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Diversity, equity and inclusion at a crossroads: a scoping review of the characteristics of its workplace backlash

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Abstract

Purpose Research has shown the positive impacts of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programmes for individuals and organisations. However, there is growing resistance to DEI in the workplace. We conduct a scoping review at the intersection of the three DEI dimensions guided by three research questions: If a multi-level lens is applied, at which level (macro, meso, or micro) is there currently evidence for a backlash against DEI? Is there evidence for a research-practice gap in this literature, and to what extent are the proposed DEI models concerning the workplace empirically tested? What evidence exists for the interplay between (i) backlash as Intentional resistance or rejection and (ii) backfire as unintended negative consequences of DEI initiatives? Overall, the meso focus dominates existing articles, but more mixed-level future research may be beneficial. Furthermore, the results suggest that while there is a tendency to bridge theory and practice, a non-negligible share of the relevant contributions has a theory-oriented focus or does not aim to complement itself with practice-related empirical applications. This fact underscores the need for more empirical studies to validate DEI initiative models in practical workplace contexts. Finally, the reviewed contributions suggest that organisations wishing to minimise any negative effects of their DEI initiatives must undertake considerable, genuine, and thoughtful work.

Keywords Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, DEI, Backlash, Resistance, Workplace

Introduction

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programmes in the workplace have evolved over time from a niche human resources concern to a mainstream issue. The origins of DEI can be traced back to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s (Qin et al., 2013). However, its content has considerably expanded from historical underrepresentation and discrimination based on gender, race, and other characteristics to broader characteristics, including (but not limited to) disability, ethnicity, culture, age, religion, and sexual orientation. A key factor that has driven an interest in DEI policies is the argument that they could be beneficial to financial performance (Gomez & Bernet, 2019), increase customer loyalty (Roberson & Park, 2007), improve competitiveness if integrated into core business planning (Roberson, 2025), attract leading talent (Simons and Robertson, 2003), and make companies more adaptable (Michels et al., 2023).

Despite their expansion, DEI programmes have faced a significant backlash in recent years.

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In this study, we distinguish between backlash and backfire. This distinction is important because our review focuses primarily on backlash to DEI initiatives. Backlash can be understood as intentional resistance or rejection of DEI initiatives, which is often ideologically or emotionally motivated. For example, individuals or groups may support DEI goals, but resist symbolic or superficial implementation, regarding it as mere lip service. Furthermore, backlash can emerge due to ideological or political opposition. For example, groups that fundamentally oppose DEI initiatives often frame them as part of a "woke agenda" (Foss & Klein, 2023). Unlike intentional resistance, backfire refers to DEI practices producing unintended negative consequences, such as reinforcing stereotypes or triggering resentment, despite good intentions (Leslie, 2019). Importantly, backlash and backfire do not operate in isolation. A flawed DEI initiative can harm its own goals. However, this clear backfire situation may provoke backlash through ideological or political opposition. This example illustrates that backfire is the direct and causal effect of implementing the DEI initiative. In contrast, backlash is not caused by the DEI initiative itself. Rather, it has an indirect and contextual association with it that cannot be described as a clear-cut cause-and-effect relationship. The example also addresses the rare perspective in the DEI literature that backlash and backfire are not separate phenomena, have complex interactions in forward and feedback loops, and should be research beyond binary categorisation.

We conceptualise "backlash" as having possible manifestations across three (macro, meso and micro) levels and take distinct forms. In line with Schrempf-Stirling and Van Buren (2020), we defined the micro level as the one in which the unit of analysis is the individual (e.g., employees or managers). The meso/organisational level of analysis regarded the organisation as a workplace and the unit of analysis (Ibid.). Macro-level studies were defined as those in which the unit of analysis extends beyond a specific organisation (Ibid.). At the macro level, backlash may involve policy retrenchment, such as scaling back or dismantling DEI programs in response to political or societal pressures, and stigmatisation, where DEI is framed as illegitimate or harmful in public discourse (Foss & Klein, 2023; Lee, 2023; McGowan et al., 2025). At the meso level, organisations may exhibit symbolic compliance or engage in diversity washing, signalling commitment rhetorically while not undertaking substantive action, nor unlearning prior DEI practices (Baker et al., 2024; Hamza-Orlinska et al., 2024). At the micro level, backlash may consist in resistance through individual attitudes and behaviours, including bias, scepticism, identity threat, or negative emotional reactions toward DEI initiatives (Boring & Delfgaauw, 2024; Garg, 2024).

Furthermore, the implementation context greatly matters regarding observed outcomes (Hamza-Orlinska et al., 2024; Wallrich et al., 2024). Critical voices originate from scholarly contributions that, for example, question the effectiveness of current DEI initiatives (Anand & Winters, 2008; Kulik et al., 2007; Foss & Klein, 2023), argue that it is only observable in the short-run (Chang et al., 2019), or emphasise a lack of any empirical evidence (Devine & Ash, 2022). This may be due to the research-practice gap observed in the broader (human resource) management literature (Bansal et al., 2012; de Frutos-Belizón et al., 2021; Negt & Haunschild, 2024). In addition, scholarly evidence shows that DEI initiatives can sometimes have negative, unintended psychological and emotional consequences, such as bias and negative perceptions and feelings (Anand et al., 2008; Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Dover et al., 2016; Thomas, 1989).

The backlash against DEI extends beyond the realm of academia. Many former corporate proponents of DEI initiatives – including many prominent U.S. companies – have suspended them (Murray & Bohannon, 2025; Williams, 2025), and Europe is not far behind. Using qualitative methods, Hamza-Orlinska et al. (2024) provide detailed evidence over eight years about the subsidiary of a French multinational company that experienced the phenomenon of policy unlearning after being sold to a Polish state-owned company. These changes included – but were not limited to – ending diversity hiring targets, renaming DEI teams, and removing DEI references from reports (Ibid.). Stakeholders have also propelled the backlash against DEI initiatives, including employees who reject organisational DEI endeavours (Lee, 2023). However, the headwind for DEI initiatives has also triggered opposition from external stakeholders. For instance, the North American warehouse giant Costco Wholesale was confronted with activist group demands to evaluate and publish a report on the risks that its diversity policies and goals pose (Williams, 2025). The outlined context of misapplying and/or misunderstanding DEI in the workplace could potentially have serious consequences for existing DEI measures. These include decreasing representation and professionalisation and increasing inequality and marginalisation (Blackstock et al., 2024; Follmer et al., 2024).

Against this background, we aim to contribute to a better and more multifaceted understanding of the backlash against DEI by conducting a scoping review. This is driven by the methodology, while our analysis is guided by three research questions (RQ).

- RQ1: If a multi-level lens is applied, at which level (macro, meso, or micro) is there currently evidence for a backlash against DEI?
- RQ2: Is there evidence for a research-practice gap in the existing DEI policies in the workplace literature, and to what extent are the proposed DEI models concerning the workplace empirically tested?
- RQ3: What evidence does exist for the interplay between (i) backlash as Intentional resistance or rejection and (ii) backfire as unintended negative consequences of DEI initiatives?

The background is as follows: Mainstream DEI research has about half a century history focused on specific aspects of DEI, including promoting diversity and combating exclusion or inequality (Fitzsimmons et al., 2023). Owing to the richness of this topic, DEI subsets of dimensions have been covered in systematic reviews. However, no scholarly contribution yet exists to analyse the literature at the intersection of diversity, equity, and inclusion. This is a significant omission because the outcome at the intersection between diversity, equity, and inclusion is "belonging", which is defined as "[f]eeling valued, heard, and accepted" (Pinkett, 2023, p. xix). Expanding our knowledge of the intersection of diversity, equity, and inclusion has high practical value because it will help organisations understand and engage better with their employees and have a better chance to excel in their strategic and operational activities. Against this backdrop, this scoping review focuses on the intersection of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

The goal of the review article is to suggest some actionable insights for managers and organisational leaders. Accordingly, we focus on peer-reviewed business and management literature. Therefore, we do not extend our scope to neighbouring disciplines such as law, education, or sociology, as doing so would dilute the managerial applicability of our findings and conflict with the practical orientation of this review. This article is structured as follows: The following section presents the methodological considerations guiding this scoping review. Subsequently, the results are analysed by grouping them into three subsections to answer the three respective research questions. The article concludes with a discussion, conclusion, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

Methodology

Our foremost consideration involved the type of review we would conduct. In such a setting, a common question is whether to conduct a systematic or scoping review. Although there is a growing scholarly interest in systematic reviews, which are commonly used, they are more appropriate when addressing specific questions related to the "feasibility, appropriateness, meaningfulness or effectiveness of a certain treatment or practice" (Munn et al., 2018, p. 3). In contrast, a scoping review can be used "[t]o identify key characteristics or factors related to a concept" (Munn et al., 2018, p. 2). Since answering the three research questions in this study consists of mapping key characteristics and factors associated with the backlash against DEI policies in the workplace, we decided to conduct a scoping review.

Literature review and screening considerations

To identify relevant articles for the conducted scoping literature review, we followed a similar set of steps suggested in other reviews (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Dinh et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2024; de Netto et al., 2020). In common with previous reviews from the broader literature (Assmann et al., 2023; de Netto et al., 2020; Martínez-Vázquez et al., 2021), we used Scopus as our primary database for the literature search. This decision was based on evidence that "Scopus reports a higher number of papers than the Web of Science [WoS] for all disciplines…" (Harzing et al., 2016, p. 8). This comprehensive database is aligned with the goal of this article to provide actionable insights for management and business scholars and professionals because it contains relevant peer-reviewed business and management journals from the standard Academic Journal Guide (AJG) 2024 of the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS). The AJG ranks journals from 1 (the lowest) to 4 (the highest). In our analysis, we included all contributions to achieve maximum completeness of the existing peer-reviewed literature.

To enhance comprehensiveness, we cross-checked our sources with Google Scholar, which facilitates the discovery of both widely cited and less visible scholarly contributions (Martín-Martín et al., 2018). The study found that of the highly cited publications in Scopus, 16% in Humanities, Literature & Arts were missing in Scopus, while Google Scholar included them. For Social Sciences, the respective value is 11% (Martín-Martín et al., 2018, p. 12). Furthermore, Scopus and WoS have a known bias toward English-language journals, whereas Google Scholar includes more non-English sources, reducing language bias (Martín-Martín et al., 2018). Despite coverage differences, Spearman correlations between Google Scholar and Scopus/WoS citation counts were very high (0.78–0.99), meaning Google Scholar is reliable for identifying influential contributions (Ibid.).

According to de Netto et al. (2020, p. 3), Scopus can formulate a more" detailed and specific string search

query than Web of Science. Therefore, we developed a keyword search in Scopus. By building on Lee (2023) and our own expertise, we sought titles, abstracts, and keywords "TITLE-ABS-KEY" by implementing variants of the expressions "diversity AND equity AND inclusion", "DEI" and words like "workplace", "job", "work", "employer" and "employee". The logic of this decision was based on our goal not to exclude relevant contributions if they formulated the research focus by using keywords other than those indicated in the Scopus synthase. In the second stage, we implemented more restrictive criteria by adding keywords closely related to our topic, research questions and the trends in the existing literature. Specifically, we added keywords including "alienation", "anger", "backfire", "backlash", "backslid", "bias", "discontent", "discrimination", "ineffective", "injustice", "litigation", "lawsuit", "misperception", "misunderstanding", "peril", "rage", "rebellion", "resentment", "resistance", "reverse discrimination", "risk", "shame", "unfair", and "unjust" to our list. Most of these words were intended to capture the content of backfire. The broader keyword search string was intended to identify articles that did not explicitly frame their contribution in terms of the notion of "backfire". For the third research question, we extended the syntax to include words such as "backfire" and "unintended consequences".

As mentioned in our introduction, the purpose of the scoping literature review was to analyse the existing literature at the intersection of diversity, equity, and inclusion. This means that contributions focusing only on some of the three DEI dimensions were excluded, and we restricted ourselves to contributions in English –standard practice in the related academic literature. We are confident this did not introduce bias into our findings because our preliminary search revealed this did not lead to the loss of essential information. Nor did we introduce a time limit in the syntax because this could have eliminated important findings. However, teaching case studies and notes were excluded as their primary goal is to further the practical understanding of a topic of interest. Both articles and literature reviews were considered and captured by "ar" and "re" in the Scopus syntax. The literature search was restricted to the field of business and management using "(LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "BUSI"))" because we assumed that this was of greatest relevance for the practice-oriented direction of our study.

Data collection and coding

Implementing the keyword search strategy and inclusion criteria produced an initial sample of 109 papers. Twenty-six articles had not been published in journals in the AJG 2024 list and were therefore excluded. By screening the references, discussing them, and agreeing that they did not comply with the inclusion criteria, we excluded 57 further articles. Subsequently, we screened the remaining 26 articles, to which we manually added two relevant references. The final sample comprised 28 articles. Figure 1 summarises the data collection process.

Concerning the analysis process, we exported the bibliographic information from Scopus into a CSV file for data analysis in Microsoft Excel. We implemented a four-eyes principle; we screened the articles and decided collaboratively, based on consensus, whether to include or exclude a contribution in our analysis. We independently screened all 109 records. The observed agreement was 93.6% (102/109), with 7 discrepancies resolved through discussion before final inclusion.

For the articles we included in our study, we noted the research methods, theoretical background, sample, key findings, research question, and goals in each case. Our analysis was guided by conceptual frameworks as part of its coding scheme, thereby rendering better structured and more robust results (Grassi et al., 2021; Paul & Criado, 2020). We implemented various thematic coding procedures informed by our research questions and inductively by the data. Coding into multiple categories as part of each coding scheme was not allowed.

The first type of coding was prompted by our first research question, which uses a multi-level (micro-meso-macro) lens to obtain a more nuanced picture of the main reasons for the backlash against DEI policies in the workplace. Here, we drew on the logic of Grassi and Toschi (2021), Schrempf-Stirling and Van Buren (2020), and van Wijk et al. (2019) and coded the contributions into micro, meso (organisational), and macro categories by defining each level and evaluating whether the level of each analysed publication. In line with Schrempf-Stirling and Van Buren (2020), we defined the micro level as the one in which the unit of analysis is the individual (e.g., employees or managers). The meso/organisational level of analysis regarded the organisation as a workplace and the unit of analysis (Schrempf-Stirling & Van Buren, 2020). Macro-level studies were defined as those in which the unit of analysis extends beyond a specific organisation (Schrempf-Stirling & Van Buren, 2020). If a contribution provided relevant insight for more than one level, we coded the article as containing a multi-level (micro, meso, macro) approach.

Multi-level coding sought to provide an initial picture of the overall employee-related, organisational, and broader society-driven directions in the existing relevant DEI literature. The second and third research

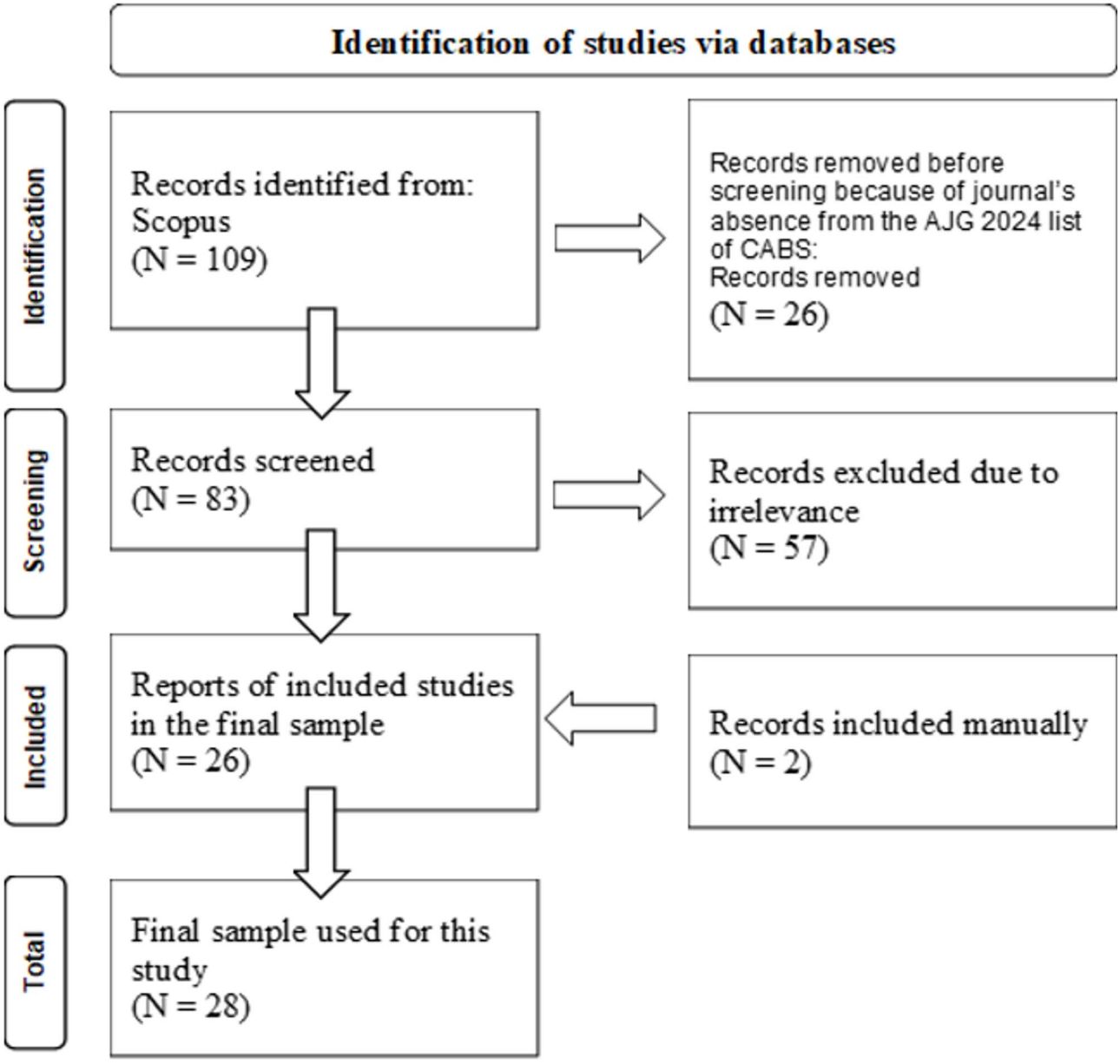


Fig. 1 Workflow of data identification, screening and inclusion. Source: Authors' own work

questions refine these initial broader insights. The second research question asks whether a research-practice gap (de Frutos-Belizón et al., 2020; Negt & Haunschild, 2024; Sanders et al., 2008) is the reason for the backlash against DEI policies in the workplace. When coding, we followed several steps. When a paper contained a theoretical model but did not operationalise or test it, we retained it as conceptual (e.g., Warren & Warren, 2023, Table A1). Conversely, whenever primary data (surveys, experiments, interviews, field designs, secondary data analyses) were used to examine or apply theoretically framed DEI questions, we coded it as theoretical and practical (e.g., Kirgios et al., 2025; Belmi et al., 2024; Hoang et al., 2022, in Table A1). If no theoretical model was developed, but empirical data were analysed, it was classified as a purely practical paper (for further details, see Table A1). The final coding scheme was guided by our study's third research question, focusing on employee and team-related psychological underpinnings (biases and perceptions) of the DEI backlash.

Empirical results

This section presents the answers to the three research questions (RQ1–RQ3) in this study. These are based on the literature search, data collection, screening, and

Table 1 List of studies according to the (multi-)level perspective

Level	Article	Number (*N*)
Macro-level – societal, jurisdictional, or broader	Chaubey and Kuknor (2024)	1
Meso-level – organisation	Alahakoon et al. (2024), Belmi et al. (2024), Berdahl and Bhattacharyya (2024), Boring and Delfgaauw (2024), Boulet et al. (2023), Folberg et al. (2024), Garlington et al. (2023), Hamza-Orlinska et al. (2024), Hoang et al. (2022), Jin et al. (2024), Marabelli and Lirio (2024), McCleary-Gaddy et al. (2023), Melaku (2024), Nittrouer et al. (2025), Smith and Griffiths (2024), Story et al. (2024), Thatcher et al. (2023), Thomas et al. (2022), Waples and Botsford Morgan (2023), Warren and Warren (2023)	20
Micro-level – individual	Garg (2024), Knowlton et al. (2022).	2
Mixed level	Baker et al. (2024), Daya (2014), Kirgios et al. (2025), Stephens et al. (2020), Zhang-Zhang (2024).	5
Total		28

Source: Authors' own work

Table 2 List of studies according to the research-practice gap classification

Classification	Article	Number (*N*)
Theoretical focus with practical implementation	Baker et al. (2024), Belmi et al. (2024), Berdahl and Bhattacharyya (2024), Boring and Delfgaauw (2024), Chaubey and Kuknor (2024), Daya (2014), Folberg et al. (2024), Garg (2024), Garlington et al. (2023), Hamza-Orlinska et al. (2024), Hoang et al. (2022), Jin et al. (2024), Kirgios et al. (2025), Melaku (2024), Smith and Griffiths (2024)	15
Conceptual contribution - theoretical focus without practical implementation	Knowlton et al. (2022), Marabelli and Lirio (2024), McCleary-Gaddy et al. (2023), Nittrouer et al. (2025), Stephens et al. (2020), Story et al. (2024), Thatcher et al. (2023), Thomas et al. (2022), Waples and Botsford Morgan (2023), Warren and Warren (2023), Zhang-Zhang (2024)	11
Practical focus only	Alahakoon et al. (2024), Boulet et al. (2023)	2
Total		28

Source: Authors' own work

coding considerations presented in the methodology section. Table 1 summarises our main findings, which are discussed in the context of each research question.

RQ1: Insights about the multi-level underpinnings of the backlash against workplace DEI policies

Table 1 contains the results concerning the first research question (RQ1). We applied the multi-level lens perspective discussed in the introduction and methodology section to explain the backlash against DEI. The approach consists of four categories: macro (outside the organisation), meso (within the organisation), micro (individual), and mixed (any combination of the macro, meso, and micro levels).

Most of the articles summarised in Table 1 relate to the meso level, which is unsurprising given our focus on DEI initiatives in the workplace. Focusing on the micro level was rare, although the macro level alone was even less common. A quarter of the articles used a mixed approach, covering several analysis levels; this group included contributions by Zhang-Zhang (2024) on the macro, meso, and micro levels, and Daya (2014) and Stephens et al. (2020) on the meso and micro levels. Lastly, we classified Baker et al. (2024) and Kirgios et al. (2025) as mixed level for combining the macro and meso perspectives; these contributions accounted for interactions with external stakeholders as a broader societal category.

Overall, a conclusion can be drawn that while the meso focus dominates the existing articles, future mixed-level research may be beneficial. Combining two or more levels in the multi-level perspective can help organisations react better to their environment and counteract the backlash against DEI initiatives in the workplace.

RQ2: A research-practice gap and the backlash against workplace DEI policies

Table 2 contains the results concerning the second research question on the research-practice gap in the context of workplace DEI initiatives. More than half of the reviewed contributions provided both theoretical insights and empirical (qualitative or quantitative) implementation, suggesting a bridge between theory and practice in these cases. To this belongs Warren and Warren (2023), who developed a comprehensive model of virtue-based allyship that can address unconscious bias. The authors thoroughly tested the model through expert interviews, demonstrating that researchers and practitioners can constructively collaborate. In contrast, 11 articles, including Thomas et al. (2022), Story et al. (2024), and Waples and Botsford Morgan

(2023), highlight various underpinnings of DEI policies without setting themselves the goal of complementing them with real-world empirical testing.

RQ3: Adding fuel to the fire: The interplay between backlash and backfire

Several contributions in the emergent literature on the interplay between backlash and backfire provide evidence for their complex and context-specific relationship. Garlington et al. (2023) show that racial code-switching, a behavioural adaptation to perceived DEI expectations, imposes psychological costs such as shame and identity threat. These unintended harms (backfire) increase turnover intentions, a form of behavioural backlash. Boring and Delfgaauw (2024) demonstrate that social desirability bias leads managers to express support for DEI while resisting it in practice. This misalignment between stated and actual attitudes reflects both a backfire in perception and a backlash in behaviour. Kirgios et al. (2025) find that measurable DEI goals can stigmatise applicants as "diversity hires," undermining their sense of belonging (backfire), while simultaneously provoking resistance from hiring managers (backlash). Smith and Griffiths (2024) show that provocative DEI terminology can elicit emotional discomfort, reducing engagement and triggering rejection. Belmi et al. (2024) reveal that disclosing first-generation status may activate deficit thinking among employers as a backfire, which may lead to biased and non-inclusive hiring decisions as backlash.

The findings of these studies imply that backlash and backfire should not be regarded as distinct categories, but rather as having intricate interrelationships that influence the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of DEI efforts. The presence of feedback loops highlights the need for further conceptual and empirical work on DEI initiative models of DEI evaluation. Future research should investigate how specific design features of DEI initiatives contribute to backlash and how stakeholder engagement could mitigate this phenomenon.

Discussion, conclusions, limitations, and future research

Three main reasons for the backlash against DEI emerge from our study: (1) a research practice-practice gap, (2) inequality and bias, including (but not limited to) algorithmic decision-making, and (3) organisational dynamics, such as insufficient support from managers and decision-makers.

The gap between research and practice is evident from various studies. For example, some models or concepts may work in theory but have not been applied in practice. The reasons are unclear, and we can only speculate about this omission; it may be due to a company's lack of financial and time resources, a lack of interest, DEI washing, or the relevance of applied DEI policies not being correctly understood. A shortage of information about such models may also play a role, as articles published in academic journals rarely target a practitioner audience. Researchers must aim to develop their research questions in collaboration with practitioners, such as those proposed in the context of clinical applications by Chakraborty et al. (2020). Rubin (2015) and Rakes (2022) also address gaps in research and practice. With a focus on the hospitality industry, Gursoy and Maier (2023) advocate the mobilisation and coordination of resources and multiple stakeholder groups. However, so long as DEI concepts are viewed as theoretical and relevant only to academia, their perceived practical significance is limited.

We see a growing relevance in algorithmic decision-making due to the increasing proliferation of AI and HR analytics. Indeed, we believe in the opportunity they offer to reduce bias and stereotypes previously induced by humans. Bader and Kaiser (2019) conceptualised "the user interface that presents decisions to humans as a mediator between human detachment and attachment and, thus, between algorithmic and humans' decisions" (p. 655). However, more emphasis should be put on non-discriminatory programming and testing of such AI and HR analytic tools in terms of the potential risk of DEI policy infringements.

Concerning organisational dynamics, such as insufficient support from managers and decision-makers, we understand the risks posed by managers who do not "walk the talk". This is exemplified by words such as "pinkwashing" (Blackmer, 2019), disseminating messages that are superficially sympathetic towards the LGBTQ community, which in effect have little to do with LGBTQ equality or inclusion. The same can be said for other aspects of DEI and is not limited to sexual orientation. For DEI policies to function efficiently, senior management must be convinced of the policies and their value, for example, by communicating DEI targets for an organisation, as shown in a study by Kirgios et al. (2025). If the higher ranks do not adhere to their own DEI policies, acceptance by lower-level decision-makers cannot be expected. It is relevant for organisations to highlight the value of DEI policies and their contribution to attracting, recruiting, and developing employees regardless of a person's characteristics.

Potential limitations posed by this study may be attributed to its methodological approach. Scoping reviews are constrained in that they focus on the breadth rather than the depth of information on a

particular topic (Tricco et al., 2016). However, we believe our methodological selection is suitable since we seek to map out academic literature covering the backlash of DEI, a relatively new phenomenon. In addition, we have restricted our sources to those published in English in peer-reviewed scholarly journals focusing on business and management. Further limitations relate to potential biases in the evidence base. Restricting our sample to journals listed in the Academic Journal Guide may introduce publication bias. A time-lag is possible because recently published or in-press studies may not yet be indexed in Scopus or available in Google Scholar. Parts of the literature—particularly empirical studies—are US-centric, which may limit the generalisability of findings to other institutional and cultural contexts. While we acknowledge that adjacent disciplines such as sociology, psychology, education and law may offer valuable insights, our scope prioritises literature directly relevant to organisational practice. Future research could expand this review to include interdisciplinary perspectives to enrich the understanding of DEI backlash. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating additional databases, grey literature, and regionally diverse sources. Finally, some studies, such as Chaubey and Kuknor (2024), focus on a specific society, which may hamper the transferability of the findings to other nations and cultures.

Acknowledging that DEI is broad in its content and implementation may require a more interdisciplinary and comprehensive approach to address its multifaceted nature. An increasing focus on DEI blind spots, as proposed by the authors of this article, was also suggested by Rašković et al. (2025), but these have hitherto not attracted sufficient scholarly interest. To expand the breadth of DEI, some organisations have added *belonging* as the intersection of diversity, equity, and inclusion dimensions (Pinkett, 2023) to their DEI strategies to create the maximum possible connectedness among employees. "*To belong* means to fit, or to fit in (the opposite of being or feeling "out of place"), to be a member of something, or to have a right to be in a location – all of which can be understood in both metaphorical and physical terms" (Eckersley & Vos, 2022, p. 2). Belonging can be increased in different ways, including but not limited to the creation of emotional bonds (Chen et al., 2024).

What practical implications and concrete, actionable recommendations for practitioners dealing with DEI backlash can be derived from this article's findings? DEI should be embedded at both the strategic and operational levels of an organisation. A practical implementation workflow can be guided by a model such as the one proposed by Galpin et al. (2012). Although originally focused on sustainability, ii is directly applicable to DEI as a dimension of social sustainability. By leveraging Galpin et al.'s framework, organisations can strategically integrate DEI into their mission, values, and overall strategy. Cultivating a culture of belonging through a shared vision and inclusive communication can further reinforce DEI principles. Moreover, top-down initiatives should be complemented by bottom-up, participatory co-creation processes to foster trust and engagement across all levels of the organisation. As Galpin et al. suggest, strategic DEI efforts must be supported by robust operational mechanisms. These include inclusive recruitment practices, bias awareness training, leadership development programs, and performance management systems that reflect DEI values. Additionally, implementing intersectional DEI metrics enables organisations to assess nuanced patterns of exclusion and inclusion, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their DEI impact.

Emphasis should be placed on measuring and evaluating the efficiency of such DEI-related belonging initiatives. Further potential substantive research through which DEI initiatives might plausibly regain and defend their name and reputation could be based on experiment designs allowing for causal interpretation (Aguinis et al., 2023). Bohonos (2023) proposes diversity officer development programmes to drive in-house DEI programmes. When efficiently developed and evaluated, such programmes can play a crucial role in ensuring that DEI initiatives are not only well-integrated into organisational practices but also lead to meaningful and lasting change.

If properly organised, stakeholder engagement may me an effective mechanism to better understand and address the context-specific reasons for DEI resistance at the workplace. What are some suggestions for stakeholder engagement in the context of the three main reasons for the backlash against DEI that this study has discussed? First, the research-practice gap can be addressed by engaging stakeholders in the co-creation of DEI initiatives by involving internal and external stakeholders. Stakeholder feedback should be used to refine DEI metrics and reporting. The effectiveness of DEI initiatives can be evaluated and improved based on created by participatory measures, such as surveys and roundtables. To ensure credibility, stakeholders should have free access to insights on how stakeholder engagement translates into organisational decisions.

Second, bias and inequality can be addressed by including marginalised stakeholders in the development and improvement of solutions. Targeted consultation could help to uncover non-obvious forms of exclusion and can motivate corrective measures. Intersectional dialogue can foster better understanding of

overlapping human identities and vulnerabilities and more inclusive solutions. Due to intense technology advancements, organisations should combine stakeholder engagement with the mitigation of inequality and bias by regulating and regularly monitoring algorithmic decision-making and artificial intelligence-aided human resources tools.

Third, organisational dynamics can be tackled if leadership is engaged in sustained and constructive for both parties' dialogue with employees. Empowering employees as internal stakeholders to lead DEI change may counteract DEI's backlash. Fostering psychologically safe environments is vital in such a setting to enhance their trust and protect them from retaliation. This includes establishing confidential reporting channels, facilitating open dialogue, and protecting employees from retaliation. A similar goal can be set by monitoring and adjusting alignment between DEI initiatives and the overarching organisational culture. Whatever of the mentioned three dimensions in our study is addressed via stakeholder engagement, it is essential to ensure that the set of chosen stakeholders for engagement measures is relevant, inclusive, transparent and participatory, and no relevant party is excluded (Tregidga et al., 2022).

Although our review identifies three dominant explanations for DEI backlash and offers practical implications, the effectiveness of these responses is likely to vary across boundary conditions. Future research should systematically examine how factors such as political and legal environments, industry norms, organisational size and maturity, unionisation, and global versus local operating models influence both the implementation and outcomes of DEI initiatives. Furthermore, DEI backlash and backfire, as defined in this study, do not have clear-cut borders, are interrelated, including through context-specific forward and feedback loops. Addressing these aspects would enable scholars and practitioners to move beyond generic prescriptions toward concrete, context-sensitive strategies that balance inclusiveness with organisational realities. Lessons learnt from own and peer experience concerning various DEI elements may help organisations develop virtuous DEI improvement cycles.

To conclude, this paper articulates the need for a more comprehensive research agenda and proposes some promising research directions. By addressing the identified gaps and deficits in the existing literature, scholars can enhance the understanding of DEI measures and reaffirm their position as a genuine and effective means to promote organisational change. This future academic focus will advance the scholarly discourse and inform practical strategies for fostering DEI. As a result, it will contribute to narrowing the existing research-practice gap in this field, ensuring that DEI is recognised as more than just a buzzword.

Methodologically, most contributions that belong to the meso level in Table A1 are quantitative (Berdahl & Bhattacharyya, 2024), Boring & Delfgaauw, 2024; Smith & Griffiths, 2024; Hoang et al., 2022), Boulet et al., 2023), Garlington et al., 2023; Belmi et al., 2024; Folberg et al., 2024). Qualitative studies (Warren & Warren, 2023), Melaku, 2024; Hamza-Orlinska et al., 2024) are scarcer. Mixed methods (Jin et al., 2024) are rarely used. Since conceptual contributions remain numerous at the meso level, there is ample room for practice-relevant empirical research. In this regard, multi-site field studies, testing conceptual contributions in different testing and causal inference studies within organisations could allow DEI initiatives to gain credibility, stakeholders' trust, and establish good practices. Since micro-level contributions remain qualitative (Knowlton et al., 2022), longitudinal and lab or field experiments could contribute to the mitigation of the backlash against DEI. The macro-level evidence (Chaubey & Kuknor, 2024) is thin and qualitative. Against this background, there is potential for quantitative generalisable studies with policy implications, such as event studies, time series and difference-in-difference settings.

Appendix

Table A1 Structured thematic synthesis table

Nr.	Author/Title	Research question / Goals	Theoretical background	Methods/key measures	Sample (*N*)	Key findings	RQ1	RQ2
1	Garg. (2024)	The effect of line management on the performance of highly skilled performers from DEI in HEI	CASCUTA theory as an abbreviation for "Curbing down aspirations and success by continuous ulterior tyranny of autocrats"	A mixed methods approach (literature review and an auto-ethnographic case study)	Employees in a UK university	The finding of this study is how the autocracy of a line manager can kill the enthusiasm of a team member and "and convert her/him into ordinary/substandard, akin to dead plant" (p. 1755)	micro level	Theoretical focus with practical implementation
2	Chaubey and Kuknor (2024)	Examine the barriers that act as a hindrance and are the reason behind the struggles for the successful practice of diversity and inclusion in the Asian region.	Cognitive diversity theory, feminist leadership theories, and social identity theory.	Semi-structured interviews	21 interviews with DEI leaders, DEI consultants and human resources experts from Asian countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, UAE, Singapore, Bangladesh and Nepal	The study highlights the difficulties patriarchal societies face in promoting diversity and inclusiveness in the workplace. The patriarchal mindset often results in a lack of gender, racial and cultural diversity in the workforce, leading to discrimination, harassment and unequal opportunities. The study suggests that overcoming these challenges requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders. Implementing policies and programs that encourage diversity and inclusiveness (e.g., equal pay, flexible working hours etc. is crucial	macro level	Theoretical focus with practical implementation
3	Zhang-Zhang (2024)	Identify factors that influence female labour participation, leadership positions and entrepreneurship	Social constructivism	Literature review	Not applicable	Double-loop gendering in the workplace is a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and societal factors that perpetuate gender inequality in Japan	mixed level	Conceptual paper - theoretical focus without practical implementation
4	Marabelli and Lirio (2024).	This paper aims to shed light on the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) opportunities and challenges of implementing the metaverse in the workplace, and the role played by artificial intelligence (AI)	Not applicable	Literature review	Not applicable	Metaverse can pose challenges in the context to DEI	meso level	Conceptual paper - theoretical focus without practical implementation

Table A1 (continued)

Nr.	Author/Title	Research question / Goals	Theoretical background	Methods/key measures	Sample (*N*)	Key findings	RQ1	RQ2
5	Alahakoon et al. (2024)	Gain a holistic view of the outcomes derived from DEI statements as a recruitment marketing strategy	Not applicable	systematic literature review on DEI statements in job advertisements and other recruitment materials, such as recruitment brochures and letters	Articles (*N* = 39)	Feeling of inferiority (in-groups), feeling of exclusion (out-group), mixed results regarding equality perceptions	meso level	Practical focus only
6	Daya (2014)	Provide organisations with key considerations that need to be managed to move beyond employment equity compliance, to a commitment to multicultural, diverse and inclusive organisations	Components from diversity and inclusion management models	mixed method approach	Survey (*N* = 2248), semi-structured interviews (*N* = 42), survey (*N* = 248 respondents), focus groups (*N* = 6)	Developed a set of diversity and inclusion management considerations at the organisational, interpersonal and personal level. Pluralistic inclusion should be considered. DEI initiatives should not be viewed as a compliance think box	mixed level	Theoretical focus with practical implementation
7	Berdahl and Bhattacharyya (2024).	Examine whether women who engage in racist behavior are also conferred relative status at work	Organizational culture and intersectionality	Three experiments	*N* = 235–330	White women are rewarded for expressing support for beliefs that mirror systemic inequality in the corporate US world, which may undermine DEI efforts. Developed "queen bee syndrome" theoretical argument	meso level	Theoretical focus with practical implementation
8	Boring and Delfgaauw (2024)	Do workers speak their mind about sexism and about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies in the workplace?	Social desirability bias	List experiment survey	*N* = 1600	Documented substantial social desirability bias. Managers exhibit a larger bias than non-managerial employees. These findings suggest that a sizable fraction of managers may pay lip service and may not actually support DEI policies. This difference between voiced and real attitudes may make organisations overestimate support for DEI policies in their workforce	meso level	Theoretical focus with practical implementation

Table A1 (continued)

Nr.	Author/Title	Research question / Goals	Theoretical background	Methods/key measures	Sample (*N*)	Key findings	RQ1	RQ2
9	Story et al. (2024)	Examine three sources of psychological threats that can shape how members of the advantaged group members perceive DEI initiatives, influencing their level of diversity resistance. Propose a model based on psychological capital to counteract resistance	Theories related to resource threat, symbolic threat and ingroup morality threat	Literature review	Not applicable	Proposed model based on psychological capital to counteract diversity resistance	meso level	Conceptual paper - theoretical focus without practical implementation
10	Thomas et al. (2022)	Reviewing research on lactation and offering a conceptual model on the critical antecedents that facilitate employee lactation behaviours, and the work-related moderators that meaningfully impact those relationships	Stigma, role-related, resource-related, and work-family perspectives and considerations at the intersection of work and family domains	Literature review	Not applicable	Proposed model that explains the process of workplace lactation. Focus lies on how critical sets of work-related resources and challenges impact the relationships of lactation uptake, employee-related outcomes and organisation-related outcomes	meso level	Conceptual paper - theoretical focus without practical implementation
11	Waples and Botsford Morgan (2023)	How to reduce prejudice through supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) via a newly proposed model	macro-level (i.e. institutional theory and institutional logics) theories from sociology and strategic management, meso-level theories from leadership and strategy, and micro-level organisational behaviour and human resource management theories	Literature review	Not applicable	Introduces a multi-level model to reduce prejudice through supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) at the institutional, organisational, and individual levels	meso level	Conceptual paper - theoretical focus without practical implementation

Table A1 (continued)

Nr.	Author/Title	Research question / Goals	Theoretical background	Methods/key measures	Sample (*N*)	Key findings	RQ1	RQ2
12	Warren and Warren (2023)	To build a new model of virtue-based allyship development in the workplace and study how a set of virtues fuelled by moral motivation might support sustainable allyship in the workplace and reduce bias	Virtue ethics perspective	(a) Used previous literature to develop essential criteria that capture the characteristics of exemplars, (b) asked experts to refine criteria for selecting exemplars, (c) asked experts to nominate exemplars that met the criteria, and (d) invited exemplars to participate in the study.	$N = 25$	This study explored internal motivations in the form of morally motivated virtues of 25 peer-nominated exemplary allies serving in leadership positions	meso level	Conceptual paper - theoretical focus without practical implementation
13	Stephens et al. (2020)	Proposes a novel theoretical model that conceptualises workplace bias as a multilevel cycle	Individual and organisational-level bias theories	Literature review	Not applicable	Theorise that workplace bias is (re)produced through the ongoing cycle through which individuals and organisations reciprocally influence each other. Given the cyclical nature of bias, the purpose of the new theory is to explain why single-level interventions that target either the individual or organisational level independently often fail to reduce bias. Review empirically supported interventions for reducing the expression of bias in the workplace. Discuss principles for practical implementation of the model	mixed level	Conceptual paper - theoretical focus without practical implementation
14	Knowlton et al. (2022)	By adopting a relational lens, explain why dominant group allyship may elicit backlash in the eyes of the marginalised group.	Theories of power, trust, and humility	Literature review	Not applicable	Clarified when and why allyship is (not) effective at producing the outcomes of enhanced equity and well-being for marginalised group members	micro level	Conceptual paper - theoretical focus without practical implementation

Table A1 (continued)

Nr.	Author/Title	Research question / Goals	Theoretical background	Methods/key measures	Sample (*N*)	Key findings	RQ1	RQ2
15	Melaku (2024)	Discuss the different types of forced invisible labour Black women are required to perform to be included in white institutional spaces. Study how systemic racism is deeply rooted in white spaces, preventing a genuine and effective path to DEI	Racialised social systems, color-blind racist ideology, systemic racism, white racial framing, systemic gendered racism, white institutional spaces, and intersectionality	In-depth semi-structured interviews	*N* = 20	Proposed theoretical model on inclusion tax that was developed based on semi-structured interviews	meso level	theoretical focus with practical implementation
16	Smith and Griffiths (2024)	Explore the relationship between the terminology used in diversity training and trainee reactions	Theoretical frameworks of diversity, openness and diversity resistance	A survey with a two-way, randomised, unrelated samples design	*N* = 630	Terminology might influence trainee reactions in diversity training and hence its effectiveness	meso level	Theoretical focus with practical implementation
17	Nittrouer et al. (2025)	Highlighting the historical and empirical track record of DEI initiatives in organisations, discuss the positive impact of DEI initiatives in the workplace, as well as the reactions that have resulted in forms of resistance and backlash		literature review	Not applicable	Argue that resistance to DEI initiatives is predominantly due to a risk-averse majority that reacts negatively to DEI initiatives due to the perceived threat they pose to the status quo	meso level	Conceptual paper - theoretical focus without practical implementation
18	Hoang et al. (2022)	Study the effects of diversity management and inclusive leadership practices on employees' perceptions of organisational justice	Organisational justice	Regression analysis	(up to) *N* = 245,597	"Inclusive leadership practices increase the perception of organisational justice among women and BIPOC, making them feel valued as members of the organisation and not mere "tokens." Managers and leaders need to encourage an inclusive working environment to minimise conflicts among different workgroups and to promote equitable practices". (p. 537).	meso level	Theoretical focus with practical implementation

Table A1 (continued)

Nr.	Author/Title	Research question / Goals	Theoretical background	Methods/key measures	Sample (*N*)	Key findings	RQ1	RQ2
19	McCleary-Gaddy et al. (2023)	Point to a research-practice gap	Anti-Black racism in the workplace	Literature review		Identified research opportunities in six key topic areas: (1) avoiding short-term solutions to a long-term problem; (2) maximising the effectiveness of DEI officers; (3) engaging white men as allies; (4) ensuring fairer selection systems for hiring and promotions; (5) effectively leveraging DEI data; and (6) leveraging employee resource groups as critical business drivers	meso level	Conceptual paper - theoretical focus without practical implementation
20	Thatcher et al. (2023)	A comprehensive A review article investigating intersectionality that is most relevant for management and organization.	Status characteristics theory, social learning theory, institutional theory, and theories related to intersectionality	Literature review		(DEI) programs have yet to integrate insights from intersectionality research, thereby failing to account for the experiences of individuals at the intersection of multiple identities	meso level	Conceptual contribution - theoretical focus without practical implementation
21	Boulet et al. (2023)	Study perceived discrimination by minority employees	Self-categorization theory	Survey	$N = 7706$	Women and visible minorities tend to perceive that they have experienced workplace discrimination	meso level	Practical focus only - empirical contribution
22	Garlington et al. (2023)	Examine the negative consequences of racial code-switching (Suppressing one's racial identity) at the workplace	Social identity theory	Survey	two surveys ($N = 286$)	Racial code-switching can lead to identity threat, shame and depression and intensifies employees' intention to leave the industry	meso level	Theoretical focus with practical implementation
23	Jin et al. (2024)	Study how employees interact with queer customers by undertaking a multi-stakeholder perspective	Cognitive dissonance theory, attribution ambiguity theory, and multiple stakeholders' perspectives	A mixed methods approach (survey and analysis of secondary data)	Study 1 ($N = 109$–129), Study 2 ($N = 320$), Study 3 ($N = 288$)	Queer customers' perceptions of DEI authenticity are affected by employees' behaviour, which is subject to DEI guidelines	meso level	Theoretical focus with practical implementation
24	Belmi et al. (2024)	Study whether revealing one's first-gen status help applicants from the employers' perspective	Meritocracy, legitimising ideologies, attribution theory, stigma management, competence theories	Experiment	$N = 285$	Nudging can improve employers' hiring of first-generation applicants in DEI settings	meso level	Theoretical focus with practical implementation
25	Folberg et al. (2024)	Study the political, ideological and racial differences in job seekers' reactions to requests about providing a DEI statement in a job application	Social dominance theory	Three experiments	$N = 1108$	Political conservatism and symbolic racism had explanatory power in the studies	meso level	Theoretical focus with practical implementation

Table A1 (continued)

Nr.	Author/Title	Research question / Goals	Theoretical background	Methods/key measures	Sample (*N*)	Key findings	RQ1	RQ2
26	Hamza-Orlinska et al. (2024)	Understand the process and factors that explain organisations' abandonment of DEI practices after a change of ownership	Grounded theory	Interviews	Pre-ownership change interviews (*N* = 15), 19 interviews post-ownership change (*N* = 19)	Organisations as makers and breakers of DEI policies and practices	meso level	Theoretical focus with practical implementation
27	Kirgios et al. (2025)	Explores whether communicating measurable DEI goals externally to job seekers increases subsequent application rates from women and racial minorities	Instrumental approach to DEI, social identity, signalling, and accountability theory	Field experiments	Field experiment (*N* = 5557), goal. Follow-up studies with women (*N* = 893) and racial minorities (*N* = 865, preregistered)	While the authors report a positive causal effect between external communication of measurable DEI goals to job seekers and subsequent application rates from women and racial minorities, they signal that a backlash may be present. Concretely, it may originate from hiring managers, who may be averse to implementing measurable goals	mixed level	Theoretical focus with practical implementation
28	Baker et al. (2024)	Explore whether companies use voluntary DEI disclosures opportunistically.	Greenwashing, diversity washing, managerial opportunism	Regression and text analysis	Up to 47,334 company observations	Empirically confirmed opportunistic behaviour of corporations	mixed level	Theoretical focus with practical implementation

Please note that due to the limited number of contributions for the third research question, they have not been included in this table to save space

Source: Authors' own work

Abbreviations

AJG Academic Journal Guide
CABS Chartered Association of Business Schools
DEI Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
ESG Environmental, Social and Governance
RQ Research question

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Not applicable.

Author contributions
All authors contributed to the conception and design of the study. The literature search, screening, and data extraction were conducted collaboratively using a consensus-based approach. The first draft of the manuscript was written by both authors, and both authors provided critical feedback and revisions. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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