

**Brand activism in the Netherlands: Exploring how Dutch companies
approach taking a public stance in social issues**

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Master Communication Science

201800100: Master Thesis Communication Science

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Date: 21-09-2025

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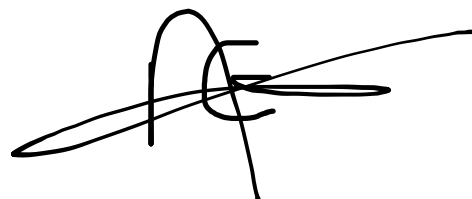
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Preface

This master thesis was written as the final requirement for completing the master's programme in Communication Science at the University of Twente. Between February 2025 and September 2025, I have been researching and writing this thesis, titled *Brand activism in the Netherlands: Exploring how Dutch companies approach taking a public stance in social issues*.

My interest in this topic comes from a personal interest in the role that companies play in society, and particularly, how brands engage with current social issues by publicly taking a stance. In recent years, brand activism has gained significant attention in the media and academia, often highlighting the consequences for companies when they take a stance and how they can contribute to society through brand activism. Given the social issues currently happening in our society, we see more and more companies vocally expressing their viewpoints on these issues. This has made me curious why they decide to do this and how they approach it. I personally believe that companies have a great impact on society and given the social issues we face today, it is even more important that they actively take a stance.

I could not have completed this thesis without support, and I would like to express my gratitude. First, I want to thank all the participants who contributed to this research. This thesis would not have been possible without your openness and willingness in sharing your perspectives with me. Second, I would like to thank my second supervisor, Meike Belter, for her valuable feedback and enthusiasm in my research topic. Finally, I would like to give a special thank you to my first supervisor, Menno de Jong, who provided valuable advice, insightful discussions and encouraging me to complete this thesis.

With this thesis, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of how companies in the Netherlands engage with brand activism.

I hope you enjoy reading it – Nancy Cai

Abstract

Purpose: Brand activism (BA) is gaining significant attention in society and in companies. While earlier research mostly focused on the impact on BA consumers, such as the effects on consumers' behavioral intentions, perceptions of authenticity and their responses to BA, less research has been done from an organizational perspective. Particularly, there is limited research on how companies approach taking a public stance on social issues through BA. To address this gap, this study examines how companies in the Netherlands approach taking a public stance through BA, focusing on diversity and inclusion (D&I). **Methods:** This research conducted two qualitative methods: a content analysis of publicly available materials from 15 Dutch companies and 11 interviews with four company representatives and six D&I-experts. **Results:** Companies often strategically implement D&I initiatives to align with their mission, vision, and values. These include internal initiatives and external initiatives. Creating awareness and facilitating an open dialogue on D&I within companies are essential for achieving perceived authenticity. The key drivers were influenced by ethical values and perceived business benefits as well as political pressures, societal trends and compliance with EU regulation and legislation. Conversely, companies face barriers such as internal resistance, fear of consequences, financial constraints, and risking backlash when taking a public stance. Participants expect that companies will shift the term "D&I" to broader and less polarizing concepts. **Conclusion:** The findings show that taking a public stance on social issues through BA involves more than just making this stance. It calls for strategic implementation, alignment, and authenticity to navigate the barriers and risks. This research contributes to the literature of BA and provides insights for companies engaging with D&I to manage their public stance in meaningful ways to society.

Keywords: brand activism (BA), diversity and inclusion (D&I), companies, corporate communication, organizational strategies

Table of contents

1. Introduction	7
2. Theoretical framework	11
2.1. Brand activism	11
2.1.1. Symbolic and substantive activism	13
2.1.2. The importance of BA authenticity and brand-sociopolitical cause fit	14
2.2. Diversity & inclusion (D&I)	15
2.2.1. Defining D&I	15
2.2.2. Risks and controversies involved	17
2.2.3. Issue selection	18
2.2.4. Communication decisions in D&I	18
2.3. Factors influencing engagement with BA	19
2.3.1. Internal factors	19
2.3.2. External factors	20
2.4. The effects of BA	22
2.4.1. The effects of BA in society	22
2.4.2. The effects of BA in companies	24
2.5. Conclusion	25
3. Study 1: Content analysis	26
3.1. Introduction	26
3.2. Method	26
3.2.1. Research design	26
3.2.2. Corpus and data collection	27
3.2.3. Coding scheme & data analysis	29
3.2.4. Inter-coder reliability	30
3.3. Results	30
3.3.1. Type of social issues (D&I-related)	31
3.3.2. Motives for BA	33
3.3.3. BA actions	35
3.3.4. Communication & implementation approach	39
3.3.5. Level of BA integration	40
3.4. Conclusion	42
4. Study 2: interviews	44
4.1. Introduction	44
4.2. Method	44
4.2.1. Research design	44
4.2.2. Participants	44
4.2.3. Ethical considerations	46
4.2.4. Procedure and interview guide	46
4.2.5. Data analysis	51
4.3. Results	52
4.3.1. Strategic implementation and alignment	52
4.3.2. Communication and positioning	57
4.3.3. Drivers for D&I	62
4.3.4. Perceived reactions, barriers and risks	68
4.3.5. Vision on the future of D&I	72
4.4. Conclusion	74
5. Discussion	75

5.1. Main findings	75
5.2. Theoretical implications.....	78
5.3. Practical implications	79
5.4. Limitations and future research directions.....	81
5.5. Conclusion	82
<i>AI statement.....</i>	<i>84</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>85</i>
<i>Appendices.....</i>	<i>97</i>

1. Introduction

Brand activism (BA) is an emerging phenomenon that has gained significant attention in society and in companies. In recent years, companies throughout the world have increasingly started to act as impactful businesses advocating for social, environmental, or political issues (Moorman, 2020). Consumers increasingly expect companies to play a social role, with “64% of consumers were found to be belief-shoppers who choose, change, avoid or boycott a brand based on its stance on social issues” (Edelman, 2018). This shows a growing prominence for companies to take a public stance on social issues. Examples of global companies like Calvin Klein’s marketing campaigns supporting LGBTQ+ rights (Wong, 2024) or Ben & Jerry’s recent statement on Israel’s military action in Gaza (Speed, 2025), show how they are using their brand name to take a stance on social issues. In the Netherlands, similar cases of BA have emerged where companies publicly advocate for issues such as ethnicity, sexuality, disability, gender equality, intersectionality, anti-racism, or LGBTQ+ rights.

In this study, BA is defined as a corporate strategy in which companies publicly take a stance by using statements and/or actions to demonstrate support for or against a social issue, driven by corporate values and strategic considerations. These social issues can include environmental challenges, social justice, anti-racism, and diversity and inclusion (D&I). This study emphasizes on D&I as the primary social issue within the broader context of BA. Due to global social movements like Black Lives Matter, Pride and #MeToo, D&I has become increasingly relevant and an important topic for companies to address (Kipnis et al., 2021; Park et al., 2022; Simchi-Levi, 2020).

BA goes beyond corporate social responsibility (CSR) as many brands have realized that CSR alone is no longer enough to address the wicked problems of society (Pimentel et al., 2023; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Although BA is seen as a progression of CSR (Sarkar & Kotler, 2017), BA differs due to its controversial nature of social issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Given its controversial nature, BA is often seen as a bolder strategy compared to traditional CSR (Sibai et al., 2021) and involves values-driven causes that concerns the future of the planet and society. On the other hand, CSR focuses on corporate-driven causes such as corporate philanthropy and socially responsible business activities that focus on widely accepted issues (Sarkar & Kotler, 2017). Another difference is that

CSR are usually integrated into a company's strategic plan (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988), whereas efforts of BA may occur accidentally or even happen voluntarily without a specific plan. In this case, it tends to be less integrated with the overall company strategy and often is still unaligned with a business strategy that aim to target specific business goals (Kim, 2024; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

Yet, there are several reasons that companies engage with BA by taking public stance on D&I as a social issue. This can be driven by internal and external motivations. Research shows that personal beliefs of the leadership and employees speaking out on social issues can be considered as internal motivations for companies to take a stand (Cook et al., 2023; Li & Soule, 2021). Moreover, companies in the Netherlands must comply with European legal frameworks such as the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) (Hummel & Jobst, 2024). This might result as one of an external pressure for companies to engage with BA, while competitive pressures within the industry serves as another external pressure to take a public stance on social issues. This indicates that companies are not only driven to take a public stance because of the increased consumers' expectations of companies' societal role (Ahmad et al., 2024; Bhagwat et al., 2020), but also due to several internal and external drivers.

Despite the potential societal benefits and opportunities for companies, it can be a double-edged sword and can carry potential risks for companies, including unintended backlash consequences and the potential of reputational damage (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021; Larcker et al., 2018). Thus, companies must consider the potential risks associated with BA, and scholars have emphasized that its strategic implementation is urgently needed (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). At the same time, taking a public stance on D&I also requires companies to decide which issues to support and which issues to avoid. This presents a challenge for companies as they must ensure to strategically select social issues that align with their long-term vision and values (Kim & Meganck, 2024). To guide this challenge, the issue maturity model by Zadek (2004) can be used as a criteria for understanding how companies assess which social issues bring more opportunities or risks to companies (Kim, 2024). This model provides a framework that considers why some social issues are avoided due to its risks or why some are selected as opportunities (Zadek, 2004). However, companies might risk being perceived as

performative even when issues are selected carefully. This occurs when the company's public stance does not align with their core values or fails to put their words into action (Vredenburg et al., 2020). This reflects a symbolic approach rather than a substantive approach where consistent and long-term actions are prioritized. Legitimacy theory by Suchman (1995) can be applied to explain the distinction between symbolic and substantive approach, which provides a framework for understanding how companies aim to gain, maintain or repair legitimacy through aligning their actions with societies' norms and values (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975).

Although research on BA has gained increasing attention in academia, most of the studies investigated BA from the consumers' viewpoint, such as investigating the effects of BA on consumers' behavioral intentions or perceptions of authenticity (e.g., Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Zhao et al., 2024). In contrast, there has been limited research on BA from an organizational perspective, and researchers have emphasized the need for more research to understand why brands take a stand despite the risks associated with it (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). This research gap is particularly relevant in the case of D&I. While D&I has become a significant topic within companies, not much is known about how it is specifically approached by companies in the Netherlands to take a public stance on this.

By narrowing the focus to D&I, this present study aims to address the research gap by examining how companies in the Netherlands approach BA, emphasizing on how they take a public stance on D&I. To gain a deeper understanding of the approach, this study analyzes the underlying factors that influence companies to take a public stance, how companies decide which issues to support or avoid, and how companies implement strategies to communicate their stance to the public. In addition, it examines the barriers and risks that companies might experience when publicly engaging with D&I. To achieve the purpose of the research, two qualitative research were conducted: a content analysis (Study 1) and interviews (Study 2). Study 1 provides the first insights into how companies in the Netherlands publicly communicate their stance on D&I through publicly available materials. Additionally, Study 2 is used to gain deeper insights into the underlying motivations, how decisions are made, and the challenges behind their public stances. The findings from both studies complement each other by combining an initial perspective on what companies are publicly stating with a deeper

understanding of why and how they take a public stance. These studies aim to investigate the following main research question:

RQ: *“How do companies in the Netherlands approach taking a public stance on diversity and inclusion (D&I) through brand activism?”*

To answer this question, four sub-questions have been formulated.

RQ1. *What are factors that influence companies to take a stance on D&I issues?*

RQ2. *How do companies decide which D&I issues to support and which to avoid?*

RQ3. *How do companies implement BA strategies to communicate their stance on D&I to the public?*

RQ4. *What are the perceived risks and challenges that companies face when taking a stance on D&I?*

This study contributes to the literature on BA by shifting the focus from the consumer's perspective (e.g., Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020; Cammarote & Branca, 2024) to an organizational perspective. It specifically investigating how D&I emerges as a form of activism in Dutch companies. Research shows that companies sometimes adopt socio-political causes that do not always align with established brand reputation (Vredenburg et al., 2020), which may result in potential pitfalls. When companies fail to align their public stance with their core values or do not fully understand the reasons for their activism, their activism can be seen as superficial (Scalvini, 2024). This results in significant consequences and missed opportunities to create meaningful societal impact. Therefore, these insights are also of societal relevance that provide valuable suggestions for D&I managers, senior executives, HR professionals, marketing and communication specialists, or other stakeholders responsible for implementing and communicating a company's stance on social issues. The findings suggest how companies can approach BA responsibly, manage its potential consequences, and enhance awareness and support for underrepresented groups by engaging in conversations on D&I in society.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Brand activism

BA is known as an emerging marketing strategy for brands to differentiate themselves by publicly taking a stance on social issues (Moorman, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). More specifically, Moorman (2020, p. 388) defines it as “the public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name.” In previous research, scholars often use other related terms to refer to BA. Some of these include corporate social advocacy (Dodd & Supa, 2015), CEO activism (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019), corporate socio-political activism (Bhagwat et al., 2020), corporate activism (Eilert & Nappier Cherup 2020), advocacy (Weber et al., 2023) and corporate political advocacy (Weber et al., 2025). These terms share the broad consensus that it involves a public demonstration of a company’s stance on a controversial issue (Saracevic & Schlegelmilch, 2024), but it differs slightly how activism is approached based on a different angle. For instance, CEO activism involves executives publicly taking stances in favor of or against social issues that are unrelated to the core business of their companies (Sanchez et al., 2022), whereas corporate socio-political activism is described as firms publicly demonstrate support for or against one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue by using statements and/or actions (Bhagwat et al., 2020). This indicates that the main difference depends on who takes the stance and in what forms of activism are expressed, but still involves a public stance made by a company on a controversial issue.

Research also often positions BA against corporate social responsibility (CSR) (e.g., Nalick et al., 2016; Lou et al., 2024; Vredenburg et al., 2020). CSR refers to the voluntary actions that companies take outside of legal obligations to fulfill the expectations of stakeholders and contributes to societal well-being that goes beyond only achieving financial benefits (Basil & Erlandson, 2008; Schwartz & Carroll, 2003). There are ongoing discussions in the literature about the relationship between BA and CSR. Some studies argue that BA is considered as a natural and faster evolution of CSR with both implementing practices to address broader societal concerns (Lee & Tao, 2021; Matten & Moon, 2008), while others consider a few clear distinctions between the two.

First, research suggest that CSR typically involves corporate-driven causes that are related to generally accepted and noncontroversial social issues that is seen as beneficial by most of society (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Such corporate-driven causes can include environmental sustainability efforts, philanthropy, ethical labor practices and responsible sourcing (Unesco, n.d.). Important to notice is that, even generally accepted issues like sustainability or climate change may become divisive and become more controversial than expected in the current polarized society. On the other hand, BA is concerned with a values-driven strategy that involves taking a public stance on partisan and controversial social issues that go beyond the immediate interest of the brand (Schlegelmilch & Saracevic, 2022).

Secondly, it was argued that BA can be either voluntarily or deliberately planned without sufficient stakeholder involvement, which can lead to risking misalignment with the company's business goals (Kim, 2024; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). In contrast, CSR involves a careful strategic planning and stakeholder communication that aims to create legitimacy and reduce potential risks (Kim, 2024). This shows that BA involves taking a public stance on controversial issues, which is considered riskier than CSR because it can potentially alienate some stakeholders (Dodd & Supa, 2014).

Thirdly, a recent study by Lou et al., (2024) argue that BA is more focused on external communication and driven by public interest, whereas CSR is practiced more internally. Also, the study suggests that BA can offer greater competitive advantages than CSR because it is more publicized and strongly advertised via external communication, which can contribute to business profit. This perspective contradicts with the findings of Vredenburg et al. (2020), who argue that an activist brand is driven by its purpose and values, often prioritizing societal contributions over business profit. Consequently, Lou et al., (2024) argue that companies may not only be motivated by the willingness to contribute to societal impact when engaging with BA, but also by a strategic objective to gain a competitive advantage. Building on these perspectives, this study adopts a perspective where BA is defined as a corporate strategy in which companies publicly take a stance by using statements and/or actions to demonstrate support for or against a social issue, driven by company values and strategic considerations.

2.1.1. Symbolic and substantive activism

While BA can be understood as a strategy in which companies publicly take a stance on social issues, previous research indicates that the motivations behind these stances can differ. Research suggests that a company's commitment to take a stance may not always be caused by a deeper understanding of their societal role, increased moral principles (Sibai et al., 2021) or a deliberate intention to support positive societal change (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). Instead, it may often be a response from stakeholder pressures, particularly the growing expectations of consumers regarding companies' societal engagement (Ahmad et al., 2024; Bhagwat et al., 2020). As a result, companies may act in two different ways to demonstrate their public stance: a symbolic approach or a substantive approach. This distinction can be further understood through the lens of legitimacy theory, which refers to the perception that the actions of an organization are desirable, proper or appropriate within society's "norms, values and beliefs" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574).

In the context of BA, companies might earn the approval of the public to gain legitimacy through symbolic and substantive strategies. It is important for companies to gain legitimacy to foster a positive relationship with stakeholders and/or customers (Suchman, 1995). To do this, their voluntary disclosures about their impact on society should be transparent and credible through a proactive and thorough communication (Burlea & Popa, 2013). However, this might be affected depending on whether a company adopts a symbolic or substantive approach, which has been discussed in earlier literature on legitimacy theory (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Hrasky, 2012; Kim et al. 2007; Milne & Patten, 2002).

In this case, symbolic and substantive approaches describe the degree how much a company does compare to what the market expects based on what the company says it will do (Yang et al., 2024). Here, a symbolic approach means addressing societal concerns by solely communicating around certain issues. For example, involving low-costs statements that provide recognition to a particular social issue, but do not commit organizational resources or take follow-up actions (Proctor et al., 2025). On the other hand, a substantive approach involves showing evidence to demonstrate concrete acts for action toward the issue, such as organizing educational events or campaigns, developing written policies that support the issue (Proctor et al., 2025), or presenting relevant statistics to

demonstrate exactly how much progress had been made (Eng et al., 2024). This suggest that companies with a more substantive approach provides detailed information to prove it stance, while a symbolic approach may be perceived as misleading when companies only say that it has done something without actual information to prove its progress (Walker & Wan, 2012).

Depending on whether the company uses a symbolic or substantive strategy, it can shape its perceived legitimacy. Prior research by Lee et al. (2018) and Yim (2021) highlights that engaging in related concepts such as CSR and corporate social advocacy (CSA) may affect perceptions of legitimacy. Another study suggests that while consumers response similarly to both symbolic and substantive messages, substantive strategies tend to be perceived as less hypocritical (Troy et al., 2025). This implies that consumers would consider a company more authentic and less hypocritical, because substantive strategies involve a demonstrable effort to align words with actions (Troy et al., 2025). As companies engaging with BA need public approval to gain, maintain or repair legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), the legitimacy theory can help to explain how companies adopt either a symbolic or substantive approach to gain legitimacy when taking a public stance on social issues. Understanding this distinction is essential as a symbolic approach might lead to perceptions inauthenticity and a lack of legitimacy, whereas a substantive approach can help companies to be perceived as more authentic and legitimate.

2.1.2. The importance of BA authenticity and brand-sociopolitical cause fit

Authenticity is considered as the most relevant factor in the success of a BA strategy (Ahmad et al., 2024; Schmidt et al., 2022; Pimentel et al., 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020) as it describes the ‘evaluations, judgments, or assessments of how real or genuine something is’ (Beckman et al., 2009; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). In this case, it reflects the judgements of how genuine a company’s public stance appears to be. Research has shown that when consumers perceive a company’s BA as authentic, they are more likely to perceive the brand’s stance as relevant, truthful and reliable (Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, when consumers feel that the stance of a company is not genuine and does not align with their personal view, consumers become more skeptical of their actions (Hong & Li, 2021). This may lead to negative consequences for companies as they might be perceived as

inauthentic, which Vredenburg et al. (2020) refer to as 'woke-washing'. This occurs when a public stance in the form of communication messaging about the sociopolitical issue does not match a brand's purpose, mission and values. Ultimately, this could damage brand equity and can trigger a backfire effect among consumers (Holt, 2002). Therefore, it is important for companies to engage with social issues in a genuine and authentic way to ensure their stance is credible and aligns with their values.

An important factor to measure BA authenticity is brand-cause fit and is defined as the fit between a brand and the cause that it supports (Verlegh, 2024). While brand-cause fit is a well-known concept in the CSR marketing literature, this study adopts the definition of brand-sociopolitical cause fit, which was introduced by Chu et al. (2022). They describe it as the perceived conceptual alignment between a brand's conceptual attributes and a sociopolitical cause the brand advocates through its activism efforts. It has been suggested that a high brand-cause fit strengthens the relationship between the brand and its initiatives (Wojciszek et al., 1998), while a low fit is likely to be perceived as inconsistent with a consumer's prior expectations. This can trigger skepticism among consumers (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Folkes, 1998). Consequently, these insights show that the degree of brand socio-political cause fit is important to determine whether a company's activism activities are seen as authentic or inauthentic: a good fit relates to authentic BA, whereas a low fit will most likely result in an inauthentic perception of BA.

2.2. Diversity & inclusion (D&I)

2.2.1. *Defining D&I*

With increasing consumer expectations for companies to play a societal role (Zhao et al., 2024), companies increasingly take a public stance and can be activist across different domains. This can include social, business, legal, political, economic and environmental issues (Sarkar & Kotler, 2017). For example, political issues can involve matters like immigration (Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020) and governmental opposition (Bedendo & Siming, 2021), whereas social issues include social justice, equality and diversity (Thomas & Fowler, 2023), gender equality (Atanga et al., 2022), LGBTQ+ rights (Hydock et al., 2020) and hate speech (He et al., 2021). Many of these social issues belong

under the domain of diversity and inclusion (D&I). In line with this understanding, this study adopts a narrowed perspective by focusing on social issues, with particular emphasis on D&I.

The literature describes a distinction between the terms of “diversity” and “inclusion”. Roberson (2006) has investigated the meanings of D&I in organizations and finds it more useful to consider D&I as separate, but interrelated concepts. In his work, it was mentioned that diversity within organizations has become an important business imperative, where organizations have adopted different approaches to diversity-related issues. This means that companies recognize an increasing importance of D&I in organizations for the business community (Simchi-Levi, 2020; Kipnis et al., 2021; Park et al., 2023) and have increasingly started to implement initiatives to stimulate D&I. Initially, common approaches on managing diversity focused on targeted recruitment initiatives, education and training, career development and mentoring programs to increase and retain workforce heterogeneity in organizations (Cox, 1993; Morrison, 1992). However, the focus has been shifted to inclusion practices in which organizations have begun to rely on a broader set of programs and initiatives like employee participation, communication strategies and community relations (Wentling & Palma-Rivas, 2000). In more recent studies, diversity is described as the “real or perceived physical or socio-cultural differences attributed to people and the representation of these differences in research, market spaces and organizations.” (Arsel et al., 2022, p. 920). Besides, inclusion involves “creating a culture that fosters belonging and incorporation of diverse groups and is usually operationalized as opposition to exclusion or marginalization” (Arsel et al., 2022, p. 920).

Some studies (e.g., Roberson, 2006; Weaver et al., 2025) describe D&I as a practice within organizations, which are aimed to foster a diverse and inclusive workplace to improve employee engagement, while others research like Park et al. (2023) take an external perspective. Namely, they view D&I as how a company engages with its customers, defining it as “the extent to which the composition of an organization’s customer base reflects equitable participation especially with respect to traditionally underrepresented, underserved, and marginalized market segments.” (Park et al., 2023, p. 175). This study considers both perspectives of D&I—an internal practice to stimulate a diverse and inclusive workplace, as well as an external approach by publicly communicating their stance on D&I-related issues that reflect underrepresented groups. This external perspective demonstrates a

company's commitment to D&I as part of their BA efforts (Batista et al., 2022). Therefore, recognizing both perspectives is necessary to have a complete and nuanced understanding of how companies approach taking a public stance on D&I through BA.

2.2.2. *Risks and controversies involved*

Companies are increasingly focusing on initiatives to foster D&I, they often go beyond just diversity to create a work environment where people from many backgrounds are valued (de Laryg et al., 2024). While these initiatives can be seen as opportunities for businesses to publicly communicate their commitment to D&I, they are also often accompanied by controversy (Jacobsen et al., 2025). This is mainly due to the risks involved when companies promote themselves based on D&I while they fail to put their words into action (Jacobsen et al., 2025). Given the controversy and risks involved, companies who commit themselves to these initiatives should ensure that their company image is in line with the self-perception of their target audience (Kipnis et al., 2013). Only when a company's target audience embraces D&I as a value, it makes sense for companies to take a stance on this.

In some cases, companies might aim to limit their D&I initiatives to avoid potential reputational risks. This can be understood through the stakeholder theory by Freeman (1984), which explains that organizations aim to generate multiple benefits for different stakeholders such as customers, employees and governments who can affect or be affected by the organization. As an example, several large Dutch multinationals such as ASML, Arcadis and Philips have recently scaled back or modified their D&I policies in response to the recent political developments in the United States (NOS, 2025). To comply with President Donald Trump's executive order that prohibits active D&I programs within organizations in America, Dutch companies doing business with the American government were pressured to adjust their policies in their U.S.-based operations (NOS, 2025). This situation illustrates how external political pressures from the U.S. can affect companies in the Netherlands to scale back their D&I initiatives to comply with the legal requirements from the government. From the perspective of the stakeholder theory, it is important that companies respond to the needs and demands of their stakeholders as they depend on the stakeholders for their success (Freeman, 1984).

2.2.3. Issue selection

When engaging in BA, companies must decide which issues to support and which to avoid. In a previous study, it was shown that some companies have strategically avoided divisive issues and focus on topics that are less controversial and more aligned with their business operations (Kim et al., 2025). This way, companies can still aim for societal change while limiting the potential risk of dividing stakeholders who do not agree with the company' stance on divisive issues (Kim & Meganck, 2024). However, it can be challenging to decide issues to select and which issues to avoid due to the complexity of social issues. To navigate this complexity, scholars have introduced the issue maturity model (e.g., McGrail et al., 2013; Zadek, 2004) as a framework to decide which issues bring more opportunities or risks to companies (Kim, 2024).

In this study, the model by Zadek (2004) is applied to understand how companies decide which issues to select. This model suggests that companies should consider the four maturity levels of social issues (i.e., latent, emerging, consolidating and institutionalized) and how companies respond to these issues through five types of responses: defensive, compliant, managerial, strategic and civil. This framework shows that companies can gain benefits or risks dividing stakeholders based on how they respond to the maturity level of a social issue. For instance, when a social issue is at the institutionalized level, which means that the issue has already been widely established in society, there will be a bigger risk when the company does not express its responsibilities to the issue (i.e., defensive). On the other hand, when a company actively express their responsibility (i.e., strategic or civil), they are able to gain more benefits. Therefore, this model is a useful framework to assess which issues companies choose to support and which to avoid.

2.2.4. Communication decisions in D&I

Nowadays, the question is no longer just whether brands engage in D&I communication, but also how they execute it. Often, companies communicate their stances on social media, but it has been argued that companies approach it differently and is shaped by several factors. This has been examined in an empirical study by Bombaij and Dorri (2024), who have analyzed more than 3 million posts from 289 brands. Their findings suggest that brands do not make D&I decisions in the same way

but depend on how well those decisions align or fit between the brand' D&I communication and their regular business activities (Dawkins & Lewis 2003; Menon & Kahn 2003). This highlights that companies often have a strategic approach to communicate on D&I, due to underlying mechanisms like perceived authenticity, credibility, informativeness and transparency (Kim, 2019; Yoon et al., 2006) that companies aimed to achieve. However, previous work by Bombaj and Dorri (2024) mainly focused on the message characteristics and its alignment with the overall message strategy on social media. They have not dealt with internal and/or external organizational factors that may influence D&I communication as part of the broader BA strategies. Given these limitations, the following section will explore the underlying factors that drive companies to take a public stance on social issues, such as D&I, within the broader context of BA.

2.3. Factors influencing engagement with BA

To understand why companies are increasingly taking public stances on social issues through BA, it is worth examining the factors behind these practices. In this study, these are divided into internal and external factors.

2.3.1. *Internal factors*

Previous studies have analyzed several internal factors in the context of CEO activism. Their findings can also be applicable in the context of BA as both phenomena involve a public demonstration of a company's stance on a controversial issue (Saracevic & Schlegelmilch, 2024). While BA occurs at the organizational level in which the whole company take a stance, CEO activism occurs at an individual level whereby company leaders publicly communicate their personal stances on social issues (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019). Research on CEO activism has identified two categories of internal factors: (1) individual-level factors and (2) institutional-level factors.

At the individual level, CEOs may engage in activism due to their personal morality or political beliefs because they feel passionate about an issue (Cook et al., 2023). Another reason is based on a strategic alignment with key stakeholders, such as employees and customers. This can be explained through Hambrick and Wowak's (2021) stakeholder alignment model, which suggests that a CEO's motivation to take a stance is influenced by how closely their views align with those of their key

stakeholders. Applying this knowledge to BA, it implies that companies may publicly engage with social issues when it reflect their core values and morals, as well as when companies believe their views are aligned with their employees and customers. As a result, this shows a strategic decision-making process where companies are not only driven by their values and morals, but also strategically position themselves based on the expectations and opinions of their stakeholders.

At the institutional level, there are three primary factors that may influence the likelihood to engage in activism: (1) representation, (2) status hierarchies and (3) firm characteristics (Cook et al., 2023). Representation and status hierarchies shape how professionals from historically underrepresented groups (Puwar, 2004) experience their role at work, especially leadership roles (Puwar, 2004). For instance, the entrance of women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals into traditional professional settings is seen as a disruption of the status quo and results in scrutiny, suspicion and doubt (Cook et al., 2023). They are often “visibly invisible”, which refers to people that are highly visible for their indifferences but are overlooked for their competence, experience and capability (Cook et al., 2023). As a result, leaders from historically low-status groups must navigate their roles in ways that avoid stereotypes and must work harder to demonstrate their competence and capability through high-risk jobs and roles (Glass & Cook, 2020). For this reason, these CEOs are more likely to engage in activism. Since they often feel a stronger commitment to social issues, especially related to D&I, they are often expected to serve as a stronger advocate in these areas (Cook et al., 2023). This suggests that leaders from marginalized groups are more likely push their company to take a public stance, driven by genuine and value-driven intentions (Kim & Ferguson, 2019).

These insights from CEO activism highlight important internal drivers of BA. However, these factors were limited to the motivations of CEO’s and it may have overlooked other factors that drive BA. In particular, external drivers may also influence a company’s decision to take a public stance.

2.3.2. External factors

Companies can also face external factors to engage in BA. One of them is the increasing consumers and employees’ expectations in companies to go beyond social responsibility actions and implement impactful stances on socio-political themes (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Companies are seen as more capable to address social change, as the public’

trust in institutions and governments has declined. Many consider that institutions and governments are unable or unwilling to address important societal challenges (Edelman, 2023; Radanielina & Grégoire, 2023).

Second, competitive and industry pressures can be another external factor. It has been argued that BA may result in competitive advantages in the market (Cammarota et al., 2023). BA could enhance the brand-consumer relationship (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021), brand reputation (Johnson et al., 2022) and a positive relationship between a company's employees and investors (Bhagwat et al., 2020). In the past, companies often remained neutral to avoid backlash from the public and their consumers, preferring not to take a stance on any issues. However, brands nowadays can no longer be neutral due to the growing awareness of sociopolitical issues (Pollack, 2020), which has forced companies to take a stance on these issues. This suggests that companies often may feel the necessity to stay ahead from their competitors and to stay aligned with industry changes in order to maintain relevance and achieve their business objectives.

Finally, complying with the legislation and regulation frameworks may also serve as an external pressure for companies to take a stance. In many countries, sustainability disclosures have become mandatory, with the European Union (EU) at the forefront with legislation initiatives (Hummel & Jobst, 2024) like the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD). Companies above a certain size are subjected to the CSRD. These companies must disclose information on the risks and opportunities arising from social and environmental issues, as well as the impact of their activities on people and the environment (European Commission, n.d.). Similarly, the CSDDD is a more recent legal framework aiming to foster sustainable and responsible corporate behavior in their operations and their global value chains (European Commission, n.d.-a). When companies have to comply with these regulation and legislation, it creates a legal certainty and demonstrates their transparency and accountability. Consequently, aligning with legal expectations can be considered as another driver for companies to publicly take a stance on social issues.

2.4. The effects of BA

2.4.1. *The effects of BA in society*

The effects of BA occur when a brand or a company takes a stance on controversial issues as means to play a more significant role in society (Edelman, 2019; CMOSurvey, 2020). Within this context, brands deliberately engage with socially controversial issues such as D&I, to influence public opinion and shape social order (Bhagwat et al., 2020). This not only has an impact on companies themselves, but also has an impact on society. To understand what the effects of BA in society are, this study adopts the positive and negative effects to provide a general understanding of BA's impact on society.

According to studies, it was suggested that positive effects of proactively taking a stance offers the potential to raise awareness, create public support and motivate certain behaviors that are good for the society (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019; Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Taylor & Sen Das, 2010). This indicates that brands that engage with activism can be key advocates, creating attention to important social issues and driving positive social change (Scalvini, 2024). In the work of Scalvini (2024), he also argues that BA can generate a sense of empowerment and moral alignment. When brands actively engage with social issues through online platforms, they not only position themselves as commercial agents, but as moral agents with a responsibility to contribute to societal well-being. As a result, it may foster empowerment among marginalized or underrepresented groups in society, because these consumer groups finally feel seen, heard and valued. This is particularly relevant in the context of D&I, where such underrepresented groups are more encouraged to speak up, which may lead to the increasing acceptance or normalization of diversity and inclusion of individuals in society.

Additionally, by addressing important social issues through online platforms, it can raise stronger moral emotions in consumers (Wannow et al., 2023). Morality is described as the principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behavior. It was argued by Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) that BA allows consumers to determine whether a brand's moral foundations are aligned with their own, which reflect their personal identity (Strohming & Nichols, 2014). For instance, when consumers agree with the stand taken by a brand, it indicates that the moral foundations of the consumer and the brand are well-aligned. Also, it posits positive moral emotions

like gratitude and admiration, which are expected to strengthen the brand and increase proactive advocacy behavior by consumers (Joo et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020). However, when consumers do not agree with the moral stand taken by a company, it implies that the consumer and the company have different moral principles (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020), which lead to a lower alignment. Thus, depending on these moral emotions, it can generate different responses from consumers reflecting its alignment with the company.

Despite the positive effects, it was also found that there are negative effects of BA on society. According to several studies, the reasons driving brands to engage in controversial or polarizing events are increasingly being scrutinized (e.g., Hambrick & Wowak, 2021; Holt, 2002; Eyada, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). The reason for this is that BA can also risk superficial engagement and selective activism (Scalvini, 2024), often leading to negative reactions from stakeholders, especially consumers. In most cases, these negative reactions result in backlashes or boycotts when consumers consider the brand's activist initiatives as a marketing strategy or a way to increase sales and generate profits (Eyada, 2020). This phenomenon can be referred to as "woke-washing", which is a term to describe a practice where brands have unclear or indeterminate records of social cause activities (Vredenburg et al., 2018), but position themselves as being concerned with social issues of inequality and injustice (Sobande, 2019). This highlights the inconsistencies between messaging and practice (Vredenburg et al., 2018) leading to the risk of superficial engagement. Ultimately, these inconsistencies between messaging and practice can increase consumer skepticism and an increased perception of woke-washing

Moreover, other studies argue that engaging with BA purely as a marketing strategy also risks the potential for polarization and has in fact a broader impact on society (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023). Namely, recent studies argue that the risk for polarization occurs in the potential for selective activism. This means that brands may prioritize causes (Bhagwat et al., 2020) that align with their target audience's values, but that it potentially marginalizes less popular or controversial issues. More specifically, in the study by Scalvini (2024), he reveals that the occurrence of selective activism can risk selective empathy, which can be seen as a contradictory aspect of BA. While BA is supposed to support social, political and environmental issues, Scalvini (2024) argues that some companies

accidentally highlight specific issues and inspire action by only focusing on only certain groups or issues while neglecting others. For instance, when a company decides to take a stance on a particular social issue, it may deviate consumers who have opposite views. As a result, this may cause polarization in society where there is a social division rather than civic solidarity. In this case, the negative effects of BA can increase consumer skepticism leading to woke-washing when a company's stance is vague and not aligned with its actual practices. Furthermore, BA affects the public discourse when consumers have opposite views, resulting in polarization in society.

2.4.2. The effects of BA in companies

There are also significant effects for companies when taking a public stance on social issues. Many companies adopt BA to gain a competitive advantage (Clement & Murguan, 2024) aiming to attract new customers, enhance brand image and connect with customers (Schmidt et al., 2021). Moreover, engaging with BA can also be beneficial for attracting talents. As mentioned earlier, there is a high expectation for companies to address social issues, particularly among Gen Z (Kumar, 2022; Shetty et al., 2019). When a company has a value-driven purpose and actively engages with activist stances, it may result in a more favorable attitude of the company (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). When potential talents see their own values aligned in those of the company, it can result in a larger hiring pool due to the increased awareness of values (Eyada, 2020). Furthermore, Eyada (2020) argue that an increased exposure by third party blogs and influencers can be considered as another positive effect in companies. This suggests that when a company takes a stance on a social issue, it often gains media attention that boosts public visibility for the company. Consequently, this visibility enhances the engagement between the company, customers and potential talents on social media (Gray, 2019), which may improve the company's overall brand image and its reputation (Abdallah et al., 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020)

While these effects indicate positive effects of BA in companies, there are also several negative effects to consider. Previous studies indicate that one of the main negative effects involves the risk of being misperceived by stakeholders, as BA is still considered as a risky strategy for many companies (Eilert & Cherup, 2020). Since BA addresses controversial or polarizing events, with contrasting

public opinions, taking a stand also means taking risks that many companies are not ready to carry (Cammarota & Marino, 2021; Moorman, 2020). By addressing social issues, a company's stance on these topics becomes a part of the brand's identity. Conversely, this can have negative effects, because companies must deal with stakeholder dissatisfaction if they don't agree with the company's opinion or feel offended by it (Barros, 2019).

Some studies found that stakeholders, such as investors, often react negatively to BA (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Villagra et al., 2021). This might be because investors often expect companies to prioritize maximization of shareholder wealth (Jensen, 2001). In the study by Bhagwat et al., (2020), it was argued that investors generally react negatively to BA, especially when it deviates from the values of key stakeholders. However, they also found that investors may see the advantages of activism when it closely aligns with the values of stakeholders. This shows that it is important to align an activist stance with its company's values to ensure stakeholder satisfaction.

2.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, brand activism (BA) is considered as a corporate strategy that goes beyond the traditional CSR in which companies take a public stance on more controversial social or political issues. A particular relevant domain of BA is diversity and inclusion (D&I), as companies recognize an increasing importance of D&I in organizations for the business community (Kipnis et al., 2021; Park et al., 2023; Simchi-Levi, 2020). While BA can bring opportunities for businesses to publicly communicate their commitment to social issues, they are also risk controversy (Jacobsen et al., 2025) when BA efforts are considered more symbolic rather than substantive. This misalignment between words and actions emphasizes the importance of brand-issue fit and that companies should be authentically perceived. By examining how companies in the Netherlands approach BA by taking a public stance on diversity and inclusion (D&I), it contributes to the broader debate on whether BA can be seen as a completely values-driven approach or also as a strategically driven approach to gain legitimacy and competitive advantage.

3. Study 1: Content analysis

3.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology, results and conclusion section for Study 1. It includes the research design of conducting a content analysis, the development of the corpus and the coding scheme. The content analysis is a qualitative research method that provides a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual or written data to describe specific phenomena (Downe-Wambolt, 1992, p. 314). Unlike Study 2, which employed in-depth interviews, the method of Study 1 enables the analysis of large amounts of raw written data by breaking it down into smaller parts, identifying and grouping categories together and seeks understanding of it (Bengtsson, 2016).

By focusing on companies' external communication, Study 1 aims to capture insights into what these companies communicate when taking a public stance on D&I. This chapter further provides information on how the data was analyzed and details on the intercoder reliability. Finally, the results are presented, followed by a conclusion.

3.2. Method

3.2.1. *Research design*

This study examines how companies in the Netherlands approach taking a public on D&I through brand activism (BA). To examine this, Study 1 employs a qualitative content analysis of 15 Dutch companies that have publicly addressed D&I by exploring their publicly available sources. The aim of Study 1 was to analyze how companies' public stances on D&I evolved in the Netherlands. By conducting a content analysis, the study aimed to identify patterns in the public communication strategies used by companies to demonstrate their stance on D&I through BA.

The researcher used an inductive approach to explore the patterns that emerged from the data. This approach allows for flexibility to explore a broad range of social issues, gather new insights and develop categories that are necessary to consistently analyze the recurring patterns in how companies approach taking a public stance on D&I. The inductive approach was particularly relevant due to the context-dependent nature of the content, the different communication styles and implementation strategies that companies used in their approach to take a public stance.

Initially, the aim was to analyze how Dutch companies engage with BA by taking a stance on a broad range of social, environmental and political issues. For instance, climate change, sustainability, labor rights, human rights, and diversity and inclusion (D&I). However, in the beginning phase of the content analysis, D&I emerged as a timely and consistent theme across companies. Therefore, the study was narrowed down by focussing specifically on D&I as the main interest of the study.

3.2.2. Corpus and data collection

The corpus for this study consists of publicly available sources from 15 Dutch companies across various sectors, including the financial banking, fashion, beauty, household goods, transportation and chocolate industry. The publicly available sources include companies' official websites, public statements, latest annual reports (ranging from 2021-2024), social media posts and marketing campaigns. These sources were selected because it allowed the researcher to analyze explicit and visible expressions of a company's stance. In particular, the primary social media platforms analyzed were Instagram and LinkedIn. Both Instagram and LinkedIn are popular platforms for Dutch companies to actively post content to interact with their audience. Hence, the choice of these platforms for this study to analyze its public stance.

To ensure the selection of appropriate companies, an inclusion and exclusion criteria were established (see Table 1). For instance, companies must be of Dutch origin and must have made a clear public statement about social issues. Based on these criteria, a number of companies were initially found through the Social and Economic Council (SER). This is a Dutch organisational network that helps and stimulate companies to commit to social issues, particularly on D&I. They manage the Diversity Charter, which is a public commitment that companies can sign to show their commitment on D&I in the workplace. A list of all companies that have signed the Diversity Charter can be found on the SER website (SER, n.d.). From this list, the researcher made an inventory of a total of 41 companies across different sectors. Then, the researcher searched for the availability of public materials and assessed its public stance. From these 41 companies, 10 companies were eventually selected for analysis based on their relevance in the Dutch market and the ability to access their public information. Additionally, Google was used as a search engine to further identify relevant

companies by using keywords such as “*bedrijven Nederland diversiteit en inclusie*” and “*merkactivisme in Nederland*”. This allowed the researcher to broaden the search and find additional companies that engage with taking a public stance, but may not have signed the Diversity Charter. This has resulted in a selection of 15 companies in total for data analysis.

Table 1

Inclusion and exclusion criteria for selecting organizations

Criteria	
Inclusion criteria	Headquartered in the Netherlands and from Dutch origin Publicly take a stance in social, environmental or political issues Engagement with socio-political issues (i.e., climate change & sustainability, diversity, equity & inclusion, labor rights & fair wages, refugee & immigration policies, democratic values & human rights) Study population: representatives of selected organization
Exclusion criteria	Not headquartered in the Netherlands or not from Dutch origin Not publicly take a stance in social, environmental or political issues No government and political institutes Stance is not related to socio-political issues

The data collection process involved manually collecting the data from the materials from March till May 2025. This was organized in an Excel spreadsheet to manage the corpus and for systematically coding and analyzing. The characteristics of the final corpus can be found in Table 2 including the frequency of the materials analyzed. All the 15 companies, including Hema, Hunkemöller, Triodos Bank, WE Fashion, KPN, NS, Rituals, Tony Chocoloney, Ace & Tate, MUD Jeans, G-Star, Filling Pieces, KLM, Randstad communicated their stance through public statements, annual reports and on its website pages. Additionally, 7 companies had created explicit marketing campaigns about their stance on social issues and 3 companies had posted issue-related posts on their Instagram and LinkedIn. This will be further presented in the results section.

Table 2

Corpus characteristics

Code name	Description	N
Source type	Annual report	15
	Company website	15
	Public statements	15
	Marketing campaigns	7
	Social media posts	3

3.2.3. Coding scheme & data analysis

The content analysis was conducted manually by coding the public sources using a developed coding scheme. For each company, all publicly available materials were examined to find any relevant information related to social issues. When this information was found, the researcher analyzed specific segments of text to analyze how the company demonstrated their stance on these issues. All the data were then organized systematically in an Excel spreadsheet for analysis.

During the analysis, the websites of companies were first explored to find any initial information regarding their public stance. Then, the annual reports were analyzed to further gain insights into specific initiatives that the company had in place and how they report on their progress that they have made. Eventually, other materials like the public statements, social media content and marketing campaigns were also reviewed to gain an overall perspective of how the company demonstrates their public stance.

The coding scheme for the public materials was then developed based on an inductive approach, whereby the researcher analyzed the data to come up with a set of main categories and subcategories. Through this inductive approach, the coding scheme was refined by identifying recurring patterns within the annual reports, public statements, social media content, company website and marketing campaigns about social issues. This process resulted in the development of main- and subcategories. These subcategories indicated specific elements within each main category, which were then used to interpret the main category. For example, the researcher found various actions and activities that companies do to demonstrate their stance on a social issue. This has led to the emergence of the main category, called “Brand activism initiatives”, with subcategories labeled “internal policies”, “external activism”, “marketing campaigns”, and “partnerships”. See for the full coding scheme in Appendix A.

Once the coding scheme was established, it allowed the researcher to analyze the data systematically by using the main- and subcategories to identify recurring patterns across the corpus.

3.2.4. *Intercoder reliability*

To ensure the reliability of the coding process, a second coder was provided with the codebook and a selection of 11 textual segments from three different companies. This represents 10% of the total dataset. The second coder independently applied the codebook to the same segments as the primary coder. During the coding process, both coders assigned the most appropriate main categories and associated subcodes that best described the content reflected in the text segments. Cohen's kappa was calculated to assess the level of agreement between the coders. The overall score was 0.74, indicating a substantial level of agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). While the second coder occasionally assigned additional codes that was not initially applied by the primary coder, these small differences were discussed and solved by both agreeing to the differences.

3.3. Results

This section presents the results of the content analysis that reveals five main themes of BA. These themes emerged through an inductive approach during the coding process. The themes show the types of issues companies address, their motivations, the actions they take to express their public stance, and the ways they communicate and implement their actions, as well as their level of integration with BA. Table 3 presents an overview of the five themes, the subcategories, and a description of the explanation of the themes. In the following subsections, the results of each theme and its subcategories are discussed.

Table 3

Overview of the main themes of brand activism identified in the analysis

Themes	Subcategories	Description
Type of social issues (D&I-related)	LGBTQ rights, disability rights, cultural diversity, neurodiversity, gender equality, social justice, racism	<i>The social issue addressed in the company's activism stance</i>
Motives for BA	Ethical responsibility and intrinsic values, business benefits, reputation, compliance with regulations and legislation	<i>The reasons for engaging in brand activism</i>

BA actions	Training programs, internal policy, employee resource groups, inclusive recruitment programs, marketing campaigns, partnerships, social media posts, D&I certifications, participation in diversity events	<i>The specific actions taken by the company</i>
Communication & implementation approach	Internal approach, external approach, mixed approach	<i>The approach on how companies communicate and implement their initiatives</i>
Integration with BA	Embedded in brand identity, strategic adoption, marketing-driven	<i>The level of the company's integration with brand activism</i>

3.3.1. *Type of social issues (D&I-related)*

The results of the social issues addressed by companies are presented in Table 4. This category shows the various types of social issues that companies have addressed when taking a public stance. There are seven different social issues identified through an inductive approach from the analysis. The publicly available sources were coded and the recurring issues across the dataset were categorized into the specific subcategories. The findings shows that LGBTQ+ rights, cultural diversity and gender equality were the most prominent type of issues, with nine out of 15 companies addressing these topics. Disability rights were also frequently mentioned, with a total of seven companies. On the other hand, topics like neurodiversity, social justice and racism appeared less frequently throughout the analysis.

Table 4

Results Type of D&I-related issues

Category	Code name	N
Type of issues	LGBTQ rights	9
	Cultural diversity	9
	Gender equality	9
	Disability rights	7
	Racism	5
	Social justice	3
	Neurodiversity	2
Total		43

LGBTQ+ rights, cultural diversity, gender equality and disability rights

From the analysis, it was observed that companies most frequently address LGBTQ+ rights, with a total of nine companies. This shows that the topic of LGBTQ+ rights are considered as an important area for BA efforts and are commonly supported by companies in the Netherlands. As can be seen in the following statement, a company publicly take a stance addressing *LGBTQ+ rights*:

“At WE Fashion, inclusivity is at the heart of our values [...] we launched “safe spaces” in all our stores. [...] Since introducing this initiative, our fitting rooms remain open throughout the year, ensuring that everyone can feel comfortable and welcome anytime they visit. We’re all about celebrating love, diversity, and togetherness!”

The second most frequent topic involved cultural diversity. This includes a broad range of multiple differences among people in society like ethnicity, nationality, religion, language, and other cultures. The analysis reveals that nine companies have addressed cultural diversity in their public stances, which indicate cultural diversity as another important topic for companies in the Netherlands to address. This is evident in a quote by Hunkemöller:

“As a global company with colleagues from 93 nationalities, we represent many different cultures and backgrounds and are so exposed to different views and definitions. [...] Our diversity makes us strong, and we actively work to create inclusive and welcoming workplaces where everyone is encouraged to be themselves and respect others for who they are [...], we want to reflect the diversity of our workforce, the consumers we serve and the communities where we live and work.”

Other frequent occurring topics were gender equality and disability rights. The findings shows that there were nine companies that have addressed gender equality in their public stance, and six companies have spoken out on disability rights. This can be seen the following examples:

1. *“The gender representation of the senior management and director levels at Triodos Bank is a priority. [...] As such, gender diversity targets have been agreed for the Supervisory Board, the Executive Board and senior management.”*

2. *“In the Netherlands, there is a large group of people with a distance to the labor market. [...] As a large social employer, NS takes responsibility for creating jobs for people with a disability from the target group register.”*

Racism, social justice, neurodiversity

Racism, social justice, and neurodiversity were the least frequently addressed issues in the analysis. It was observed that five companies have addressed the issue of racism, and three companies have mentioned social justice in their public stance. An example from a company that have expressed their stance against racism:

“At Tony Chocolonely, our main mission is to fight for equality and fairness. [...] This is why we cannot idly stand by and be silent as black people in America and worldwide continue to suffer under the oppressive weight of racism. We must speak out against inequality and violence caused by racism.”

The small number of companies addressing racism and social justice can be considered as more controversial, which can carry more risks when people have different views (Larkcer et al., 2018; Kim & Meganck, 2024). In addition, only two companies spoke out on neurodiversity, which indicate that this topic remains relatively underrepresented to take a stance on among the analyzed companies. This limited attention suggest that the maturity level of the issue might be still in the latent or emerging phase (Zadek, 2004). This might explain why companies' response is either compliance or managerial, meaning that they aware of the issue but do not fully integrate it into their core business strategies management processes and tend to rely on policy-based compliance (Zadek, 2004).

3.3.2. Motives for BA

The findings for the category “motives for BA” are highlighted in Table 5. This category indicates the reasons why companies engage with social issues. It shows that there four different motives, with “ethical responsibility and intrinsic values” as the most frequently observed motive. This was followed by “business benefits” as the second most frequent motive. In addition, the analysis reveals that two companies had both the “ethical responsibility and intrinsic values” and “business benefits” as their motives to engage with BA. On the other hand, no companies were observed that had the

motive to engage with BA as an effort to gain, maintain or repair reputation. Similarly, no cases were found of companies to engage with BA efforts as reason to comply with regulations and legislation.

Table 5

Results Motives for BA

Category	Code name	N
Motives for brand activism	Ethical responsibility and intrinsic values	10
	Business benefits	7
	Reputation management	0
	Compliance with regulations and legislation	0
Total		17

Ethical responsibility and intrinsic values

Within the category of “motives for BA” category, 10 companies have been identified to engage with BA due to their ethical responsibility and intrinsic values as their primary motive. This indicate that most companies are considered as socially responsible companies with ethical practices that are aligned with their intrinsic values. An example from a company that is ethically responsible and engage with BA due to the alignment between their stance and intrinsic values:

“We do this from an intrinsic motivation for a better everyday life in a more beautiful world. [...] Our goal in the coming years is to transform Hema from 'a company that does sustainable things' to 'a sustainable company'. [...] As a company, we MUST take that responsibility and invest in the future of the next generations now. Not later. Now.”

In addition to sustainability, the CEO of Hema is also putting more focus on D&I driven by their intrinsic values: *“D&I is at the heart of the company. 'We don't have a separate department or job titles for it; it is an integral part of the organization.”*

Business benefits

Another motive for companies to engage with BA is driven by business benefits. The findings shows that there are seven companies who decide to take a public stance mainly due to the financial benefits it can gain for its business. For instance, Ace & Tate decided to take a stance on D&I to

become more attractive to millennials and Gen Z consumers. Also, they support D&I to create an inclusive workplace to attract talents from different backgrounds:

“Based on the research conducted by inclusion strategist and advocate Marian Spier in 2021, we formulated our foundation to rethink our DE&I vision, strategy and future actions. [...] Our strategic pillars are getting the basics right, building an inclusive workplace, creating a diverse workforce and being representative & accessible to customers.”

This indicates that companies might be driven to engage with D&I to attract diverse talents to enhance its innovation power, and to meet consumers’ demand. In turn, this can lead to overall financial benefits for the company.

3.3.3. BA actions

Table 6 provides an overview of the BA actions as the main theme. This theme revealed the specific actions companies implement to demonstrate their public stance. Within this theme, two subcategories have emerged: internal and external actions. Regarding the internal actions, the analysis reveals that training programs and workshops for employees are the most common internal actions, with a number of ten companies from the data sample. This was followed by the implementation of employee resource groups and inclusive recruitment programs. On the other hand, internal policies was the least commonly implemented action, with a total of five companies from the data sample.

Additionally, the analysis shows that marketing campaigns were the most popular external action, with a total of 11 companies that have implemented these to demonstrate their stance on a social issue. This was followed by partnerships with external parties, acquisition of D&I certifications, and participating in diversity events. The least popular action was the usage of social media, with only a number of 3 companies that actively post on social media as a way to demonstrate their stance.

Table 6

Results BA actions

Subcategory	Code name	N
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Internal actions	Training programs/ workshops for employees	10
	Employee resource groups	7
	Inclusive recruitment programs	7
	Internal policy	5
Total		29
External actions	Marketing campaigns	11
	Partnerships	10
	D&I certifications	6
	Participation in Diversity events	6
	Social media posts	3
Total		36

Internal activities

The subcategory “internal actions” under the main category “BA actions”, indicate four types of internal actions that companies implement within their organisation to show their active stance on a social issue. For training programs and workshops for employees, it was analyzed that this was the most common action that companies implement. In most cases, these training programs and workshops are designed for employees to create awareness and engagement towards D&I. This is evident in the following quote from a company that have implemented trainings programs for its employees:

“To increase awareness on unconscious biases, G-Star’s employees are requested to participate in an online Unconscious Bias training every year. [...] Following up on this, employees are encouraged to follow a face-to-face training.”

This action shows that this company emphasized a significant focus on ensuring that their employees receive sufficient training and workshops to address unconscious biases and to make sure that they are aware of the importance of creating a diverse and inclusive working environment.

Additionally, seven out of the 15 companies that were analyzed also had employee resource groups (ERG) in place. In many companies, these groups can vary from LGBTQ+ networks, a women’s network, a network for people of color and a network for younger employees. These networks are an initiative by companies with the aim to bring employees together and encourage them to discuss and engage with related social issues within the specific network group. An example of the implementation of ERG by a company:

“KLM’s Over the Rainbow is the organisational network that represents, supports, and connects the LGBTIQ+ community (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer). Over the Rainbow wants every LGBTIQ+ colleague to be able to be themselves at work and feel recognised, valued, supported and safe.”

This was followed by inclusive recruitment programs that also seemed to be important for companies, resulting in a number of seven companies that implemented this initiative. However, another action that was the least frequently coded included the internal policies. From the analysis, it reveals that only five out of 15 companies had a formal policy written and published on its website.

External activities

The second subcategory, “external actions”, shows five types of actions that companies execute to demonstrate their stance to the public. The analysis reveals that marketing campaigns are the most popular action. In these campaigns, the companies aimed to show their commitment to a social issue through creative storytelling and marketing efforts. For instance, they might create a campaign for their new products with a diverse range of people acting as their models, or launch a new product collection in collaboration with influencers or celebrities that represent a minority group. Another example could be to use bold storytelling throughout its communication. By implementing such campaigns, companies actively advocate for a particular issue and emphasize their commitment through their marketing efforts. This can be seen in the following segment from a marketing campaign by Ace & Tate:

“A Frame for Every Face is a multimedia campaign that represents Ace & Tate’s longstanding commitment to inclusivity, sustainability, and affordability. [...] The message speaks for itself – for every face out there, there is a perfect pair of frames at Ace & Tate.”

Other frequently implemented action involves partnerships with external organizations or stakeholders, signing D&I charters or obtaining formal certifications to become a certified impact company, and participating in events relating to D&I. Firstly, it was found that 10 companies were involved in collaborations with organisations or stakeholders that have similar goals and thrive to create a positive impact. These partnerships included working together with local charities, NGOs and

non-profit organizations like the Refugee Talent Hub or the Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO). In addition, these partnerships could also involve collaborations with like-minded stakeholders such as investors, artists or celebrities. For example, the analysis shows that Filling Pieces collaborated with a queer clothing brand and with a LGBTQ+ activist and artist to create awareness for the LGBTQ+ community and support inclusivity in the streetwear industry. As said by the founder of the brand regarding the collaborations:

“With the brand, we are a reflection of how we want to see society. We bridge different people, cultures and disciplines. In this, it doesn’t matter how anyone identifies. We are proud to work with initiatives and communities that proudly carry their beliefs to the outside world.”

With both collaborations, the company created a bold and distinct clothing collection that clearly demonstrate their support on the LGBTQ+ community and their stance on fostering inclusivity. Moreover, Hunkemöller collaborated with a South-Sudanese/Australian top model to raise awareness and support the Black community:

“Fierce, sexy and determined: Duckie Thot is the embodiment of a modern woman [...] bringing her message of inclusivity to the world. [...] As a Black woman working in the fashion industry, Duckie offered a unique and valuable perspective on how we at Hunkemöller could challenge ourselves and reach even further with our inclusivity strategy.”

Secondly, signing D&I charters and obtaining formal certifications to become a certified impact company was also identified as a frequently recurring action. Among the data sample of 15 companies that were analyzed, it was found that six companies are a member of the Dutch Charter Diversity and are a certified B. Corporation. This is evident in the following quote by a company that have signed the Diversity Charter:

“In 2023, we’ve signed the Dutch Social Economic Council’s Diversity Charter, confirming our belief that diversity and inclusion are essential [...], we’re making D&I a core part of our operations and culture.”

Thirdly, participating in various diversity-related events was another action that frequently occurred during the analysis. The analysis highlights that six out of 15 companies occasionally participate in

diversity-related events such as attending the yearly Pride Canal Parade in Amsterdam, raising the rainbow flag during Pride Month or advocating for not-yet official holidays like Keti Koti by taking a day off to commemorate the abolition of slavery and celebrate freedom. Below are two examples of these events:

1. *“In 2022 and 2023 we joined the Pride Canal Parade Amsterdam with our boat ‘The Ritual of Love’ to celebrate the LGBTQIA+ community. [...] Employees from all over the world came to Amsterdam to take part in this celebration.”*
2. *“On July 1 we commemorate the abolition of slavery in 1863 in Suriname and the former Netherlands Antilles. [...] The consequences of the colonial past are still palpable in the present. [...] By taking action together, we can change this.”*

Lastly, the findings show that posting content about social issues on social media platforms was the least frequent form of an external action to demonstrate a public stance. Only a number of three out of 15 companies have engaged with social issues by posting content on its social media platforms. These posts often involve showing their commitment and support for D&I-related topics such as LGBTQ+ rights and cultural diversity. See Appendix B for a company that engage with social issues on social media (Instagram).

3.3.4. Communication & implementation approach

This category consists of the different approaches that companies use to communicate and implement their public stance. Table 7 presents an overview of three approaches identified from the analysis. It became clear that “mixed approach” was the most employed approached by companies, with 12 companies in total. This indicate that these companies have combined both internal and external approaches to communicate and implement their BA initiatives. However, two companies have primarily focused to communicate and implement their BA efforts internally, while one company only take an external approach to demonstrate their stance.

Table 7

Results Communication & implementation approach

Theme	Subcategory	N
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Communication & implementation approach	Mixed approach	12
	Internal approach	2
	External approach	1
Total		15

Internal approach

In the category “communication & implementation approach”, it was found that two companies use an internal approach to demonstrate their stance on social issues. In this approach, companies have mainly focused on internal communication like policies and strategies to ensure an inclusive working environment for its employees. This was evident in the following segment from a public statement by KPN:

“All this does not happen by itself. It’s hard work at all levels of the organization. [...] We also have several network organizations within KPN], in which we encourage everyone to contribute to more diversity and inclusion themselves.”

External approach

Another approach involves externally communicating and implementing BA initiatives, which focuses on explicitly taking a stance through advertising campaigns or branding. It was evident that only one company mainly focused on an external approach by creating an advertising campaign featuring a diversity of models:

“The video features the group talking about their view of the world [...] from “friendship,” “inclusion” and “solidarity” to “individuality” and “owning what you’re about.”

Mixed approach

The mixed approach involves companies using both internal implementation strategies and external communication. With this approach, they prioritize both ways to publicly demonstrate their stance. The analysis shows that a total of 12 companies uses this approach, which indicate that most companies find it important to address social issues by internal actions and external communication.

3.3.5. Level of BA integration

In Table 8, the findings of the category “level of BA integration” are presented. This category outlines four different levels of how companies incorporate activism to take a public stance. The

analysis reveals that the subcategory “embedded in core identity” was the most frequent level of integration, with a total of 12 companies taking this approach. While other companies might engage in BA as a strategic adoption, for marketing-driven purposes or to comply with regulations and legislations. The analysis found that eight companies has strategically integrated activism efforts to demonstrate their stance on social issues. However, no cases were found of companies that engage in BA only for marketing-driven purposes.

Table 8

Results Level of BA integration

Category	Code name	N
Level of BA integration	Embedded in brand identity	12
	Strategic adoption	8
	Marketing-driven	0
Total		20

Embedded in core identity

The integration of BA efforts as embedded in the brand identify was observed across 12 companies. This indicate these companies engage in BA efforts, because their stance on a particular issue is well-aligned to their brand identity reflecting its mission, vision and purpose. This is evident in the following segment:

“At Hunkemöller,, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) are very important to our brand. [...] We promote diversity and equality through products and communication, and advance inclusion in our communities. [...] Creating a diverse and inclusive workplace that represents the communities in which we operate and where our talented employees can thrive is vital to that mission.”

With this statement, the company clearly emphasizes why taking a stance on D&I is crucial for them, because it was already a part of their mission to be a socially responsible and an inclusive brand.

Strategic adoption

Another level of integration involves the strategic adoption of BA efforts. The analysis reveals that eight companies strategically integrate BA efforts. This often include to strategically think about how to publicly take a stance on a social issue as part of their overall business strategy. In this approach, companies carefully consider both the communication and implementation of their stance to ensure it is aligned with its strategic objectives. Interestingly, the analysis reveals that some of the companies both strategically integrate its BA efforts while these stances are at the same time also embedded in their brand identity:

“D&I has always been a core part of Hema’s brand identity. [...] The refreshed identity emphasizes accessibility, with a color palette [...] aiming to be diverse and inclusive, reflecting Hema’s commitment to being a brand for everyone.”

This would indicate that companies still carefully consider whether taking a public stance on a social issue is appropriate for them, particularly given the current polarized societal environment.

3.4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the results shows that most companies in the Netherlands take a public stance on D&I-related issues, particularly LGBTQ+ right, cultural diversity, disability rights and gender equality. For these companies, being ethical responsible and having intrinsic values that aligns with their purpose to drive positive social impact were seen as the most important motive for taking a public stance. To implement their public stance, companies often use internal actions and external actions. Also, most companies commonly communicate and implement their public stance through a mix of internal and external approach to demonstrate their stance. Finally, most companies take a public stance on D&I as embedded in their brand identity, showing that their efforts are an integrated part on who they are and what they stand for. However, the findings show that taking a public stance through BA in the Netherlands can often be perceived as a form for self-serving purposes (Kim, 2014; Yoon et al., 2006). This is because companies often deliberately take a public stance (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020) that reflect how they want to be seen by the public, which can lead to potential backlash. To limit potential backlash, companies aim to be perceived as authentic and ethical

responsible by aligning their public stance with both internal and external actions, and by using a mixed approach to communicate and implement their public stance. These insights and its implications are further discussed in the main findings.

4. Study 2: interviews

4.1. Introduction

Chapter 4 outlines the methodology, results, and conclusion section for Study 2. Whereas Study 1 focus on a content-analysis, Study 2 complements its findings by providing deeper in how and why companies take a public stance through in-depth interviews. This chapter provide the methodology, which includes a description of the research design, participants, procedure, interview guide, and the data analysis. The results of the study are then presented, followed by a conclusion summarizing the findings.

4.2. Method

4.2.1. *Research design*

Study 2 employed a qualitative research design with interviews as the data collection method. While the content analysis provides valuable insights, it doesn't offer a comprehensive and deeper understanding of the factors that influence companies to take a stance. It also cannot clarify how companies decide which issues to support and which to avoid, how they implement the strategies to communicate their stance, and what the perceived risks and challenges are when taking a stance. Therefore, a qualitative research design for Study 2 was chosen to further gain deeper understanding of how companies in the Netherlands approach taking a public stance through BA.

The qualitative interviews are a suitable method as it allows for an open, flexible, and interactive approach that is intended to gather participants' own perspectives, experiences, understandings, and interpretations (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). Additionally, the interaction between the researcher and the participants allowed for rich insights, where participants are encouraged to share broader insights about how companies in the Netherlands approach taking a public stance on social issues. Such insights might have been remained hidden if only content analysis had been conducted.

4.2.2. *Participants*

To address the research question, a purposeful sampling method was employed to recruit the participants for Study 2. This method is widely used in qualitative research to select participants that are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information (Kelly, 2020, p. 317). The original goal was to interview participants from 10 to 15 different companies identified in Study 1. These

participants were meant to be representatives from the companies with a relevant professional function related to D&I. However, due to difficulties in finding representatives from the companies identified in Study 1, the researcher decided to broaden the sampling strategy. This included a sample of two groups: (1) representatives from companies beyond those identified in Study 1, and (2) experts within the D&I field.

The reason for including experts was because they can provide rich insights based on their knowledge and expertise about a specific field of interest (Döringer, 2020). They were able to offer an external perspective to validate the findings of Study 1 and complement the insights from the representatives of the companies. Therefore, the combination of expert-interviews and interviews with company representatives enabled the researcher to gain broader and deeper insights to address the research question.

The final sample included a total of 11 participants, with four company representatives and seven D&I-experts. Among the company representatives interviewed, two were D&I-leads, one was a former D&I-lead and one was a senior communications manager at a midsize company. Additionally, from the experts interviewed, five were identified as D&I-experts who support companies and organizations in addressing D&I-related challenges and having the insights how companies approach it. Furthermore, two participants were D&I-advisors at an institutional organization. Although there was some variety in the characteristics of participants, all participants held senior positions and had rich knowledge and expertise in the field of D&I. This diverse sample enhances the study's ability to gather insightful perspectives, highlighting both patterns and differences in the responses.

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, with LinkedIn as the primary channel for recruitment. The researcher searched for "diversity & inclusion manager", "D&I manager" and "D&I expert" in the LinkedIn search bar. This has resulted in a list of potential participants. From this list, the participants who fulfilled to the requirements were either personally approached by sending them a personal message or were contacted via email. Only a few participants responded to the initial outreach despite sending reminder messages. However, these initial participants recommended others that enabled the researcher to personally approach them via email and LinkedIn, after being recommended. Moreover, one participant invited the researcher to an event

hosted by this participant. This event was attended by potentially relevant participants. During this event, the researcher personally approached potential participants in person to ask for their willingness to participate in the study. This tactic resulted in two additional interviews arranged in the following weeks. Furthermore, one participant reached out after being referred by someone from the researcher' personal network who had seen a recruitment post on the researcher' LinkedIn profile.

4.2.3. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was requested and obtained from the BMS Ethics Committee of the University of Twente to ensure participants' data confidentiality and voluntary participation (See Appendix C). An informed consent form was sent via mail to the participants, outlining the purpose of the study, their rights and information how the data will be processed (See Appendix D). All participants provided their consent by either signing the informed consent form or giving verbal consent before taking part in the interviews.

Additionally, the role of the researcher involves being a student who primarily recruited participants through LinkedIn. Since participants are active in the field and have extensive knowledge on the topic, they often have a personal passion and motivation to discuss D&I. This may lead them to provide responses that were influenced by their own biases. To limit these risks, the researcher emphasized neutrality and stayed cautious on potential biases during data collection.

4.2.4. Procedure and interview guide

The data was collected using interviews with 17 main questions, and additional probing questions for both groups of participants (i.e., company representatives and D&I-experts). Prior to each interview, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form or give verbal consent, in which they agreed with the study's objectives, their rights, and the way their data will be further protected. The interviews were conducted one-on-one, most of them via Microsoft Teams or Google Meet. Only one interview was conducted in-person. The interviews were held in English or Dutch, depending on participants' preference. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed using the software Amberscript. The data was safety stored in a personal network folder at

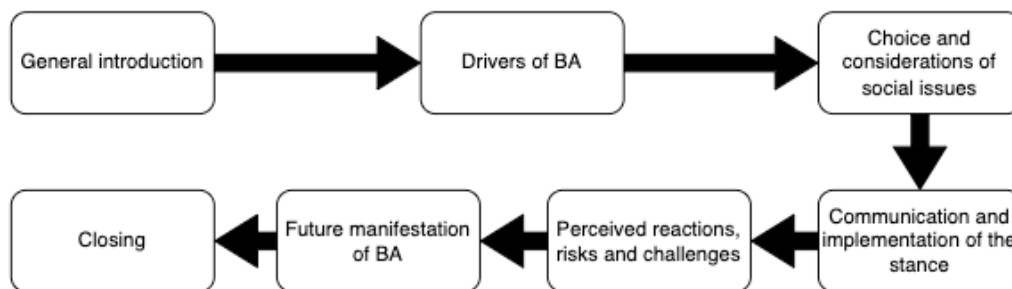
the University of Twente. On average, an interview was about 48 minutes and 22 seconds. The total duration of all 11 interviews was 8 hours, 52 minutes and 5 seconds.

4.2.4.1. Interview guide

The aim of Study 2 was to further gain insight in participants' perspectives on how companies in the Netherlands approach taking a public stance through BA. The interviews were organized in a structured way to collect the data systematically, as illustrated in Figure 1. The interview process was guided by an interview guide (see Appendix E), which consisted of several sections addressing key topics relevant to answer the research question. Important to mention is that the interview questions were slightly adapted depending on whether the participant was a representative of the company or an expert. This was done to make sure that the questions were appropriate for the type of participants.

Figure 1.

Components of the interview protocol



(1) The representatives of the company

In the part 1 of the interview, participants were asked a few introductory questions about their professional background, responsibilities at their company, and personal background. Questions such as, “*Could you give me a brief description of your role in the company and your main responsibilities*” and “*Can you tell me something about the company’s core values, mission and vision?*”, were used. This helped to build rapport and get to know the participants better.

The core section of the interviews starts with part 2. To gain a general understanding how the company engage with BA, participants were asked questions like, “*Can you tell me about a situation where [company name] took a public stance on D&I?*” and “*Could you describe how that decision*

was made?". This was followed by the questions, *"What factors played a role in that decision?"* and *"What were the main considerations to engage with this specific issue?"*. These questions were relevant because they allowed the participants to share relevant examples that shows how they take a stance, while also providing insights into the factors and reasons that drives them to make such decisions.

This was followed by part 3, which was focused on the company's choice of social issues to take a stance on. Questions were asked such as, *"How does the company decide which social issues are appropriate to take a public stance on?"* and *"What makes a topic like D&I relevant for the company to communicate about?"*. These questions allowed the participants to elaborate on their decision-making process regarding the communication of their stance on a social issue and the relevance is of those issues. To discover which social issues the company would avoid to publicly take a stance on, participants were asked the follow-up question: *"Are there also any topics that you deliberately chose not to take a public stance on? If so, why?"*. By asking this follow-up question, this was possible to understand if there were any specific social issues that the company would avoid and their reason behind this decision.

Following this, part 4 focused on the perceived reactions, risks, and challenges in taking a public stance through BA. In this part, participants were asked questions like, *"How do people internally react when the company takes a stance on D&I?"*. This was followed-up by the question: *"And how do people externally react to this?"*. Additionally, questions such as, *"What are the risks or challenges you or the company have faced while implementing or communicating D&I initiatives?"* and *"How does the company usually respond to this when there is criticism?"*. These questions aimed to gain insights how people, internally and externally, react to this. While it also provides insights what the risks and challenges are that companies encounter when publicly taking a stance.

Part 5 focused on the communication and implementation of strategies of the company's public stance. Participants were asked questions like, *"How do you communicate topics such as D&I to the public?"*, *"What were important considerations to consider when designing such messages, like the tone, style, and choice of communication platforms?"* and *"Through which platforms is the message*

usually shared?”. These questions enabled to understand how companies approach their communication and implementation strategies to take a public stance.

The final part of the core section (part 6) focused on the vision of future manifestations of BA. To gain insights about the evolution of BA in the future, participants were asked questions such as, *“How do you see the role of companies engaging with social issues now and in the future?”* and *“Do you think that companies should continue play an active role or be more cautious?”*. This was followed-up by asking questions like, *“Looking at the future of [company name], how do you expect your approach on D&I will evolve?”* and *“Do you think it will become more important and remain relevant or will that start to change?”*. This allowed to gain participants’ insights regarding the future development of companies taking a public stance on social issues.

The last part of the interview (part 7) was closed by thanking the participants for their contribution and for their time. Additionally, participants were asked whether they had anything else to share that wasn’t discussed yet. The last question of *“Is there anything you would like to add that we haven’t covered?”* provided participants with an opportunity to reflect and provide additional insights. This allowed to gather valuable data that may not have been mentioned before.

(2) Experts

In the part 1 of the interview with experts, participants were asked a few introductory questions about their professional background, their field of expertise, and personal background. Questions such as, *“Could you tell me a bit more about your professional background and your field of expertise?”* and *“How did you become interested or involved in the field of D&I?”* were asked to build rapport and get to know the participants better. This was followed by part 2, which is the core section of the interview. In this part, the experts were asked questions like, *“What do you see regarding how companies in the Netherlands publicly take a stance on social issues?”* and *“What are the factors for companies to make the decision to take a stance on social issues”*. Moreover, this was followed-up by asking: *“How do internal or external factors play a role in this decision?”*. This allowed for a deeper understanding of the specific internal and external factors that influences companies to take a stance.

In part 3, the participants were asked about their perspective on companies’ choice of social issues to take a stance on. They were asked questions like, *“How do companies decide which social issues*

are appropriate for a company to publicly take a stance on?” and “Are there any other social issues that you think or expect that companies tend to avoid taking a public stance on?” These questions explored the participants’ perceptions regarding the decision-making processes behind public stances on social issues.

In the fourth part, participants were asked about the reactions, risks, and challenges of companies who publicly take a stance. Questions like, *“Looking at the reactions from other people, how do people internally and externally react when a company takes a stance on D&I?”* and *“What are some of the risks or challenges companies usually face when implementing or communicating D&I initiatives?”*. Follow-up questions like, *“How do companies usually approach this?”* and *“Do you have examples of companies that recently have faced specific challenges while implementing or communicating D&I efforts?”* were asked to gather further insights.

In part 5, participants were asked if they were practically involved in the development of D&I communication strategies. This was asked to ensure they were able to answer the following series of questions such as, *“Could you tell me more about how you approach the communication strategy on D&I?”*, *“What are the most important considerations to consider regarding the tone, style and choice of platforms to share D&I efforts?”* and *“Through which platforms is the message usually shared?”*

In the final part of the core section (part 6), experts were also asked about their vision of BA in the future. Questions like, *“How do you see the role of companies in the Netherlands evolving when it comes to engaging with social issues now and in the future?”* and *“Do you think that companies should continue play an active role or be more cautious?”*. In addition, they were asked, *“Looking at the future of companies taking a stance, do you think it will continue to increase or will that start to change?”* By interviewing experts in this way, it discovered valuable insights from a broad external perspective on how companies approach taking a stance on social issues, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the topic.

The final part of the interview (part 7) ended by thanking the participants for their contribution and time. Participants were also asked if they have anything else to share that wasn’t discussed yet. This provided participants with an opportunity to reflect and provide additional insights, which allowed to gather valuable data that may not have been mentioned before.

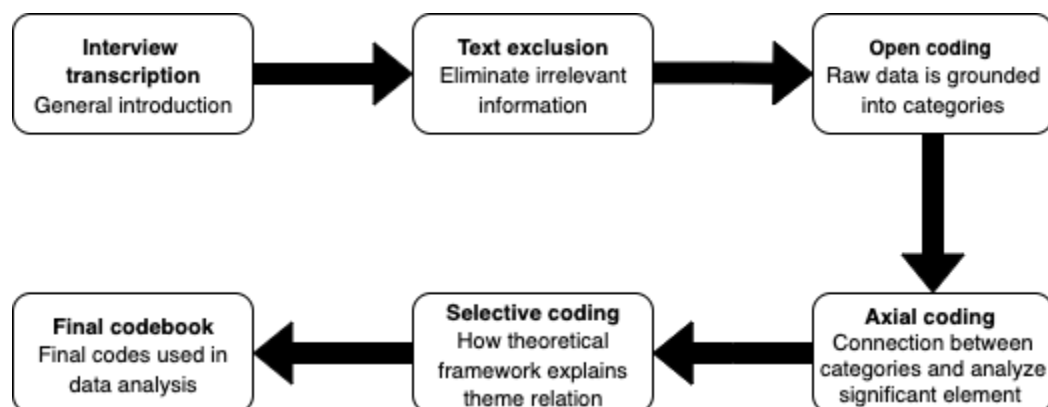
The structure of these interviews was chosen to stimulate participants to provide broad and insightful responses, starting with general questions and moving on to more in-depth and substantive questions. This approach allowed that the interviews are both thorough and considerate of participants' insights, while also providing rich data for analysis.

4.2.5. *Data analysis*

For the data analysis, thematic analysis from Braun et al. (2019) was employed to analyze the interviews. The qualitative data analysis software Amberscript was utilized in transcribing the interviews, and ATLAS.ti was used for coding to identify key themes relevant to the research questions. The process involved familiarizing with the raw data, generating initial codes, and categorizing them into potential themes. These themes were reviewed, refined, and defined multiple times to ensure they represent the dataset accurately. The data analysis consisted of six stages, as illustrated in Figure 2. All interviews were transcribed word-for-word, resulting in 142 pages of transcripts. To ensure confidentiality, all individuals and companies names mentioned in the interviews were anonymized. For the coding process, the researcher followed the coding method of Boeije (2010), which involves three coding phases. These phases were adjusted to the context of this study and will be explained below.

Figure 2

Overview of the data analysis stages



The initial phase was the open coding phase, which involves a careful and detailed analysis of the data. During this phase, the focus is to stick close to the data and attach labels to segments of data to identify what is going on in those segments. The aim is to find and identify distinct ideas, themes or

categories that emerge from the dataset (Boeije, 2010). For that reason, the researcher first read through the interviews carefully, and then every section was assessed. Relevant segments were highlighted, and each was given a code that captured its core meaning. This phase was aimed to break down the data into smaller and significant segments without any predetermined codes.

The next phase, axial coding, builds upon the open coding phase by analyzing the relationships and links between the identified codes (Boeije, 2010). During axial coding, the initial codes were organized into more general categories and subcategories by analyzing the connections between the codes. To clarify how different data fragment interact and influence one another, patterns, connections, and hierarchies were identified. To further understand the structure and relationships, the hierarchies were visualized in coding networks.

The final phase, selective coding, involves refining and integrating the developed categories to create a theoretical narrative. In this phase, all key themes that best represented the research question were found and the data was carefully coded to support or demonstrate these themes. Following this, all coded categories were compared and evaluated to uncover patterns. This process led to a clear and understandable interpretation of the data. Ultimately, these interpretations were used as definitive answers to address the research questions of this study.

4.3. Results

This chapter presents a detailed thematic analysis of the findings, offering insights into the research questions. Five main themes have emerged that explain how companies in the Netherlands approach taking a public stance on diversity and inclusion (D&I) through BA: (1) strategic implementation and alignment, (2) communication and positioning, (3) drivers for D&I, (4) perceived reactions, barriers and risks, and (5) vision on the future. A set-up of the result section of the research is provided in Appendix F. Besides, code networks were created to provide an overview of the related sub-codes and sub-sub codes, as illustrated in Appendix G.

4.3.1. Strategic implementation and alignment

The first key theme that has emerged from the data is the strategic implementation and alignment on D&I. The results indicate that companies often strategically implement its stance to ensure that it

aligns with the overall company identity. Specifically, to answer how companies in the Netherlands approach taking a public stance through BA, it is necessary to understand how they implement its stance through the internal board of management and a data-driven approach. Moreover, it is also needed to understand the importance of strategic alignment on D&I, which involves having an inclusive company culture and showing commitment to D&I.

To implement a public stance on D&I as a company, companies often need to involve the board of management to discuss about the public stance they want to take. A common aspect of this was the importance of having the support from an inclusive leadership, mentioned by participants across the interviews. When there is strong support from an inclusive leadership, it often indicates that D&I is being prioritized within a company and often communicated externally by taking a public stance. Participant 1 illustrated this with a recent example where their CEO was named in MT/Sprout's "Inclusive30", which is a national list recognizing the most inclusive leaders in the Netherlands:

"Our CEO was named in that list for being an inclusive leader, a role model, and taking a stance. Specifically, he was named in there because we are proactively working on gender diversity, on the gender pay gap. And he's recognized for that. To the point about taking a stance in line with the announcement of this." – Participant 1, D&I manager

Being mentioned in this list shows that D&I is taken seriously within this company because their CEO was recognized for being an inclusive leader. This made it possible for them to successfully take a public stance, illustrating the importance of having inclusive leadership to positively support the public stance and its D&I commitment. Also, there should always be an active involvement and engagement from the leadership to be able to make D&I a reality. When the leadership is not involved or hesitates on the topic, it can negatively affect the progress on D&I efforts, and it fail to make it work. Participant 5 highlighted on the importance of the leadership support:

"And maybe I think leadership is also very important. It can be that the communication team thinks, okay, we should do something with brand activism, but if they're not supported by the leadership team, especially with D&I, because of the risks that it can bring, it will not be done. Leadership, I think, is very important here." – Participant 5, D&I-expert

This indicates that the role of leadership is crucial in the implementation of D&I efforts. However, when there is a lack of leadership support, companies might start to rethink the priorities of D&I and might treat it as a secondary priority. A total of 10 participants expressed their concerns of the reduced priority on D&I due to the lack of leadership support. One participant illustrated this with a clear example within the broader business context:

“And I would say in general in the Netherlands, diversity and inclusion is often not a priority of a company. It's to support other functions, right. It's to support talent retention, it's to support diversity of thought, to produce services or products. But a company doesn't in its first instance usually exist to have diversity and inclusion. Um, so usually it's a secondary commitment or a secondary priority.” – Participant 7, D&I-expert

These insights suggest that support from an inclusive leadership is crucial to successfully take a public stance on D&I-related topics. Since a strong leadership enables companies to implement D&I as a priority in their company, it helps companies to move forward in their D&I efforts. Without a strong leadership support, it is more likely that a company does not prioritize it and remains as a secondary priority.

Secondly, the interviews also show the importance of taking a data-driven approach to implement D&I practices. To effectively implement actions on D&I, companies should actively gather feedback and opinions from its employees to better understand what is important to them and to better prioritize their wellbeing. Participants mentioned that this is usually done through employee's surveys or setting up internal groups such as the employee research groups (ERG) to gather employees' insights on D&I. This reflects that employees are a crucial part of a company, and companies should understand what they need and prioritize their wellbeing by gathering data to successfully implement D&I actions. This was illustrated by Participant 8:

“And that's why we have set up an employee resource group (ERG) for example. This is a group of people that monthly come together to organize things and do things, and then share data. And you really need that to grow (D&I) from the inside out.” – Participant 8, D&I-expert

This quote highlights that internal groups such as ERG are used to implement D&I efforts within companies by gathering data from within and foster further growth. Beyond a data-driven approach, there is also the need for a strategic alignment across the departments within a company. This means that companies must coordinate their D&I efforts across different departments to make sure that all employees have the same vision to demonstrate their consistency. When there is no such alignment, companies will risk being perceived as inconsistent. In this case, it would be difficult for a company to take a public stance on D&I if only certain departments actively support it, while others are not that enthusiastic about it. Seven out of 11 participants mentioned the importance of an internal strategic alignment to implement D&I strategies, with Participant 6 illustrating this:

“In the different offices, we work with different people depending on what the objectives are. Often, it's somebody else in HR who, as part of their role, also rules out EDI-related initiatives. And I'm kind of in the center of internally consulting with different people and setting some of the objectives. Then, we work with different colleagues to implement them.” – Participant 6, D&I manager

This indicates that D&I strategies need to be aligned across the departments and cannot be restricted to only one department. It needs to ensure that all teams in the company are aligned, and that D&I becomes embedded throughout the entire company. This became evident from the interviews where participants highlighted that D&I needs to be incorporated and weaved into the overall business strategy. Participant 6 illustrated the strategic integration of D&I to implement its strategies:

“And then we also do things like the trainings and workshops. We have maybe different sessions for different things. So, there's a whole range of things that we do. And then I always try and incorporate EDI into other things. So rather than just like only having like EDI comms all the time, I try and have an EDI reflection as part of other pieces that comes as well.” – Participant 6, D&I manager

As can be seen from this quote, D&I is not a stand-alone topic, but an integrated part of the overall company culture. This has been supported by Participant 5:

“If you're talking about diversity and inclusion, I think the way forward is to incorporate it in such a way that it's stuck to everything that you do. So everything that you touch is already set up in a way that you cannot go in another direction.” – Participant 5, D&I-expert

Fourth, the interviews show the importance of an inclusive company culture for the implementation of D&I. With regards to this, two aspects have emerged from the data: ‘psychological safety’ and ‘a sense of belonging’. Participants talked about how important it is to provide a safe workplace environment to have an inclusive company culture. Participant 1 mentioned that creating such environment allow employees to feel valued and to be the best versions of themselves at work, where psychological safety is a crucial part in this:

“It's a no brainer that you need to, you know, foster an inclusive culture, provide a safe environment where you value people. You welcome them. You get the best out of them. Like that's a no brainer.” – Participant 1, D&I manager

This suggest that it is almost inevitable to create psychological safety where employees feel safe to speak up, initiate ideas or asking questions without having the fear of embarrassment or negative feedback or criticism. Next to this, participants have also mentioned that simply hiring a diversity of people is not enough. It was explained the level of diversity within a company is almost irrelevant if employees do not feel a sense of belonging. In fact, employees will be more likely to leave the company, which undermines the company’s D&I efforts. Participant 8 clearly highlighted this:

“But it’s also about, what is the ‘sense of belonging’? What is the factor; ‘do people feel appreciated?’ I think that is the essence of inclusion. So, you can still bring in lots of diverse people. But if that sense of belonging isn’t there, then no matter how hard you try, people will still leave.” – Participant 8, D&I-expert

This reflects that D&I is not only about hiring a diverse range of people, but it is also about ensuring that people feel welcomed and valued. To address this, Participant 6 explained how their company organizes workshops designed for its employees to raise more awareness and create more understanding of inclusivity:

“In the beginning of this year, we did inclusive hiring workshops for active hiring managers. That's something that not everybody needs to do that particular workshop. But if we have like

a foundational level of understanding that every coworker has, and then on top of that, we supplement that with specific pieces of understanding and workshops, then that helps you be more inclusive in your particular role.” – Participant 6, EDI lead

This helps individuals in particular roles to become more inclusive at work and ultimately strengthens the practice of inclusivity in the long run. Taken together, the findings indicate the need for psychological safety and a sense of belonging to create an inclusive company culture where D&I is embedded within a company.

Finally, this study found that remaining committed towards D&I is a crucial aspect when implementing D&I. When companies engage with D&I in some way, it is important that they remain committed and keep it high on their agenda. When they only do it temporary without clear consistency, they will fail to implement their D&I efforts authentically and might face the potential risk of backlash. As a participant explained:

“And as a company, I strongly believe that we keep inclusion and diversity, that it's important to keep inclusion and diversity on the agenda. And continue to work on, uh, offering an inclusive culture and attracting. Or providing an environment where a diverse range of talent are contrived.” – Participant 1, D&I manager

It was also mentioned by participants that this commitment is particularly important for value-driven companies. In such cases, companies should remain consistent and committed to their D&I-values even in times of political turbulence. Participant 6 have mentioned this clearly:

“But if you're a values-driven organization, then I think you should stay consistent, at least to your values throughout any kind of, um how do you call? Like turbulence in the wider political atmosphere.” – Participant 6, D&I manager

Participants who highlighted the importance of remaining committed to D&I are confident that value-driven companies with such commitment can continue to implement their D&I actions successfully.

4.3.2. Communication and positioning

The second theme that has emerged from the data involves two aspects: (1) how companies use strategic communication to create awareness and facilitate an open dialogue on D&I, and (2) how

companies position themselves when taking a public stance by choosing which issues to address and making sure their stance is authentically perceived to avoid the risks of performative D&I.

From the findings, it became clear that strategically communication is a crucial part for companies that take a public stance, and there are multiple communication strategies. These strategies help companies to raise awareness about D&I among their stakeholders and customers, as well as showing their support in a visible way. As Participant 6 illustrated with a practical example:

“And then we also on the communications and awareness side, we do, you know like probably what other companies have told you, like webinars and we have like internal communications channels where we post different articles on one thing. Actually, which I think might be quite interesting to you is that we also look at the engagement with different articles within our internal platform.” – Participant 6, D&I manager

Not only is it important to create visibility, awareness and advocacy on D&I through webinars or internal communication platforms, but it is also essential to facilitate an open dialogue where people feel free to talk about D&I-related topics. This aligns with the stakeholder theory by Freeman (1984), which highlights that companies aim to generate benefits for different stakeholders. Among these stakeholders, employees are also an important stakeholder group, and their interests must align with the company for mutual benefit. Companies that make efforts to create an open space to discuss about social issues, aim to normalize such conversations and make their employees feel heard within the organization. In this way, it helps to satisfy the needs of stakeholders when these are considered (Mahajan et al., 2023). This has been further confirmed by Participant 1, who described that the company is encouraged to consider their employees’ needs by providing an open dialogue:

“And secondly dialogue. So again, back to that point where we talk about personal relationship focused. Then we try to foster a culture where we provide the opportunity also to engage in dialogue, to discuss this, that people can also flag it if they feel it, but then we can have a discussion about it.” – Participant 1, D&I manager

This shows the importance of facilitating a dialogue to openly discuss about social issues, which enhances the authenticity of a company’s public stance on D&I. Previous research has highlighted that when companies consistently align their public stance with showing how they act, it is more

likely that they engage in authentic BA (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Thus, by providing an open space for discussing D&I-related issues, companies demonstrate an actual practice to support their public stance. As a result, this reflects a substantive approach rather than a symbolic approach as supported in earlier research (e.g., Proctor et al., 2025; Troy et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2024). However, without such open dialogue, employees may feel unheard or uncomfortable to speak up, which makes it harder for a company to authentically support D&I. Participant 10 noted how the absence of an open dialogue can become a challenge for an organization to fully support D&I:

“And we need to be very flexible nowadays. So, you have more flexibility in the end. But it's not like that so easily, because you also have to facilitate this dialogue or this conversation. For example, at [University X], there is not such a dialogue. So, they don't use the diversity that is there.” – Participant 10, D&I-expert

At the core of strategic communication on D&I lies the need for strategic positioning. This concerns how companies externally present their stance by addressing which types of social issues they choose to address. At the same time, companies should consider whether these stances are perceived as authentic or performative. The results revealed that the most common type of social issues that companies choose to address is gender diversity. Based on Zadek's issue maturity model, gender diversity can be considered to have reached the maturity level of institutionalized. This means that social awareness on gender diversity is widely established, and practices on this issue have become a normal part of the business (Zadek, 2006). As a result, companies are able respond to this issue at the strategic or civil stage, where they see benefits to actively pursue this issue. They consider that the major benefit of taking a stance on an institutionalized social issue is a safe choice, because it limits the risk of alienating key stakeholders (Chandler, 2019). Therefore, companies might integrate the issue of gender diversity into their core business strategies and/or promote other companies to do the same. This has been noted by a D&I-expert that illustrates how companies are encouraged to sign a framework that outlines several principles on gender equality in the workplace:

“And we also in addition to the ten principles, we also encourage companies to commit to the Women's Empowerment Principles. Um, so again that is more focused on the gender equality side of things. Um, but those are seven principles for companies to essentially commit to treat

women equally, to prioritize their health and to promote gender equality in the workplace, the marketplace, and in the community.”

In addition, companies must consider aligning their stance with its core purpose, mission, and values to have an effective positioning on D&I. While a company might feel the need to speak out or are willing to make a public stance, one participant highlight that it should always be in line with its mission:

“It has to fit in with who we are. And sometimes we have had periods where we wanted to do so much, where we had an opinion on everything. Now it’s more like; okay we definitely want to speak out, but we also want to focus more on our mission because that fits better with who we are as a company.” – Participant 11, Senior Communications Manager

When the public stance fits with a company’s overall purpose, mission and values, their decisions about which issues to support or which to avoid are perceived more credible. In this way, it becomes easier to make certain choices and to justify their public stance, as it seems more reasonable for such companies to speak out with a sincere purpose. This resonates with the legitimacy theory, where companies must gain approval of the public to succeed in society and to maintain positive relationships with stakeholders (Deegan, 2002; Schiopoiu et al., 2013; Suchman, 1995). The same participant illustrated this by explaining that making such decisions are easier for them to gain acceptance and trust from their stakeholders compared to companies who does not have this alignment:

“That also makes it easier for us to make certain decisions than other sustainability managers or companies that were not sustainable at first and now want to become more sustainable. That is always a very diplomatic and difficult story. But for us, it is actually very logical. It is never questioned as to why we do this.” - Participant 11, Senior Communications Manager

This illustrates the importance of a strategic positioning on D&I that must fit a company’ values to earn the approval of the public, which can enhance their legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Companies without this alignment are less likely to gain approval from the public to successfully take a public stance. In fact, it can even make the communication on the stance appear as performative, involving

superficial activism, symbolic activism, or inconsistency with D&I actions. This type of activism occurs when the stance about a social issue is not aligned with a company's core purpose or mission and is often referred as "woke-washing" (Vredenburg et al., 2020), or in some cases as pink-or diversity-washing as indicated by Participant 2:

"But Pride Month is in June, and we see that companies can also view it as an easy way to make a certain marketing statement. Which, of course, could be called pink washing or diversity washing. So, just sticking out a cute little rainbow somewhere doesn't suddenly make you a very inclusive organization." – Participant 2, D&I-expert

Raising a rainbow during Pride Month may show that companies want to support and create awareness for the LGBTQ+ community. But their sincerity might be questioned when it is inconsistent or poorly reflected with their overall company's purpose and values. Companies might consider Pride Month as a simple marketing opportunity to gain external attention from the public, which illustrate a form of inauthenticity that can result in consumer skepticism (Schmidt et al., 2021). Such skepticism can have serious consequences for companies because they might receive backlash and boycott (Mirzaei et al., 2022). This issue was reflected by Participant 11, who shared how his company experienced backlash after promoting a product that received negative reactions. As a result, they were accused of pink-washing:

"We made a bit of a mistake with that in the past. We were accused of pink washing because we had, in a way... I wasn't involved myself, but we did it more as a joke. We called our rainbow bar the 'Gay Bar' and sold it in our webshop. And that went down very badly. I think it's fair to say that it went down badly." - Participant 11, Senior Communications Manager

These findings highlight that strategic communication and positioning are important to successfully take a public stance on social issues. Besides, when a stance is well-aligned with a company's core purpose, mission, and values, it becomes easier for companies to justify their stance and gain societal approval as reflected in the legitimacy theory. However, the perception of performative activism may occur when alignment is lacking, which can lead to negative consequences like backlash or boycott. Therefore, the difference between authentic and performative activism is important to understand how companies approach taking a stance on social issues.

4.3.3. *Drivers for D&I*

The reason why companies take a public stance on social issues through BA can be shaped by several internal and external factors. Previous research has indicated how internal factors such as a strong personal morality, political beliefs, and the need for strategic alignment with stakeholders (i.e., employees and customers) can influence companies to publicly engage with social issues (Cook et al., 2023; Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). In addition, research also highlighted that companies are influenced by external factors, including rising societal expectations, competitive and industry pressures, and legal pressures. Participants in this study further confirmed the importance of these factors, but also revealed additional internal and external drivers.

The interviews revealed two main internal factors: ‘business benefits’ and ‘personal values’. These factors show how companies are influenced to take a public stance based on internal characteristics. This reflects a twofold understanding of BA, where both strategic considerations and integrated personal values play significant roles.

Participants described those motivations to engage in BA do not only depend on personal morals or stakeholder expectations, but also to gain business benefits. As Participant 5 stated, companies take a public stance on social issues because they see a financial benefit in return:

“But 99% of the time, a company that wants to make money just wants to make money. And they want to see the financial benefits of hiring someone of color, for example, or with a disability. So I think yes, it's proven that it's a benefit to have more diversity in your team.” – Participant 5, D&I-expert

This illustrates that taking a stance on D&I can be considered as a strategic business advantage that brings financial opportunities for companies. As companies need to make money to thrive and being able to survive, they must think of possible ways to strengthen their brand and increase their revenue. The results revealed two key benefits that companies can gain by taking a stance on D&I through BA: ‘innovation power’ and ‘talent attraction’.

Participants suggested that companies with diverse teams and inclusive practices are more innovative because a diverse group of employees can share different knowledge, experiences, and

points of view. This enables new solutions and stimulate innovation, which may not have occurred in a more homogenous group (Wang et al., 2024). This has been confirmed by Participant 3:

“The other one was that it gives the opportunity for innovation. Data shows and there's a lot of research behind it. If you have a diverse workforce in an inclusive environment, you have big chances of coming up with more innovative or creative ideas than, compared to a group that is a bit more homogeneous.” – Participant 3, former D&I manager

When employees in a diverse workplace feel more included, they are more likely to bring the best versions of themselves to work and are encouraged to perform well. At the same time, previous studies highlight that another key business benefit of having a diverse workplace is the ability to attract a wider pool of talents (Weaver et al., 2025). This was evident in one of the interviews, where a participant described their capability to attract people as the diversity of their company has increased significantly:

“On the capability to attract people, the diversity of our company has increased significantly over the last few years. You know, we definitely see the benefits of being able to fish in a broader pool of talent and in a market where there's a war for talent.” – Participant 1, D&I lead

Companies that prioritize D&I become an attractive employer that can attract a wide group of diverse talents. Especially, younger generations are more attracted to work for companies that are committed to D&I due to their growing expectations for companies to play a societal role (Edelman, 2018). As younger generation will become the future workforce, it can result in significant benefits for company as it can increase employees' satisfaction, which leads to reduced employee churn:

“There's also a talent factor. When you look at what people are looking for in companies, there's lots of research out there that says that talent will either not come to your organization or will leave if they don't think that you're committed. And that is showing up, particularly in younger generations.” – Participant 6, D&I manager

By engaging with D&I, companies can hire a diverse group of talents with different experiences, perspective, and knowledge, which eventually leads to increased innovation power. This suggests that companies might have a strategic motivation to take a public stance on D&I to gain business benefits.

As a strong personal morality or political beliefs can influence companies to publicly engage with social issues (Cook et al., 2023; Hambrick & Wowak, 2021), participants further emphasized that personal values are an internal factor that play a role in a company's motivation to take a public stance on D&I. Particularly, when a company has established its values in social responsibility, they are better able to connect their commitment on D&I to these core values. In this case, D&I becomes an integrated part of the business rather than a stand-alone topic. According to the literature on BA, this helps to enhance the authenticity of their stance (Vredenburg et al., 2020) rather than perceived as performative. This way, companies are better able to embed D&I throughout their business practices where D&I becomes an intrinsic motivation to take a stance on D&I. This was illustrated by Participant 6, who described that their company is able to embed D&I within their business due to their core values:

“The other thing worth mentioning, I think, is with the values. So we have three core values, and one of the values is equity. So that also helps because it's like a fundamental part of the business. And then all the work that I do on EDI kind of helps us to live up to that particular value, if that makes sense.” – Participant 6, D&I manager

This quote shows that companies with strong values can naturally integrate D&I into their business practices. When there is such alignment, companies tend to remain committed on D&I, even in times of external pressures that makes D&I more scrutinized. For instance, due to the political developments in the United States, some companies feel pressured to scale back their D&I initiatives (The Associated Press, 2025). However, one participant highlights that companies with D&I deeply integrated in their DNA are more likely to remain committed despite this challenge:

“So even when there are geopolitical developments now with the US very heavily, uh, signaling, you know, a backlash against diversity and inclusion, the companies who have it as part of their DNA and of their business case, they are either doubling down and saying, this is this is just who we are. There's no way we can deviate.” – Participant 7, D&I-expert

This quote illustrates that such companies resist against D&I backlash, demonstrating a strong resilience to a resistance on D&I. It also shows that companies stay persistent in their stance instead

of discontinuing on their D&I efforts. Importantly, some companies are even more willing to take a stance to demonstrate their values and commitment towards D&I:

“Although I do see that companies that are not affiliated with America are not really concerned with this at all and believe that we should continue doing what we are doing.” –

Participant 8, D&I-expert

These findings demonstrate how a strong commitment towards D&I is maintained when companies integrate it into their personal values. Besides, companies are more likely to show resilience against negative backlash and to continue with D&I initiatives. This highlights the importance of personal values as an internal driver to take a public stance on social issues.

Beyond internal factors, companies can also be influenced by external factors. Participants highlighted three external factors in particular: ‘political pressures’, ‘societal trends’, and ‘legal pressure to comply with EU regulations and legislations.’ Among these factors, political pressures emerged as a frequently mentioned factor that affect companies’ decision to take a public stance. The participants noted how the recent political developments in the United States have had a significant impact on Dutch companies that collaborate closely together with the U.S. government. Namely, an executive order by President Donald Trump to restrict D&I programs has pressured several large Dutch companies to adjust or scale back their D&I efforts. As described by Participant 1:

“So, the impact of the Trump executive orders has a real knock on impact on companies with a link or a business proposition in the US, irrespective of where they're headquartered.”-

Participant 1, D&I manager

This response is mainly driven by the fact that these companies actively work for the U.S. government and often rely on the profits they generate in the U.S (Dekker, 2025). As a result, many large Dutch companies have taken steps to adjust their D&I programs accordingly to Trump’ executive order to protect its relationship and maintain legitimacy with the American government. However, these companies that adjust or scale back their initiatives may not be against the principle of D&I. In fact, a news article from De Volkskrant, a Dutch newspaper, highlights that some companies even emphasized that D&I remains an important aspect for companies and will still prioritize an inclusive environment (Dekker, 2025). These companies rather respond strategically to the current

political landscape instead. If companies fail to adjust accordingly, it could bring potential threats to their access to resources or negatively impact their reputation. In this case, companies have been confronted with letters from the American government that notified them to withdraw their D&I initiatives if they wished to continue operating in the U.S. market. As explained by Participant 7:

“So I don't know if you heard that a lot of Dutch companies, they received a letter from the American embassy, basically saying, you know, if you operate with the US, you need to scale down your diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.” – Participant 7, D&I manager

Although some companies are not against D&I and even want to prioritize it more, these findings suggest that external political pressures can sometimes outweigh internal companies' values.

Especially, political pressures from the U.S. have had a significant impact on Dutch companies with business ties to the U.S. As these companies may be afraid of reputational damage or economical loss, it pressured them to comply with Trump's executive orders. Consequently, this situation indicates an increasing tension between political pressures and internal values in the broader sense of taking a public stance on social issues through BA.

Alongside political pressures, societal trends have emerged as another significant external driver for companies to take a public stance on social issues. For example, societal trends like Pride Month or Black Lives Matter (BLM) have been used by companies for real-time marketing to connect with the public and they might consider these moments as opportunities to speak out on these trends to increase brand awareness. This aligns previous research showing that companies engaging in BA primarily advocate on divisive social issues such as BLM (Lou et al., 2024) and publicly speak out to demonstrate support for or against a social issue (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Participant 11 reflected that BLM as a societal movement have significantly impacted them to take a public stance on this topic:

“For us, I think BLM has been a real game changer. We were very much in that corner, but I think it also accelerated things, just like it did for many companies. Suddenly the issue became so visible that people thought; oh yes, this is really not right at all. So yes, that set a lot of things in motion for us at the time.” – Participant 11, Senior Communications Manager

This example indicate how societal trends can influence companies to intensify their commitment to take a public stance on the social issue. While societal trends can be used as opportunities to create

more visibility and enhance brand awareness, research also pointed out that it might be rather perceived as a marketing tactic for higher profit (Edelman, 2019). This implies that companies should be intentional when taking a public stance to avoid performative activism.

A third factor that emerged as an external driver for companies to take a public stance is legal compliance with EU regulations and legislations. Participants described that there are legal frameworks in Europe, which requires companies to be more inclusive and transparent on their social impact. For instance, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) is an EU legal framework that requires companies to report their transparency and provide specific information about their D&I initiatives. Due to this legal framework, companies in the Netherlands might feel the pressure and the necessity to comply with these standards. Such legislation and regulations can be considered as a positive thing that drive companies to take a public stance, as explained by Participant 7:

“And then the other one is legislation and regulation. And I think that's a great thing, because in the EU, there's an increasing focus on companies being able to show what they do on EDI and through things like the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive, so the CSRD. With that regulation, you're also seeing companies having to be a bit more specific about the actions.” – Participant 6, D&I manager

As a result, this insight illustrates that the European regulations and legislations is not only a requirement, but also acts as a driver that pushes companies to actively adopt D&I initiatives and be more specific about their actions. By doing this, it requires companies to comply with the law, leading them to take more accountability in their actions.

Lastly, the results revealed that indirect drivers are an important factor that play a role when companies to take a public stance. According to the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (Dutch: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau or SCP) there is a growing concern among Dutch citizens regarding polarization and tensions in society (Soest, 2024). Given this increased concern, it was found that companies tend to take a more subtle and cautious approach when expressing their public stance on social issues. This indicates that while companies are motivated to engage with D&I, they often do this without explicitly mentioning it. Instead, they rather choose to demonstrate their commitment in

more indirect ways. One reason for this may be the fear of backlash or criticism if companies appear too outspoken, or if they stay silent on important issues. By showing a more nuanced approach, it allows companies to show their commitment without risking the potential of negative reactions. As Participant 5 described:

“So, uh, that communication means is also very important, I think right now to still in a more gentle way show that you behind inclusion without putting yourself on the stance and risking your organization.” – Participant 5, D&I-expert

These findings highlight that an important indirect driver for companies to take a stance is the fear of receiving negative backlash. To manage this risk, it is important that companies use a subtle way of communicating their commitment. This allows them to be more cautious in their approach to reduce negative backlash, but still showing their support for D&I.

4.3.4. Perceived reactions, barriers and risks

This section examines how stakeholders and customers respond when companies take a public stance on social issues, as well as the barriers and risks they face. Although, companies might experience barriers and risks when taking a public stance, they generally receive positive responses from the public when their stance is authentic and fits within its mission. This resonates with earlier findings from this study and prior research on BA authenticity, which emphasizes that authenticity is only achieved when companies are true to itself and its consumers (Morhart et al., 2015; Schmidt et al., 2022). When companies are perceived as authentic, they are more likely to expect positive stakeholder responses compared to when they are perceived as inauthentic. Participant 5 highlight that companies with a clear commitment to D&I typically have little resistance and rather receive positive reactions instead:

“Yeah, I think it's SO in their mission that they don't really receive people that are against that a lot. So they receive a lot of positive criticism about the work that they do. And they take a public stance a lot of times and openly also talk about the issues that still goes wrong.” – Participant 5, D&I-expert

This reflects the importance of authenticity in the context of BA as it indicates how credible, true, and genuine a company's public stance is (Hydock et al., 2020; Newman & Smith, 2016; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Companies that integrated D&I in their mission are not afraid to speak out openly, which is appreciated by the public and can lead to positive reactions. However, these positive responses might also be shaped by social desirability pressures. This means that people may feel the need to respond positively to D&I due to social norms and what is expected of them. When someone speak negatively about D&I, they can risk being associated with negative labels such as being called a racists or sexist. Most people want to avoid these labels for the sake of their own personal reputation. As Participant 4 described:

"I don't think you can ask a person and then that person says, I hate D&I. At least in this part of the world, if you say that, it means you are racist, you're sexist, and people don't want those labels. Because no one is going to tell you that, I hate it, or I don't want it. Who is going to say that? No one, right? Technically. But, of course, you can find some very far-right people right now, but I don't think people are going to tell you, at least for their reputation."
 – Participant 4, D&I-expert

Despite the positive reactions, companies might face barriers when taking a public stance on social issues. The key barriers revealed by participants include 'resistance on D&I' and 'financial constraints'. Resistance on D&I may occur when customers and/or stakeholders feel uncomfortable, skeptical, or even annoyed about a company's public stance on D&I due to the controversiality of the topic. There are people who do not resonate with it or simply lack the understanding, which makes it harder for them to support companies with such efforts. This was mentioned by Participant 6:

"You're going to have a number of people who are just like, they just don't get it. Or they say; oh, this isn't relevant to me, which I don't think is true, but sometimes people just don't connect with it for whatever reason." – Participant 6, D&I manager

This finding indicates that D&I efforts are not always positively accepted but may generate negative responses, which is consistent with the dual nature of BA that could result in both positive and negative reactions (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Participant 8 highlighted that resistance often comes from "conservative senior leaders in the supervisory board" and are "mostly white men over

the age of 50” that considers D&I as “nonsense”. This indicates that older individuals in senior positions often view D&I as a threat, which may be caused by their lack of personal experience with diversity and inclusivity that lead to a disconnection with the topic. While participants in the interviews suggest that a strong leadership support is important to be able to prioritize D&I, without such support, companies may face significant challenges to prioritize D&I.

The second barrier that was identified by participants was the fear of consequences when taking a public stance. Even though, some companies are willing to engage with D&I, they are sometimes hesitant to take a stance because they are concerned about the potential risks like backlash. As Participant 7 explained:

“Because now it's kind of for some companies they're like, look, I want to be more inclusive and I want to continue. But I fear that if I do, I'm going to face real consequences.” _

Participant 7, D&I expert

Such fears can be considered as a barrier for companies that can discourage them to take a public stance. In such cases, they want to avoid negative consequences such as criticism, backlash, unintentionally excluding other minority group(s) and the reputational damages it can cause.

A third barrier involves the lack of resources, particularly financial constraints. As D&I efforts requires time and money, it can be seen as an investment for a company. When a company experience budget cuts, they often start to reconsider their commitment and might want to invest less in this. If companies cannot allocate a certain amount of money for these initiatives, it will become a challenge to keep D&I as a priority and to successfully implement its efforts. As described by Participant 3:

“When a company finds itself in some kind of financial constraint, D&I is a topic that starts losing relevance because it's not something that you can afford in a way, in terms of resources and in terms what it will require from the company.” – Participant 3, former D&I manager

When D&I start losing its relevance due to financial constraints, their importance is undermined as companies consider it as something extra rather than a top priority. As a result, Participant 10 described that budget cuts often affect D&I-related activities to save money, especially when companies don't have the activities integrated into their core values:

“Because there's a lot of budget cost cuts. And the budget cuts go especially on those kind of things that are inclusion related. Because they see that as something extra. So they don't see it as a core thing.” – Participant 10, D&I expert

This emphasizes the significant role that financial resources play in supporting D&I initiatives and remaining committed to these principles. Without sufficient financial support, it becomes harder for companies to allocate money for it, which could negatively impact the future of D&I as companies may see it as less relevant. Nevertheless, companies need to make profits to survive. That is why, companies look for ways to save costs during financial crisis and D&I is an area where companies might want to cut back on investments. Especially, companies that do not prioritize D&I as part of their core values are more likely to reduce investment or decide to eliminate D&I programs. This suggests that companies are dependent on financial resources, which is why it is needed to understand the importance of D&I and to what extent it is integrated in their core values. In this way, companies are better able to navigate them even during financial challenges.

Despite these barriers, there are also risks involved when taking a public stance. Earlier research highlighted that companies that take a stance explicitly focus on external communication, positioning themselves in the public eye (Lou et al., 2024). However, by being in the public eye and publicly expressing their stance on controversial issues, companies might risk potential backlash from individuals with different opinions (Lou et al., 2024). This was evident in the interviews where participants noted that there will always be risks involved when engaging in controversial issues, even when companies sometimes do not intend to take a public stance:

“I think there's always a risk when you take a stance. And I think that this company didn't even take a real stance. But you'll see this as like some activist action, so there's always a risk.” – Participant 9, D&I expert

As BA involves the controversiality of social issues, companies must be considerate when taking a public stance. If a stance is perceived as inappropriate or controversial, a company can receive backlash that negatively impact the company. Participant 11 reflected on his own experience with such backlash:

“A few years ago, [a public figure] was always someone who was very close to our brand. When he came under fire for his BLM speech, we still did an event with him. And then we were overwhelmed with a flood of negative reactions: “How can you work with a man like that?” and, “I’ll never buy your products again.” – Participant 11, Senior Communications Manager

This example illustrates how companies might face backlash when collaborating with a controversial public figure. In addition, potential risks may arise when a company’s stance does not align with its core values. This highlights the importance of value alignment to avoid potential risks that might harm the company’s reputation. As noted by Participant 6:

“I think the risks that I see for some companies is they will have a lot of one-off maybe initiatives or projects, but it's not integrated in their business strategies, or they're not assigning anyone to be accountable for the targets that they're setting.” – Participant 6, D&I manager

These results illustrate that companies need to carefully consider their public stance and that it is aligned with their values. By ensuring this, companies can reduce the potential risks of backlash and reputational damage.

4.3.5. Vision on the future of D&I

The final theme presents the vision of D&I developments based on participants’ perspectives on how it may evolve in the future. Despite the identified barriers and risks, participants have expressed optimism that D&I will remain relevant as it gradually becomes accepted and normalized within society. When D&I is accepted and normalized, people are more likely to perceive companies engaging with BA in a more positive light and believe that it can become a powerful tool when done positively. This is in line with the legitimacy theory, which emphasizes that companies taking a stance on D&I must gain approval to succeed in society (Deegan, 2002; Schiopoiu et al., 2013; Suchman, 1995). As D&I becomes more accepted, it suggests that companies are increasingly gaining approval for their actions. Therefore, it is important to consider *how* they formulate their public stance, rather than just taking a public stance for the sake of expressing their viewpoints. As Participant 5 explained:

“I think if you do it in a very positive way instead of just taking a stance to make noise. Of course, it's always good to be sometimes angry about something. But I know that positive stance taking also gives a lot of positivity back. So what you give is also what you receive, and I think brand activism that's used in that way is very powerful.” – Participant 5, D&I expert

Companies can expect to receive positivity back from its customers or stakeholders that appreciate what the company stand for and what it demonstrates to support this stance. Thus, when it is done positively, it makes taking a public stance become beneficial for a company.

Nevertheless, participants indicated that people start to feel overwhelmed or fatigued by the terminology of “diversity and inclusion” due to global tensions. While the principles remain relevant and might even become more important, Participant 7 expect that the term will start to change in the future. Instead of using “diversity & inclusion”, companies may use terms like ‘cultural change’, ‘social safety’, ‘psychological safety’, ‘fairness’ or ‘equality’. Although there is no defined term yet, these terms relate to the broader concept of psychological well-being in organizations. As described by Participant 7:

“Um, I think at least I can say what we're seeing, uh, globally, because of the tension now, globally on diversity, equity and inclusion, I think we're going to maybe see a deviation from the term. So rather than saying, you know, D&I initiatives or D&I commitments, I think we're moving more and more towards, non-discrimination equal like fairness, equality.” – Participant 7, D&I expert

This illustrates that companies might be looking for alternative language to approach the topic of D&I more broadly. This allows them to still address the principles of D&I while avoiding the tensions that can come from a polarized society.

Taken together, these findings suggest that there will be significant developments of D&I in the future. On the one hand, participants mentioned that they are optimistic about how D&I is evolving and that it will remain important and relevant within companies and in society. On the other hand, participants also expect that companies will change the term of “D&I” to alternative names. Although,

the principles of D&I remain relevant, people start to feel fatigued by the frequent use of the term itself. Therefore, companies might consider reframing the term that are perceived as less polarizing.

4.4. Conclusion

In short, the results suggest that companies approach taking a public stance on D&I through a combination of strategic implementation, alignment, and communication on D&I. It does not only depend on whether companies take a stance, but also on how authentically they integrate it into their core values to avoid the perception of performative activism. While there are both internal and external factors that drive companies to take a public stance, it was also revealed that companies must balance significant barriers and risks.

Finally, participants anticipated that D&I will remain relevant and important in the future, but that the terminology will change. Companies will consider reframing its terminology under the broader concept of psychological well-being in organizations. These insights and its implications are further discussed in the main findings.

5. Discussion

5.1. Main findings

This study examined how companies in the Netherlands approach taking a public stance on diversity and inclusion (D&I) through brand activism (BA). Two studies were conducted for this research: a content analysis of companies engaging with D&I (Study 1) and interviews with company representatives and D&I experts (Study 2). The findings of both studies show that Dutch companies have various approaches to publicly take a stance through BA. These approaches complement existing studies on BA (e.g., Cammarota et al. 2023; Miguel & Miranda, 2023; Scalvini, 2024), and include strategic implementation and alignment, authentic communication, and positioning. In addition, these approaches are shaped by different key drivers, as well as perceived risks and barriers.

The first key approach is strategic implementation and alignment. Consistent with prior research by Vredenburg et al. (2020), Lou et al. (2024) and Moorman (2020), this study revealed that companies often strategically implement D&I initiatives to ensure alignment between their stance and its mission, vision and core values. Both Study 1 and Study 2 indicate that most companies take a public stance on D&I when it is embedded into their brand identity. To show their commitment to D&I, Study 1 showed that companies employ different actions, including external activities (e.g., public statements and/or posts on social media) and internal activities (e.g., employee resource groups, inclusive training, inclusive hiring and D&I policy). Since these actions are visible to the public, it allows companies to show their commitment, which is important for value-driven companies. This aligns with an earlier study by Bhagwat et al. (2020), who argue that actions can signal an increased commitment to BA among value-driven companies. However, the interviews in Study 2 highlighted that actions alone are not sufficient to demonstrate their public stance on D&I.

The participants have emphasized on the importance of a strong leadership support. Without this support, it will become challenging for a company to implement its stance on D&I because its efforts are often not seen as a priority. This lack of leadership support can have consequences on the authenticity of the company's commitment to D&I. In line with previous research on BA authenticity, it was found that authenticity is the most relevant factor in the success of BA (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2024; Schmidt et al., 2022; Pimentel et al., 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020). When a company's public

stance appears to be genuine, research shows that they are more likely to be perceived as relevant, truthful and reliable (Vredenburg et al., 2020). To achieve this authenticity in BA, participants revealed that internal strategic alignment across different departments within a company and a data-driven approach are needed to ensure a company can authentically implement their D&I actions.

Strategic communication and positioning emerged as a second approach. Study 1 revealed that companies often combine internal (e.g., policies and training programs) and external (e.g., marketing campaigns and branding) approach to communicate their stance. Study 2 extended these insights by revealing that communication is not only used to express a public stance, but also to raise awareness and foster an open dialogue about D&I. Nevertheless, participants were also critical and suggested that companies should ensure a substantive communication approach rather than a symbolic approach to enhance their authenticity.

Research on symbolic and substantive activism (e.g., Proctor et al. 2025) highlight that companies that communicate statements without taking follow-up actions can risk being perceived as performative. For instance, participants noted that companies who only communicate support for LGBTQ+ rights during Pride Month, without followed by proper action, can risk superficial activism and be accused for “woke-washing”. Previous studies support these findings, such as by Scalvini (2024), Sobande (2019) and Vredenburg et al. (2020), which shows that substantive activism requires real and concrete actions. Such actions can include facilitating open dialogue and creating awareness on D&I to align with the stances that companies advocate and communicate.

Additionally, the findings from Study 1 showed that companies address different types of D&I-related issues. The most frequently addressed were LGBTQ+ rights, cultural diversity, gender equality and disability rights, while racism, neurodiversity and social justice were less frequently addressed. Similarly, the interviews revealed that companies mostly address LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality, whereas the other issues were rarely mentioned. This approach of addressing specific D&I-related issues can be viewed through the issue maturity model by Zadek (2004) and reflects the argument of Bhagwat et al. (2020) on selective activism who argue that companies selectively choose issues that align with the company’s mission, to resonate with the values of their stakeholders and customers, and to potentially avoid controversial issues.

Moreover, companies that publicly take a public stance are influenced by various internal and external factors. The findings Study 1 found that ethical responsibility and intrinsic values were the most common internal drivers (Cook et al., 2023; Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). Participants in Study 2 further identified that gaining business benefits is another internal factor that has a significant influence. It was noted that companies often consider engaging with D&I to attract more diverse talents, which increases their innovation power to gain a competitive advantage. Participants further elaborated on external factors that influence companies to engage with D&I. This included political developments, societal trends (e.g., Pride, Black Lives Matter) and the need to comply with EU legislation and regulations. While the need to comply with EU legislation and regulations were not directly found in Study 1, participants in Study 2 revealed this as a significant external factor. These findings indicate that taking a public stance is not only influenced by intrinsic values but is also shaped by external pressures.

Despite these factors, participants were concerned about several barriers and risks when companies take a public stance. The most prominent barriers included internal resistance, fear of negative consequences and financial constraints that hinder companies to take a public stance and to remain committed. Participants also revealed the potential of receiving backlash as a common risk. These barriers and risks extend previous research (e.g., Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Eyada, 2020) who addressed barriers that hinder social issues from being accepted in society and the risks of backlash when consumers consider the company's activist actions as inauthentic.

Finally, participants' expectations on the future evolvement of D&I were quite positive. Many participants expect that D&I would remain relevant due to the increased societal expectations, as shown in earlier studies by Ahmad et al. (2024) and Bhagwat et al. (2020). At the same time, participants highlighted signs of fatigue with the term of 'D&I'. Consequently, they expect that companies may shift using a broader and less polarizing terminology related to the broader concept of psychological well-being in organizations to refer to the principles of D&I.

In summary, this study demonstrates that companies in the Netherlands taking a public stance through BA involves a variety of approaches. These approaches involve a strategic implementation and alignment with the company's mission, vision, and core values, guided by consistent

communication and authentic positioning. Moreover, companies often implement internal initiatives such as formal policies or providing internal trainings, as well as external initiatives like public statements or marketing campaigns. The factors that drive companies to engage with D&I varies from internal drivers (i.e., ethical values and perceived business benefits) and external drivers (i.e., political pressures, societal trends, and compliance with regulations and legislation). However, barriers and risks such as resistance towards D&I, financial constraints, and the potential for negative backlash are important considerations in deciding whether companies should take a public stance. Furthermore, D&I will remain relevant in the future, but its terminology may evolve to a broader and less polarizing term that addresses more widely accepted topics.

5.2. Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the existing literature on brand activism (BA) by shifting the focus from a consumer perspective to an organizational perspective. While previous studies often examined consumer responses, purchase intention, and the perception of authenticity as result of engaging in BA (e.g., Cammarota & Branca, 2025; Lou, 2024; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020), this study focus on how companies in the Netherlands approach taking a stance on diversity and inclusion (D&I) through BA. By focusing specifically on D&I, this study extends earlier studies that have often addressed a broader range of social, political, or environmental issues.

The findings show that most companies in the Netherlands embed D&I into their brand identity, while also adopting a strategic approach when taking a public stance on D&I through BA. This implies that companies carefully consider the alignment between their public stance and brand identity to ensure authenticity of their activism. While Schlegelmilch and Saracevic (2022) have argued that activist companies are mainly values-driven that prioritizes societal impact over business profit, a more recent study by Lou et al. (2024) have suggested that BA is not always motivated by the willingness to contribute to social impact. Rather, it is driven by a strategic objective to gain a competitive advantage. In accordance with Lou et al. (2024), this study emphasizes that companies strategically align and implement their stance, but also shows that authenticity of their activism is achieved through a strategic approach. BA authenticity is important when engaging with controversial

social issues in today's polarized society, as it reflects how genuine a company's public stance is (Ahmad et al., 2024; Schmidt et al., 2022; Pimentel et al., 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Moreover, this study also adds to prior research on brand-sociopolitical cause fit (Chu et al., 2022) by demonstrating how companies can enhance a strong alignment with social issues while minimizing the potential risk of performative activism. This study suggests that companies should adopt a substantive approach rather than a symbolic approach. According to the legitimacy theory, companies need to earn the approval of the public to gain legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). This study shows that creating awareness and facilitating an open dialogue on D&I are concrete actions that companies might adopt to show their commitment to D&I and to be seen as legitimate by the public.

Next, this study contributes to the internal and external factors that influence companies to engage with BA. Prior research highlighted internal factors like personal morality (Cook et al., 2022) and external factors such as competitive advantage, and compliance with legislation and regulations (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). The present study adds to these existing factors by showing how companies are driven to take a public stance by internal and external factors, including company's personal values, perceived business benefits, political pressures, societal trends, and legal compliance with regulations and legislation

Lastly, this study also contributes to the literature of BA by examining the perceived risks and barriers. While Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020) found several barriers that hinder organizations from supporting certain issues, the findings of this study revealed risks and barriers that companies face after they decide to take a public stance. The most prominent barriers found were internal resistance and financial constraints that challenges companies to take a stance. In addition, receiving negative backlash underscores a crucial risk, which could have significant consequences for a company's reputation engaging in BA.

5.3. Practical implications

The findings of the study suggest valuable insights about how companies in the Netherlands approach taking a public stance through brand activism (BA), particularly focusing on diversity and inclusion (D&I). These findings offer several practical implications for professionals, including D&I

managers, senior executives, HR managers, marketing and communications specialists, and other organizational roles responsible for implementing and communicating a company's social responsibility towards the public.

While taking a public stance on social issues can create several opportunities, it does not come without risks and challenges. One of an important practical implication to consider is the involvement of a company's leadership. It is necessary that a company receive sufficient support from the senior management, such as the CEO, to ensure the stance is embedded into the company's core values and its priorities. Without this support from the management, D&I is unlikely to be considered as a priority and will lack the resources that it requires. This underscores the need for a strong leadership that not only supports the company's public stance, but also actively advocates for the social issues it addresses.

In addition, strategic alignment of D&I efforts across departments within a company is another important implication to consider. The results show that a public stance on social issues should not be treated like a stand-alone project within a company. Instead, it must be aligned and embedded across all the departments. This alignment ensures that D&I is consistently integrated throughout the entire company. When every department understands the principles of D&I, companies can maintain their commitments and meet the expectations of their stakeholders.

Thirdly, to strategically align D&I efforts within companies, authenticity is needed. The findings of this study highlights that the D&I initiatives must reflect a company's mission, vision, and core values. Conversely, when a company fails to align its public stance to concrete actions or it does not fit with its brand identity, it can be perceived as performative activism or "woke-washing". Therefore, companies must ensure that they are "walking the talk" to ensure authenticity. This means that a public statement must be supported by substantive actions, demonstrating transparency between what they say and what they do.

Finally, practitioners should consider involving employees by asking for their feedback on what is important to them matters. Understanding employees' perspectives and values are essential to ensure an inclusive company culture in which their mental wellbeing is prioritized. To achieve this, D&I managers should foster this employee involvement by facilitating open dialogues on D&I, where

discussions on the topic are welcomed and encouraged. This allows to create a safe environmental where employees feel comfortable sharing their perspective on sensitive topics. By involving employees in this way, companies can ensure that their D&I efforts are genuinely embedded in practice. In doing so, it will improve credibility and reliability of their public stance on D&I.

5.4. Limitations and future research directions

Since this study is based on two qualitative studies, the potential limitations will be discussed for each study. First, a potential limitation of Study 1 is that the company sample was limited to only include companies that have publicly demonstrated a stance on D&I. This was an intended decision to align with the concept of BA, which involves companies publicly expressing their stance on social issues. However, this means that the findings cannot be generalized to companies that does not publicly take a stance on social issues, and may address them internally. In other words, these companies can be considered as “silent companies”, who may have different approaches with different implementation strategies, motivations, or experiencing barriers and risks that are not explored in this study. Future research could explore these silent companies to better understand how their approaches differs from vocal companies that publicly express their stance.

A second limitation is that the researcher analyzed public stances of publicly available sources such as official websites, public statements, latest annual reports, social media posts and marketing campaigns. Since Study 1 relied to content that companies voluntarily decide to publish, it was not able to analyze deeper insights behind the company’ decision to take a public stance. To address this limitation, Study 2 was therefore designed to further explore how companies in the Netherlands approach taking a public stance in greater details.

Regarding Study 2, a limitation was the sample size the participants. As participants were purposively selected based on their roles as company representatives and D&I experts, it resulted in a relatively small group. While the insights from these participants were valuable, their insights may not fully represent those from other companies. This means that the findings are only based on a small group of participants and could not generalize to a larger population. Besides, company representatives might have been biased in their responses because they could only provide company-

specific information or gave responses that only showed the positive aspects of how their companies approach taking a public stance on D&I. To reduce this limitation, expert interviews were conducted to further complement and validate the insights. However, future research could still expand the sample size and incorporate a broader range of companies to improve its generalizability of the findings. In addition, the researcher's role may have influenced the interviews as the researcher's knowledge of D&I may have had influence on the formulation of questions and interpretation of participants' responses.

Furthermore, this study focused on D&I as a social issue to explore BA. While this focus provided a narrowed direction to deepen the understanding of how companies approach taking a stance on this specific issue, it did not address other social, political or environmental issues. By examining other issues in society, such as political, environmental, or economic issues would allow future research to investigate whether the findings of this study also apply in different contexts. This would provide additional insights to understand of how companies take a stance on other important issues. Besides, this study was focused within the Dutch context, so the findings may not be able to generalize to other countries with different political or cultural perspectives.

Another direction for future research is to examine how companies' approaches in taking public stances on social issues develop over time. This could be done with longitudinal studies that track companies over several years. These studies could investigate whether companies' approaches to take a public stance stay consistent or may change due to new societal expectations or political developments. It could also examine how it affect BA authenticity over time. Finally, future research could consider a comparative study between two or more countries to examine how companies approach taking a public stance is different or similar across countries with various cultural context.

5.5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine how companies in the Netherlands approach taking a public stance on diversity and inclusion (D&I) through brand activism (BA). The research question of this study has been addressed by demonstrating that taking a public stance does not only involve external communication, but also involves strategic implementation, alignment, and decision-making. These

aspects are influenced by motivating factors, as well as perceived risks and barriers. The findings show the internal factors (i.e., ethical values and perceived business benefits), and external drivers (i.e., political pressures, societal trends and compliance with EU regulation and legislation). However, companies might experience internal resistance and financial constraints, as well as risking negative backlash, which can limit their efforts. Despite of the risks and challenges, the relevancy and importance of D&I will remain in the future. But companies will consider reframing the terminology of ‘diversity and inclusion’ to broader and less polarizing concepts.

Moreover, this study adds to the literature on BA by showing the understanding of how companies take a public stance on D&I as a form of brand activism. The study emphasized that companies cannot take a one-time public stance on social issues but should rather be consistent and supported by substantive actions. Practitioners should consider the importance of a strong leadership involvement, strategic internal alignment across departments, and integrating authenticity in their public stances. Also, to effectively take a stance on D&I, companies should involve their employees and facilitate a safe space for open dialogues on the topic. This ensures for an internal company culture that reflects the values that the company publicly take a stance on.

Therefore, this study answers the research question “*How do companies in the Netherlands approach taking a public stance on diversity and inclusion through brand activism?*” by showing that taking a public stance involves more than just making a stance. It calls for a strategic implementation, alignment with the company’s values and an authentic approach to navigate the risks and barriers of taking a public stance. Thus, strategically demonstrating strong values with genuine actions are key to make meaningful contributions to society.

AI statement

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT and Grammarly to improve the quality of the written text. ChatGPT was used for inspiration, checking the sentence structure, checking the written paragraphs for its clarity and shorten the number of words. Grammarly helps with writing and was used to check the sentences on its on fluency, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the work.

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Appendices

Appendix A – coding scheme

Main category	Subcategory	Description	Example
Type of social issues (D&I-related)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LGBTQ+ rights: inclusion of LGBTQ+ communities • Disability: inclusion of people with disabilities • Cultural diversity: ethnic, racial, cultural representation • Neurodiversity: inclusion of people with autism, ADHD, dyslexia etc. • Gender equality: equal treatment between men and women • Social justice: support towards equity and systemic change • Racism: addressing racism and promoting anti-racism 	The social issue addressed in the company's activism stance	<i>In 2024, we had 165 employees with an occupational disability in what are known as participatory jobs. Of these employees, 151 were still in employment at the end of December. Due to the tight labour market, staff with disabilities are difficult to recruit. At the end of 2024, 2 job vacancies for this target group had not yet been filled. We train internal employees and managers in mentoring colleagues with an occupational disability."</i>
Motives for BA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical responsibility and intrinsic values: BA is driven by genuine ethical beliefs and core values • Business benefits: BA is driven by potential financial or strategic benefits • Reputation management: BA is driven to gain, maintain or repair reputation • Compliance with the law: BA is driven by legal requirements 	The reasons for engaging in brand activism	<i>"D&I is very important to our brand: we proactively strive to achieve and improve standards to strengthen our commitment to D&I. It is our mission to be a much-loved, social and inclusive brand, powered by our people".</i>
BA actions	<p>Internal activities, e.g:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training programs/workshops for employees • Internal policy • Employee resource groups • Inclusive recruitment programs <p>External activities, e.g:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing campaigns 	The internal programs or actions taken within companies as part of their brand activism efforts	<i>"We are committed to ensuring that all co-workers have the required training to support our journey to being fully inclusive. All co-workers are required to complete e-learnings on inclusion and diversity."</i>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnerships • Public statements • Social media posts • D&I certifications 	<p>The external actions taken by companies as part of their brand activism efforts</p>	<p><i>“For new hires and promotions of employees with a migration background, we cooperate with organisations such as the UAF, Refugee talent Hub, Agora Network and the ECHO Foundation.”</i></p>
<p>Communication & implementation approach</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal approach: BA initiatives are focused internally to target employees and stakeholders • External approach: BA initiatives are focused externally in advertising or branding to target customers • Mixed approach: combination of both internal and external approach 	<p>The approach on how companies communicate and implement their initiatives</p>	<p><i>“We promote diversity and equality through products and communication, and advance inclusion in our communities.”</i></p>
<p>Integration with BA</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embedded in core identity: BA is embedded into the brand’s mission, vision and purpose. • Strategic adoption: BA initiatives are integrated into business strategy to gain strategic advantage (e.g., talent attraction, competitive advantage, financial gain). • Marketing-driven: BA stance is shown in one-time social media posts and campaigns often used only for PR and image. • Regulatory compliance: BA initiatives are mainly taken to meet legal commitments. 	<p>The level of the company’s engagement with brand activism</p>	<p><i>“D&I has always been a core part of our brand identity. But in late 2021, the company underwent a rebranding to align with its strategic direction. The refreshed identity emphasizes accessibility, with a color palette developed to represent the brand’s values of modernity, cheerfulness, and openness.”</i></p>

Appendix B – Example of an Instagram post by KLM supporting Pride

klm • Follow
New York City

klm 🌈 This June, we proudly joined NYC Pride — celebrating love, diversity, and belonging, together with other Dutchies @citizenm @heinekennl @adyen & @ingnederland! Rooted in our Dutch values of respect and inclusion, we stand with the LGBTQIA+ community in New York, in the Netherlands, and around the world. 🇺🇸 🇳🇱

Check our stories to get a taste of yesterday's parade with @owinpierson & @roy_fer!

Missed NY Pride? Come to Amsterdam this summer at the end of July! Plus, World Pride will make its way to our capital in 2026! We hope to see you there! 🇳🇱 🇺🇸

#KLM #NYCPride #Pride2025 #DEI #newyork
Edited · 4 d

For you ▾

michaeldevos_ 🌈🌈🌈🌈
4 d · 1 like · Reply

27travels Thank you for having us 🇳🇱 🇺🇸 can't wait for Amsterdam World Pride in 2026! NYC Pride was just a taste 🌈🌈
3 d · 4 likes · Reply

— View replies (1)

owinpierson 🌈 Thank you for proudly parading with us in NYC. it means so much to so many people 🇳🇱 🇺🇸

Liked by lucas_heule and others
4 days ago

Add a comment... Post

Appendix C – Ethical approval

UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.

Dear Nancy Cai,

This is a notification from the Humanities & Social Sciences (HSS) Ethics Committee to inform you that your research project has received a **positive advice**.

Application nr.	: 250913
Title	: Brand activism in the Netherlands: Exploring how Dutch companies approach taking a public stance in social issues
Application date	: 18-Apr-2025
Researcher	: Nancy Cai
Supervisor	: Menno de Jong
SONA	: No
Date of advice	: 29-Apr-2025

The ethics committee has reviewed the ethical aspects of your research project. Based on the information you have provided in the web application, the ethics committee has no major ethical concerns for the research project to go forward as proposed. Please find attached the PDF with the application together with the review comments and advice.

It is your responsibility to ensure that the research is carried out in line with the information provided.

Future communication regarding this research project should also be directed to the secretary of the HSS Ethics Committee via ethicscommittee-hss@utwente.nl, stating the Application nr. 250913.

If you later make considerable changes to the research project that might affect the ethical aspects or raise new ethical concerns, you must submit an amendment. For this, please send a concise description of the intended changes to the secretary of the HSS Ethics Committee, stating the Application nr. 250913. An additional review of the proposed changes will be performed.

Best regards,

Humanities & Social Sciences (HSS) Ethics Committee

Appendix D1 – English information sheet and informed consent

Information about the study ‘Brand Activism in the Netherlands: Exploring how Dutch companies approach taking a public stance in social issues.’

The purpose of the study

This research project aims to investigate how companies in the Netherlands approach taking a public stance on social issues. The research is conducted by Nancy Cai, a Master student in Communication Science at the University of Twente. The study is supervised by Prof.dr. M.D.T. de Jong and dr. M. Belter. The research is reviewed and approved by the BMS Ethics Committee.

The research consists of a combination of qualitative content analysis and in-depth interviews. The purpose of the qualitative content analysis must identify which Dutch organizations are actively involved with brand activism, specifically Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) related issues. The purpose of in-depth interviews will further uncover a deeper understanding of the factors that influence companies to take a public stance in social issues, how companies decide which issues to support and which to avoid, how companies implement the strategies to communicate their stance to the public, and the perceived risks and challenges when taking a public stance. The in-depth interviews will last between 45 and 60 minutes.

Voluntary participation and data collection

Participation in the research is entirely voluntary. Participants can withdraw from the study at any time for any reason, without the need to justify their decision. Participants also have the right to refuse to answer specific questions.

The researchers would like to make an audio recording of the interview. After the interview, the recording will be transcribed and anonymized. When the transcription is made, the recording will be erased.

The data will be saved as anonymized transcripts and may be accessed within the research team (the researchers and the supervisors). The supervisors do not know with whom the interviews were held. Participants have the right to request access to and rectification or erasure of their interview data. The transcripts will be stored in a safe online environment for a period of five years.

The data will be used by the researcher to write their Master theses. If quotes of participants are used, special attention will be paid to the confidentiality of the research. Only quotes that cannot be reduced to individuals can be used in the reporting.

Contact details

In the case of questions, suggestions, or concerns, please feel free to contact the researchers or their supervisors (see emails below).

Researcher:	Supervisors:
Nancy Cai – n.cai@student.utwente.nl	Menno de Jong – m.d.t.dejong@utwente.nl
	Meike Belter – m.belter@utwente.nl

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Secretary of the Ethics Committee/domain Humanities & Social Sciences of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences at the University of Twente by [ethicscommittee- hss@utwente.nl](mailto:ethicscommittee-hss@utwente.nl)

Informed consent form for the study ‘Brand Activism in the Netherlands: Exploring how Dutch companies approach taking a public stance in social issues.’

You will be given a copy of the study information and this form.

Please tick the appropriate boxes

Yes No

Taking part in the study

I have read and understood the study information. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions, and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.

Use of the information in the study

I understand that information I provide will be used for this master theses.

I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or my job function, will not be shared beyond the study team.

I agree that my anonymized interview fragments can be quoted in research output. I agree to be audio recorded.

Signatures

Name of the Participant

Signature

Date

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

Name of the Researcher

Signature

Date

Appendix D2 – Nederlands informatiebald en geïnformeerde toestemming

Informatie over het onderzoek:

“Merkactivisme in Nederland: Hoe Nederlandse bedrijven omgaan met het innemen van publieke standpunten in maatschappelijke kwesties.”

Het doel van het onderzoek

Dit onderzoeksproject heeft als doel te onderzoeken hoe bedrijven in Nederland omgaan met het innemen van publieke standpunten over maatschappelijke kwesties. Het onderzoek wordt uitgevoerd door Nancy Cai, een masterstudent Communicatiewetenschap aan de Universiteit Twente. De studie staat onder begeleiding van prof. dr. M.D.T. de Jong en dr. M. Belter. Het onderzoek is beoordeeld en goedgekeurd door de Ethische Commissie van de faculteit BMS.

Het onderzoek bestaat uit een combinatie van kwalitatieve inhoudsanalyse en interviews. Het doel van de kwalitatieve inhoudsanalyse is om te identificeren welke Nederlandse bedrijven actief betrokken zijn bij merkactivisme, met name op het gebied van Diversiteit & Inclusie (D&I). De interviews zijn bedoeld om een dieper inzicht te verkrijgen in de factoren die bedrijven ertoe aanzetten een publiek standpunt in te nemen over maatschappelijke kwesties, hoe zij bepalen welke onderwerpen ze steunen of vermijden, hoe zij strategieën implementeren om hun standpunt naar het publiek te communiceren, en welke risico's en uitdagingen zij daarbij ervaren. De interviews duren tussen de 45 en 60 minuten.

Vrijwillige deelname en gegevensbescherming

Deelname aan het onderzoek is volledig vrijwillig. Deelnemers kunnen op elk moment en om welke reden dan ook stoppen met het onderzoek, zonder dat zij hiervoor een verklaring hoeven te geven. Deelnemers hebben ook het recht om bepaalde vragen niet te beantwoorden.

De onderzoeker wil graag een geluidsopname maken van het interview. Na het interview wordt de opname getranscribeerd en geanonimiseerd. Zodra de transcriptie is voltooid, wordt de opname verwijderd.

De gegevens worden opgeslagen als geanonimiseerde transcripties en kunnen worden geraadpleegd door het onderzoeksteam (de onderzoekers en de begeleiders). De begeleiders weten niet met wie de interviews zijn gehouden. Deelnemers hebben het recht om inzage in hun interviewgegevens te vragen, en om rectificatie of verwijdering ervan te verzoeken. De

transcripties worden gedurende een periode van vijf jaar opgeslagen in een veilige online omgeving.

De gegevens zullen door de onderzoeker worden gebruikt voor het schrijven van haar masterscriptie. Indien citaten van deelnemers worden gebruikt, zal er bijzondere aandacht worden besteed aan de vertrouwelijkheid van het onderzoek. Alleen citaten die niet tot individuele personen te herleiden zijn, zullen in de rapportage worden opgenomen.

Contactgegevens

Bij vragen, suggesties of opmerkingen kunt u gerust contact opnemen met de onderzoekers of hun begeleiders (zie onderstaande e-mailadressen).

Researcher:	Supervisors:
Nancy Cai – n.cai@student.utwente.nl	Menno de Jong – m.d.t.dejong@utwente.nl
	Meike Belter – m.belter@utwente.nl

Als u vragen heeft over uw rechten als deelnemer aan dit onderzoek, of informatie wilt verkrijgen, vragen wilt stellen, of eventuele zorgen over deze studie wilt bespreken met iemand anders dan de onderzoekers, kunt u contact opnemen met de secretaris van de Ethics Committee/domain Humanities & Social Sciences of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences van de Universiteit Twente via: ethicscommittee-hss@utwente.nl

Toestemmingsformulier voor deelname aan het onderzoek “Merkactivisme in Nederland: Hoe Nederlandse bedrijven omgaan met het innemen van publieke standpunten in maatschappelijke kwesties.”

U ontvangt een kopie van de onderzoeksinformatie en dit formulier.

Gelieve de juiste vakjes aan te vinken

Ja

Nee

Deelname aan het onderzoek

Ik heb de informatie over het onderzoek gelezen en begrepen. Ik heb de mogelijkheid gehad om vragen te stellen en mijn vragen zijn naar tevredenheid beantwoord.

Ik stem er vrijwillig mee in om deel te nemen aan dit onderzoek en begrijp dat ik vragen mag weigeren te beantwoorden en dat ik op elk moment mag stoppen met het onderzoek zonder een reden te hoeven geven.

Gebruik van de informatie in het onderzoek

Ik begrijp dat de informatie die ik verstrek gebruikt zal worden voor deze masterscriptie.

Ik begrijp dat persoonlijke informatie over mij, zoals mijn naam of mijn functie, niet buiten het onderzoeksteam gedeeld zal worden.

Ik geef toestemming dat geanonimiseerde fragmenten uit mijn interview geciteerd mogen worden in onderzoeksresultaten.

Ik geef toestemming voor het maken van een geluidsopname van het interview.

Handtekeningen

Naam deelnemer

Handtekening

Datum

Ik heb de informatie uit het informatieblad correct voorgelezen aan de potentiële deelnemer en heb er, naar beste kunnen, voor gezorgd dat de deelnemer begrijpt waarmee hij/zij vrijwillig instemt.

Naam onderzoeker

Handtekening

Datum

Appendix E1 – English version of interview protocol

Introduction and background

Good morning/afternoon, how are you?

Thank you so much for taking the time to have this interview with me today, I really appreciate it. I will briefly introduce myself: my name is Nancy, and I'm currently in my last phase of my masters Communication Science at the University of Twente. For my thesis, I'm conducting research on how companies in the Netherlands approach taking public stances on societal issues through brand activism.

In my study, I define brand activism as a phenomenon where companies or brands publicly take a stance through statements or initiatives on social, political, or environmental topics. For example, themes such as climate and sustainability, political and economic justice, and **diversity and inclusion (D&I)**. I'm focusing specifically on D&I since it is currently a relevant and important topic.

The goal of this interview is to gain deeper insight into how [company name] approach taking a stance on social issues such as D&I. I'm particularly interested in your perspectives on this within your organization: how D&I has developed within [], how it is implemented, and what risks or challenges you or the company may encounter in the process.

Informed consent

I would also like to let you know that all the information you share with me today will be treated confidentially. I will process the data of the interview fully anonymously, meaning that your name and the company's name won't be mentioned. Also, the data will only be used for my thesis and will not be shared with anyone except my supervisor and myself. You are free to skip any question or stop the interview at any time, without needing to provide a reason.

Before we start, I have one more point. I would like to record the conversation for transcribing. After transcribing the recording will be deleted.

...

The interview will take about 45 to 60 minutes. Do you have any questions before we begin?

...

Start recording.

Interview guide [representative of the company]

Introduction

1. My first question is, could you give me a brief description of your role in the company and your main responsibilities?
2. Can you tell me something about the core values, mission, and vision of [company name]?
 - a. Probe: what drives the company and what it really stands for?

Factors driving to engage with brand activism

3. Can you tell me about a situation where [company name] took a public stance on D&I?
4. Could you describe how that decision was made?
5. What factors played a role in that decision? For example, an internal event, expectations from employees/customers, current news events or maybe other influences that played a role?
6. In your opinion, what were the main considerations to engage with this specific topic?
 - a. Probe: was it related to the company's mission, vision or values? Or were there perhaps also other reasons?

Choice and considerations of social issues

7. How does the company decide which social issues are appropriate to take a public stance on?
8. What makes a topic like D&I relevant for the company to communicate about?
9. Are there also any topics that you deliberately chose not to take a public stance on? And why?

Communication and implementation of the stance

10. How do you communicate topics such as D&I to the public?
 - a. Probe: what are important considerations when shaping such message, such as tone, style, and choice of communication platforms?
 - b. Probe: through which platforms or tools is the message usually shared? Are there any examples of campaigns that you could share?
11. Who within the company are involved in developing D&I-related initiatives and public statements?
 - a. Probe: for example, are any specific departments, employees, or external parties involved?
 - b. Probe: how are they included in the process?

Reactions, risks and challenges

12. How do people, internally, react when the company takes a stance on D&I? And how do people externally react on this?
 - a. Probe: would you say the responses are usually positive or do you also receive criticism or mixed reactions?
13. And when there is criticism or tension, how does the company usually respond to this?
14. Have you faced any specific risks or challenges while implementing or communicating D&I efforts?
 - a. Probe: could you share an example?

Vision on the future

15. How do you see the role of companies engaging with social issues now and in the future?
 - a. Probe: do you think that companies should continue to play an active role or be more cautious?

16. And looking at the future of [company name], how do you expect your approach on D&I will evolve?
 - a. Probe: do you think it will become more important and remain relevant, or will that start to change?
17. Is there anything you would like to add that we haven't covered?

Closing and final question

18. As a final question, do you know a colleague, or experts who might also have valuable insights on this topic and may be interested to participate? If you happen to know someone, please let me know! If someone comes to mind later this week, feel free to reach out. You can just send me a message via LinkedIn or my email.

Thank you very much your time and input today. Your insights are very valuable to my research, so I appreciate your participation. If you are interested, I will be happy to send you a factsheet of the most interesting findings at the end of the project.

Interview guide [D&I expert]

Introduction

1. My first question is, could you tell me a bit about your professional background and your field of expertise?

Factors driving to engage with brand activism

2. From your perspective, how do you see companies in NL publicly speak out on social issues like D&I?
 - a. Probe: are there certain trends, sectors or types of companies that stand out in this?
3. And I'm curious what you think the factors are for companies to make the decision to speak out and take action on D&I?
 - a. Probe: Do internal factors like employee values or leadership influence this? Or maybe external factors like expectations from customers or stakeholders, current events in society that played a role?

Choice and considerations of social issues

4. I was also wondering if you have insights how companies decide whether D&I is appropriate to communicate about. Can you tell me a bit more about how these decisions are made?
5. Are there also any other social issues that you think or expect that companies tend to avoid taking a public stance on? And why might that be?

Reactions, risks and challenges

6. And looking at the reactions from other people, how do people internally and externally react when companies take a stance on D&I?
 - a. Probe: would you say the responses are usually positive or do you also receive criticism or mixed reactions?
7. And what are some of the risks or challenges companies usually face when implementing or communicating D&I initiatives? →
 - a. Probe: in your opinion, what do companies struggle the most with when taking initiatives on D&I?

8. Do you have examples of companies that recently have faced specific challenges while implementing or communicating D&I efforts?
 - a. Probe: how do companies usually respond or manage them when there are some risks or criticism involved?

Communication and implementation of the stance

9. Are you also involved in setting up or developing JEDI strategies for companies?
 - a. Probe: If so, could you tell me more about how you approach the communication strategy on D&I? And tell me something about what this communication looks like?
 - b. Probe: What are the most important considerations to take into account regarding the tone, style and choice of platforms to share the D&I activities?
 - c. Probe: through which platforms or tools is the message usually shared? Are there any examples of campaigns that you could share?

Vision on the future

10. Looking towards the future, how do you see the role of companies in the Netherlands evolving when it comes to speaking out on social issues?
 - a. Probe: Do you think that companies should continue to play an active role or be more cautious?
 - b. Probe: what kind of opportunities or challenges do you expect in terms of its work and approach on D&I?
 - c. Probe: do you think it will become more important and remain relevant, or will that start to change?
11. Is there anything you would like to add that we haven't covered?

Closing and final question

As a final question, do you know a colleague, or experts who might also have valuable insights on this topic and may be interested to participate? If you happen to know someone, please let me know! If someone comes to mind later this week, feel free to reach out. You can just send me a message via LinkedIn or my email.

Thank you very much your time and input today. Your insights are very valuable to my research, so I appreciate your participation. If you are interested, I will be happy to send you a factsheet of the most interesting findings at the end of the project.

Appendix E2 – Nederlands versie van interview protocol

Introductie en achtergrond informatie

Goedemorgen/middag, hoe gaat het met u?

Wat fijn dat u de tijd heeft genomen om met mij in gesprek te gaan, dat waardeer ik heel erg. Ik zal even kort iets over mezelf vertellen – mijn naam is Nancy en ik doe momenteel de masteropleiding Communicatiewetenschap aan de Universiteit van Twente. Voor mijn afstudeerscriptie onderzoek ik hoe bedrijven in Nederland omgaan met het innemen van publieke standpunten over maatschappelijke problemen via merkactivisme.

Hierin beschrijf ik merkactivisme als een fenomeen waarbij bedrijven of merken zich publiekelijke uitspreken—bijvoorbeeld d.m.v. bepaalde verklaringen of initiatieven— over maatschappelijke, sociale, politieke of milieu gerelateerde onderwerpen. Denk bijvoorbeeld aan thema's zoals klimaat en duurzaamheid, politieke en economische rechtvaardigheid, maar ook aan diversiteit en inclusie met onderwerpen zoals gendergelijkheid of LGBTQ+ rechten. Voor mijn scriptie richt ik mij specifiek op **diversiteit en inclusie (D&I)** als maatschappelijke kwestie, omdat dit momenteel een erg actueel en relevant thema is.

Het doel van dit interview is om meer inzicht te krijgen in hoe *[naam van het bedrijf]* omgaat met het innemen van een standpunt over sociale kwesties zoals D&I. Ik ben daarbij vooral benieuwd naar uw perspectieven op dit onderwerp binnen het bedrijf: hoe het standpunt tot stand is gekomen, op welke manier het wordt geïmplementeerd, en welke risico's of uitdagingen u of het bedrijf hierbij tegenkomt.

Informatie over informed consent:

Graag wil ik laten weten dat alle informatie die u vandaag met mij deelt op een vertrouwelijke manier wordt behandeld. Ik zal de resultaten van het interview volledig anoniem verwerken, zodat uw identiteit of die van het bedrijf niet worden genoemd. De gegevens worden uitsluitend gebruikt voor mijn afstudeeronderzoek en zullen, naast mijzelf en mijn begeleider vanuit de universiteit, niet met anderen worden gedeeld. U bent op elk moment vrij om vragen over te slaan of het interview stop te zetten, zonder dat u hiervoor een reden hoeft te geven.

Voordat we beginnen, heb ik nog een punt. Ik zou graag het gesprek willen opnemen voor het transcriberen en na het transcriberen wordt de opname gewist.

...

Het interview zal ongeveer 45 tot 60 minuten duren. Heeft u nog vragen voordat we beginnen?

...

Start de opname.

Interview guide [voor de vertegenwoordiger van het bedrijf]

Introductie

1. Mijn eerste vraag is; kunt u kort iets vertellen over uw rol binnen de organisatie en wat uw verantwoordelijkheden o.a. zijn?
2. Zou u iets kunnen vertellen over de kernwaarden, missie en visie van [naam van bedrijf]?
 - a. Probe: wat drijft het bedrijf en waar staan jullie echt voor?

Aanleiding en factoren voor merkactivisme binnen het bedrijf

3. Kunt u vertellen over een situatie waarin jullie als bedrijf een publiek standpunt hebben ingenomen over [*diversiteit en inclusie*]?
4. Kunt u beschrijven hoe dat besluit tot stand is gekomen?
5. Welke factoren speelden op dat moment mee aan die beslissing? Bijvoorbeeld, een interne gebeurtenis, verwachtingen van klanten of medewerkers, iets wat speelde in de actualiteit op dat moment of wellicht andere externe factoren?
6. Wat waren volgens u de belangrijkste redenen of overwegingen om dit onderwerp juist op te pakken binnen het bedrijf?
 - a. Probe: sloot het bijvoorbeeld aan bij jullie missie, visie en merkwaarden. Of wellicht andere redenen?

Keuze en afweging van maatschappelijke thema's

7. Hoe wordt binnen het bedrijf bepaald welke maatschappelijke kwesties passend zijn om er publiekelijk een standpunt over in te nemen?
8. Wat maakt een onderwerp [zoals diversiteit en inclusie] voor jullie passend of relevant om als bedrijf erover te communiceren?
9. Zijn er ook bepaalde thema's of situaties waarvan jullie bewust hebben besloten om er geen publiek standpunt over in te nemen en niet over te communiceren?

Communicatie en uitvoering van het standpunt

10. Hoe brengen jullie als bedrijf maatschappelijke standpunten—op het gebied van diversiteit en inclusie—naar buiten? [*Dus hoe worden zulke initiatieven of publieke verklaringen gecommuniceerd?*]
 - a. Probe: En wat zijn belangrijke overwegingen bij het vormgeven van zo'n boodschap—qua toon, stijl en keuze van communicatiekanalen?
 - b. Probe: via welke platformen of middelen wordt het standpunt meestal gedeeld? Kunt u mij een voorbeeld geven van een campagne of andere uitingen?
11. Wie zijn binnen het bedrijf vooral betrokken bij het meedenken en uitwerken van diversiteit en inclusie-initiatieven en publieke verklaringen hierover?
 - a. Probe: Gaat het dan bijvoorbeeld om specifieke afdelingen, bepaalde medewerkers of misschien zelfs externe partijen die hierbij worden betrokken?
 - b. Probe: hoe worden zij betrokken bij de initiatieven?

Reacties, risico's en uitdagingen

12. Hoe wordt er intern en extern gereageerd als jullie een standpunt innemen over een maatschappelijke kwestie zoals diversiteit en inclusie?
 - a. Probe: zou u zeggen dat de reacties meestal positief zijn, of zit daar ook weleens wat kritiek of misschien zelfs gemixte reacties bij?
 - b. Probe
13. Hoe gaan jullie om met eventuele kritische feedback, spanningen of gevoelige reacties? — bijvoorbeeld van mensen buiten het bedrijf, of juist van mensen intern binnen het bedrijf zelf?
14. Zijn jullie weleens bepaalde risico's of uitdagingen tegengekomen bij het uitvoeren of communiceren van diversiteit en inclusie-initiatieven?
 - a. Probe: heeft u daar ook een voorbeeld van?

Visie op de toekomst

15. Hoe kijkt u naar de rol van bedrijven in maatschappelijke discussies, zowel nu als in de toekomst?
 - a. Probe: vindt u dat bedrijven daarin een actieve rol moeten blijven spelen, of juist wat voorzichtiger mee moeten omgaan?
16. En als u kijkt naar de toekomst van [*naam van bedrijf*] als het gaat om het innemen van publieke standpunten over maatschappelijke kwesties, hoe verwacht u dat jullie hiermee zullen omgaan?
 - a. Probe: denkt u dat het alleen maar belangrijker wordt en relevant zal blijven, of zal dat gaan veranderen?
17. Wilt u nog iets toevoegen over uw ervaringen met diversiteit en inclusie binnen de organisatie, waar we het nog niet over gehad hebben?

Afsluiting

18. Tot slot nog een vraag: kent u misschien iemand—bijvoorbeeld een collega, kennis of experts—die u zou kunnen aanbevelen die ook interessante inzichten heeft over dit onderwerp en mogelijk wilt deelnemen aan mijn onderzoek? Als u iemand in gedachten heeft, dan hoor ik dat natuurlijk heel graag. U kunt er uiteraard even over nadenken, en mocht later deze week of volgende week iemand te binnen schieten, dan kunt u mij altijd even bellen of mailen. Ik zal mijn contactgegevens na afloop van dit interview met u delen.

Alvast heel erg bedankt voor het meedenken en ontzettend bedankt voor uw tijd en moeite vandaag. Uw input is heel waardevol voor mijn onderzoek, dus ik waardeer uw deelname enorm. Mocht u interesse hebben in de eindresultaten, dan stuur ik u graag aan het eind van het project een factsheet toe met de meest interessante bevindingen.

Interview guide [voor experts]

Goedemorgen/middag, hoe gaat het met u?

Wat fijn dat u de tijd heeft genomen om met mij in gesprek te gaan, dat waardeer ik heel erg. Ik zal even kort iets over mezelf vertellen – mijn naam is Nancy en ik doe momenteel de masteropleiding Communicatiewetenschap aan de Universiteit van Twente. Voor mijn afstudeerscriptie onderzoek ik hoe bedrijven in Nederland omgaan met het innemen van publieke standpunten over maatschappelijke problemen via merkactivisme.

Hierin beschrijf ik merkactivisme als een fenomeen waarbij bedrijven of merken zich publiekelijke uitspreken—bijvoorbeeld d.m.v. bepaalde verklaringen of initiatieven— over maatschappelijke, politieke of milieu gerelateerde onderwerpen. Denk bijvoorbeeld aan thema's zoals klimaat en duurzaamheid, politieke en economische rechtvaardigheid, maar ook aan diversiteit en inclusie met onderwerpen zoals gendergelijkheid of LGBTQ+ rechten. Voor mijn scriptie richt ik mij specifiek op **diversiteit en inclusie (D&I)** als maatschappelijke kwestie, omdat dit momenteel een erg actueel en relevant thema is.

Het doel van dit interview is om meer inzicht te krijgen in hoe bedrijven in NL omgaat met het innemen van een standpunt over sociale kwesties zoals D&I. Ik ben daarbij vooral benieuwd naar uw perspectieven op dit onderwerp, zoals hoe standpunten tot stand komen, op welke manier het wordt geïmplementeerd, en welke risico's of uitdagingen daarbij komen kijken.

Informatie over informed consent:

Graag wil ik laten weten dat alle informatie die u vandaag met mij deelt op een vertrouwelijke manier wordt behandeld. Ik zal de resultaten van het interview volledig anoniem verwerken, zodat uw identiteit niet worden genoemd. De gegevens worden uitsluitend gebruikt voor mijn afstudeeronderzoek en zullen, naast mijzelf en mijn begeleider vanuit de universiteit, niet met anderen worden gedeeld. U bent op elk moment vrij om vragen over te slaan of het interview stop te zetten, zonder dat u hiervoor een reden hoeft te geven.

Voordat we beginnen, heb ik nog een punt. Ik zou graag het gesprek willen opnemen voor het transcriberen en na het transcriberen wordt de opname gewist.

...

Het interview zal ongeveer driekwartier tot een uurtje duren. Heeft u nog vragen voordat we beginnen?

...

Start de opname.

Introductie

1. Mijn eerste vraag is; kunt u kort iets vertellen over uw professionele achtergrond en expertisegebied?

Aanleiding en factoren voor merkactivisme binnen bedrijven

2. Wat valt je op in hoe bedrijven zich in Nederland publiekelijk uitspreken over diversiteit en inclusie?
 - a. Probe: Zijn er bijvoorbeeld bepaalde trends, sectoren of type bedrijven die hierin opvallen?
3. Wat zijn volgens jou belangrijke factoren of redenen die meespelen dat bedrijven ervoor kiezen om publiekelijk een stelling te nemen in diversiteit en inclusie?
 - a. Probe: hoe spelen bijvoorbeeld interne of externe factoren een rol in zo'n beslissing?

Keuze en afweging van maatschappelijke thema's

4. Hoe wordt volgens u bepaald over welke maatschappelijke kwesties passend zijn voor een bedrijf om er publiekelijk een standpunt over in te nemen?
5. Wat maakt een onderwerp [zoals diversiteit en inclusie] passend of juist gevoelig om als bedrijf erover te communiceren?
6. Zijn er ook bepaalde thema's of situaties waarvan u weet of verwacht dat bedrijven deze bewust vermijden? En wat zou de reden hiervoor zijn?

Reacties, risico's en uitdagingen

7. Hoe wordt er meestal gereageerd als een bedrijf zich uitspreekt over diversiteit en inclusie?
 - a. Probe: wat voor type reacties komen vaak voor, en hoe wordt daarmee omgegaan?
8. Welke risico's of uitdagingen komen bedrijven weleens tegen bij het uitvoeren of communiceren van diversiteit en inclusie-initiatieven? En hoe wordt hiermee omgegaan?
 - a. Probe: heeft u misschien een voorbeeld van een organisatie of bedrijf die hiermee te maken had?

Communicatie en uitvoering van het standpunt

9. Hoe ziet de communicatie rondom diversiteit en inclusie berichtgeving er meestal uit?
 - a. Probe: wat zijn volgens u belangrijke overwegingen qua toon, stijl en keuze van communicatiekanalen?

Visie op de toekomst

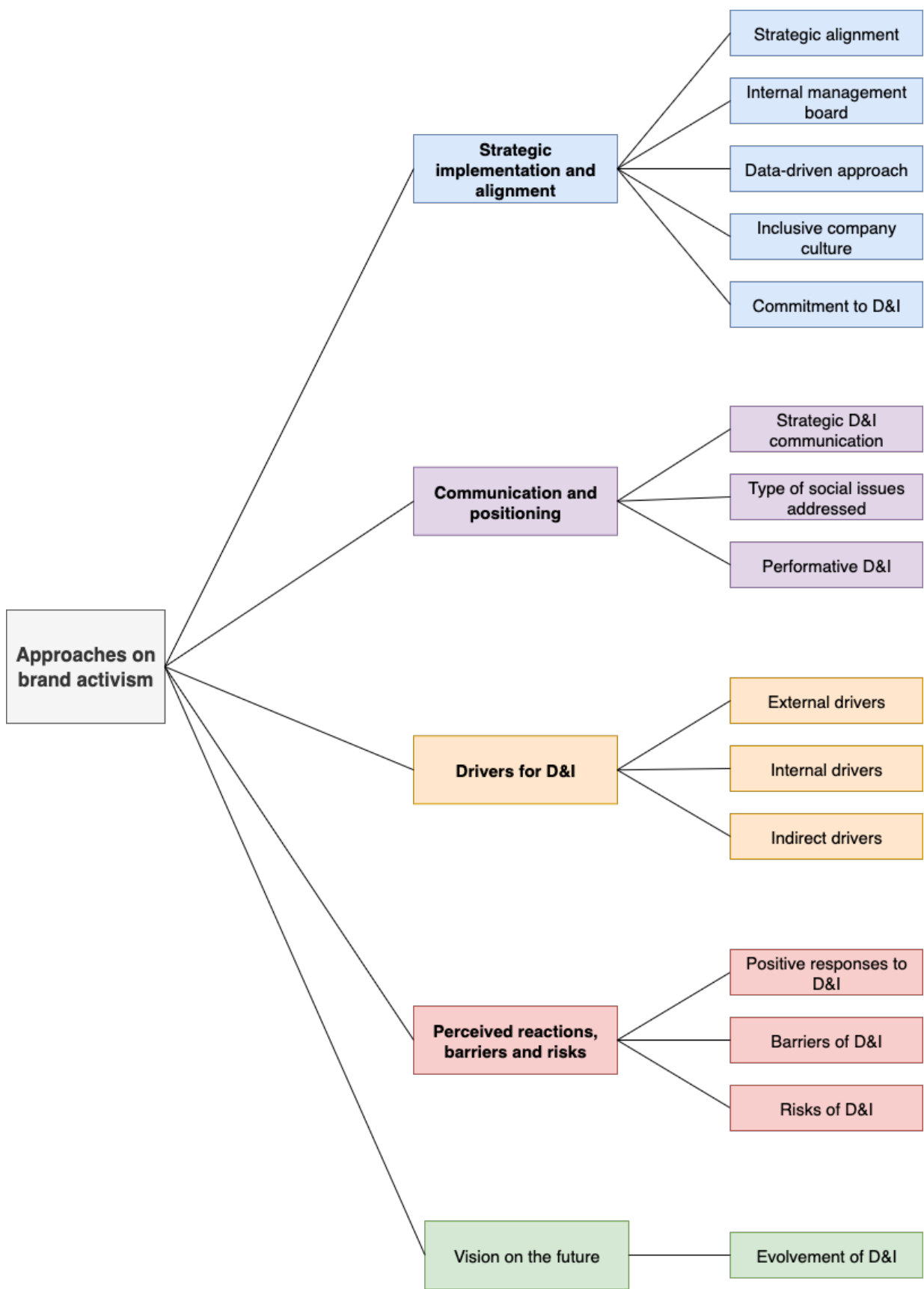
10. Hoe kijkt u naar de rol van bedrijven in maatschappelijke discussies, zowel nu als in de toekomst?
 - a. Probe: vindt u dat bedrijven daarin een actieve rol moeten blijven spelen, of juist wat voorzichtiger mee moeten omgaan?
11. En als u kijkt naar de toekomst van bedrijven als het gaat om het innemen van publieke standpunten over maatschappelijke kwesties?
 - a. Probe: verwacht u dat het verder zal toenemen of zal dat gaan veranderen?
12. Wilt u nog iets toevoegen over dit onderwerp waar we het nog niet over gehad hebben? Of iets anders willen delen?

Afsluiting

13. Tot slot nog een vraag: kent u misschien iemand—bijvoorbeeld een collega, kennis of experts—die u zou kunnen aanbevelen die ook interessante inzichten heeft over dit onderwerp en mogelijk wilt deelnemen aan mijn onderzoek? Als u iemand in gedachten heeft, dan hoor ik dat natuurlijk heel graag. U kunt er uiteraard even over nadenken, en mocht later deze week of volgende week iemand te binnen schieten, dan kunt u mij altijd even bellen of mailen. Ik zal mijn contactgegevens na afloop van dit interview met u delen.

Alvast heel erg bedankt voor het meedenken en ontzettend bedankt voor uw tijd en moeite vandaag. Uw input is heel waardevol voor mijn onderzoek, dus ik waardeer je deelname enorm. Mocht u interesse hebben in de eindresultaten, dan stuur ik u graag aan het eind van het project een factsheet toe met de meest interessante bevindingen.

Appendix F – Set-up of results sections



Appendix G – Coding networks

