

Diversity and inclusion in employer branding: an explorative analysis of European companies' digital communication

Diversity and
inclusion
in employer
branding

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Received 22 November 2022

Revised 4 July 2023

31 July 2023

Accepted 31 July 2023

Abstract

Purpose – The study aims to investigate the usage of diversity and inclusion (D&I) signals in communications for employer branding through digital channels made by European companies.

Design/methodology/approach – A quali-quantitative content analysis approach was employed to detect the usage of D&I signals of the top 43 European companies ranked in the 2021 Refinitiv Diversity and Inclusion index. These signals were organized according to Plummer's Big 8 diversity's dimensions. A correlation analysis was conducted to verify a relationship between D&I initiatives and digital communication for employer branding on corporate websites and LinkedIn. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the D&I dimensions' pervasiveness in digital communications and relevance on LinkedIn.

Findings – The results show that the correlation exists only between D&I initiatives and communication on the corporate website, while LinkedIn is still underused in this field. The most pervasive and relevant D&I dimensions for European companies are "Gender" and "Sexual Orientation".

Originality/value – This paper enriches employer branding research by providing original insights into the use of D&I dimensions in digital communications.

Keywords Diversity and inclusion management, Signaling theory, Employer branding, Diversity management, D&I signals, D&I dimensions

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Recruiting skilled employees has become increasingly challenging for many organizations in today's world, primarily due to factors such as population aging and the transition to a knowledge-based economy (Ployhart *et al.*, 2017). As a result, maintaining a positive employer



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Employee Relations: The
International Journal
Vol. 45 No. 7, 2023
pp. 121-139
Emerald Publishing Limited
0142-5455

DOI 10.1108/ER-11-2022-0522

image has become crucial, prompting organizations to actively seeking comprehensive strategies that can help them attract and retain potential and current employees (Guthridge *et al.*, 2008). Consequently, the concept of employer branding (EB) has emerged as a prime approach in the human resource management (HRM) domain for tackling such challenge (Martindale, 2010).

An effective employer brand has to convey a workplace's image that coincides with the job seekers' needs and expectations. The "Diversity and Inclusion (D&I): Global Strategic Business Report" (2023) testifies that new generations of job seekers prefer companies with inclusive workplaces. For this reason, job seekers actively seek information to gain insights into a company's work culture before deciding to apply for a job (Turban, 2001). They interpret what they read, hear, or see about an organization as signals of its inclusiveness (Uggerslev *et al.*, 2012). Companies can provide these types of signals and catch their attention through digital corporate communication for EB (Taj, 2016).

While many scholars have focused on the relationship between D&I issues and EB (Matuska and Sałek-Imińska, 2014; Puncheva-Michelotti *et al.*, 2018; Jonsen *et al.*, 2019), only a few studies have investigated the use of digital communication to signal workplace inclusivity and fairness for members of different groups (Ball *et al.*, 2016; White *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, implementing EB strategies in the digital realm that pursue D&I is a pressing competitive necessity, and academic scholars need to expand research in this area.

Drawing on signaling theory, one of the dominant paradigms used to explain how EB activities can influence potential candidates' perceptions of an organization (e.g. Celani and Singh, 2011; Gregory *et al.*, 2013; Keppeler and Papenfuß, 2021), this study aims to fill this gap and provide interesting insights on the use of D&I signals in digital communication practices for EB, offering an overview on the European context.

In recent years, the European Commission has encouraged companies to incorporate diversity and inclusion (D&I) management to comply with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement. For instance, by signing a Diversity Charter, organizations voluntarily commit to implementing proactive D&I practices, often in the context of broader corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies (Maier and Ravazzani, 2019). Furthermore, the European Union (EU) Directive 2104/95 on non-financial reporting and diversity has changed the way large companies in Europe report and disclose their non-financial information on economic, social and environmental aspects. Since 2017, this regulation has required larger companies with more than 500 employees and public interest entities to produce annual reports containing information on their social, environmental, human rights and anti-corruption policies, risks and benefits.

Consequently, the largest European companies have been obliged to produce annual non-financial reports to comply with national and supranational law (La Torre *et al.*, 2020). For this reason, the first step of this research is to examine whether the commitment to D&I management, as disclosed in accounting statements, is leveraged to attract talent in digital communications for EB. This leads to the first research question:

RQ1. Is there a correlation between D&I accounting statements and digital communication for employer branding?

Furthermore, since D&I management involves addressing various dimensions of diversity (e.g. gender, age, race, sexual orientation, etc.), this research aims to investigate which dimensions companies tend to emphasize the most through digital channels primarily used for recruitment communications, such as the corporate website and LinkedIn, in order to signal the inclusiveness of their work environment. Consequently, two additional research questions arise:

RQ2. How pervasive are D&I dimensions in digital channels for employer branding communications among European companies?

RQ3. How relevant are D&I dimensions in communications for employer branding on LinkedIn business pages?

The RQ2 seeks to provide an overview of the D&I dimensions used by European companies in their EB efforts, highlighting the most widespread dimension on each channel, based on the total number of companies in the sample. Finally, the RQ3 aims to identify the D&I dimensions that frequently appear in LinkedIn posts of each company.

The paper is structured as follows. [Section 2](#) introduces the theoretical framework of signaling theory and presents the fundamental concept of EB, underlying the role of diversity management as a crucial prerequisite for strengthening organizational attractiveness and shaping the employee value proposition around D&I values. The conceptual background concludes by highlighting the utility of digital channels in EB communications. [Section 3](#) explains the research's methodological approach, including the procedure, context and sample for content analysis. It also describes the data sources used to identify D&I signals and the measures employed to address the research questions. Subsequent sections (4, 5 and 6) present the findings, discuss them and highlight the theoretical and managerial implications of the study. Finally, [Section 7](#) disclose the limitations of the research and propose future lines of investigation.

2. Conceptual background

2.1 Signaling theory

Signaling theory has been frequently used in social science studies as a framework for understanding the dynamics of communication between individuals and organizations ([Spence, 1978](#); [Highhouse et al., 2007](#); [Connelly et al., 2011](#); [Taj, 2016](#)). At its core, signaling theory posits that information exerts a profound influence on decision-making processes, enhancing our understanding of how information is exchanged between interacting entities ([Connelly et al., 2011](#)). The effectiveness of signals relies on their observability by external parties. Notably, signaling theory has found prominence in strategic management and entrepreneurship, particularly in the realm of recruitment research ([Uggerslev et al., 2012](#)), where it has been employed to examine information asymmetry ([Connelly et al., 2011](#); [Suazo et al., 2009](#)). This phenomenon operates bidirectionally, with job applicants utilizing their qualifications as signals of their latent performance potential to prospective employers. In turn, organizations can employ signals, such as heterogeneous board compositions, to convey high social values, thereby augmenting their appeal to potential employees ([Ryan et al., 2000](#)) and attracting a talented workforce ([Carpentier et al., 2019](#)). From the applicants' perspective, signals enable them to make well-informed evaluations of prospective employers and assess the alignment of their personal needs with the organizational context ([Highhouse et al., 2007](#)).

Existing literature predominantly focuses on the communication of information intended to convey favorable organizational attributes ([Bergh et al., 2014](#); [Ganesan et al., 2018](#); [Wilhelmy et al., 2019](#); [Zhang et al., 2020](#)), with a particular focus on the differences in knowledge and power between employers and job seekers ([Pernkopf et al., 2021](#)). For this reason, signaling theory serves as a valuable framework for elucidating the mechanisms through which EB activities shape the perceptions of prospective applicants regarding organizational attractiveness ([Turban, 2001](#); [Carpentier et al., 2019](#)).

2.2 Employer branding

Employer branding is the process of developing a distinct and recognizable employer identity or, more specifically, “the promotion of a unique and attractive image” as an employer ([Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004](#)). In this process, marketing principles are applied to manage organizations' tangible and intangible employment offerings through, for example,

communication campaigns to raise awareness and strengthen the association between the employer brand and desirable attributes (Edwards, 2009). Many authors point out that an EB strategy is one of the few long-term solutions to the problem of “talent shortage” (Mandhanya and Shah, 2010) and a fundamental requirement to feed the desires of the new generations like Generation Z (Carbajal-Cribillero *et al.*, 2022).

As highlighted by Pernkopf *et al.* (2021), potential applicants prefer to assess the attractiveness of employers themselves, seeking signals that assist them in understanding whether joining the company would meet their personal needs. Job seekers consider various factors as signals, such as firms’ reputation, their corporate social performance, diversity management efforts, or “best place to work” certifications (Dauth *et al.*, 2023).

Particularly, younger job seekers tend to evaluate an organization based on its employer brand. The term was introduced by Ambler and Barrow (1996) to define “the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employment company” (p. 185). As depicted in the Martin and Sinclair (2018)’s model, the employer brand represents a unique image encompasses elements such as the company’s identity, leadership style, work environment, employee benefits, career development opportunities and more, which the employer should signal as attractive factors to potential employees. The employer brand, in fact, influences the level of engagement in the organizational context on the base of how the organization is perceived by both current and potential employees, as well as external stakeholders such as customers, partners and the general public. The outcome of the process of building the employer brand image through signals must be gaining a significant reputational capital.

At the core of the employer brand is the Employee Value Proposition (EVP), which is a straightforward statement defining how the organization will fulfill employees’ requirements, outlining what they can expect in exchange for their efforts and achievements (Pawar and Charak, 2014; Bagienska, 2018). This proposition sets the employer apart from its competitors on job market. Since it is widely recognized that employee satisfaction extends beyond purely economic value (i.e. the salary), Pawar and Charak (2014) stated that EVP could be grounded in other dimensions of employer attractiveness (Berthon *et al.*, 2005), such as: (1) interest value, associated with the excitement and creativity of the work environment; (2) social value, built on a collegial work environment with a good team atmosphere; (3) development value, based on recognition of work and career enhancement opportunities; (4) application value, referring to employees’ ability to apply what they have learned, teach others and interact with customers in a positive and compassionate manner. Therefore, EVP refers to the value or benefit employees derive or perceive to gain or experience through being part of an organization (Herger, 2007).

2.3 D&I in employee value proposition

Some scholars argue that diversity management (DM) is a core element of EVP (Matuska and Satek-Imińska, 2014) as it helps build the organization’s identity around the principles and values sought by job seekers (Kele and Cassell, 2022). DM is an approach to human resource management aimed at creating an inclusive working environment that encourages individual potential and supports the achievement of organizational goals (Barabino *et al.*, 2001). It focuses on addressing the subjective needs and potential of each employee, highlighting the importance of building an inclusive workplace that embraces countless diversities.

Various scholars have attempted to define and categorize diversities. Some studies have focused on social group memberships as minorities compared to the majority society, while others have emphasized individual uniqueness and personal choices (Liff, 1997). Dimensions of diversity have been categorized as primary (age, ethnicity, gender, physical ability, race and sexual orientation) and secondary (education, geographic location, income level, marital

status, military experience, parental status, religious beliefs and work experience) (Loden and Rosener, 1991). Additionally, Plummer (2003) identified the “Big 8” dimensions of diversity: age, ethnicity/nationality, gender, psychophysical capacity, organizational role/job function, race, religion and sexual orientation. While gender and race have been extensively studied in academic research on diversity management, other aspects such as age, physical abilities, mental well-being, work-life balance and LGBTQIA + representation are gaining recognition as important areas to address (Boehm and Dwertmann, 2015; Zheng *et al.*, 2015; Akanji *et al.*, 2020; Hossain *et al.*, 2020).

Commitment in managing diversity enables companies to align with the SDGs of Agenda (2030), including securing good health and well-being (SDG 3), supporting gender equality (SDG 5), fostering decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) and reducing inequalities (SDG 10) (To and Häkli, 2021). This alignment serves as a distinctive advantage on which to build EVP. Further advantages arise from communicating D&I commitment. For example, Puncheva-Michelotti *et al.* (2018) demonstrated that communicating workplace diversities, employee participation and development opportunities enhances employer brand attractiveness. For this reason, companies often signal practices related to employee well-being, including respect for human rights, employee health and safety, work-life balance, employee training and equal opportunity (Hameed *et al.*, 2016). Jonsen *et al.* (2019), in their study on corporate websites, found that diversity statements are a means of EB used by companies to become an employer of choice. Moreover, creating a climate where employees feel a sense of belonging increases the likelihood that they will become brand ambassadors and help attract other talent to the organization (Wells *et al.*, 2021), thus supporting EB efforts. Dauth *et al.* (2023) confirm that the presence of diversity initiatives in firms’ communication (such as annual reports, websites and social media channels) positively impacts employers’ attractiveness.

2.3.1 The use of digital channels in EB strategies. Previous research has examined the role of online communication in facilitating the recruitment process for both job seekers and organizations (Borstorff *et al.*, 2007; Walker *et al.*, 2011), making it a crucial aspect of EB communications. Corporate websites and social networks enable the quick and easy dissemination of information and the establishment of strong relationships between employees and the organization (Arriscado *et al.*, 2019). Corporate websites, in particular, have been highlighted as important channels for communicating a company’s values and employer attributes (Kane *et al.*, 2017; Banks *et al.*, 2019). Kissel and Büttgen (2015) found that the perceived availability of information about an organization on social media positively influenced corporate image perceptions, which in turn were associated with employer attractiveness. Job applicants often visit a brand’s social media pages to gather signals and assess its employer personality (Carpentier *et al.*, 2019). Katiyar and Saini (2016) indicated that social media activities focused on informing, interacting and entertaining positively influenced employer brand awareness. Mičák and Mičudová (2018) confirmed that organizations rely on these channels to attract and recruit job seekers. LinkedIn, in particular, is widely used in recruitment and EB efforts (Content Stadium, 2022). Joglekar and Tan (2022) demonstrated that employee-generated content and firm-generated content in the form of LinkedIn posts positively influenced employer perception, with this relationship being mediated by organizational attractiveness and corporate reputation. Their findings suggest that companies can strategically utilize LinkedIn to encourage employee advocacy initiatives, attracting new talent and enhancing organizational attractiveness and reputation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Procedure and sample

To address the research questions, a quali-quantitative content analysis was conducted. This approach combines qualitative methods to identify the presence of certain words, themes, or

concepts in qualitative data (such as text) with quantitative analysis to quantify and analyze their meanings and relationships (Drisko and Maschi, 2016). It is a systematic coding and categorizing approach used for exploring large amounts of textual information, uncover trends and patterns in words usage, frequency, relationships, communication structures and discourses (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2013). The empirical procedure for data retrieval was based on the descriptive approach and human coding described by Neuendorf (2017). In content analysis, the descriptive approach focuses on identifying and describing features, themes and patterns present in the analyzed material, without necessarily elaborate explanation or interpretations of the results (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2013). Its primary goal is to provide an accurate and comprehensive representation of the data by classifying and categorizing units of analysis based on a coding scheme. For this research, the coding scheme referred to Plummer's (2003) Big 8 model of diversity, because it encompasses and categorizes various aspects of diversity found in multiple European Diversity Charters. This model is widely recognized as a common framework for understanding diversity (Pineda and Mishra, 2023). The Big 8 are: age, ethnicity/nationality, gender, psychophysical capacity, organizational role/function, race, religion and sexual orientation.

The units of analysis were content retrieved from digital spaces dedicated to EB, specifically corporate website and LinkedIn. Promotional content, such as those exclusively focused on products, was excluded from the analysis. Following the principles of the descriptive approach, only text-based content such as statements, articles, and posts with captions were selected, as they are more explicit and less open to individual interpretation compared to visual content without accompanying text.

Within these contents, the analysis focused on searching for keywords related to the Big 8 dimensions of diversity, which serves as D&I signals. Additionally, a ninth dimension called "Generic" was added to categorize D&I content does not specifically align with any particular Plummer's dimension. This category includes content that addresses the concept of diversity and inclusion at a macro and non-specific level, such as statements about the company's value orientation.

The sample for analysis consisted of the top 43 European corporations ranked in the 2021 Refinitiv Diversity and Inclusion Index. This index, published by Refinitiv Knowledge Direct and available through Eikon, assesses over 12,000 companies globally and identifies the top 100 publicly traded companies with the most diverse and inclusive workplaces. Companies are scored using 24 indicators across four key pillars: diversity, inclusion, people development and controversies. Selecting companies from this index ensured that the analysis focused on organizations recognized for their strong commitment to D&I initiatives. The Refinitiv Diversity and Inclusion Index is widely respected in the financial market data and analytics industry, serving as a standard reference for investors, stakeholders and organizations interested in assessing and supporting D&I initiatives. Moreover, it considers all the diversity dimensions analyzed in this study, providing a more comprehensive understanding of a company's overall commitment to diversity and inclusion. The index is also frequently utilized in academic research examining D&I corporate performance (e.g. Bouslah *et al.*, 2022; Cillo *et al.*, 2021; Noja *et al.*, 2019).

The research focused on the European context for two primary reasons. Firstly, to contribute to the existing literature dominated by studies conducted in North America or with a global perspective. By narrowing the analysis to Europe, researchers aimed to address this gap in the literature and provide insights specifically relevant to European organizations and stakeholders. Secondly, Europe has implemented various laws and regulations promoting diversity and inclusion in the workplace. These regulations, such as gender equality and non-discrimination laws, create a specific context for EB communications. Analyzing D&I signals in EB within the European context can shed light on how companies navigate these legal requirements and incorporate them into their messaging.

The content analysis was conducted by four independent researchers trained in qualitative research methodologies with a predominantly positivist approach to analysis: two scholars in the field of business management and two experts of digital and social media management. The intercoder reliability between researchers obtained was 0.91 (Krippendorff, 2012), indicating a high level of agreement.

3.2 Data sources and measures

The analysis focused on three primary sources of information: (1) 2021 non-financial reports, (2) corporate websites (accessed in September 2022) and (3) official LinkedIn business pages, considering posts from September 2022 back to September 2021, with a maximum of 1000 posts. The one-year time frame for LinkedIn posts aimed to collect sufficient data for analysis without being too outdated to represent the current state of EB strategies.

To measure D&I accounting (DIA), the presence or absence of each D&I dimension was detected in the non-financial reports. If a D&I dimension was present in these reports, it indicated that the company had activated an initiative related to that dimension. For measuring D&I digital communications for employer branding, the presence or absence of each D&I dimension was assessed on corporate websites (DIW) and LinkedIn business pages (DIL). If a D&I dimension was identified in the content published on the corporate website or in LinkedIn posts, it suggested that the company was signaling its commitment to that dimension to enhance organizational attractiveness.

The D&I dimensions identified served as measurable indicators for evaluating DIA, DIW and DIL and were treated as dichotomous (dummy) indicators. A value of “1” represented the presence of a dimension, while “0” indicated its absence. To ensure logical validity and an appropriate amount of variance, each measure was scored by accumulating scores assigned to individual dimensions (Babbie, 2012). Additionally, each score was normalized to 1, attributing equal weight to each dimension in the calculation. This normalization process resulted in a value between 0 and 1 for each measure.

4. Data analyzes and findings

Table 1 shows the results of the correlation analysis between DIA, DIW and DIL (RQ1).

It results that there is a significant relationship between DIA and DIW (.005) but there is No correlation between DIA and DIL (.540). The remaining analyses enrich this result with further insights.

To analyze the general pervasiveness of every D&I dimension among European companies’ communications for employer branding (RQ2), Table 2 shows in how many brand

		DIA	DIW	DIL
DIA	Pearson’s correlation	1	0.418**	0.096
	Sign. (two sided)		0.005	0.540
	N	43	43	43
DIW	Pearson’s correlation	0.418**	1	0.490**
	Sign. (two sided)	0.005		0.001
	N	43	43	43
DIL	Pearson’s correlation	0.096	0.490**	1
	Sign. (two sided)	0.540	0.001	
	N	43	43	43

Note(s): ** The correlation is significant at level 0.01 (two sided)

Source(s): Authors own creation

Table 1. Correlations between DIA, DIW and DIL

Table 2.
The pervasiveness of
D&I dimensions
according to the digital
channel

	D&I dimensions								
	Age	Ethnicity	Race	Gender	Mental/Physical ability	Organizational role and job function	Religion	Sexual orientation	Generic
Corporate website	10 (23,3%)	20 (46,5%)	14 (32,6%)	33 (76,7%)	23 (53,5%)	18 (41,9%)	2 (4,7%)	24 (55,8%)	35 (81,4%)
LinkedIn	27 (62,8%)	18 (41,9%)	10 (23,3%)	40 (93%)	21 (48,8%)	13 (30,2%)	2 (4,7%)	27 (62,8%)	41 (95,3%)

Source(s): Authors own creation

cases (number of companies, expressed also as a percentage) each D&I dimension was found on the corporate website and among LinkedIn posts.

Beyond the “Generic” use of D&I, the most pervasive topics among European companies are “Gender”, “Sexual orientation” and “Mental/Physical ability” on both digital channels. On LinkedIn, the Age dimension also emerges as very pervasive, while it is very little widespread on corporate websites. The “Religion” and “Race” dimensions, on the other hand, are the least adopted.

To analyze the relevance of each D&I dimension in the communications for employer branding of each company (RQ3), we referred to how frequently a dimension was used as the topic of LinkedIn posts compared to each company’s total of D&I posts (Table 3). The last column of Table 3 shows the total of D&I LinkedIn posts detected for each sampled company. Other columns show the percentage of these posts dedicated to each D&I dimension.

It results that “Gender” and “Sexual orientation” are the topics to which almost all companies attribute greater relevance. However, the indistinct use of D&I content (“Generic” dimension) is the most frequent choice of publication.

5. Discussion

The goal of this study was to shed light on the utilization of D&I signals in EB communications to attract talents. The researchers initially examined whether there was a statistical correlation between D&I initiatives stated in non-financial reports and communications for EB on digital channels (RQ1). The results indicated that a correlation exists only between the declaration of initiatives and communications on the corporate website, but not with communications on LinkedIn. Those findings confirm the role of the corporate website as a primary source of information used by companies to highlight the values, benefits and workplace that they offer to their employees (Kane *et al.*, 2017; Theurer *et al.*, 2022). On the other hand, LinkedIn communications did not demonstrate a significant correlation. Considering that each analyzed company has an average publication frequency on LinkedIn exceeding three posts per day, it can be assumed that more than 1,000 posts are published annually by each company. Therefore, even the highest frequency of 93 D&I posts found among L’Oréal’s SA LinkedIn posts (below 10%) cannot be interpreted as significant relevance attributed to D&I topics in EB. This negative result suggests that European companies are currently underutilizing D&I communication in their EB strategies, missing the opportunity to enhance their attractiveness.

Regarding the usage of D&I dimensions, findings from RQ2 and RQ3 highlight the extensive pervasiveness and relevance of the “Gender” dimension. This aligns with recent studies demonstrating that the commitment to gender equality and women empowerment is a fundamental prerequisite to keep up with the SDG 5 of UN Agenda and position their employer brand to attract female talents (i.e. Ronda and Azanza, 2021).

Another dimension that stands out for its pervasiveness and relevance is “Sexual orientation”. This is likely due to the ongoing acute problem of discrimination faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals, which is currently a subject of significant public debate at the international level. Numerous studies show members of the LGBTQIA+ community continue to experience various forms of informal workplace discrimination, including sexual, physical and verbal harassment (Aksoy *et al.*, 2019).

Furthermore, the European Union (EU) has implemented various legal frameworks and regulations aimed at preventing discrimination based on sexual orientation. For instance, Directive 2000/78/EC and the “List of Actions to Advance LGBTI Equality” are policy frameworks specifically designed to combat discrimination against this minority group. As a result, organizations may prioritize signaling their commitment to this dimension due to legal requirements and societal expectations aligned with these regulations. Interestingly, the

Table 3.
The relevance of D&I
dimensions according
to each company

Company	D&I dimensions										#D&I posts
	Age	Ethnicity	Race	Gender	Physical ability	Organization role/Job function	Religion	Sexual orientation	Generic		
Accenture PLC		2,6%	6,5%	20,8%	16,8%	6,5%		22,1%	24,7%		77
Allianz SE	7,4%			11,1%	25,9%			29,6%	25,9%		27
Enel Spa	14,3%			11,4%	22,9%				51,4%		35
Coca-Cola HBC AG	11,1%		5,6%	61,1%		5,6%			16,7%		18
Kering SA	16,7%			55,6%		5,6%		11,1%	16,7%		18
CCC SA									100%		1
Red Electrica Corporation SA	14,3%			57,1%					28,6%		7
GlaxoSmithKline PLS				26,3%					47,4%		19
WPP PLC		2,6%	7,7%	17,9%	12,8%	5,1%	2,6%	26,3%	33,3%		39
Siemens AG	2,4%		5,4%	48,6%	2,7%	2,7%		10,8%	29,7%		37
Infrastruttura Wireless		2,4%		28,6%					66,6%		42
Italiane Spa											
Novartis Spa				26,7%	6,7%			33,3%	33,3%		15
Mercedes-Benz Group AG (ex Daimler AG)		25%		25%				25%	25%		4
Acciona SA	13,5%	2,7%		10,8%		5,4%			67,6%		37
L'Oréals SA	11,8%	4,3%	2,2%	51,6%	6,5%			6,5%	17,2%		93
Roche Holding AG	9,1%	18,2%		18,2%				18,2%	36,4%		11
Diageo United PLC	2,2%	4,4%	6,6%	30,4%	6,6%	4,4%		15,2%	30,4%		46
Telecom Italia Spa	2,9%			22,3%	11,4%			5,7%	54,3%		35
HERA Spa	14,3%							7,1%	78,6%		14
Schneider Electric SE	18,5%	7,4%		37%	3,7%	3,7%		14,8%	14,8%		27
Stellantis NV		22,2%		33,3%					44,5%		9
Epiroc AB	7,1%	21,4%		35,7%	7,1%			7,1%	21,4%		14
Adidas AG		4,4%	17,4%	21,7%	4,4%			21,7%	26,1%		23
Intesa San Paolo Spa	7,7%	3,9%		23,1%	11,5%	3,9%		3,9%	46,2%		26
Bayerische Motoren Werke AG	12%	12%		28%				12%	36%		25
Sandvik AB	7,4%			74,1%		3,7%			14,8%		27
BAE system PLC	29,4%	2%	7,8%	27,5%	19,6%		2%	3,9%	7,8%		51

(continued)

Company	D&I dimensions										#D&I posts
	Age	Ethnicity	Race	Gender	Mental/ Physical ability	Organization role/job function	Religion	Sexual orientation	Generic		
Ebro Foods SA	25%			50%					25%		4
Salvatore Ferragamo	20%			40%	10%				10%		10
LVMH moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton SE	11,8%			35,3%	5,9%	20%		35,3%	11,8%		17
Volkswagen AG				100%							1
Industria de Diseno Textil (Inditex)				9,1%		27,3%			63,6%		11
British American Tobacco PLC				22,2%				16,7%	61,1%		18
Standard Chartered PLC	26,5%			17,6%	14,7%	11,8%		11,8%	14,7%		34
VERBUND AG	14,3%	2,9%		57,1%				14,3%	14,3%		7
Unilever PLC	9,4%			15,6%	15,6%			15,6%	43,8%		32
Sanoofi SA	6,6%			33,4%				40%	20%		15
Astrazeneca PLC	30,8%	7,7%		15,4%	7,7%			23,1%	15,4%		13
CNH Industrial NV				40%					60%		5
Telenor ASA	37,5%	12,5%		12,5%	12,5%				25%		8
Norsk Hydro ASA			11,1%		11,1%			44,4%	33,4%		9
National Bank of Greece SA				100%							2
UBS Group AG Investment			40%	30%							10
<i>Average frequency</i>	8,9%	3,7%	2,6%	32,1%	11%	4,9%	0,1%	11,5%	30%		

Source(s): Authors own creation

Table 3.

researchers observed that in some cases (10 out of 27 companies addressing this dimension), the publication of LinkedIn posts related to “sexual orientation” was concentrated during the period dedicated to pride month, which falls in June. This trend among some companies in the sample could suggest a superficial alignment with one of the most debated social issues of the current time.

The high pervasiveness of the “Mental and physical ability” dimension could be attributed to the increasing attention given to integrating neurodiverse individuals into the labor market (Doyle, 2020). This highlights the need for companies to reshape the workplace by offering new possibilities for individualizing work methods (Tomczak, 2022; Jashinsky *et al.*, 2021). Promoting inclusion in this area helps overcome the stigma associated with mental and physical disabilities. Moreover, it also appeals to workers who are increasingly interested in maintaining a healthy work-life balance. The concept of mental and physical well-being in the workplace extends beyond managing disabilities and encompasses employees’ desire for benefits and services that cater to their personal needs. Examples of such accommodations include flexible working hours, remote working opportunities, childcare facilities, wellness programs and dedicated spaces for relaxation.

Another notable result pertains to the dimensions of “Age” and “Organizational Role and Job Function”. The researchers observed that the Age dimension, which is primarily associated with initiatives targeting young people, is more pervasive on LinkedIn (62.7%) compared to corporate websites (27.3%). This difference may be attributed to the fact that the social network is more commonly used by a younger target audience. Additionally, given the professional nature of LinkedIn, age-related factors such as job opportunities, career progression expectations and labor flexibility may hold greater significance in the recruitment and career development context. Job seekers and professionals on LinkedIn may place greater importance on age-related information, prompting organizations to prominently highlight the age dimension in their employer branding communications. However, it is worth noting that the overall relevance of the “Age” dimension is relatively low (8.9%). This can be attributed to prevailing stereotypes associating older workers with lower adaptability, resistance to change, or higher salary expectations, while younger workers may be seen as more innovative and technologically adept (Burke *et al.*, 2013; Morfaki and Morfaki, 2022). On the other hand, information related to roles and organizational functions is more typically found on corporate websites, given its managerial nature.

The findings of the content analysis also indicate that the dimensions of “Race” and particularly “Religion” are the least pervasive and relevant. While “Ethnicity” emerges as pervasive, its relevance is comparatively low. Considering that most companies in the analyzed sample operate globally, it is surprising that issues related to race, ethnicity and religion are not adequately covered. These results can be attributed to various factors, including cultural and historical contexts. European countries have diverse demographic compositions and histories, leading to differing societal perceptions and levels of sensitivity toward race, ethnicity and religion. However, these results align with the concept of color-blindness approach to diversity (Strauss, 1986), which emphasizes treating individuals equally and disregarding group differences when making decisions such as hiring and promotion (Jansen *et al.*, 2016). While this phenomenon requires further investigation, several authors have already focused on measuring levels of color-blind attitudes in the workforce within different European contexts (e.g. Bonnet, 2014; Jansen *et al.*, 2016; Safi, 2017; Schütze and Osanami Törngren, 2022).

The most significant finding relates to the pervasiveness and relevance of the “Generic” dimension, indicating that the common practice is to disseminate messages that mention the concept of D&I in a broad sense, without delving into specific dimensions. This suggests that European organizations tend to signal D&I dimensions in their digital employer branding communications primarily as a result of aligning with current anti-discrimination policy directives, social expectations and compliance with the goals of the 2030 Agenda.

6. Implications and conclusion

The study has both theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical standpoint, the implications are manifold. It contributes to academic research on digital communications for EB, with a focus on the D&I perspective. In particular, this study is one of the first to explore the use of signals regarding D&I commitment to attract human resources and it aligns with recent literature that delves into aspects of D&I that have been less studied to date, such as age, mental and physical abilities and sexual orientation. In this perspective, the study demonstrates that Plummer's model is suitable for applying signaling theory to the study of D&I dimensions in EB. However, empirical analysis revealed that the "Mental and physical abilities" dimension is considered with a broader meaning, encompassing psycho-physical well-being linked to work-life balance. This suggests that in the contemporary era, Plummer's model could be updated by broadening the categorization to include new aspects that are currently hot, such as the "well-being" dimension.

Moreover, the study highlights that European organizations with diverse and inclusive workplaces have recognized that D&I signals are significant factors in attracting a more diverse workforce. By strategically leveraging diversity-related messaging in digital EB communication, organizations aim to enhance their employer brand image as an inclusive and diverse employer. Additionally, this study sheds light on which aspects of diversity companies tend to focus on the most and which channels they tend to leverage the most. The significant correlation between the disclosure of D&I initiatives and communication on corporate websites indicates that when there is an initiative related to a D&I dimension, it is more easily signaled on the website than on LinkedIn. This not only confirms the central role of the corporate website with particular reference to building the employer's brand image (Bermúdez-Edo *et al.*, 2010; Mashiah, 2021), but highlights that many companies continue to prefer managing "traditional" corporate websites that provide more control over their reputation than social media. In contrast to the cited literature that emphasizes the significant role of social media, particularly LinkedIn, in EB processes, this study shows that organizations do not fully take advantage of this channel for D&I signaling. The reduced signaling activity on this social network predominantly concerns the "Generic," "Gender," and "Sexual orientation" dimensions, suggesting that the focus on this channel tends to follow trendy social topics.

From a practical standpoint, the empirical analysis demonstrates that companies often fail to fully exploit the synergistic use of digital channels for employer branding. It is crucial to intensify the use of LinkedIn posts, for example, by incorporating storytelling from current employees who can testify to their inclusive experiences. This technique can significantly impact the attraction of new talent. This study could inspire organizations to enhance their commitment to D&I management and become more explicit about it in order to become the employer of choice (Jonsen *et al.*, 2019), particularly appealing to Generation Z individuals.

Furthermore, it is suggested to abandon the generic use of D&I messages and instead characterize posts with explicit references to the specific D&I dimensions (and thus initiatives). Speaking generically about D&I may make companies appear superficial in their handling of these issues. Using vague and broad statements without explicit references to specific D&I dimensions may give the impression that organizations are merely paying lip service to D&I, rather than actively engaging with and addressing these issues. To help companies avoid appearing superficial in their approach to D&I, we recommend providing explicit references to the specific D&I dimensions and initiatives. For example, instead of using generic statements like "We value diversity and inclusion", organizations can mention specific actions they are taking to promote gender equality, support LGBTQIA + rights, accommodate employees with disabilities, or foster cultural diversity. By highlighting concrete initiatives, organizations demonstrate their commitment to addressing specific D&I challenges and create a more authentic and credible impression. Furthermore, providing

examples or guidelines for companies to follow can be beneficial. For instance, organizations can showcase success stories of employees from diverse backgrounds or highlight specific programs and policies they have implemented to promote D&I. Companies can also incorporate testimonials or quotes from employees who have experienced the positive impact of these initiatives. These specific examples and guidelines can help organizations move beyond generic messaging and provide tangible evidence of their efforts, thereby increasing their credibility and avoiding the perception of superficiality in their approach to D&I.

It's important to note that our explanations about the study's outcomes are general in nature and may vary across different European countries. This study, by providing an overview of the EB practices of the most inclusive European companies, can serve as a starting point for other researchers willing to investigate the influences of country-specific cultural and social factors on the use of D&I signals.

7. Limitations and further research

The present empirical research suffers from some limitations, linked to the small sample of companies analyzed and to the manual content analysis procedure. The latter is considered more affected by subjectivity of interpretation, but at the same time allows for greater precision of analysis to be guaranteed. Moreover, the analysis was limited to explicit messages excluding, for example, visual contents not accompanied by specific statements or captions (i.e. the photographs on the website portraying a multi-ethnic staff). Furthermore, it was not possible to distinguish with certainty the purpose of the messages analyzed, i.e. whether aimed at attracting or retaining talent.

For these reasons, future research could be addressed to overcome those limitations, expanding the analysis sample and including implicit messages. Further research could also consider the communications for EB on other digital channels. For example, the most recent social networks, most frequented by young people, such as TikTok or Instagram, which are starting to take on relevance in the field of recruitment and EB (Bharti and Antil, 2021; Carbajal-Cribillero *et al.*, 2022).

Finally, this study emphasizes the need to continue expanding this research field, trying to understand, for example, if there are factors that increase the possibilities of using D&I as a lever in EB communications.

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