



DEI rollbacks: Consequences and considerations for brand managers

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Abstract As corporate landscapes evolve, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives face increasing scrutiny, with many large corporations rolling back their commitments amid sociopolitical pressures, legal uncertainties, and shifting stakeholder expectations. While such decisions may be framed as strategic recalibrations, they carry implications for brand trust, authenticity, and consumer perceptions. This article examines the consequences of DEI rollbacks from both the consumer and brand management perspectives, highlighting their impact on consumer trust, brand positioning, and corporate reputation. Drawing on contemporary examples and theoretical insights, we explore how brands can navigate these challenges while maintaining credibility and competitive advantage. We suggest that transparent communication, authenticity in brand engagement, and strategic adaptation are critical for mitigating risks associated with DEI retrenchment. For brand managers, the ability to balance external pressures with long-term brand equity considerations is essential to sustaining consumer loyalty and to fostering an inclusive corporate identity in an increasingly complex sociopolitical landscape.

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1. The evolving DEI landscape

Over recent decades, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have transitioned from peripheral concerns to central pillars of brand management (Arsel et al., 2022; Ferraro et al., 2023). While diversity and equity efforts focus on representation and

fairness, *inclusivity* is about fostering a culture in which all individuals feel valued, engaged, and empowered to contribute meaningfully (Arsel et al., 2022). Despite this distinction, there is no consensus about the relative importance of each element, and DEI initiatives are often discussed collectively (Arsel et al., 2022). Initially viewed as compliance-driven imperatives tied to legal frameworks like affirmative action and antidiscrimination laws, DEI evolved into a critical and dynamic component of modern business practices

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(Georgeac & Rattan, 2023; Harriott et al., 2023; Slater et al., 2008). In recent years, social movements like #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and Stop Asian Hate intensified demands for corporate accountability, prompting brands to expand their DEI efforts to address systemic inequities, improve workplace diversity, and engage more meaningfully with their communities (Nittrouer et al., 2025; Sitzmann & Schwartz, 2025).

Brands like Nike and Ben & Jerry's epitomized these shifts (Ferraro et al., 2023). Via high-profile campaigns addressing issues like racial injustice, gender equality, and LGBTQIA+ rights, these companies positioned themselves as leaders in purpose-driven marketing, gaining cultural relevance and consumer loyalty in the process (Park et al., 2023; Nike's 2018 campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick, for instance, sparked widespread debate but ultimately strengthened the brand's alignment with socially conscious consumers, contributing to increased sales and heightened cultural resonance (Kim et al., 2020; Ladd, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic marked an inflection point in the corporate embrace of DEI, with the pandemic unearthing the systemic inequities in healthcare, employment, and economic stability that disproportionately affected marginalized communities. Concurrently, the global outcry following George Floyd's murder catalyzed a renewed focus on racial justice, leading many corporations to pledge substantial resources toward addressing inequities. Walmart's creation of a \$100 million Center for Racial Equity, alongside similar commitments from brands across industries, reflected this broader movement toward DEI initiatives and accountability (Johnson, 2021).

However, the momentum behind DEI initiatives has waned, and today many companies face mounting external pressures, including financial constraints, legal challenges, and an increasingly polarized political environment. While some companies cite economic justifications for rolling back DEI programs, political pushback—particularly from conservative media and activist groups—has played a key role in shaping public discourse on DEI. Conservative critics have framed DEI as emblematic of woke overreach, accusing corporations of prioritizing progressive values over shareholder interests (Warren, 2022). This rhetoric has gained traction through media amplification, influencing corporate decision-making and consumer perceptions. In addition, legal challenges like the 2023 US Supreme Court decision limiting affirmative action in college admissions have further complicated the landscape by raising concerns about the legality of DEI-related hiring

practices and supplier diversity programs (Aratani, 2024). In acknowledging the intersection of financial pressures and political discourse, it becomes clear that DEI rollbacks are not merely a response to cost concerns but are also shaped by broader ideological battles that influence corporate strategy.

As a result of these challenges, a wave of DEI rollbacks is sweeping across the US (Green, 2025). In addition to the US federal government, numerous corporations (e.g., Walmart, Ford, and John Deere) have scaled back their initiatives, often framing these decisions as necessary recalibrations in response to external pressures. While these rollbacks may alleviate immediate legal or reputational concerns, they also carry risks, including reputational damage, erosion of consumer trust, and diminished employee morale. For brand managers, the navigation of this landscape requires a nuanced understanding of the forces driving these changes, as well as the tools to balance external pressures with a commitment to authenticity.

In this article, we examine the implications of corporate DEI rollbacks for brands, offering brand managers insights with which to navigate this evolving landscape. We first examine the consumer perspective, focusing on the risks of alienating socially conscious demographics and the amplified impact of social media activism. Following this, we examine the brand perspective before discussing strategic considerations for brand managers. We conclude with a discussion of how brands can balance external pressures with long-term equity considerations, leveraging transparency, authenticity, and strategic adaptation to sustain trust and competitive advantage in an increasingly complex sociopolitical environment.

2. DEI from the consumer perspective

Modern consumers expect brands to serve as agents of social change, using their influence to address pressing societal issues (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). This expectation has been particularly pronounced among millennials and Gen Z, who view brands as more than providers of goods and services. Instead, they see them as cultural entities with the power to drive meaningful impact (Abbasi et al., 2024). Nearly 80% of Gen Z consumers believe companies should play a role in addressing societal challenges (Sprehe & Hay, 2023), and a majority report that their purchasing decisions are influenced by a brand's stance on social issues (Francioni et al., 2025).

2.1. Building trust and loyalty

Over the past decade, DEI initiatives have become central to fostering trust and loyalty among these socially conscious consumers. Brands that authentically embrace DEI often resonate deeply with their audiences, as evidenced by the success of Nike's Dream Crazy campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick (Kim et al., 2020). Despite its polarizing nature, the campaign aligned the brand with progressive values, bolstering its reputation among younger, socially engaged demographics and contributing to a significant increase in sales (Kim et al., 2020; Ladd, 2018). In addition, Ben & Jerry's sustained focus on racial justice and environmental sustainability has positioned the brand as a leader in values-driven marketing, earning widespread admiration from consumers who prioritize ethical business practices (Beard, 2021).

2.2. Backlash and perceptions of betrayal

The rollback of DEI initiatives could create a perception of betrayal among consumers who view these efforts as integral to a brand's identity (Ferraro et al., 2023). For instance, Walmart's decision to discontinue the funding of its Center for Racial Equity sparked criticism from advocates who argued that the move signaled a retreat from the company's commitments to equity and justice (Daniels, 2024). Such actions risk alienating key demographics—particularly younger consumers, who tend to prioritize the alignment between a brand's stated values and its actions. This perception of hypocrisy can erode brand trust and loyalty, leading to long-term reputational damage.

2.3. Intersectionality and consumer expectations

The concept of intersectionality further shapes the consumer perspective on DEI (Uduehi et al., 2024). Today's consumers are increasingly aware of the interconnected nature of inequities, recognizing that factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status often overlap to create unique challenges (Arsel et al., 2022). Brands like Sephora, which have integrated intersectional narratives into their marketing and workplace policies, have successfully built trust by authentically reflecting the complexities of identity (D'Angelo et al., 2024). Their efforts to feature diverse models in advertising campaigns and create product lines that include a wide range of skin tones demonstrate a commitment to addressing intersectional

issues. Conversely, those companies that roll back DEI initiatives risk appearing to be out of touch with these evolving expectations, potentially alienating consumers who demand nuanced and holistic approaches to inclusivity.

2.4. Social media and consumer activism

Social media plays a critical role in determining consumer reactions to corporate decisions (Gensler et al., 2013). Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) provide tools for consumers to critique brands publicly and to mobilize collective action. Viral campaigns like #BoycottBrandName and @show_the_boardroom exemplify the power of digital activism in shaping public perception. For example, when Lowe's withdrew from its LGBTQIA+ advocacy programs, this generated significant backlash on social media, where users accused the company of prioritizing political appeasement over genuine inclusivity (Stewart et al., 2024). Social media not only magnifies these incidents but also provides a platform for consumers to share alternative brand recommendations, creating opportunities for competitors to capitalize on any perceived shortcomings of rival companies. Moreover, the growing trend of cancel culture underscores the risks of alienating socially conscious audiences (Demsar et al., 2023). Brands that are seen as retreating from their commitments to equity may face organized boycotts, negative press, and a viral wave of discontent that is difficult to counteract. For instance, Tractor Supply, which halted its sponsorship of Pride events and voting campaigns, was met with widespread condemnation online, with many accusing the brand of failing to support marginalized communities (Treisman, 2024).

2.5. Demand for authentic and measurable actions

Ultimately, the consumer perspective on DEI reflects a broader shift in expectations for corporate accountability, particularly following political pressure campaigns (Treisman, 2024). Many consumers can no longer be placated with symbolic gestures or with performative statements; they demand tangible, measurable actions that align with a brand's stated values. As consumers increasingly prioritize values alignment in their purchasing decisions, brands must navigate the complexity of corporate policies with care, balancing external pressures with the need to preserve trust and loyalty. For brand managers, this means demonstrating authenticity, engaging

proactively with stakeholders, and maintaining transparency to overcome the challenges of a shifting DEI landscape.

3. DEI from the brand perspective

For brands, DEI rollbacks are often a strategic response to external pressures, including legal risks, shareholder demands, and activist campaigns (Treisman, 2024; Uritus & Witeck, 2024). But these decisions extend beyond operational concerns, directly shaping brand perception and long-term brand equity. Internal DEI policies contribute to a company's external brand image, and any misalignment between corporate messaging and internal culture can undermine brand credibility (Ferraro et al., 2023). Consumers expect brands to uphold social commitments, and inconsistencies in DEI initiatives may erode trust, particularly among younger demographics (Campbell et al., 2025). In Section 3, we examine the internal, reputational, and global implications of DEI rollbacks, highlighting their impact on employee morale, brand trust, and international market positioning.

3.1. Internal culture and brand perception

DEI initiatives play a vital role in fostering inclusive workplaces that attract and retain top talent, as well as shape a brand's external reputation and consumer trust (Georgeac & Rattan, 2023). Researchers have consistently demonstrated the benefits of diversity within teams, as companies with diverse leadership teams are more innovative, better at problem solving, and more financially successful than their less diverse counterparts (Homan et al., 2010; van Dick et al., 2008; van Knippenberg et al., 2007). Moreover, inclusive workplaces are associated with higher levels of employee engagement, loyalty, and productivity—factors that contribute directly to brand equity and to consumer perception. The rollback of DEI programs can undermine these benefits, creating a sense of disillusionment among employees, particularly among those from underrepresented groups. Brands like Molson Coors, which replaced formal DEI training with mentorship programs, highlight the challenges of balancing cost-cutting measures with efforts to sustain an inclusive culture (Yildirim & Gomez, 2024). While mentorship initiatives provide valuable support for individual employees, they are unlikely to fully address the systemic inequities that DEI programs are designed to tackle.

Employee perceptions of inclusivity are particularly important in competitive labor markets, where the ability to attract and retain diverse talent is a key differentiator (Georgeac & Rattan, 2023). Internal DEI policies also serve as a foundation for external brand positioning, influencing how consumers perceive brand authenticity and corporate responsibility (Ferraro et al., 2023). Brands that integrate DEI into their organizational structures—beyond mere performative gestures—achieve stronger consumer trust and higher brand equity (Campbell et al., 2025). Conversely, brands that roll back DEI initiatives without clear justification risk being perceived as inauthentic, potentially leading to reputational damage and reduced consumer engagement.

3.2. Reputation and equity

DEI rollbacks can damage a brand's reputation, erode consumer trust, and deter socially conscious investors, ultimately affecting long-term brand equity. Consumers increasingly expect brands to authentically align their internal DEI practices with external messaging, and perceived inconsistencies can result in perceived woke washing (Ferraro et al., 2023). Companies like Ford, which withdrew from the Human Rights Campaign Foundation's Corporate Equality Index, faced criticism from stakeholders who questioned their commitment to equity (Bussewitz, 2024). Such decisions may also alienate consumers who view inclusivity as a core brand value, leading to boycotts, negative brand sentiment, and diminished brand loyalty. Given that socially conscious consumers, particularly millennials and Gen Zers, actively seek brands that align with their values, DEI rollbacks pose not only reputational risks but also significant financial consequences. Furthermore, the financial implications of reputational damage can be significant. A McKinsey & Company report found that brands perceived as socially responsible achieved higher levels of customer loyalty and advocacy, resulting in increased revenue and market share (Frey et al., 2023). However, the financial consequences of perceived DEI inauthenticity extend beyond immediate consumer reactions. Brands will need to balance previously established DEI commitments and any novel changes, as brand equity, customer retention, and market differentiation could potentially decline (Ferraro et al., 2023). In addition, Campbell et al. (2025) found that consumers are willing to switch brands if they feel a company does not align with their values, underscoring the critical role of authentic DEI efforts.

3.3. International market positioning

DEI rollbacks can create additional challenges for brands operating in international markets, particularly in maintaining cultural resonance and brand trust. While cultural attitudes toward—and responses to—DEI initiatives vary (Campbell et al., 2025), brands that successfully integrate diverse representation into their marketing strategies often enjoy enhanced credibility and loyalty (Ferraro et al., 2023). As such, brands that fail to adapt DEI messaging to local contexts may encounter backlash—particularly in markets where inclusivity is a key consumer expectation (Campbell et al., 2025). Brands that incorporated culturally sensitive DEI efforts (e.g., Unilever’s tailored regional campaigns) were more successful in maintaining brand trust and market share (Ferraro et al., 2023). For instance, Walmart’s decision to deprioritize supplier diversity may limit its appeal in regions where equitable procurement practices are a priority for both consumers and regulatory bodies (Kelly, 2024). As brands navigate global markets, maintaining transparency and authenticity in DEI efforts is critical to fostering sustained consumer relationships and protecting long-term brand equity.

4. Strategic considerations for DEI rollbacks

We propose that the successful navigation of DEI rollbacks requires brand managers to adopt a multifaceted approach that balances transparency, authenticity, and stakeholder engagement with long-term strategic vision. As DEI initiatives come under scrutiny, brands must ensure that any adjustments are framed and communicated to preserve trust and protect long-term brand equity. Brands perceived to be consistently aligned with social values retain stronger consumer loyalty, particularly among Gen Z and millennial consumers (Ferraro et al., 2023).

Brands that openly communicate strategies to maintain or adjust their DEI efforts help preserve their reputation and prevent backlash resulting from perceived inconsistency (Campbell et al., 2025). It is important to distinguish between companies that strategically recalibrate DEI efforts in response to financial and operational constraints—while still upholding inclusivity—and those that use external pressures as a justification to abandon DEI altogether. If managed transparently and authentically, brands can more easily

navigate this evolving landscape without significant reputational damage, yet the latter can create a perception of hypocrisy and erode stakeholder trust. These challenges are significant, but they present opportunities for brand managers to innovate, redefine inclusivity, and strengthen stakeholder relationships via transparency, authenticity, proactive stakeholder engagement, the alignment of DEI with organizational goals, and the provision of metrics and accountability.

4.1. Transparency as a pillar of trust

Transparency is fundamental to managing the reputational risks associated with DEI rollbacks. Consumers, employees, and other stakeholders expect brands to provide clear and honest explanations for their decisions (Wang et al., 2023), particularly those involving sensitive issues like inclusivity. Brown-Forman’s decision to remove DEI-linked metrics from executive compensation serves as a noteworthy example. By openly framing this change as a strategic recalibration rather than an abandonment of equity goals, the company mitigated potential backlash while reaffirming its broader commitment to fairness. Effective transparency extends beyond merely announcing changes; it requires a comprehensive and proactive communication strategy. Brand managers should provide detailed explanations about the rationale behind adjustments, including any external pressures or evolving organizational priorities that prompted the decision. For example, if a company reduces its investment in formal DEI programs, it could simultaneously highlight alternative efforts (e.g., community engagement initiatives or expanded employee support systems) to demonstrate a continued commitment to equity. Clear and honest communication fosters goodwill and helps prevent misunderstandings that could erode trust.

4.2. Authenticity via substantive action

Authenticity is equally critical (Logan, 2021). Superficial gestures like token representation in marketing campaigns or isolated symbolic initiatives risk alienating stakeholders who value substantive action over performative statements. Brands like Target, which have long demonstrated a commitment to LGBTQIA+ inclusion via workplace policies, marketing campaigns, and community partnerships, exemplify how sustained efforts can build credibility and trust. For brands scaling back formal DEI programs, authenticity can be demonstrated by

redirecting resources into meaningful, long-term initiatives (e.g., mentorship programs, scholarships, or partnerships with community organizations). For instance, shifting from large-scale, resource-intensive training programs to targeted initiatives like leadership development for underrepresented employees can deliver more tangible benefits while addressing cost constraints. The key is to ensure that any changes align with the brand's core values and are seemingly genuine efforts to promote inclusivity. Authenticity also requires consistency across all facets of the organization, and a brand's external messaging should align with its internal policies and practices. For example, a company that promotes diversity in its advertising but fails to reflect this commitment in its hiring practices risks being accused of hypocrisy (Campbell et al., 2025). Conversely, brands that integrate inclusivity into every aspect of their operations—from recruitment to product development—reinforce their credibility and strengthen their relationships with stakeholders.

4.3. Proactive stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement is another cornerstone of effective DEI management. Changes to DEI initiatives should be informed by dialogue with key stakeholders, including employees, investors, and community leaders. Proactive engagement fosters trust and ensures that decisions align with the expectations and priorities of those affected. For example, Caterpillar's policy of requiring approval from senior leadership for DEI initiatives underscores the importance of structured, collaborative decision-making (Revell, 2024). This approach can be enhanced by incorporating diverse stakeholder perspectives via mechanisms like employee resource groups (ERGs), external advisory boards, and public forums. ERGs can serve as invaluable platforms on which underrepresented employees can share their insights and experiences, ensuring that organizational decisions are informed by a wide range of perspectives. In addition, partnerships with external organizations (e.g., advocacy groups or community leaders) can provide additional guidance and accountability. Digital tools and platforms also play a role in stakeholder engagement. Surveys, virtual town halls, and anonymous feedback systems enable organizations to gather input from a broad audience, identify potential areas of concern, and cocreate solutions. This two-way dialogue builds trust and ensures that DEI

strategies are tailored to the unique needs and expectations of stakeholders.

4.4. Aligning DEI with organizational goals

Brand managers should consider the importance of aligning DEI strategies with broader organizational goals. For instance, companies with global operations must balance local sensitivities with international commitments to equity and inclusion. This requires a nuanced understanding of cultural differences and a willingness to adapt policies to meet the unique needs of each market. A *phased* or *hybrid approach*, in which formal DEI programs are scaled back while new initiatives are introduced, offers a potential solution for navigating these complexities. For example, a multinational corporation might scale back its centralized DEI training program while simultaneously investing in region-specific initiatives that address local issues, such as gender parity in one market or racial equity in another. This approach allows brands to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and remain responsive to local contexts while maintaining a global commitment to inclusivity. The integration of DEI into overarching business strategies might also enhance their impact and sustainability. For instance, the alignment of diversity goals with talent-acquisition strategies or with supply-chain management can help ensure that DEI becomes an integral part of organizational decision-making rather than a standalone initiative. This alignment can also help mitigate risks (e.g., legal challenges or shareholder criticism) by demonstrating that DEI efforts contribute directly to business performance.

4.5. Brand positioning and market segmentation

Brand positioning and market segmentation are critical factors when navigating DEI rollbacks. Research suggests that inclusive branding plays a central role in attracting diverse consumer groups and in reinforcing brand identity (Ferraro et al., 2023). Companies that maintain an authentic commitment to DEI often differentiate themselves in the marketplace, whereas those that scale back DEI initiatives risk alienating key demographic segments, including younger and more diverse consumers (Campbell et al., 2025). As brands reassess their DEI strategies, they must evaluate how these decisions align with their target markets and brand positioning to avoid undermining their competitive advantage.

5. Conclusion

Rolling back DEI initiatives is a pivotal moment for brands that requires balancing responses to external pressures and preserving long-term equity and trust. While sociopolitical and legal challenges may necessitate adjustments to DEI strategies, by abandoning DEI altogether, brands risk harming their reputations, consumer relationships, and organizational cultures. Brands will need to take a macro perspective and recognize that inclusivity is a core expectation among stakeholders globally—particularly in multinational business environments, in which diversity is increasingly linked to innovation and competitive advantage. By embracing transparency, brands can help mitigate the risks associated with DEI rollbacks. Clear and proactive communication about the rationale for changes—particularly via social media—that is supported by evidence of ongoing inclusivity efforts builds trust with stakeholders and demonstrates accountability. For example, brands that accompany changes to their DEI policies with data-driven progress updates and actionable commitments can retain credibility despite challenging circumstances. However, transparency must extend beyond messaging; it should include visible actions like publishing detailed DEI reports or holding leadership accountable for meeting equity goals. These efforts demonstrate that even as specific programs evolve, the organization remains steadfast in its broader mission to advance equity and inclusion.

Authenticity is also essential, as consumers and employees increasingly demand meaningful action rather than superficial gestures. Performative statements or token initiatives can alienate stakeholders who are seeking substantive engagement with issues of equity. Brand managers must ensure that inclusivity remains embedded in the brand's identity, not only in public-facing communications but also in internal practices, product offerings, and supply chain operations. By consistently integrating inclusivity into the brand's core values, organizations can safeguard their reputations and foster deeper loyalty among stakeholders. This is particularly critical in competitive markets where perceptions of authenticity often drive consumer preferences.

The ability to adapt thoughtfully and strategically will define the next generation of brand leadership. The decisions made today will shape the future of individual brands and influence the broader cultural and economic landscape. As consumers increasingly demand accountability, equity, and transparency, brand managers must

rise to the challenge of sustaining trust and fostering meaningful change. By positioning inclusivity as a cornerstone of modern business strategy, brands can navigate the uncertainties of this moment and build a foundation for long-term success. The juncture of DEI rollbacks presents an opportunity for brands to both reflect on their roles as agents of social change and lead with purpose. By committing to innovation, collaboration, and a deep understanding of stakeholder needs, organizations can ensure that inclusivity remains a defining feature of their legacy, regardless of the evolving sociopolitical landscape.

As the corporate landscape of DEI continues to evolve, future research is necessary to explore the long-term impacts of DEI rollbacks on consumer trust, employee engagement, and financial performance. Comparative studies examining industries or regions with different approaches to inclusivity could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of different strategies. Further, research into the role of technology in mitigating biases and strengthening equity efforts (e.g., via AI-driven inclusivity tools) could inform best practices to navigate these challenges. Finally, longitudinal studies tracking the reputational and operational outcomes of brands that either roll back or double down on DEI initiatives would contribute to this ongoing discourse.

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