

# Perceived Authenticity of DEI Messaging in Social Media Advertising: A Netnographic Study of Instagram Users

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## ABSTRACT,

*This thesis investigates how Instagram users in the Netherlands perceive the authenticity of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) messaging in brand campaigns. Using a netnographic approach, the study analyzes 1,000 public comments on ten DEI-related campaigns posted on cestmocro, a major Dutch Instagram platform followed by multicultural youth. The objective is to explore the conditions under which audiences interpret DEI advertisements as sincere or performative. To interpret these responses, the study applies three theoretical frameworks: brand authenticity, representation theory and signaling theory. These perspectives collectively explain how users assess the trustworthiness of brand communication. In the end, authenticity is not just about what the brand says, but also about how people experience it. People on social media are quick to judge whether something feels real or performative. The comments showed five main reactions: people called out brands for woke-washing, expressed moral outrage, showed skepticism, felt excluded or shared appreciation. Many users felt that some brands were just jumping on social causes for attention, especially when the message did not match the brand's usual behavior. But some campaigns were praised, like HEMA's body-positive advertisement and Jumbo's Ramadan iftar events, because they felt honest and respectful. This study contributes to marketing research by showing how the authenticity of DEI messaging is judged by real users in a public and fast-paced Instagram environment. By focusing on actual user reactions, the research highlights that audiences respond not only to who is represented in a campaign, but also to how and why that representation is presented. For brands, this means that authenticity is not something they can define on their own. It must be built over time through consistent actions, honest storytelling and long-term commitment that goes beyond one-off campaigns or symbolic gestures.*

*During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT in order to check grammar and spelling and to translate Dutch transcriptions. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the work.*

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## Keywords

brand authenticity, DEI messaging, Instagram, netnography, representation, signaling, user perception, multicultural audiences.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, more brands have started including diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in their marketing strategies (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Instagram plays a big role in this because it lets brands share messages directly with their audience (Appel et al., 2019). At the same time, people have also become more critical and pay closer attention to whether brands actually mean what they say (Biraghi & Gambetti, 2022). When a campaign feels insincere or mainly done for attention, it is often called “woke-washing” (Sobande, 2019).

Because of this, being seen as authentic has become more important for brands. A DEI message feels genuine when it matches the brand’s values, identity and behavior over time (Morhart et al., 2015). When a brand shows consistency and puts in long-term effort, it helps build trust (Walter et al., 2024). But when a message seems out of place or does not fit the brand’s usual actions, people are quick to criticize it (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

Instagram is a useful platform to study this topic, because users can respond instantly. The comment sections offer direct insight into how people feel about certain campaigns. A good example is @cestmocro, a Dutch Instagram page with over a million followers. It shares content related to identity, discrimination and culture, which often leads to strong reactions (NOS, 2024). This makes it a relevant and active space to explore how people talk about whether DEI messaging feels sincere or not.

Even though DEI is becoming a bigger part of brand communication, there is still limited research on how diverse young people actually respond to these messages in everyday online environments. Most studies focus on what brands want to communicate, rather than on how people react. This research helps fill that gap by reviewing real user comments on DEI-related posts by @cestmocro. Using a netnographic approach, it looks at how users judge whether a message feels honest, forced or disconnected and how these opinions are shared in public comment sections.

## 1.1 Problem Statement and Research Gap

While DEI messaging has become more common in brand communication, it does not always lead to positive responses from the public. A brand might try to show that it supports inclusion, but if its actions tell a different story, people are quick to point that out (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

A clear example is Starbucks, which faced backlash in 2023 after employees in the United States were reportedly disciplined or dismissed for showing support for Palestine during the Israel-Gaza conflict. This sparked protests and online criticism, especially because the company publicly promotes values like diversity, inclusion and freedom of expression (Durbin, 2023). This example shows that if a brand’s DEI message does not match its actions, the public response can be very negative (Ahmad et al., 2024). Other cases show that even when brands try to reflect diversity, poor execution or a lack of cultural awareness can still lead to strong backlash. In 2018, H&M was heavily criticized for featuring a Black child wearing a hoodie with the text “Coolest Monkey in the Jungle.” Many people saw the image as racially insensitive and the campaign was quickly removed (BBC News, 2018).

Still, most academic research focuses on what brands aim to communicate, rather than on how people actually respond. Consumers are often treated as passive, even though they actively share opinions, experiences and criticism, especially in online spaces (Labrecque et al., 2013). This study addresses that

gap by exploring how Instagram users judge DEI messaging in real-life online interactions.

## 1.2 Research objective and question

This study explores how Instagram users, especially those from multicultural youth communities, respond to DEI messaging from brands. It focuses on when people perceive a campaign as honest and when they see it as fake or mainly done for attention. The goal is to understand how users react to DEI content on Instagram, what aspects of the message, such as tone, representation or consistency influence their opinions and how brands can communicate about DEI in a way that feels more genuine and trustworthy.

The central research question is: *How do Instagram users in the Netherlands perceive the authenticity of DEI-related brand messaging, based on their responses to posts on @cestmocro?* This study uses a qualitative method, specifically netnography, to explore how users express trust, doubt or criticism in public comment sections (Kozinets, 2015). It does not aim to test a fixed theory. Instead, it focuses on how people talk about DEI in everyday digital spaces, based on their own perspectives and values.

## 1.3 Academic and Practical Relevance

This study adds value in both academic and practical ways. On the theoretical side, it combines three key perspectives: brand authenticity, representation and signaling. Together, these help explain how people respond to DEI messaging.

Brand authenticity theory helps explain how people decide whether a brand feels “real” based on values, consistency and honesty (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2013). Although it is often used in the context of products or influencers, this study applies it to DEI communication on Instagram. It shows how users pay close attention to a brand’s tone and past behavior when judging its intentions. Representation theory, especially from Hall (1997), focuses on how people and groups are portrayed in media. This research uses that perspective to explore how users respond to portrayals in DEI campaigns, including whether they feel included, stereotyped or ignored. Signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2010; Spence, 1973) helps explain how users judge whether a message is genuine or performative. A DEI message is more likely to be trusted when it clearly takes effort and aligns with the brand’s behavior over time. These three theories together provide a deeper understanding of how users interpret DEI messaging in online spaces.

On the practical side, this study offers insights for brands that want to understand how their DEI efforts are perceived. It shows that Instagram users often question, support or criticize DEI campaigns in public comment sections and that these responses can shape broader public opinion. This is especially relevant for brands targeting ethnically diverse millennial audiences, who are known to critically assess marketing content for authenticity and cultural sensitivity (Cui & Licsandru, 2019). By learning from real user reactions, brands can improve how they communicate about inclusion in ways that are more honest, thoughtful and sustainable over time.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review outlines the theoretical foundation for understanding audience responses to DEI messaging on social media. It focuses on three interrelated perspectives: brand authenticity, representation theory and signaling theory, which together offer a comprehensive lens for interpreting perceived sincerity in brand communication. Each framework is discussed

in relation to prior research and forms part of the study's conceptual foundation.

## 2.1 Brand Authenticity

When it comes to DEI messaging, people want to feel that a brand genuinely means what it says. It is not only about posting a statement or showing a diverse group in an advertisement. What matters is whether the message fits the brand's identity and past behavior. This is where the idea of brand authenticity becomes relevant. According to Morhart et al. (2015), a brand is perceived as authentic when it stays true to its values, acts consistently and communicates honestly over time. Napoli et al. (2013) also emphasize that people care about whether a brand's words align with its actions.

This has become more important in recent years, especially with DEI content. When brands talk about inclusion or anti-racism but behave differently, people are quick to call them out. This is often referred to as woke washing, when brands try to appear socially conscious without doing the actual work (Ahmad et al., 2024; Vredenburg et al., 2020). And it is not just a matter of a few negative comments. Research shows that performative messaging can damage a brand's reputation and credibility (Walter et al., 2024).

Younger audiences like Gen Z are especially sharp when spotting this. They have seen brands use social causes to get attention and they look closely at whether a post feels genuine. DEI campaigns from brands without a history of engagement or whose tone feels inconsistent, are often perceived as inauthentic or as attempts to enhance brand image rather than promote genuine inclusion (Branca and Cammarota, 2025). They want to see real values, not just what is popular.

Even though authenticity is often discussed in marketing, most research focuses on product branding or influencer marketing (Audrezet et al., 2018; Beverland, 2005). There is still not much research on how people judge the authenticity of DEI messages, especially in comment sections where reactions happen in the moment. Surveys and experiments often miss these quick, emotional responses. That is where this study comes in.

## 2.2 Representation Theory

Representation is about more than just showing different people. According to Hall (1997), it is about how people and communities are portrayed in media and what that says about identity, power and belonging. In advertising, it is not just about who appears in a campaign, but also how they are shown, what roles they play and what messages they send. Many brands count how many different faces are in an ad, but that does not always mean the representation feels meaningful.

Research shows that people notice when representation feels off. Campbell et al. (2023) argue that it is not enough to include diversity visually. It needs to feel honest and relatable to the people being represented. If that is missing, people often speak up. Especially on social media, users quickly react when a brand's message does not match their lived experiences.

Sobande (2019) studied examples of brands using feminist messages in ads, often called femvertising. Even when the message seems positive, it can feel superficial if it is too focused on sales or disconnected from deeper issues. The same thing happens with DEI. People notice how stories are told and whether the representation feels real. If it feels like just another trend, they call it out.

Instagram makes all of this public. A brand might think its campaign is positive, but if people do not relate to it or find it disrespectful, they will say so in the comments. For multicultural youth communities, who talk about identity and

fairness online, this is even more important. These users read between the lines. If the representation feels fake or forced, they stop trusting the message. Studies show that when people think a brand's message is not honest, it can hurt the brand (Gürhan-Canli, Schwarz, & Yoon, 2006).

Representation theory is widely used in media studies, but not often applied to social media comment sections. Most research looks at the content of the ad, not how people react to it. This study focuses on the reactions, to understand what users say when they feel included and what they say when they do not. This helps explain what kind of representation builds trust and what kind leads to criticism.

## 2.3 Signaling Theory and Credibility

Signaling theory is about how people decide whether something is real or trustworthy based on the signals they receive. In marketing, it explains how brands show their values through messages, images or actions. But not all signals are trusted. If something feels too easy or costs nothing, people often ignore it. But when a brand takes a risk, makes a real effort or speaks out even when it is not popular, the message feels more serious (Connelly et al., 2010; Spence, 1973).

This applies directly to DEI. For example, any brand can post during Pride Month or Black History Month. But if that brand has never shown support before, people might not take it seriously. Kirmani and Rao (2000) explain that a signal becomes more believable when it involves some kind of cost, like money, time or public risk. That makes it harder to fake.

Instagram users are quick to notice when something does not feel real. People often comment to question if the message is honest or just made to look good. This is where the idea of virtue signaling comes in. That is when a brand says the right things just to get praise but does not actually do anything behind the scenes. Timing also matters. If a brand only posts when everyone else is, users might see it as following the trend. But when a brand speaks out early or consistently, it feels more committed.

Recent research supports this. Walter et al. (2024) found that people trust brands more when their DEI messages are supported by actions. Nam et al. (2023) found that timing matters too. A thoughtful, timely response builds trust. A rushed or poorly planned one can do more harm than good.

So when users look at a DEI post, they are not just looking at the message itself. They are thinking about effort, timing and history. These things all shape how the message is received. On Instagram, where everything is public and fast-moving, even small details can make a difference.

## 2.4 Conceptual Framework

This research brings together three theories to understand how people respond to DEI messaging on Instagram. Each theory focuses on a different part of the message, but together they show how users decide whether something feels real or fake.

Brand authenticity looks at whether a message fits with a brand's identity, values and past behavior. If a brand suddenly starts talking about social causes with no history of doing so, users may not believe it. Representation theory focuses on how people and groups are shown. It is not just about who appears in a campaign, but also how they are portrayed. If the portrayal feels stereotypical or disconnected from real life, users will call it out. Signaling theory helps explain how users look for signs of effort or risk. If a message feels cheap or trendy, people might think it is insincere. But if it involves real action or commitment, it feels more believable.

These theories help explain how users judge DEI messages. A single post can be judged in several ways: Does it match the brand's usual tone? Does the representation feel honest? Is there a sign of real commitment? If something feels off, people often speak up. On Instagram, these comments happen in public and can shape how the whole campaign is viewed.

| Theory                    | Focus   | Role in Authenticity Judgments   |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Representation Theory     | Portrayal of identity, culture, and inclusion | Audiences assess whether they feel recognized, respected or stereotyped in brand messaging.                          |
| Brand Authenticity Theory | Alignment with brand values and history       | Audiences evaluate if the DEI message is consistent with the brand's long-term actions and identity.                 |
| Signaling Theory          | Perceived effort, risk, and credibility       | Audiences tend to trust DEI messaging more when they see real effort, continuity or meaningful investment behind it. |

Although each of these theories has been used before, they are usually studied separately. Brand authenticity is often applied to products or influencers. Representation theory usually looks at the ad itself, not the reactions. And signaling theory is more common in studies on sustainability or corporate responsibility. Very little research looks at how these theories play out together in real-time conversations on social media.

Most earlier work also relies on surveys or lab settings. But those do not always show how people talk naturally online. This study uses netnography, which means analyzing real social media conversations without interfering (Kozinets, 2015). It focuses on how users respond to DEI content on a major Instagram page in the Netherlands. The goal is to understand how people judge whether something feels real and how those judgments are shaped by group discussions and online context.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design: Netnography

This study follows a qualitative and inductive research design. The aim is to explore how people respond to DEI messaging on Instagram and how they express their opinions in the comments. Since the focus is on natural conversations, this research uses a netnographic approach. Netnography is a method developed to study online communities and social media behavior (Kozinets, 2015). It allows researchers to observe how users engage with posts and each other in public spaces without interfering.

This approach fits the research question because it looks at real and everyday reactions. Instead of asking people what they think in a survey or interview, it studies what they actually say and how they say it. This makes it possible to see how authenticity is discussed in online spaces, especially around topics like diversity and inclusion. Since the comments are

shared publicly and without being asked, they offer honest insight into how people view brand messaging.

The study takes a non-participatory role. The researcher does not join in the conversation or interact with users. This keeps the flow of the discussion natural. The analysis is inductive, meaning themes and patterns are discovered by studying the data closely, not by using predefined categories. This is useful when exploring how people react to something complex like DEI content, where emotions, tone and opinions all play a role.

### 3.2 Research Setting

The research takes place on the public Instagram page @cestmoco. This is one of the biggest pages in the Netherlands, with around 1.1 million followers, mostly young people with multicultural backgrounds (NRC, 2024). The page posts content about news, culture, politics and social topics like racism, gender and representation. Its informal and direct style makes it different from regular media.

Many posts on the page get hundreds of comments. Some even go viral. The comment sections include a mix of opinions, jokes, debates and personal experiences. Because @cestmoco often posts about social issues and sometimes includes brand content, it is a strong place to observe how people respond to DEI messaging in real time.

The followers of this page are highly active and often critical, especially on topics like inclusion and representation. This makes it a valuable setting to study how people judge the sincerity of DEI efforts. By focusing on this space, the study can show how people negotiate the meaning of authenticity in public discussions that happen online, outside of interviews or structured research settings.

### 3.3 Data Collection

The data is collected from ten public posts on @cestmoco using purposive sampling. This means the posts were selected based on specific criteria. Each post was related to DEI topics such as diversity, racism or identity and had at least one hundred user comments. All data was collected manually. A short description of each post and the first one hundred comments were copied into a document. In total, the final dataset included one thousand comments. Because the data came from a public Instagram page, user consent was not required. Still, all usernames and any identifying details were removed to protect privacy. Only public comments were used and no private profiles were accessed. Most comments were written in Dutch. These were translated into English by the researcher, who is fluent in both languages. The translations aimed to keep the original tone, slang and meaning. Emojis and informal expressions were kept, since they often carry important emotional meaning or sarcasm.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The comments were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen because it helps identify patterns and themes in qualitative data and fits well with an inductive approach. The main goal was to understand how users talked about DEI messages and how they decided whether something felt authentic or not.

The first step was familiarization. The researcher read through the comments several times and took notes on tone, repeated words and initial impressions. In the second step, coding, short labels were added to meaningful parts of each comment. These codes included examples like "calling out fake behavior,"

“supporting the brand,” or “sharing a personal story.” Microsoft Word and Excel were used to keep the codes organized.

In the next step, similar codes were grouped into broader themes. For instance, several codes could fall under themes like “woke-washing” or “emotional connection.” These themes helped show what users found important when judging DEI messages. The themes were then reviewed, adjusted where needed and clearly described. Key comments were selected as examples to support each theme.

In the final step, the themes were linked back to the main research question and the theoretical framework; brand authenticity, representation, and signaling. This helped explain what the findings meant in a broader context. While the coding process was mostly inductive, the interpretation was supported by theory to make sense of the patterns.

### 3.5 Validity and Reliability

To keep the research trustworthy and consistent, several steps were taken. In qualitative research, validity means that the findings reflect what is actually happening in the data, while reliability means the process is clear and can be repeated. These ideas are often described using four key criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Shenton, 2004).

Credibility was supported by using the same selection and coding process for all posts. The researcher took notes throughout the development of themes. Transferability was improved by providing detailed descriptions of the research setting, the selected posts and how users interacted in the comment sections. While the aim was not to generalize the findings, this level of detail allows others to judge whether the results may apply to similar online spaces.

Dependability was ensured by keeping records of each step in the research process and by using a codebook to track how each code was defined and used. If a new code was added later in the analysis, the earlier data was revisited to apply it consistently. Confirmability was addressed by making sure the researcher’s own opinions did not shape the findings. Because the topic touches on personal and social issues, the researcher wrote reflection notes throughout the process to stay aware of possible bias.

By following these steps, the study aimed to produce results that were well-grounded in the data, clearly explained and open to review.

## 4. FINDINGS

This chapter presents the key findings of the netnographic analysis of 1,000 Instagram comments in response to ten brand campaigns related to diversity, equity and inclusion. Instead of discussing each campaign individually, the findings are structured around recurring emotional and thematic patterns identified across all comments. Translated user quotes are included to illustrate each theme. A detailed overview of each campaign is provided in Appendix A.

### 4.1 Campaign Overview and Dataset Context

Each post featured a brand campaign that addressed DEI-related themes, either directly or indirectly. The selected posts represent a range of industries, including fashion, retail, media and public services. Brands included Mason Garments, Jumbo, Albert Heijn, HEMA, Kruidvat, the Dutch National Police and NPO FunX.

| Campaign  | DEI Theme                                      |
|---|--|
| Mason Garments Eid Campaign                         | Religious celebration and cultural recognition |
| Jumbo Community Iftar Campaign                      | Religious inclusion and community engagement   |
| Jumbo World Cup Ad Featuring Construction Workers   | Labor representation in sports marketing       |
| HEMA Body Positivity Campaign Featuring Stoma Model | Body positivity and disability representation  |
| Kruidvat Traditional Mother’s Day Campaign          | Gender-based gift marketing and family imagery |
| NPO FunX Urban Identity & Representation Campaign   | Urban youth identity and ethnic representation |
| Dutch Police Diversity Recruitment Campaign         | Workforce diversity and inclusion              |
| Adidas Pride Campaign Featuring Transgender Model   | LGBTQ+ representation                          |
| Albert Heijn Pride Month Social Media Post          | LGBTQ+ visibility and seasonal celebration     |
| Albert Heijn Eurovision Campaign                    | Cultural identity                              |

Campaign topics ranged from Eid (a holiday celebrated by Muslims) and Ramadan celebrations to Pride Month promotions, body positivity, inclusive hiring and anti-racism awareness. Some campaigns, like HEMA’s body-positive ad featuring a model with a visible stoma, were praised for being sincere and inclusive. Others, like Jumbo’s World Cup ad or Albert Heijn’s broccoli meme, faced backlash for being tone-deaf or opportunistic. This variety allowed for the analysis of different styles, tones and outcomes of DEI communication on Instagram.

### 4.2 Analytical Framing and Emotion Coding

To better understand the emotional reactions in the comment sections, the study developed a custom framework of eight emotion categories. These were based on repeated close readings of the dataset and supported by existing research in social media and emotion theory. Well known emotion models like Ekman’s six basic emotions, anger, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise and disgust (Ekman, 1992) and Plutchik’s emotion wheel, which organizes emotions into opposing pairs like joy and sadness or trust and disgust (Plutchik, 2001), were used as starting points. However, they did not fully capture the ironic, layered or culturally coded ways users express themselves on Instagram.

The final framework includes eight emotion categories: anger, disappointment, scepticism, disgust, exclusion, humour or irony, appreciation and confusion or discomfort. These categories helped capture a range of reactions, from moral outrage to sarcasm and subtle emotional distance. This framing made it easier to identify patterns in how users evaluate the authenticity of DEI messaging.

### 4.3 Perceived Inauthenticity and Commercialization

A dominant theme across the campaigns was perceived inauthenticity. Users frequently accused brands of “woke-washing”; using social issues as a marketing strategy without meaningful engagement. Campaigns by Mason Garments (Eid), Kruidvat (Mother’s Day) and Albert Heijn (Eurovision and Pride) were commonly described as opportunistic. Comments like “Islam as discount seriously?” and “Eid only matters when the cash register rings” reflect skepticism and emotional resistance to the use of identity-based messaging for commercial purposes. These reactions suggest that users expect brands to align their messaging with long-term values, not just seasonal promotions.

### 4.4 Moral Outrage and Ethical Boundaries

Some campaigns did more than trigger skepticism; they crossed ethical lines for many users. Jumbo’s World Cup ad featuring dancing construction workers was widely condemned due to ongoing concerns about migrant labor abuses in Qatar. One user wrote, “You’re dancing on the graves of workers”, while another stated, “Shame on you. This is no joke”. Similarly, Albert Heijn’s broccoli meme, which referenced lyrics from a slavery-era resistance song, was viewed as deeply offensive. One commenter wrote, “Slavery is not marketing material”. These examples show how users assess not only what is represented in a campaign, but also how ethically appropriate the message feels.

### 4.5 Skepticism and Emotional Distance

Another recurring reaction was emotional detachment. Users often responded to campaigns with sarcasm, irony or indifference, especially when they felt the messaging was inconsistent or performative. This was evident in responses to Albert Heijn’s Pride Month content and the Dutch National Police’s diversity recruitment ads. Comments such as “Where were you the other 11 months?” and “Bunch of actors in uniform” reflect doubts about the authenticity and lasting commitment behind inclusive branding. These comments point to a broader expectation: that brands should show ongoing effort and credibility, not just temporary gestures.

### 4.6 Feelings of Exclusion and Misrecognition

Several users expressed feelings of being misrepresented or left out. Campaigns meant to include people sometimes backfired when they leaned on stereotypes or failed to reflect diverse realities. For example, Kruidvat’s Mother’s Day campaign was criticized for reinforcing outdated gender roles. One comment stated, “Kruidvat thinks that women are only capable of cleaning”. Others felt unseen or reduced to caricatures. Adidas’s swimsuit campaign also received criticism for featuring a male-presenting model in a traditionally feminine swimsuit. Some women commented that they felt replaced or sidelined in a campaign that was supposed to promote inclusion. One user asked, “What is wrong with using female models for swimsuits?”. These reactions underline that visible diversity alone is not enough; users want to see respectful and accurate representation that feels real and dignified. They also show that inclusive campaigns need to consider the concerns of all groups involved, including those who feel overlooked or displaced in the process.

### 4.7 Appreciation and Emotional Resonance

Not all campaigns were criticized. Some were met with genuine appreciation and emotional connection. HEMA’s campaign

featuring a model with a stoma bag, Jumbo’s Ramadan iftar initiative and FunX’s city-based cultural series were praised for their sincerity and relatability.

Comments such as “Finally, real representation”, “I got goosebumps” and “Thank you for showing this” demonstrate how users reward campaigns that feel emotionally grounded and socially aware. These examples show that authenticity is not just about the content itself, but also about how that content makes people feel.

## 4.8 Key Themes

Across the ten campaigns, three key factors shaped how users judged the authenticity of DEI messaging: sincerity of intent, cultural awareness and long-term commitment. Campaigns that lacked these qualities were met with criticism, while those that embodied them were more positively received. Overall, this study shows that users act as critical evaluators who look beyond surface representation. What matters most is whether the brand’s message aligns with its broader values, actions and emotional tone.

## 5. DISCUSSION: THEORETICAL INTERPRETATION

### 5.1 Summary of Key Audience Responses

The findings of this study reveal five major audience responses to DEI-themed Instagram campaigns: woke-washing, moral outrage, skepticism, exclusion and appreciation. These themes show how users emotionally and critically engage with brand messaging.

Critiques of woke-washing came up most in response to campaigns that seemed to use DEI as a surface-level marketing tactic. Users were frustrated when inclusion felt opportunistic; when brands appeared to post inclusive content without real action behind it. This matches what Vredenburg et al. (2020) found: today’s consumers expect brands to live the values they promote. When symbolic gestures are not backed up by long-term behavior, users question their sincerity.

Moral outrage was another strong theme, especially when users felt brands had crossed ethical lines. Jumbo’s World Cup ad and Albert Heijn’s slavery-themed meme were both called out as deeply insensitive. This supports Beverland and Farrelly’s (2010) idea that authenticity can be damaged by “moral incongruence”. In these moments, users acted not just as consumers, but as people expressing moral judgment.

Skepticism, while less intense than outrage, often showed up as sarcasm or ironic distance. Users were especially critical of campaigns tied to Pride Month or Eid that felt timed for attention. These reactions reflect the importance of brand sincerity and consistency over time, as argued by Napoli et al. (2013).

Feelings of exclusion came up when users felt reduced to stereotypes or left out entirely. Kruidvat’s portrayal of Mother’s Day through cleaning products and Adidas’s swimsuit campaign featuring a male-presenting model both triggered backlash. Stuart Hall’s (1997) theory of representation as a site of power helps explain this. People not only notice when they are missing, but also when their image is simplified or misused.

In contrast, appreciation was shown for campaigns that felt sincere, relatable and respectful. HEMA’s stoma campaign, FunX’s cultural content and Jumbo’s Ramadan initiative received praise for how they handled inclusion. These campaigns created emotional connections. This supports what

Morhart et al. (2015) describe as consumer-brand identification built on authenticity and value alignment.

## 5.2 Brand Authenticity Theory

Authenticity was central in how users judged DEI campaigns. As Beverland and Farrelly (2010) explain, authenticity is not a fixed trait but something people perceive based on how a brand acts over time. Users in this study were constantly checking if the campaign matched the brand's real behavior. This fits with Napoli et al.'s (2013) view that authenticity is about consistency, credibility and staying true to core values.

When users saw a gap between messaging and real actions (like only posting during Pride or Eid) they saw it as inauthentic. On the other hand, campaigns that felt genuine often had emotional depth, reflected cultural awareness and were part of a broader brand identity. HEMA's campaign, for example, worked because it showed imperfection in a real and respectful way. Beverland and Farrelly (2010) note that showing vulnerability can make brands more trustworthy and human.

## 5.3 Representation Theory

Representation theory helps explain why some campaigns triggered backlash. Hall's (1997) encoding/decoding model shows that audiences do not just take in messages passively. They interpret them based on their own experiences and cultural lens.

In this study, many users engaged in "negotiated readings", they appreciated some parts of a campaign but criticized others. Others gave "oppositional readings," fully rejecting what the brand was trying to say. For example, many criticized portrayals of women, Muslims or LGBTQ+ people that felt simplified or staged.

Hall's theory also highlights that representation is never neutral. It always shapes how people feel seen or not seen. Users were not just asking to be visible. They wanted to be represented with depth, respect and cultural accuracy. The backlash shows how damaging it can be when brands miss this mark.

## 5.4 Signaling Theory

Signaling theory offers another useful perspective. According to Connelly et al. (2010), a signal's strength depends on how costly it is to fake. When users see DEI messaging that looks cheap or low-effort, they tend to dismiss it as performative. This idea of "cheap talk" is backed by Donath (2007).

The campaigns that were most appreciated showed signs of real investment. Jumbo's iftar campaign, which has been repeated and community-focused, felt sincere. That kind of signal carries weight because it shows long-term commitment. As Mirzaei et al. (2021) argue, costly signals like community outreach make DEI messaging more credible.

When brands rely on easy signals like a rainbow logo or a quick Ramadan post, users often see through it. In today's online space, audiences are quick to spot inconsistency. What matters is not just what a brand says, but what it risks or invests to say it.

## 5.5 Contributions to Literature

This study adds to research on DEI in marketing in several ways: First, it deepens our understanding of brand authenticity. It shows how online audiences use emotional cues and consistency to judge whether inclusion is real or symbolic (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2013).

Second, it adds to representation theory by showing that misrecognition can happen not only when people are absent, but when they are poorly represented. This supports Hall's (1997)

view that representation has real social and emotional effects. Third, it applies signaling theory to DEI branding. It confirms that users look for signals that require real investment or carry reputational risk, such as long-term inclusion efforts, community collaboration or policy changes (Connelly et al., 2010; Mirzaei et al., 2021).

Lastly, it shows the value of netnography. By looking at real Instagram comments, the study captured raw, emotional reactions that traditional surveys might miss. It also highlights how Instagram functions as a space for public conversations about recognition, identity and trust in brands.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### 6.1 Main Answer to the Research Question

The main question of this study was: How do Instagram users in the Netherlands perceive the authenticity of DEI-related brand messaging, based on their responses to posts on @cestmoco? The findings show that users approach these campaigns with a critical mindset. Authenticity is not assumed: it must be earned.

Users focus on three key elements: emotional sincerity, cultural awareness and consistency over time. Campaigns that appear only during symbolic moments, such as Pride Month or Ramadan or that feel disconnected from the brand's core identity, are often dismissed as performative or opportunistic. These efforts are seen as commercially motivated rather than socially committed.

In contrast, users respond positively when a campaign feels sincere, respectful and aligned with the brand's values. This is especially the case when messaging is supported by concrete action or past behavior. Users reward brands that show continuity, take visible risks or engage with real issues.

In short, it is not the brand's intention that defines authenticity, but how the message is received. That perception is shaped by the content, timing, tone and the brand's broader behavior.

### 6.2 Practical Implications for Brands

The results offer a few clear lessons for brands that want to communicate DEI messages in a way that feels real. Brands need to move beyond symbolic gestures. Posting a rainbow logo or a cultural holiday greeting without action behind it is no longer enough. Audiences are quick to spot when a post is disconnected from real values or policy.

Representation matters, but how it is done matters even more. People want to feel seen in ways that are respectful and free from stereotypes. This means including diverse voices not just in the campaign visuals, but also in the process of creating the message.

Consistency builds credibility. Users are more likely to trust brands that show inclusive values over time, not just on one occasion. DEI messaging should not be a seasonal strategy but a reflection of ongoing commitment.

Effort makes a difference. Users notice when a campaign took time, thought or involved some kind of risk. This kind of investment signals sincerity and builds trust.

Finally, brands should be prepared for critical feedback. Social media users will respond, especially when it comes to topics like identity, inclusion or ethics. Acknowledging mistakes and responding transparently can actually strengthen trust if done genuinely. Inclusion works best when it is part of the brand's DNA, not something added on for a special event. Audiences reward honesty and effort. They are not asking for perfection, but for campaigns that feel real and responsible.

### 6.3 Limitations

This research is qualitative and based on ten campaigns from Dutch brands. While this offers deep insights, it does not represent all online users or cultural contexts. The study focused on publicly visible Instagram comments, meaning the perspectives of silent users or private conversations were not captured. Cultural factors also played a role in how campaigns were received, which may not translate to other countries or regions.

In addition, the data came from one specific Instagram page, @cestmocro, which has its own audience demographics and tone. This means the findings may not reflect how users from different platforms or communities would respond. Also, only 100 comments were analyzed per campaign. It is possible that other comments not included in the sample would express different views or emotions.

Another limitation is that the study looks at how people react, not at what these reactions lead to. It does not measure changes in brand trust, loyalty or purchasing behavior. These are important questions for future research.

### 6.4 Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies could explore how users respond to DEI messaging on other platforms like TikTok, YouTube or X, since each platform has its own culture and norms. It would also be helpful to track how user responses evolve over time, especially in brands that continue DEI efforts beyond a single post.

Survey-based research could examine whether perceived authenticity actually influences trust, loyalty or consumer behavior. Other studies could compare reactions across different identity groups, like how users from different religious or ethnic backgrounds respond to the same campaign.

## 7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## 9. APPENDIX

This appendix presents ten DEI-themed social media campaigns analyzed in this netnographic study. Each campaign is treated as a separate case to explore how Instagram users responded to different branding strategies related to diversity, equity and inclusion.

For each case, a general description is provided, outlining the campaign’s objectives, format and broader context. This is followed by a theoretical framing informed by Representation Theory, Signaling Theory and Brand Authenticity literature.

Each analysis includes a thematic and emotional interpretation of 100 manually coded Instagram comments. Comments are categorized by sentiment (positive, neutral, or negative) and associated emotions, including anger, disappointment, skepticism, disgust, exclusion, humor/irony, appreciation and confusion/discomfort.

Every case concludes with an interpretation of how users perceived the campaign in terms of authenticity, emotional resonance and communicative effectiveness. These insights support the thematic analysis in Chapter 4 and the theoretical reflections in Chapter 5.

### Jumbo – Ramadan Iftar Initiative

In 2024, the Dutch supermarket chain Jumbo launched a Ramadan iftar initiative during the Islamic holy month. Rather than promoting products or services, the campaign centered on organizing communal iftar meals at various store locations across the Netherlands and Belgium.

A widely shared Instagram post featured a tent outside a Jumbo branch in Amsterdam, where Muslim and non-Muslim community members gathered to break the fast. The gatherings included shared meals, traditional Ramadan decor such as lanterns and long communal tables welcoming people of all ages and backgrounds. Notably, the campaign contained no commercial messaging or product placement. Its core message emphasized connection, mutual respect and social cohesion.

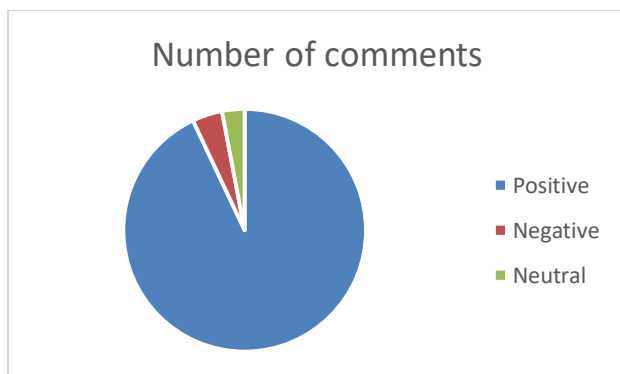
The campaign received overwhelmingly positive engagement on Instagram. Of the 100 analyzed comments, 94% were positive, 4% neutral, and only 2% negative. Users frequently described the

initiative as a “fantastic gesture,” “beautiful,” or “this is how the Netherlands should be.” Emotionally resonant phrases like “this gave me goosebumps” and “this really touched me” were common. Commenters often used symbolic expressions, such as heart emojis, applause, or prayer hands, to signal admiration and gratitude.

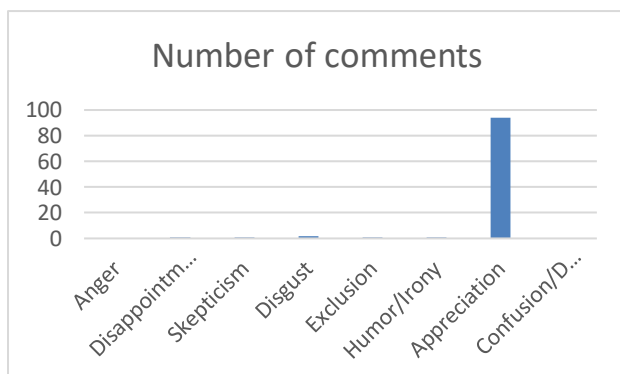
A key theme that emerged was cultural recognition and calls for structural change. Several users noted the importance of making such initiatives permanent, with comments like “we need more of this” and “this should happen everywhere.” From a Representation Theory perspective, the campaign stood out for its respectful and visible inclusion of Muslim cultural practices in a mainstream context, avoiding tokenism or exoticization and instead presenting Muslim communities as central and active. According to Signaling Theory, the absence of commercial incentives served as a credible signal of genuine brand values, which users appeared to recognize and affirm.

A small number of users expressed skepticism or discomfort. One referred to the campaign as “hidden bribery,” implying a covert strategic motive, while another called it “disgusting.” However, such views were rare and did not reflect the broader reception. The overwhelmingly positive sentiment suggests that the campaign’s low commercial intensity and community-centered execution strongly enhanced its perceived authenticity.

*Sentiment distribution:*



*Emotional response distribution:*



### Mason Garments x @cestmuro – Eid Collaboration

During Eid al-Fitr 2024, luxury sneaker brand Mason Garments partnered with the Dutch Instagram platform @cestmuro for a social media campaign aimed at young Muslim audiences. The post used a meme-style image showing a contrast between worn-out shoes labeled “Normal” and new Mason Garments sneakers labeled “Met Suikerfeest,” with the caption “Craving new shoes?” (While the tone was meant to be humorous and culturally familiar, the campaign sparked significant backlash in the

comments, revealing deeper concerns about religious representation and authenticity.

Out of 100 analyzed Instagram comments, 82% were negative, 13% neutral and only 5% positive. Users largely viewed the campaign as opportunistic and emotionally insincere. Four main themes emerged from the negative responses. First, many users criticized the use of a religious holiday for commercial purposes. Comments like “Islam = discount now?” and “Eid is not a business model” expressed discomfort with what was seen as the commodification of Islam.

Second, the campaign was perceived as selectively inclusive. Users questioned why Muslim communities were only acknowledged when there was something to sell. Comments such as “You are only muslim when it’s profitable” reflected frustration with being reduced to a seasonal marketing opportunity.

Third, emotional responses were often expressed through sarcasm or conflicted humor. Some users referred to the post as the “is this halal marketingahaha”. Even when users engaged with the joke, the underlying feeling was one of discomfort or betrayal.

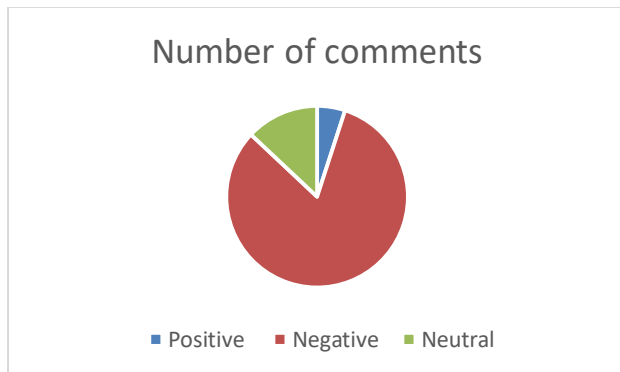
Finally, many felt that the campaign relied on shallow stereotypes and lacked meaningful engagement. By centering the post on consumer behavior and style, the brand was seen as reducing Muslim identity to a marketing trope. Several users questioned whether the brand had ever supported Muslim communities beyond Eid, pointing out a lack of long-term commitment.

Emotionally, the dominant reactions were skepticism (20%), anger (17%) and exclusion (11%), often expressed through sarcastic remarks and accusatory language. Disappointment (12%) and disgust (10%) were also present. Humor and irony made up 15% of the responses but were usually mixed with critique. Only 5% of comments expressed appreciation and even those often felt conflicted.

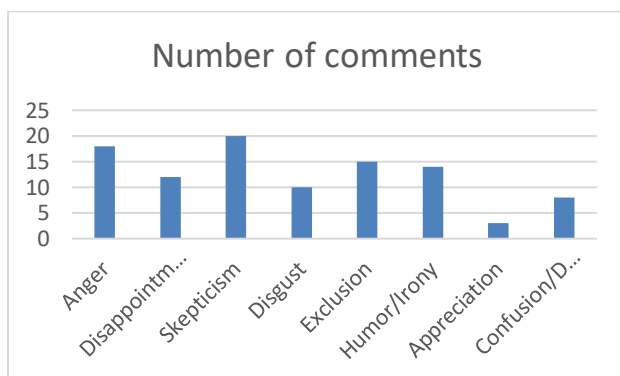
From a Brand Authenticity perspective, the disconnect between the campaign’s playful tone and users’ expectations led to a loss of credibility. What may have seemed culturally aware to the brand came across as surface-level and commercially motivated. According to Representation Theory, the problem was not visibility, but the lack of meaningful and respectful engagement. And from a Signaling Theory point of view, the campaign failed to send credible signals of inclusion. Without real effort, risk or relational investment, users read the campaign as a marketing move rather than a sincere attempt at connection.

This case shows how even familiar formats like memes can backfire if they are not grounded in genuine understanding and long-term engagement.

*Sentiment distribution:*



*Emotional response distribution:*



### Jumbo – World Cup Advertisement

In the lead-up to the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, Dutch supermarket chain Jumbo released a festive television commercial designed to boost national football spirit. The ad featured a group of cheerful construction workers in orange clothing dancing in a polonaise across a building site, an attempt to show different types of people out society and evoke lighthearted Dutch football culture. However, the campaign quickly triggered backlash on social media and beyond. Rather than being received as playful or patriotic, the imagery was widely condemned as tone-deaf.

The controversy centered on the broader context of the World Cup in Qatar, where thousands of migrant workers were reported to have died under unsafe and exploitative labor conditions. Against this backdrop, the use of construction worker imagery, especially in a celebratory setting, was perceived as deeply insensitive. Many saw it as making fun of the suffering of real migrant laborers who had built the stadiums under dangerous conditions.

Out of 100 analyzed Instagram comments, 76% were negative, 18% neutral, and only 6% positive. Anger was the most dominant emotional response (22%), followed by disgust (14%) and moral outrage framed through irony or sarcasm (13%).

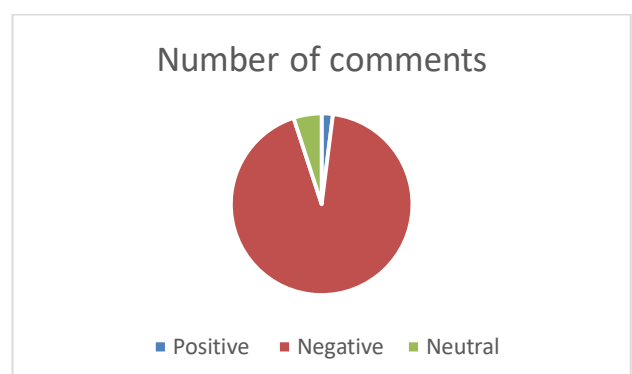
Users referred to the ad as “completely inappropriate,” “a disgrace,” and “a Marketing disaster.” One comment read: “Dancing construction workers? In Qatar? This is beyond embarrassing.” Another stated, “This isn’t funny. People died for those stadiums.” These reactions were not just political but moral, with many users expressing that the ad crossed an ethical line.

Skepticism and disappointment were also visible, as users questioned how such a campaign passed internal review processes. Several comments asked whether the brand had considered the implications or if the ad had been approved without input from a more diverse or critically aware team. A few users attempted to defend the ad by focusing on the humorous intent, but these voices were rare and often quickly challenged by others.

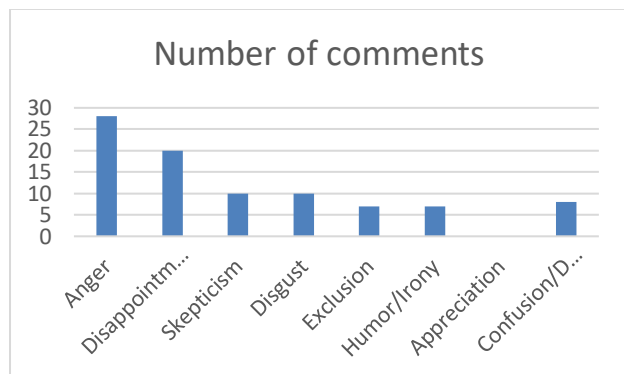
From a representation theory perspective, the ad failed to acknowledge the real-world power dynamics embedded in the imagery it used. Instead of celebrating football culture in a neutral way, the depiction of dancing construction workers, especially in a moment when labor exploitation was at the forefront of public conversations, sent a message of insensitivity and detachment. According to signaling theory, the commercial signaled a lack of awareness or moral cost. Rather than demonstrating ethical alignment, the campaign came across as careless or even complicit in ignoring ongoing injustice.

In terms of brand authenticity, the backlash reflected a split between Jumbo’s intended national pride narrative and audience expectations for social responsibility. The ad was interpreted not as a misstep in tone, but as a failure to act in line with broader ethical norms. It highlighted that authenticity in DEI-sensitive contexts is not just about inclusion, but about moral positioning and awareness of global events. This case illustrates how brand storytelling, when disconnected from current social realities, can backfire.

*Sentiment distribution:*



*Emotional response distribution:*



### Kruidvat – Mother's Day Cleaning Product Promotion

In May 2024, Dutch drugstore Kruidvat ran a Mother's Day campaign promoting cleaning products like laundry detergent as gift ideas. These ads were shared in printed flyers and online. The campaign used old-school images of mothers doing housework. Instead of being funny or thoughtful, the message came across as outdated and disrespectful.

Social media was quickly flooded with negative reactions. Many people called the campaign sexist and said it felt like a step back in time. Users pointed out that giving cleaning supplies for Mother's Day was not only a bad idea, but also reinforced the stereotype that women belong in the kitchen. While Kruidvat did not apologize, the campaign caused a stir in national media and sparked debates about how brands should talk about gender roles.

From the 100 Instagram comments analyzed, 94% were negative, 6% were neutral, and none were truly positive. The most common emotion was anger (27%), shown in comments like "This belongs in the 1950s" or "Mother's Day is not an excuse for sexist marketing." Disappointment (16%) also came up a lot, with users saying they expected better from such a well-known brand. Disgust (13%) was another strong emotion, as people reacted negatively to the idea that cleaning tools represent motherhood. Some users also felt excluded (8%), saying that not all women should be boxed into this old-fashioned image. Humor and irony (12%) were used to mock the campaign.

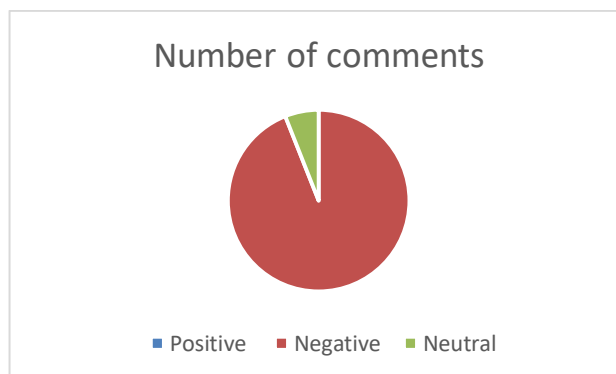
Overall, the tone of the comment section showed that people were upset not just with the ad itself, but with the bigger message behind it. The lack of any praise or support showed a clear disconnect between what Kruidvat thought it was doing and how people felt.

Looking at this from a theory perspective: According to Representation Theory, the way Kruidvat showed mothers was way too narrow and did not match how most people see motherhood today. In terms of Brand Authenticity, it made the

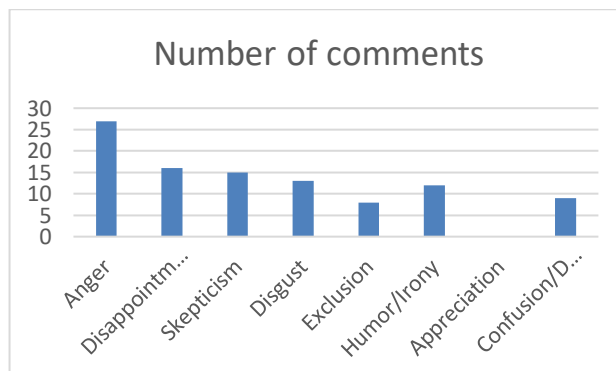
brand seem out of touch. From a Signaling Theory view, this kind of low-effort messaging sent the wrong signal, it looked like Kruidvat had not put any real thought into what it was saying.

In short, this campaign shows how even a simple promotion can go wrong when it sends the wrong message. Today's audiences expect brands to be respectful and aware. When that's missing, backlash follows fast.

*Sentiment distribution:*



*Emotional response distribution:*



### NPO FunX – 'Your City, Your Sound'

In 2024, the Dutch radio station FunX launched the campaign "Your City, Your Sound" to celebrate urban identity, diversity and youth culture across the Netherlands. The campaign included short videos, creative edits and local stories that put a spotlight on young talent from different cities.

These local creatives, referred to as "local heroes", were featured to show the richness of Dutch street culture, especially outside the usual Randstad focus. The idea was to let people "hear their city" and recognize themselves in the stories being told.

This campaign was not about selling a product, but about showing real connection with the communities FunX serves. It matched FunX's brand identity as a broadcaster that

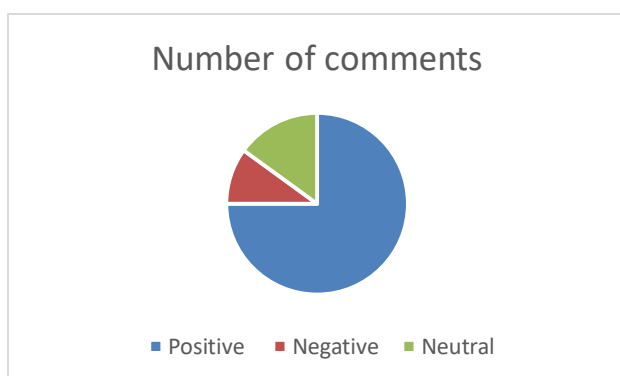
understands and reflects urban life. The videos focused on emotion, pride and shared experiences, not on promotion.

Out of the 100 Instagram comments analyzed, 75% were positive, 15% neutral, and only 10% negative. The most common emotion was appreciation. Many users praised FunX for truly understanding their audience. Comments like “FunX shows they understand urban life” and “This is what media should look like” showed that people felt proud, seen and represented.

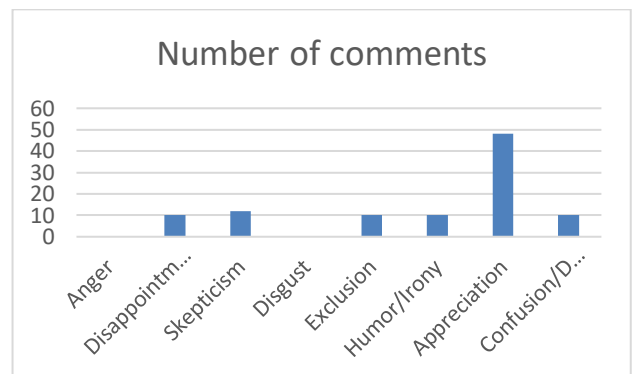
Some users also used humor and jokes to express their excitement, calling the campaign things like “Urban Oscars” or “FunX flexxing.” Even the funny comments still supported the campaign’s message. Critical reactions were present but mostly constructive. A few users asked whether FunX only does this type of campaign during special projects or if it reflects deeper, ongoing efforts. Others felt the content could have gone further in depth or pointed out that certain groups, like people with disabilities or those outside big cities, were still underrepresented. But overall, users seemed to want more of this kind of content.

The campaign worked well because it did not feel forced or fake. From the perspective of Representation Theory, FunX showed real people in ways that felt honest, not stereotypical. From a Signaling Theory point of view, FunX sent a strong and credible message of inclusion by doing what they have always done; highlighting youth voices and urban culture. And when we look at Brand Authenticity, the campaign fit perfectly with who FunX already is. It did not feel like a performance. But it felt natural. In short, “Your City, Your Sound” shows what can happen when a brand understands its audience and includes them in a way that feels real. There was no backlash, only connection. This case proves that when DEI is built into a brand’s identity, people recognize and appreciate it.

*Sentiment distribution:*



*Emotional response distribution:*



### Albert Heijn – "Broccoli" Meme Controversy

In 2021, during the Eurovision Song Contest, Dutch supermarket chain Albert Heijn used a meme with a piece of broccoli. The meme was a reference to the lyrics of Jeangu Macrooy’s Eurovision song “Yu no man broko mi” (“You cannot break me”), which carried a powerful message about Surinamese identity and the history of slavery. In the Netherlands during that time a lot of people heard that phrase as “broccoli”.

Instead of being seen as funny or supportive, the meme was widely criticized. Many people felt that the post made a joke out of something deeply serious. The backlash came quickly. A lot of users accused Albert Heijn of using Black culture just for likes, without understanding its meaning. They felt the brand took a powerful message about resilience and turned it into a silly joke. Many comments came from people in the Surinamese and Afro-Caribbean communities, who felt deeply hurt and disrespected. Some called it “marketing racism,” while others said, “This is offensive.”

Of the 100 Instagram comments analyzed, 96% were negative, 2% neutral or mixed, and only 2% were even somewhat positive. The most common emotion was anger (25%). Users said things like, “You’re making pain into a joke,” and “This is not marketing, this is harm.” Disappointment (15%) was also common, especially from people who expected more care from a big national brand. Some users expressed skepticism (13%) by questioning whether Albert Heijn even understood what it was doing: “Did anyone think this through?” Disgust and exclusion were each seen in about 12% of the comments. Users said things like, “You’re using our culture as a gimmick,” and “Black trauma is not a marketing tool.” A few people responded with humor or sarcasm (12%).

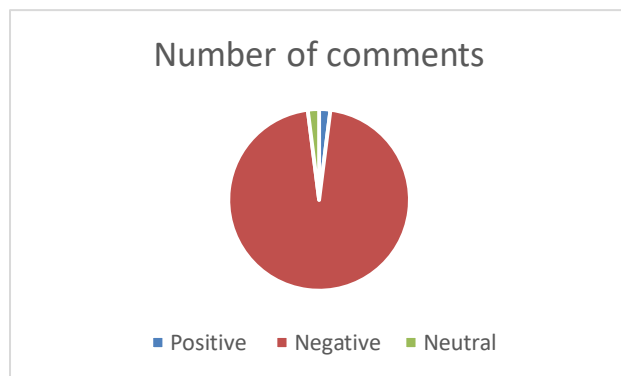
From a theoretical point of view, this campaign failed in several ways. According to Representation Theory, Albert Heijn misused a meaningful cultural phrase, stripping it of its history



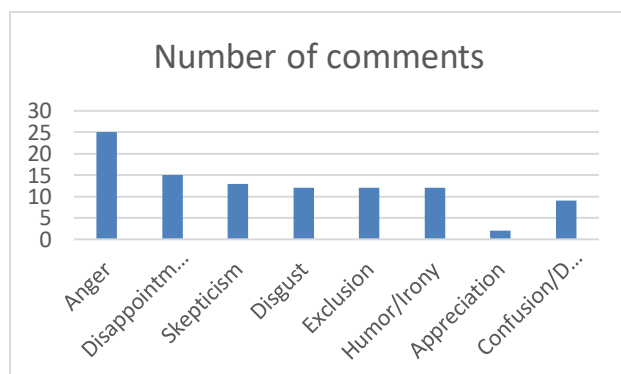
and meaning. Instead of showing respect, the post reduced identity to something funny or trendy. Signaling Theory also helps explain the backlash. The post was meant to be light and relatable, but instead it sent the message that the brand did not understand or care about the culture it was referencing. And when it comes to Brand Authenticity, this post made the brand seem out of touch. There was no sign of real understanding or effort, which made the message feel fake and careless.

This case shows how quickly things can go wrong when brands use cultural references without proper context or respect. A single post, even a meme, can cause serious damage if it is seen as tone-deaf or exploitative. The response to this campaign makes it clear: audiences expect brands to handle sensitive topics with care and to back up their words with real knowledge and respect.

*Sentiment distribution:*



*Emotional response distribution:*



## HEMA – Body Positivity and Disability Representation

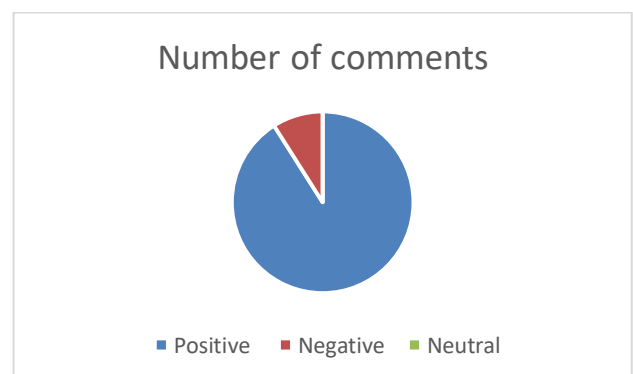
Dutch retailer HEMA launched a striking body-positivity campaign featuring a model with a visible stoma bag. The goal was to normalize visible disabilities and challenge traditional beauty standards by showing natural, unfiltered images of real people. The model, an influencer who lives with a chronic illness, helped make the campaign feel honest, relatable and grounded in real experience.

The campaign was shared widely and received strong praise across social media. Unlike other DEI campaigns that sometimes feel fake or too polished, this one stood out as sincere and emotionally powerful. The photos focused on dignity, not perfection and HEMA came across as a brand that sees and respects all kinds of people.

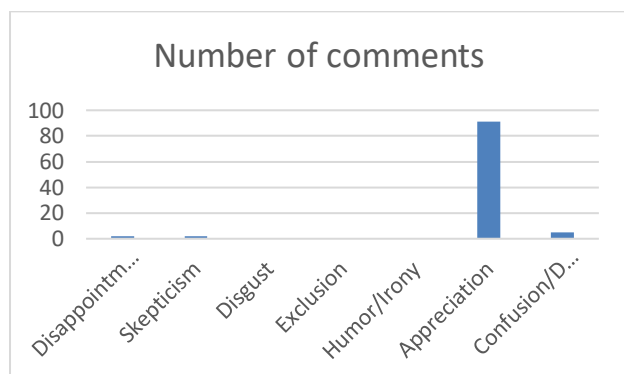
Out of 100 Instagram comments, 91% were positive and only 9% negative. The most common emotion was appreciation, shown in responses like “Fantastic campaign,” “Beautiful model” and “HEMA shows how it is done”. Some users said it gave them goosebumps or made them emotional, which shows that it really meant something to them. There was some criticism, but it was mostly thoughtful. A few users (2%) showed mild skepticism, wondering whether the campaign was a genuine statement or more of a PR strategy. Some (5%) said the images felt too intimate or surprising for Instagram, especially for people scrolling with kids. Others (2%) questioned whether disability should be shown in ads at all, feeling unsure about mixing vulnerability with marketing. Still, none of these comments dominated the conversation and they were not aggressive.

The campaign worked well across all three theoretical lenses used in this study. Representation Theory was clearly at play: HEMA gave space to a body type that is often ignored in media, sending a powerful message about visibility and self-worth. In terms of Brand Authenticity, the campaign felt in line with HEMA’s inclusive and people-first brand identity. Users did not sense a disconnect between what the brand says and what it does, which is a key part of building trust. Finally, from a Signaling Theory perspective, the campaign avoided surface-level gestures. By featuring someone with lived experience and sharing that story in a respectful way, HEMA sent a strong and believable message of inclusion. Overall, this campaign shows how brands can do DEI right. When representation feels real and is handled with care, it not only avoids backlash but also creates emotional connection and public trust.

*Sentiment distribution:*



*Emotional response distribution:*



### Albert Heijn – Pride Bag

Albert Heijn launched a special Pride-themed plastic bag with a rainbow design to show support for the LGBTQ+ community during Pride Month. The campaign was likely meant as a positive gesture, but it quickly drew heavy criticism on Instagram and was one of the most negatively received in this study.

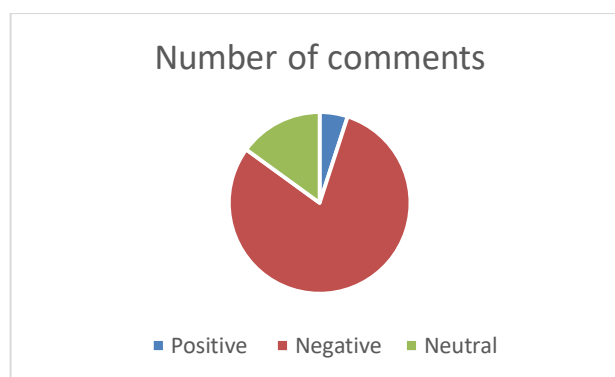
While the bag clearly referenced Pride symbols, many users felt it was a typical example of “pinkwashing”; using LGBTQ+ themes to look inclusive without backing it up with real action. People did not see this as real support, but as shallow marketing. Of the 100 Instagram comments analyzed, 80% were negative, 15% neutral or mixed, and only 5% were positive. The most common emotion was anger (27%). Users felt the brand was using Pride for profit, without actually supporting the LGBTQ+ community in a meaningful way. Skepticism was also high (24%), with users doubting the brand’s intentions and asking what this gesture actually achieved. Comments “Why would you involve into groceries” showed this feeling clearly. Disappointment (16%) was also common. Some felt excluded (4%) or even disgusted (4%), saying things like “secondhand embarrassment” and “stop forcing this on people” About 10% used humor or sarcasm to make their point. These comments were often critical, even if light in tone. There were a few (5%) more positive voices, mostly from people who appreciated the visibility, even if they felt it was not perfect. Comments like “bare minimum, but good step” showed support for the idea, but still hinted at the need for more depth.

From a theoretical point of view, this campaign shows what happens when representation is not paired with real action. Based on Representation Theory, the rainbow bag was a symbol of inclusion, but users did not feel genuinely represented. Signaling Theory helps explain why: there was no clear effort, partnership or investment behind the gesture. That made the signal seem cheap and easy to fake. In terms of Brand

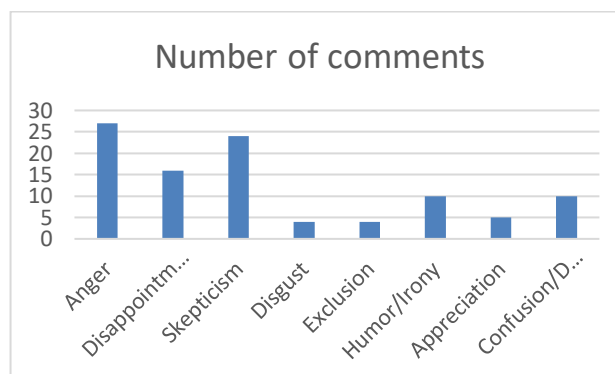
Authenticity, the campaign felt out of sync with the rest of Albert Heijn’s identity, which led users to see it as performative.

In short, the Pride tote bag campaign shows that symbols are not enough. People want brands to put action behind their words. Without that, even a well-meaning gesture can come across as fake and damage trust instead of building it.

*Sentiment distribution:*



*Emotional response distribution:*



### Dutch National Police – “Everything You Have in You”

The Dutch National Police launched a recruitment campaign aiming to show a more diverse and inclusive image of the police. The campaign featured real officers from different ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds, sharing personal stories. By focusing on lived experience, the goal was to encourage people from underrepresented communities to consider a job in law enforcement and help rebuild public trust.

The campaign was shared widely online, where it received a mix of positive and negative reactions. Because it came from a public institution, one with a history of mistrust in certain communities, the campaign sparked a wide range of opinions and emotions. Unlike most commercial brand campaigns in this study, this case touched on deeper issues around representation, identity and institutional credibility.

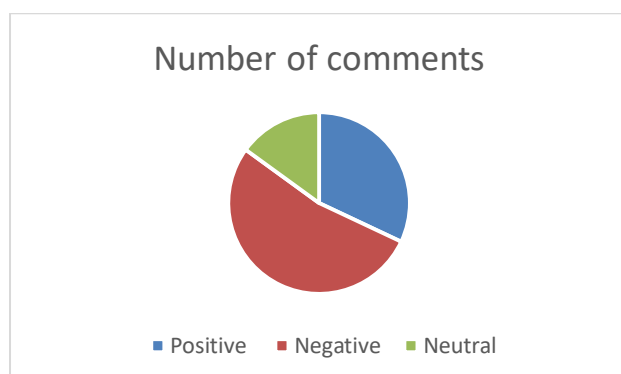
Of the 100 Instagram comments analyzed, 53% were negative, 15% neutral or mixed, and 32% positive. Many of the positive comments (24%) praised the campaign’s effort to show real

people and reflect the diversity of Dutch society. Comments like “everyone is welcome” and “this is the Netherlands” showed support for the campaign’s inclusive tone. However, skepticism was also high (18%), with people questioning whether the campaign truly reflected change or was just image management. Some users said things like “this is just marketing” or used sarcasm to express doubt: “woke level over 9000.” There was also irony (15%), showing a kind of resigned humor or cautious distance. More critical reactions included anger (12%) and disappointment (13%). Some users saw the campaign as political or even as “woke propaganda,” saying it focused too much on diversity and not enough on qualifications. Others felt it was unrealistic or forced. Discomfort and confusion (10%) were expressed by people who did not reject the idea completely, but felt unsure about its tone or intent. A smaller group (8%) felt excluded, arguing that the focus was too much on ethnicity, while other forms of diversity or even Dutch majority voices were overlooked. These users did not necessarily oppose the message, but felt it did not fully represent society.

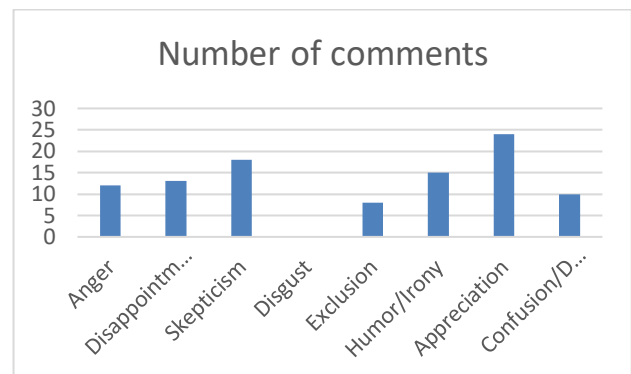
From a theoretical angle, this campaign highlights the complex realities of Representation Theory in a government context. The stories of diverse officers gave visibility to new identities within the police, but not all users felt included or understood. According to Signaling Theory, the message of inclusion was clear, but the source (the police) made it harder for some people to believe. For Signaling to work, the message has to feel credible and this was a challenge here. From a Brand Authenticity perspective, the gap between the campaign’s message and people’s real-life perceptions of the police limited its impact. Trust must be built over time and many users still had doubts

In short, the campaign was powerful in its storytelling and received praise from some users, but it also faced criticism. It shows that in state-led DEI campaigns, messaging alone is not enough. Real trust and authenticity must be built through long-term, visible actions not just videos.

*Sentiment distribution:*



*Emotional response distribution:*



### Adidas – Pride Swimsuit Controversy

Adidas launched a Pride Month campaign featuring a biological male model wearing a women’s one-piece swimsuit. The goal was to promote gender fluidity and show support for LGBTQ+ inclusion. However, the post sparked a major backlash online, especially from users who felt that the campaign ignored women’s representation and crossed a line in the name of inclusivity.

The campaign was meant to position Adidas as progressive and open-minded. But many Instagram users did not see it that way. Instead of feeling included, many women felt replaced or erased. The campaign became one of the most criticized in this study.

An analysis of 100 Instagram comments showed that all were negative. Not a single comment expressed support or even neutral sentiment. The emotional tone was intense and personal, with many users reacting in anger, frustration or disbelief. Anger (18%) came through in direct statements like “Adidas, shame on you.” Many users felt let down by a brand they used to trust. Skepticism (18%) was just as common, with users accusing the brand of “fake-woke marketing” and performative inclusivity. Disappointment (16%) and exclusion (17%) were also dominant. Women commented that they did not feel seen or respected, using phrases like “We are being replaced”. The campaign’s message of inclusion ended up making some groups feel pushed aside. Disgust (15%) and confusion (6%) added to the backlash. Some users called the campaign inappropriate or offensive. Even humor and irony (10%) were used to express discomfort, with sarcastic remarks like “Next time, a giraffe in a sports bra?” showing disbelief and mockery.

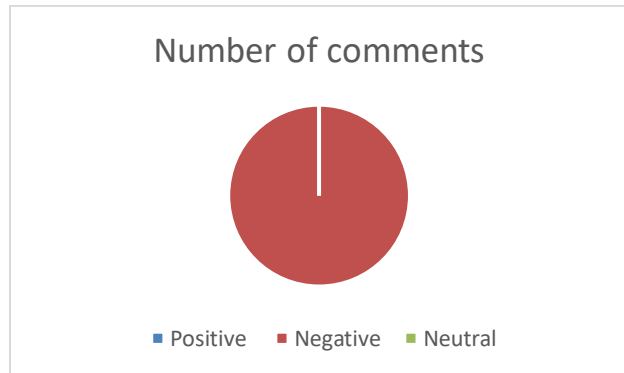
Theoretically, this case highlights the limits of symbolic representation. Adidas tried to expand the visibility of non-traditional identities, but the campaign clashed with many people’s expectations and values. According to Representation Theory, recognition only works when it matches shared cultural meaning and here, that connection broke down. From a Signaling Theory point of view, the intended message of inclusivity was not received as sincere. Instead, users saw it as ideological or disconnected. The signal backfired and created



distrust. Finally, in terms of Brand Authenticity, the campaign felt out of step with the Adidas brand. The lack of emotional connection and audience understanding led to accusations of hypocrisy and identity loss.

In short, this campaign shows how risky DEI messaging can be when it does not connect with the audience. Inclusion has to feel real and thoughtful. Without that, campaigns can end up creating more division than connection.

*Sentiment distribution:*



*Emotional response distribution:*

