

Inclusive branding approaches: A conceptual framework[♦]

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Abstract

The evolving role of marketing and brands as catalysts for social change is crucial for scholars and practitioners. Increasingly, citizens and consumers expect companies to take a stand and address environmental, social, and political issues. In this scenario, inclusive branding, which incorporates Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) principles into brand management, has become increasingly important, also due to pressures from activist movements like *Black Lives Matter* and *#MeToo*. However, the concept of inclusive branding is still in its early stages of development and the potential role that brands may play in meeting these consumer demands is currently limited. In light of these gaps, this conceptual paper aims to develop a theory-based typological framework that outlines the fundamental strategic approaches to inclusive branding. Moreover, defining the concept of inclusive brand, the study seeks to explore its dimensions.

The study introduces the "DEI triad", comprising *depth*, *breadth*, and *intersectionality*, to capture the heterogeneity in applications of DEI principles into brand management. Depending on the level of development of these three dimensions, two contrasting approaches (i.e., *strategic* and *tactical approaches*) are identified. Using *Netflix* as a case vignette, the paper illustrates best practices in adopting a strategic approach. The study contributes to the growing field of inclusive branding by introducing a cohesive framework that delineates the main brand approaches to DEI - overcoming the limited and fragmented perspectives in previous managerial and academic literature - and deepens the DEI-based brand identity, which was not addressed in previous studies.

Key words

Transformative branding, Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI), inclusive branding, DEI triad (*depth*, *breadth*, *intersectionality*), case vignette.

[♦] This paper, which is the result of ongoing research, presents a synthetic reworking of the study by Vernuccio M., Patrizi M. and Ceccotti F. "*Deepening inclusive branding: A managerial perspective*" forthcoming in Masiello B., Izzo F., Bonetti E. (co-eds), "Inclusive Marketing and Social Sustainability. Strategies for creating value for organizations, conscious consumers, and society," Cambridge Scholars Publishing Series on Social Sciences studies.

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1. Introduction

Marketing and brand's new role as a promoter of social change in contemporary society is central to both academic (Chandy et al., 2021; Demangeot et al., 2019; Spry et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020) and managerial discussions (e.g., Accenture, 2018; 2021; Edelman, 2023). Recently, some authors have introduced the concept of *transformative branding* (Spry et al., 2021), defined as “a dynamic capability deployed by firms as a prosocial process to facilitate collaboration amongst stakeholders to co-create brand meanings that draw on hybrid logics. As such, this process is aimed at achieving outcomes aligned to both market and social logics, ultimately creating value for stakeholders, the market, and society at large” (p. 534). Transformative branding can trigger changes in market and societal systems by challenging the dominant social paradigm (e.g., advance prosocial change), shaping markets and promoting economic, sociocultural, regulatory, and political transformations (Spry et al., 2021). Transformative branding is a force for good that has been conceptualized by marketing scholars at the “macro” level. Indeed, a comprehensive prosocial transformation can be achieved when the prosocial actions of one brand inspires other brands and stakeholders to follow suit, leading to a collective disruption of the social and market landscape.

Addressing how branding can contribute to environmental, social, and political good by adopting the microlevel perspective (i.e., the firm-centric view), different conceptualizations emerge, such as CSR-based approaches to branding (e.g., Carroll, 2016; Vallaster et al., 2012), sustainable branding (Kumar and Christodouloupoulou, 2014), green branding (Kumar, 2016), brand activism (Cammarota et al., 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020), and cause-related marketing (e.g., Xu and Zhou, 2020).

Recently, *inclusive branding* has emerged within the domain of studies on firm-specific prosocial branding approaches, focusing on the concept of “Diversity, Equity and Inclusion” (DEI). According to Arsel et al. (2021), *diversity* encompasses the actual or perceived physical and socio-cultural differences among people and the representation of these differences in research, market spaces, and organizations. *Equity* involves fair treatment of people in terms of both opportunity and outcomes. Finally, *inclusion* refers to the creation of a culture that promotes belonging and incorporates diverse groups, typically by opposing exclusion or marginalization.

The attention to diversity, equity and inclusion is relevant for citizens, consumers, and practitioners. Consider, for example, the actions carried out by activist movements (e.g., *Black Lives Matter*, *#MeToo*) worldwide. As consumers, individuals demand that brands increasingly focus on DEI issues (IAS, 2023) and are ready to recommend inclusive brands while penalizing those that do not pay attention to inclusion (Acconciamezza, 2023). The issue is also significant for companies, as evidenced by the increasing number of initiatives undertaken by brands both internationally and in Italy (e.g., Diversity Brand Index 2023 and Diversity Media Awards 2024).

According to Ferraro et al. (2023), the concept of DEI has been acknowledged as a valuable asset for developing an intentional and authentic brand management strategy, aiming to construct and express a brand identity that aligns with consumer values.

Coherently with previous research on diversity in the domain of consumer behavior (Arsel et al., 2021), studies on inclusive branding have emphasized the importance of

simultaneously considering multiple differences in people's identities (i.e., social identity structures), which includes physical (e.g., gender, age, body, dis/ability), ethnic (e.g., race), socioeconomic and cultural variables (e.g., social class, social status, political orientation). Thus, considering the plurality of diversity dimensions, inclusive branding should include a recognition of *intersectionality*, i.e., taking into account not only one aspect at a time (e.g., gender) but also the interdependence between different social identity structures (e.g., gender, race and disability), which can be seen as multiple "layers of oppression" faced by different marginalized groups (Crenshaw, 1989; Ferraro et al., 2023; Gopaldas, 2013).

Given the fundamental role that advertising can play in education and societal change (McDonald, 2020; Viglia et al., 2023), it is not surprising that studies on diversity and inclusive branding have focused mainly on the use of inclusive advertising (Burgess et al., 2021; Eisend et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023), devoting less attention to the use of the other marketing mix elements, such as product (Keenan et al., 2021), place (Demangeot et al., 2013), and price (Francis and Robertson, 2021).

While there is a growing demand for reduced discrimination and increasing pressure on social actors to embrace inclusive principles and practices, the concept of inclusive branding is still in its early stages of development (Jonsen et al., 2021). Moreover, the potential role that brands may play in meeting these consumer demands is currently limited. Although there are some early attempts to formalize approaches to inclusive branding (Burgess et al., 2021; 2022; Ferrero et al., 2023), previous studies are significantly fragmented (Kipnis et al., 2021), focusing on single dimensions of inclusive branding, such as a single cause of discrimination (Licsandru and Cui, 2019) or a single element in the marketing mix (e.g., Liljedal et al., 2020). Moreover, although Ferraro et al. (2023) introduced the impact of DEI on brand identity by emphasizing the need for brands to constantly strive for authenticity, a lack of focus on DEI-based identity elements emerged.

Bridging these gaps could be particularly relevant on both the theoretical and managerial fronts. On the first front, many studies emphasized the need to deepen inclusive branding, given the persistence of open questions related to the definition and the leading managerial practices (e.g., Burgess et al., 2021, and the recent special issue in a leading journal, such as the *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, 2024). For marketers, exploring inclusive branding approaches can help identify critical dimensions to create value for the firm, consumers, and society.

To fill the gaps, this study aims to develop a theory-based typological framework that outlines the fundamental strategic approaches to inclusive branding, addressing and surpassing the limited and fragmented perspectives in existing managerial and academic literature. Moreover, defining the concept of inclusive brand, the study explores its dimensions.

The paper is structured as follows. After describing our conceptual model with two different approaches to inclusive branding, we will deepen the development of the DEI-based brand identity system (§ 2). Then, we propose a case vignette (Vollero et al., 2016), i.e., *Netflix*, to explore the strategic inclusive branding approach (§ 3). Finally, we briefly present our conclusion (§ 4).

2. *DEI triad* and inclusive branding approaches

Inclusive branding entails embedding DEI principles into branding strategies. A genuine approach to inclusive branding should follow a strategic process that begins with building or reshaping the brand identity.

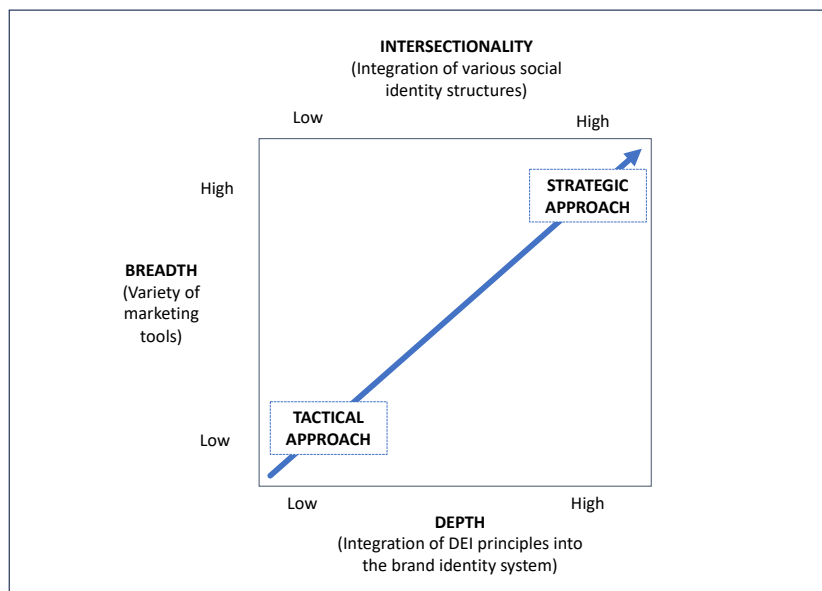
According to Vernuccio et al. (forthcoming), to grasp the significant heterogeneity in how DEI principles are applied into brand management decisions and actions, three following strategic dimensions of inclusive branding should be considered (i.e., “*DEI triad*”):

- i) *Depth*, which refers to the full integration of DEI principles into the construction of the brand identity system (Ferraro et al., 2023);
- ii) *Breadth*, which is related to the variety of marketing mix elements and communication mix tools used by the company (Henderson et al., 2013);
- iii) *Intersectionality* (i.e., the integration of various interdependent social identity structures, such as race, class, gender, and political perspectives), which includes intersecting and multiply oppressed groups (Gopaldas, 2013).

Depending on the level of development (i.e., low or high) of the three dimensions mentioned above, two contrasting approaches to inclusive branding can be identified (Vernuccio et al, forthcoming) (fig. 1):

- A *strategic (holistic) approach*, characterized by a high level of *depth*, *breadth*, and *intersectionality*;
- A *tactical (reductionist) approach*, characterized by a low intensity across the three dimensions of the DEI triad.

Figure 1 – *DEI triad* and inclusive branding approaches



The two approaches represent the extreme ends of the spectrum on which brands implement the DEI principles into brand management decisions, showcasing the broad range of behaviors brands exhibit in practice.

At the broadest level, branding strategies encompass a long-term vision that integrates DEI principles deeply within the brand's identity framework (i.e., *depth*). Brand identity stands as the "true heart" of a brand, shaping its reason for being. This involves developing various critical dimensions across several layers, namely: the essence or key concepts that capture a substantial portion of what the brand signifies and aims to represent (e.g., vision, values), visual and tangible elements (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008), cultural traits (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001), characteristics of the product offering (Kapferer, 2008), and brand personality (Aaker, 1996).

In the *strategic approach*, the inclusive brand identity's construction involves the definition of the following relevant aspects:

- core values intertwined with DEI (the "brand essence");
- brand personality and the related psychological values (i.e., empathy, authenticity, sincerity, and warmth);
- brand cultural traits, grounded in a dedication to openness (listening, fairness, transparency, and dialogue);
- specific attributes of the product offering. These attributes encompass an assortment that can cater to diverse social identities, inclusive packaging options, and comprehensive communication strategies. Thus, these attributes must consistently align with the other inclusive brand dimensions mentioned above (i.e., *breadth* and *intersectionality*);
- brand's societal role as a champion of diversity. This entails actively seeking diversity in markets, advocating for a more inclusive society, and fostering connections toward a multicultural and diverse marketplace (Demangeot et al., 2019).

Integrating these identity dimensions - essence, personality, cultural traits, product characteristics, and social roles - represents a promise to consumers and other stakeholders. This promise entails a heightened recognition, acceptance, and appreciation of each consumer's uniqueness and a genuine dedication to fostering a more inclusive society. This commitment is fundamental because it represents the basis of the brand's positioning and communication strategy (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000).

Furthermore, as previously highlighted in the second dimension of inclusive branding (i.e., *breadth*), the strategy goes beyond mere advertising. It includes various marketing and communication tools, all used to achieve strategic goals. More in detail (Demangeot et al. 2019; Francis and Robertson, 2021; Keenan et al., 2021):

- Product: Brands should strive to attract a diverse spectrum of consumers with different identities (e.g., biscuits for children with celiac disease with appearance and characteristics similar to products with gluten);
- Place: Brands can play a crucial role in promoting equitable access, for example, by offering assisted shopping hours for elderly and disabled consumers;

- Promotion: Brands can adopt a counterstereotype point of view by representing individuals in a multitude of social roles and contexts;
- Pricing strategies, which can be employed to support disadvantaged segments and ensure that consumer offerings for marginalized groups are priced fairly.

Finally, the *strategic approach* encompasses also the principles of *intersectionality*, which involves addressing a finite yet diverse combination of social identity structures. The *strategic approach* can determine one of the inclusive branding outcomes highlighted by scholars, namely, *audience connectedness* (Burgess et al., 2021). Indeed, consumers perceive that branding efforts can facilitate a sense of acceptance and validation. This sense of positive identification and belonging is not solely based on direct similarities, such as gender or ethnicity; instead, consumers may experience a connection through shared experiences, values, or relevance to others (Åkestam et al., 2017). Since forming connections fulfills a fundamental psychological need, fostering a sense of connectedness can enhance brand success by contributing to physical and social well-being, self-esteem, and overall satisfaction (Hutcherson et al., 2008; Lee and Robbins, 1998). The *strategic approach* (i.e., *holistic approach*) to inclusivity is guided by a hybrid logic that merges market and social principles, as previously discussed (§1), to benefit the brand, consumers, and society (Spry et al., 2021). Conversely, the *tactical approach* (i.e., *reductionist approach*) is characterized by its short-term, surface-level focus and lacks emphasis on brand identity. The principles of the "DEI triad" are applied in a tactical manner, primarily within advertising, rather than being integrated into the brand's identity framework. Additionally, diversity is often interpreted in a limited way, concentrating on a single dimension at a time, such as gender. This approach may lead to consumer disengagement and skepticism, with some accusing the brand of "woke washing" (Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020) or "tokenism" (Burgess et al., 2022).

3. Illustrating the strategic inclusive branding approach: A case vignette of Netflix

Netflix stands out as a compelling case vignette in inclusive branding, exemplifying how a company can intricately weave DEI principles into its brand identity. The company adeptly addresses *depth*, *breadth*, and *intersectionality*, utilizing a diverse array of marketing and communication strategies (Asmar et al., 2023; Thuillas and Wiert, 2024). This commitment to diversity began in 2017 when it made inclusion a core brand value. Recognizing that early efforts did not fully achieve the intended impact, recently, the inclusion team at Netflix has "*laid the groundwork to ensure this value is deeply embedded within the organization*" (Netflix, 2021). Regarding *breadth* and *intersectionality*, the company was distinguished as the leading brand at the Diversity Brand Awards 2022. This honor was given in acknowledgment of Netflix's "*comprehensive and effective efforts in diversity and inclusion, particularly for gender, aging, multiculturalism, sexual orientation, and emotional diversity*" (Diversity Brand Summit, 2022a). Further solidifying its commitment to inclusive branding, Netflix's DEI initiatives were ranked among the top 10 by the Brand Diversity Index in 2023 (Diversity Brand Summit, 2023). Additionally, several important media outlets,

including *The New York Times* and *Forbes*, have highlighted the company's achievements in advancing diversity and inclusion, emphasizing its innovative approach and significant impact on the industry (Grynbaum, 2024; Shacknai, 2021). These accolades highlighted Netflix's success in addressing representation issues and affirmed its status as an inclusive brand resonating with diverse audiences.

To illustrate how Netflix has embodied this strategic approach, we will examine the company's key milestones and initiatives, highlighting its commitment to inclusion across offerings, distribution, and communication strategies. Since its founding in 1997 by Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph, Netflix has transformed content consumption, evolving from a disruptor in media access to a major force in content creation. Early successes such as *House of Cards* and *Narcos* paved the way for popular series like *Bridgerton* and *Stranger Things*. Throughout its evolution, Netflix has focused on unique narratives and amplifying underrepresented voices (Netflix, 2024a). Reflecting this dedication, the company enlisted Dr. Stacy L. Smith and the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative to evaluate its U.S. original content from 2018 to 2021. The study, published in April 2023, reviewed 546 narratives, assessing gender, race/ethnicity, LGBTQ+ representation, and disability, including behind-the-camera roles (Netflix, 2023). Despite historical industry challenges with gender imbalance, Netflix has made significant progress. By 2021, female characters held 61% of lead and co-lead roles and nearly 50% of main cast positions. Netflix has also improved racial and ethnic representation, featuring underrepresented groups like Black, Asian, Latinx, and Middle Eastern/North African individuals in 47.5% of lead or co-lead roles. Women of color have been prominently cast in leading roles and key creative positions. LGBTQ+ representation has also advanced, with 20.3% of lead roles and 5.7% of main cast members identifying as LGBTQ+. Additionally, 4.2% of Netflix's stories featured a lead character with a disability (Netflix, 2023).

Netflix's distribution spans over 190 countries and supports more than 62 languages, offering various accessibility features for individuals with hearing, sight, or mobility impairments. Users can enhance audio clarity with assistive listening systems such as headsets, hearing aids, and neck loops. Many titles provide audio descriptions that detail on-screen actions, facial expressions, and scene transitions. Netflix is also compatible with common screen readers that read text aloud and offer customizable subtitles and closed captions in terms of font, size, color, and background. Additionally, voice commands can be used to search for and play content via voice-enabled remotes and assistants (Netflix, 2024b).

In its communication strategy, Netflix effectively leverages various digital platforms, including Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, to engage audiences with behind-the-scenes content, teasers, memes, and interactive challenges that spotlight the diversity within its programming. One notable initiative in Italy, "Parliamone," is featured on Netflix's social media channels and explores themes of on-screen diversity representation through dialogues with prominent figures from cinema, culture, and society. This initiative has attracted significant media attention, bolstered by a strategically targeted PR campaign (Diversity Brand Summit, 2022b).

Regarding advertising, during Pride 2021, Netflix launched a worldwide campaign celebrating LGBTQ+ representation by showcasing iconic scenes and couples from its

shows, reinforcing its commitment to visibility and sexual orientation issues (Diversity Brand Summit, 2022b).

Netflix further supports DEI through public relations initiatives, maintaining transparency with regular diversity and inclusion reports, and supporting external organizations and internal programs through the Netflix Fund for Inclusive Creativity, which focuses on advancing diversity and nurturing emerging international talent (Netflix, 2024c). In Italy, Netflix's programs include "La Bottega della Sceneggiatura," which supports young multicultural Italian authors with scholarships and development opportunities, and "Becoming Maestre," a mentoring and job access program for female talent under 35 in behind-the-camera roles, reflecting the company's commitment to gender diversity (Diversity Brand Summit, 2022b).

Collectively, these initiatives highlight Netflix's dedication to fostering inclusivity and advancing diverse representation in the media landscape.

4. Conclusion

This study aims to advance knowledge in the emerging field of studies on inclusive branding, a firm-specific prosocial approach focused on applying DEI principles to brand management. (e.g., Burgess et al., 2021; 2022).

Our primary contribution is introducing a theory-based typological framework delineating the main branding approaches to DEI. This framework constructs inclusive branding by identifying its three dimensions – the DEI triad that comprises *depth*, *breadth*, and *intersectionality* - and proposing a novel and more in-depth conceptualization that incorporates multiple and intersectional identities in diversity initiatives. By doing so, the study deepens two contrasting branding approaches, namely the *strategic* and the *tactical approaches*, overcoming the limited and fragmented perspectives in previous managerial and academic literature. Moreover, we focus on the *depth* dimension and thus on the construction or the redefinition of the DEI-based brand identity, not addressed in previous study. Finally, through *Netflix's* case vignette, we provide a representation of a company's best practices of adopting a strategic approach.

Finally, we propose a cohesive framework that marketers should consider in defining and managing an inclusive branding. Brands can utilize this framework to assess their current diversity strategies, benchmark them against competitors, and identify potential adjustments to enhance benefits for individuals, companies, and society.

The study suggests some interesting questions that remain open and deserve attention in further research in the promising field of inclusive branding. For example, it could be interesting to empirically analyze: (a) the main challenges that companies must address in adopting various approaches to DEI; (b) the brand-building or rebranding process carried out by companies that want to include DEI into their brand identity and brand identification system; (c) the dynamics evolutionary paths in the adoption of two approaches, delineating different possibilities for firms that could start with the *tactical approach* and then evolve towards the *strategic approach* or vice versa; (d) the reasons behind a brand's deliberate choice of one approach over another.

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