an old brand of cigarettes. These seem positively ridiculous, viewed in 2018.

While we’ve come a long way in advertising, we’ve almost come no way at all. From the 50s, telling women they ‘belong in the home’, to the 70s where women have more freedom yet are encouraged to be sexy for their men, to the 90s where shock appeal keeps rising as women are depicted in more and more risqué ads. We must ask ourselves where branding stands: does it merely describe culture at large, or does it have a responsibility to lead the way?

We are seeing much more non-conformity compared to past expectations. Consumers expect brands to embrace these issues and not ignore them. According to consumers, it’s not cool to be stuck in the old gender stereotypes.

Major US retailer Target has been one of the first to break down the ‘pink aisle’ structure - with explicitly “girls’ toys” in pink and “boys’ toys” in blue or other colours. Now, toy aisles are gender-neutral. Barbie, who has drawn the ire of feminists for many decades, released their 2015 Moschino Barbie ad, which for the first time, included a boy in their advertising.

Locally, character model agency My Friend Ned has started their own gender-neutral division to meet this need. At SA Menswear Week 2017 we saw SA designers like Kim Gush making waves and defining themselves as “gender-neutral”, breaking the barriers of gender conformity by throwing thigh-high pleather platforms on male models. Gush’s ethos as a designer is to become gender-non-conformist. To be shown in this way at a platform like Menswear week, is still considered pretty risqué by many.

To show how mainstream gender non-conformity is becoming locally, Woolworths jumped on the bandwagon and featured a trans model during their 2017 #StyledBySA capsule. We cannot deny that this trend will only strengthen in 2018 and beyond. What we must remember, though, is that even with Woolworths embracing the gender-neutral trend, South Africa does lag behind a little. This allows us a great opportunity to see what is coming. What we need to ask ourselves, though, is how much tolerance audiences in SA have for these admittedly challenging statements. While we know we must embrace these changes, we must ensure we do not alienate those people loyal to our brands.

At the [2018 IMC Conference](#), IGI will explore where the South African marketing industry is currently, and what consumers are expecting from brands in this space. We’ll look at the rise of ‘femvertising’, the death of ‘bro marketing’, and how to start the process of becoming more gender-neutral in communication, retaining relevance to your audience today.

Integrated Marketing Communications Conference 2018

Jess Jorgensen will speak at the Integrated Marketing Communications Conference 2018 on the 8 Feb 2018, Vodaworld, Midrand. Twenty-seven of the industry’s top minds will present across three stages, tackling nine topical themes in interactive sessions under the theme, **Evaluate, Consolidate, Integrate**. Heated debates, networking platforms and learning content will be packed into one exhilarating day as big brands, top agencies and media owners come together to examine how the local and continental marketing industry is embracing new and exciting trends in the emerging market space.

Register here: <http://imcconference.com/conference/johannesburg-2018/home/>.

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