

Repicturing the French Girl

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Most social media users know the French Girl archetype. Easily recognisable with classic jeans, fresh flowers and a taste for Parisian terraces, this aspirational figure has been familiar visual territory for many years. Between art exhibitions, *déjeuner* and co-designing a new red lipstick label, the Romanesque life of the French Girls has become one of the most recognisable symbols of France worldwide. Don't get me wrong, these women do exist, but they represent only a small portion of the French population, yet a great part of advertising.

As a marketing persona, the French Girl (also known as *La Parisienne*) continues to sell perfumes across the world. However, this visual representation is clichéd and far from reality. Even though the recent conversations around inclusion and diversity continue to dismantle the traditional French Girl image, our VisualGPS data shows that only 1 in 10 French women think that they are accurately represented in advertising visuals. What's more, the global success of *Emily in Paris* saw a *retour en force* of the idealised and highly elitist version of the Parisian lifestyle. The show faced a local backlash: Parisians didn't see their multicultural city represented.¹

Some new French Girl aesthetics such as *coquette* or *dolette*² have recently appeared on social media, leaving a place for more fantasy and creativity. Still, between the aspirational myth and social media fantasy, it is hard to find a more authentic representation of women in France. A quick internet search reproduces a similar visual trope: a French woman who is slim, white, seductive and forever young. It's no surprise, then, that popular imagery at Getty Images follows a similar, homogenous view of women in France, erasing ethnic diversity, age or body inclusion.

First, the visual representation of French women is a story of territorial domination: that of continental France over the DOM-TOM —the overseas French territories— is nearly absent in the popular imagery brands use. Interestingly, even though Paris is one of the most multicultural capitals of Europe, the share of visuals showing “La Parisienne” as a young, white woman is even higher than for the rest of France, and the high concentration of berets heightens the urgency for more authenticity—or at least more inclusive take on who is wearing it. A person with curls, braids, coloured hair, grey hair or no hair deserves equal representation, even in one of those “beret” clichés. In fact, the question of who gets to be represented with a beret or a baguette is more important than it seems. In France, as immigration became one of the central subjects during the last presidential elections, with a candidate proposing to

ban foreign names³, it has never been more important to represent all French women and their diverse ethnic backgrounds.

It is widely known that French women do not gain weight. Or at least they have been told they do not. With Paris being the fashion capital of the world, society faces an aggressive pressure to be thin, and the country ranks poorly concerning body inclusion in advertising and media. According to VisualGPS data on bias, nearly half of French women experience discrimination, in most instances related to body shape or type. Our research reveals that less than 1% of visuals used by our French customers showed variety in body types, even though our image testing amongst French consumers shows a clear preference for more body inclusion in visuals. Yet the authentic body representation goes beyond just size. It also includes appearance, and popular visuals continue to highlight faces and bodies without complexity or signs of aging. Even the word “girl” in the #FrenchGirl hashtag hints toward the youth-obsessed culture we live in.

While it’s true that body is the first reason for discrimination, the second is age. Despite some recent examples such as the outdoor campaign from Darjeeling⁴, aged faces and bodies remain stereotyped in popular imagery. Across all popular visual scenarios, whether it’s beauty, lifestyle or business, visuals centre on women in their 20's leaving other age groups far behind. They are two times more represented in business than 50+ women, and two times more likely to be seen in leadership positions. When older women appear in visuals, they are often depicted in medical circumstances or on recreational walks.

The state of gender inclusion in France needs guidance, but the French are welcoming of inclusive visual language. Famous for their social movements challenging the status quo, when it comes to gender expression and identity, French consumers are the most welcoming in Europe. 7 in 10 think that people should be free to choose the gender that they want to identify it, and 8 in 10 think that society should not enforce conformity to traditional gender roles. However, in visuals, transgender women are only represented in relation to pride symbols, and never as active members of society or in beauty scenarios. Clearly, more guidance is needed, and our partnership with GLAAD⁵ can help not only to close the visibility gap for transgender women in France, but also to empower better representation.

[1] Cheating, croissants, couture: Young Parisians revile cliché-packed 'Emily in Paris' ([NBC News](#))

[2] Coquette ou la nouvelle esthétique romantique à suivre ([Nylon France](#))

[3] Spooked by immigration, Islam and ‘woke’ ideas: Who are Éric Zemmour’s supporters? ([France 24](#))

[4] Darjeeling lance une campagne pour toutes les générations de femmes ([Fashion United](#))

[5] Widening the Lens on Transgender Stories ([Creative Insights](#))