

Social Media and Society: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
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Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Introduction

Diversity, equity and inclusion, also known as DEI, put together, has become an extremely important part to a brand's social media presence, social media in general and even society as a whole. Diversity broadly refers to "real or perceived physical or socio-cultural differences...and the representation of these differences." Equity refers to the treating people fairly in relation to opportunity and outcome. Inclusion is "creating a culture that fosters belonging and incorporation of diverse groups" (Arsel, 2021).

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion on Social Media

As a company and brand, it is important to include diversity, equity and inclusion into posts on all channels. Diversity, equity and inclusion show that your brand and company have a fair and healthy foundation.

A fantastic example of supporting diversity online would be that of financial services company, Morningstar.com's social media pages. Before Martin Luther King Day, two years ago, Morningstar promoted the day to encourage Americans to help volunteer to improve their communities. The company "partnered with the Black, Caribbean, and African Network (BCA) ERG to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy." On the actual day, Morningstar "highlighted employee volunteer activities on MLK Day as well as content about race, investing, and wealth from Morningstar.com on our social media accounts" (Marshall, 2021). Morningstar.com did not stop there for equality and diversity. In January, Black History Month, the company launched a social media takeover that represented Pan-African freedom and pride. The designs on the channels featured "Bauhaus design and the rich history of jazz and its Black pioneers" (Marshall, 2021).

On social media, equity is not fully about post supporting equity, however, there are such posts. Social media equity is about the equity of distribution, copyrighting, and reposting of content from one channel or page to another. Equity is best described in the Fair Use document of the Copyright Act where it states, "Fair use permits a party to use a copyrighted work without the copyright owner's permission for purposes such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, or research" (Tobin, 2023). An example of social media equity would be Instagram itself keeping its users equitable and fair. The content copyright policy of Instagram states that the company "protects the original words or images that express a fact or idea [from the original publisher]. This means that you may be able to express the same idea or fact as another author, as long as you don't copy that author's way of expressing that idea or fact" (Instagram, 2023).

Social Media inclusion "can be seen as policy intervention in order to reduce digital inequalities and to foster participation of all citizens to the information society" (Verdegem, 2011). Inclusion and diversity can go hand in hand. Diversity, being aware and supportive to different races, ethnicities, customs, genders, etc. can also be rounded into an inclusivity range. Not only could companies become aware and supportive, but also welcoming the differences is a part of the inclusion of a brand or even as people.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion on Social Media for Strategic Brand Communication

Strategic Brand Communication is “a data-driven, purposeful conversation with a brand’s stakeholders” (University of Illinois, 2023). Strategic Brand Communication is used to serve its brand followers and be able to connect. Using diversity, equity and inclusion is one of the ways to both improve connectivity and build a more inclusive following.

Diversity, equity and inclusion can be used for strategic brand communication and can be very successful. An example of using diversity, equity and inclusion is from the soap company, Dove. The company ran a campaign on the well-known, yet sexist, quote, “Run like a girl.” The campaign challenged that even though genders run differently, why can the girl not win? “Commodity feminism has emerged as an advertising strategy employed by companies seeking to build upon new movements of empowerment and the recent proliferation of the online feminist space.” The company used equity and inclusion in this advertisement to better focus on their women, who have had more of a purchasing power in the economy (Reker, 2016) . In a study relating to the purchase behavior of women conducted by SheKnows, a digital media company, it was found that 53% of women buy from a brand due to the presence of a woman in their media or advertising (Hsu, 2017).

One disturbing part to diversity, equity and inclusion is that on social media, there has been less of an acceptance of diversity throughout the years. While companies are striving to be more diverse and inclusive, while also being pushed to do so by the general public, it is different on social media. Generation Z is found to have the least amount of acceptance for diversity on social media, while Generation Y has much more of an acceptance or referred to as ‘openness to change.’ Also, along with older generations, women were found to be more accepting of diversity on social media. (Tutgun-Unal, 2021).

What Diversity Means to Society and Large

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are the broad and diverse range of groups that make up a community or population. Diversity in a group context refers to the extent to which the group consists of various individuals, viewpoints, or ideas. Examples of diverse groups include those based on racial or ethnic origin, sexual orientation, or ability. The active participation of every individual within that group or population is inclusion. Regardless of how they identify, equity is the fair and just treatment of those individuals (Johnson, 2020).

DEI can promote greater innovation, creativity, and productivity when it is given social priority. It may also help in the eradication of bias and discrimination, which can result in a society that is more equitable and just. In order to foster equality of opportunity and make sure that everyone may prosper and realize their full potential, DEI is essential in the workplace, the classroom, and other spheres of society.

Each component of DEI is important, and they are all intimately connected. Yet there are variations. A varied population is not necessarily inclusive or equitable, for instance. In a similar vein, a varied community is not always welcoming. The three must be included in every part of a community for DE&I to be a success in society.

Social Media and Body Image

Nowadays, social media can have a big impact on body image and how people feel about themselves, especially those between the ages of 20-39. According to Stacy Dixon, the age groups that lead the use of platforms such as Instagram and Facebook are the 19-29 (31%) and 30-39 (33%) (Dixon, 2022). These platforms are the ones that have the most influencer activity and these age groups are the ones that tend to have some kind of aesthetic procedure (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2020).

There are a number of variables that have been suggested to indicate a person's desire for cosmetic surgery. "Body dissatisfaction and self-esteem are two of the main reasons" (Furnham, 2012). Body dissatisfaction is a subcomponent of negative body image, usually referring to holding negative thoughts or feelings about one's body image. The daily exposure to hundreds or even thousands of images and photos on social media, including those of famous people and fitness or fashion models, is known to cause internalization of unattainable beauty standards and increase dissatisfaction with body size and shape.

Although social media has a big negative impact, it can also be positive in many ways and to many people. Social media can, on the one hand, serve as a platform for body positivity and self-love by enabling people to interact with like-minded people who have similar body types and by promoting acceptance of various body types (Walker, 2019).

Women's Image on Social Media

On social media, and even places on the globe, women are seen as less than men. According to a study done by African researcher, Emeka Obioha, "women are seen as the weaker sex whose role in society should not go beyond the home arena" (Fab-Okuzor, 2021). In another study conducted by Luo and Hao in 2007, the researchers discussed that "media may not really be an agent of change, but may help reinforce the societal ideology that already exists.... When this ideology has to do with gender, the media may go ahead to reinforce the gender differences" (Fab-Okuzor, 2021). Women are forced to live in this ideology while also seeing false and distorted images of the 'perfect woman.'

The people of Instagram tend to "upload only their 'best' photos, ones that have been carefully taken and selected to maximize attractiveness and which can be further enhanced by filters and digital alteration." While doing this, these posts can be called 'social surveillance.' This term allows users to "formulate a view of what is normal, accepted, or unaccepted in the community" (Tiggemann, 2022). In other words, social media has become a false reality. With that being said, women have been comparing photos to something that is not real. A woman, as a consumer of social media, is exposed to content of other women that is sometimes unhealthy and unattainable for most women. This influx of content has had a tremendous impact on the lives of female media consumers. "Instagram use has been linked to body dissatisfaction and body surveillance among women in correlational studies" (Tiggemann, 2022).

One specific problem in social media is the image of women being too skinny and the promotion of anorexia on social media. One study found that women have a decrease in happiness and lowered self-esteem after seeing a website with pro-ana, or pro anorexia, women (Perloff, 2014).

Moreover, social media cannot just cause a decrease in happiness, but also unhealthy living styles. “It is likely that young women who frequent the sites have higher levels of eating disorders and body image concerns” (Harper, 2008).

Equal Pay in Women’s Sports

The idea of paying male and female athletes the same amount of money for comparable performance or achievements in their respective sports is known as equal pay in sports. However, the majority of professional sports leagues around the world still have a sizable gender wage difference.

According to research published by SportsPro Media, the biggest gaps in payment among the sports for male and female athletes are in golf, basketball, and soccer, but lately, women’s soccer has had a huge win for themselves and the future of the sport (Carp, 2022). Tennis is one of the few sports where women make more than men in the United States, with top-100 players averaging \$275,860 a year, and women averaging \$307,343. But worldwide men make more money (Adelphi University, 2021).

The biggest disparity in payment among all sports occurs in soccer. In 2018 the World Cup prize for men was \$400 million while the Women’s World Cup only generated \$30 million for the winner of the tournament. But lately, women’s soccer in the United States has made progress towards equal pay. “The House of Representatives passed a bill that ensures equal compensation for U.S. women competing in international events.” It will mandate equal pay and benefits for all athletes who represent the United States in international competitions, regardless of gender (Associated Press, 2022). Although there is still a gap between the MLS and NWSL salaries, soccer has made a lot of progress toward the growth of the sport in the country and closing this pay gap between men and women.

Promoting Women’s Sports and its Popularity

The popularity of women’s sports is obviously lower than men’s in the current days, but it has been steadily increasing in recent years. Fans and industry insiders alike have been paying more attention to women's leagues and the accomplishments of top-tier female athletes all over the world. Three out of ten sports enthusiasts in the US say they watch more women's sports now than they did five years ago—more than twice as many as those who say they watch less. And nearly as many (25%) claims that their interest in women's competitions has grown over the past 12 months (Murrey, 2022).

It's timely for female sports to become more popular. With the rise of legalized betting, NIL, esports, the popularity of gaming, and fantasy leagues, live sports have never been more popular. Live sports-related streaming video is on the rise, which will increase exposure and bring in more money. In addition, female athletes are gaining millions of devoted followers on social media and are active in crucial causes like mental health and social and racial justice. In order to enhance prize money and secure athlete endorsements, marketers are investing in women's sports and signing sponsorship deals.

According to Forbes, the Women's viewing of the March Madness Finals in 2023 broke records, while men's viewing fell (Adgate, 2023). An indicator of the sport's rising popularity. The event,

which ESPN reports was the most viewed women's collegiate basketball game to date, had an audience average of 9.92 million viewers and peaked at 12.6 million during the final.

Women in Sport on Social Media

In 2022, the United States honored the 50th anniversary of the Title IX law. Title IX is the law that promotes gender equality in sport. Today, fifty-one years later, women's sports are at an all-time high in popularity (Adgate, 2021). This year, in the NCAA Tournament and the Final Four of 'March Madness,' ratings were the highest they have ever been. The tournament averaged roughly 4.5 million viewers, which is up 66% from the previous year. While women's sports are gaining more popularity, they are not receiving the same respect on social media.

According to Dr. Janet Fink, "female athletes and women's sport are still woefully under-represented in all types of media and sportswomen are rarely acclaimed solely for their athletic abilities. Instead, the focus is often on their physical appearance, femininity, and/or heterosexuality" (Fink, 2016). Women athletes have been pushed through by all types of media. Women's sports media coverage actually declined in 2006 when at the same time, women's participation was rising rapidly (Kane, 2013). "The vast majority of studies across media platforms show that female athletes and women's sports receive only a fraction of media attention afforded to male athletes and men's sports" (Fink, 2016).

Women Represented on Social Media for Brands

Influencers offer a unique perspective and relationship for brands to reach a wider audience. Through influencers, brands get exposure regarding their products and can build their following through reaching more people. The use and significance of influencers has increased dramatically over the past four years (Hudders, 2021). These influencers provide unique opportunities for individual brands to develop their image and a personal connection that allows them to better connect with the audience.

Instagram is an influencer heavy platform. The visually driven social media account provides a variety of ways for users to promote products and build a relationship with their audience. According to a study conducted in 2019, 84% of influencers worldwide are females. Additionally, in general females are likely to be influenced by females (Weishaar, 1981). As influencers, these women use their platforms for a variety of purposes. From being a role model to younger women, to reviewing and promoting products, to just building a relationship with their audience, these women are not posting meaningless content.

Storytelling

One of the main factors of an influencer building their personal brand and presence on social media is through their ability to tell stories. Brand storytelling is when users utilize narrative techniques to engage with their followers. Even though so many followers only ever see influencers and some of their favorite content creators through a screen, they are able to feel as if they know who they are as a person. This is accomplished through storytelling. A good storytelling is someone who is able to capture their audience's attention and make them want to come back for more. They provide a look into their life with background information and stories to tell who they are as a person.

Storytelling creates a relationship between the influencer and their audience. They are no longer some stranger who posts on Instagram every day. They are truly a person who their audience wants to learn more about. Trust and authenticity are built through storytelling, and these two ideas are crucial when it comes to being a successful influencer.

Brands want to work with influencers who are captivating storytellers. They want people who can tell stories about their products and how it worked for them and the positive influence it had in their life. Without the ability to tell these stories, brands would not benefit from influencers talking about their products. Influencers provide insight as to what the product can do for the consumer by providing first-hand sensory experiences they have had. The stories influencers tell about a brand and their products allow the followers to “digest and remember content more easily because it helps connect information with emotions” (Rodriguez, 2020).

Narrative Theory

Emotions are an effective way for influencers to connect with their audience and following. Followers may not just feel like another number to the influencer if they feel it is a two-way street and the influencers are open and honest about who they are. The Narrative Theory states how and why this is effective. This strategy describes the fundamental elements that lead to a positive experience for a follower. Influencers must have a “why” that engages the audience. As previously stated, they also must be impactful storytellers who can talk about their background and build an emotional connection with their following.

Social media platforms provide a way for influencers to be able to tell these stories and build connections with their audience. As a majority of modern-day influencers are women, this means they have been able to successfully build relationships with their followers on social media. However, social media is not always the friendliest and healthiest place for people to “spend” their free time.

Instagram vs. Reality

Instagram, along with many other social media platforms can create this “perfect reality”. Everyone wants to post when they look and are feeling their best. This can lead to individuals comparing what they look like to people they see on social media. According to a feminist media study, *Flat Tummy Co.* conducted a study in 2023 that looked into marketing messages and habits that created the “ideal” female body. Throughout the study, the impossible dilemma was viewed as “you must attain an ideal” and “the reality is you cannot attain the ideal” (Campbell, 2023). This is just one example of wanting “the perfect body” but knowing that it is not always obtainable.

The male gaze is another element of viewing female bodies. Male gaze is diminishing and sexualizing looking at women in a way that empowers the man (Vanbuskirk, 2022). This can have a negative impact on women as they want to look a certain way that

appeals to men. Experiencing male gaze has reportedly led to “greater body shame and social physique anxiety” (Calogero, 2004). Male gaze is another way that females can struggle compared to men on social media platforms, thus lacking equity between the two genders.

Women are constantly facing the challenge of viewing themselves again what they see on social media. Comparison and body image hardships are common when it comes to posts on Instagram. This connects back to the idea of people always wanting to post their best selves on social media, even if that is not the reality of their life. However, real Instagram posts have shown to support women and their body images of themselves (Tiggemann and Anderberg, 2020). This is where social media influencers and the trust they build for themselves, and their brand can lead to a positive relationship and space for their followers.

Influencers do not just use their platform to talk about brands and their products. Social issues, such as female body positivity, is a way for emotional and truthful connections to be made between the influencer and followers. Research suggests that it is important for women to engage “with social networks that foster respect and appreciation for one’s own body” (Cohen, Fardouly, and Slater, 2019).

Female social media influencers provide a more personal connection between followers and the brand. Trust and authenticity are two significant elements of a successful influencer. Brands want to work with influencers who have a positive and loyal following who care about what the influencer has to say. As opposed to traditional celebrities, audience’s exposed to trusted “Instagram celebrities posts show more positive attitude towards the endorsed brand” (Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu, 2019).

Nearly 85% of social media influencers worldwide are women. Through higher and more consistent levels of engagement on social media, these women are more successful in connecting with their audience and promoting products as opposed to “traditional celebrities” (Nouri, 12 September 2018). These women consistently must be mindful of their image and personal brand, while continuing to be open and honest with their followers. It is not easy to share one’s entire life on social media for all to see, but brands rely on these individuals to do so to provide a more personal side to their brand and products.

Athletes

Athletes are an amazing example of women on social media and working with brands. As athletes, these women build a brand within the sport: Serena Williams arguably being the best female tennis player, Simone Biles being one of the best American gymnasts, Carli Lloyd being a star soccer player for the United States. All these women build a following due to their performances in their sport, but they also have the ability to work with brands and use their social platforms in a positive light.

U.S. soccer star Megan Rapinoe is a primary example of this. She is a well-decorated athlete having won two World Cups, a gold and bronze medal in the Olympics, and 2019 FIFA Player of the Year (2023). Now at 37 years old, Rapinoe uses her platform for social activism, and awareness for LGBTQ rights and gender equality. It is traditional for

championship winning teams to visit the White House following their successes and after winning the World Cup in 2015, the entire U.S. Women's Soccer Team did so. However, in 2019, Rapinoe stated that she would not be attending the White House visit if the team were to win the World Cup. This created an extremely political situation as Rapinoe was open about not going to the White House with former President Trump having been in office.

Despite this situation, Rapinoe and Nike have built a positive relationship with one another. In 2021, Rapinoe launched her partnership with the brand, including a fresh line of clothing. The athlete still encourages social activism on her social media platforms, while having a successful brand partnership with a billion-dollar brand in Nike.

From smaller and growing influencers to world-wide famous athletes, brands are constantly working with influencers to promote their products and brand image. With a majority of influencers being women, they are the ones mainly building and maintaining the relationships with their followers. These women can use their social media platforms to not only promote brand products, but also create a vulnerable and safe space for other women to go to when experiencing social hardships. Through these emotions connections influencers build with their audience, they have the ability to grow their reputation and brand.

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