



Diversity and Inclusion in Social Media Communication: An Empirical Study of Engagement in the Football Context

Matthijs Meire¹ · Willem Standaert^{2,3} · Arno De Caigny¹ · Kristof Coussement¹ · Mihaly Szerovay⁴

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Abstract

Different stakeholders, especially customers, increasingly expect organizations to communicate about diversity and inclusion (D&I) on social media. However, the relationship between D&I content and social media engagement remains unclear. This empirics-first study in a football context investigates how the presence of D&I dimensions in social media content relates to volume of engagement. In the first study phase, we conduct interviews with 11 experts, based on which we uncover seven D&I dimensions key to social media communication: age, gender, body and mind, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, social class and social status, and religion and cultural diversity. The second phase is based on quantitative analyses of 6006 social media posts from 9 football associations across Facebook and Instagram. The posts were coded by a diverse set of human annotators for the perceived presence of each of the seven D&I dimensions. We find negative relationships between the presence of D&I dimensions and volume of engagement in general, yet we also find that the relationship patterns differ across individual D&I dimensions: negative associations for age and gender diversity, but positive associations for race diversity. Our granular approach can explain why prior research, either taking an aggregate or a piecemeal approach, has been inconclusive. Using Social Identity Theory as a theoretical lens, we explore identification, through value congruence and based on identity cues, as potential explanations for our findings. We elaborate on the theoretical and ethical contributions of our findings across both study phases, underscoring the context and topic's unique position for producing relevant insights.

Keywords Diversity and inclusion (D&I) · Social media engagement · Social identity theory · Football context · Empirics-first approach

✉ Matthijs Meire
m.meire@ieseg.fr
Willem Standaert
willem.standaert@uliege.be
Arno De Caigny
a.de-caigny@ieseg.fr
Kristof Coussement
k.coussement@ieseg.fr
Mihaly Szerovay
mihaly.m.szerovay@jyu.fi

- ¹ IESEG School of Management, UMR 9221-LEM-Lille Economie Management, Univ. Lille, CNRS, 3 Rue de La Digue, 59000 Lille, France
- ² HEC Liège – Management School of the University of Liège, Liège, Belgium
- ³ Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium
- ⁴ University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

Introduction

While social media platforms were originally designed to facilitate peer-to-peer connections and interactions based on user-generated content, they have become critical for organizations for a variety of reasons, including communicating with their customers (Lysyakov et al., 2025; Saxton et al., 2019). As to the latter, more than 70% of social media users expect organizations to attend to diversity and inclusion (D&I) topics (FacebookIQ, 2021), an expectation mirrored by employees and other stakeholders (Bombaij & Mokarram-Dorri, 2024; Thomas & Chintagunta, 2022). In communication messages and marketing campaigns, D&I has been defined as the “representation, portrayal, and valuation” of varied individuals (Bombaij & Mokarram-Dorri, 2024, p. 347; Eisend et al., 2023). Its importance is underscored not only in stakeholder expectations but also in financial markets, as D&I announcements have been shown to generate positive abnormal stock returns (Li et al., 2024).

In advertising research, diverse representation has long been recognized as a powerful means to connect with audiences, shape brand attitudes, and respond to societal change (for a recent review, see Campbell et al., 2025). However, prior research has also found negative effects of D&I in communications, as the appreciation for diversity varies across consumer groups and may differ based on the accuracy of representation (Campbell et al., 2025). For instance, religious people have been found to react negatively to ads featuring LGBTQIA+ content (Chowdhury et al., 2024). Whereas D&I has been studied extensively in advertising research, far less is known about how D&I is enacted through *social media communications* (SMC). SMC notably differs from traditional one-way advertising, as interactivity, visibility, and user participation create unique opportunities and challenges (Karahanna et al., 2018). For example, users do not only consume content on social media but can also publicly engage with it through likes and comments. This way, users co-produce brand meaning, while also developing their social identities (Mikhaeil & Baskerville, 2024).

While social media platforms have become the primary platforms for organizations to engage with stakeholders, including on D&I topics, academic literature about SMC strategies including D&I content has only recently started to emerge (Bombaij & Mokarram-Dorri, 2024). Our review of the literature reveals two important gaps at the intersection of D&I and SMC. First, in terms of considering various D&I dimensions (e.g., race, gender), prior studies have adopted either narrow or overly broad measures. In particular, some studies focus on one single dimension (e.g., race in both Ro et al., 2024 and Wang et al., 2022), while others use a broad, catch-all variable that combines multiple D&I dimensions into a single composite measure (Bombaij & Mokarram-Dorri, 2024). Neither of these approaches allows uncovering the potentially heterogeneous effects of distinct D&I dimensions on social media engagement. A more fine-grained approach is therefore adopted in this study: we first identify relevant D&I dimensions and subsequently examine their differential relationships with engagement. As to the second gap, prior research suggests that social media platforms offer different functionalities and attract distinct user bases (e.g., Karahanna et al., 2018; Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021), which implies potential variety of engagement with D&I-related content across platforms. However, systematic comparative insight into how D&I in SMC relates to engagement across platforms is currently lacking.

In response, our paper seeks to address the following open-ended research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: What dimensions of D&I do organizations communicate about on social media?
- RQ2: How does the perceived presence of D&I in social media content relate to the volume of user engagement,

and do the relationship patterns differ by (a) D&I dimension and (b) social media platform?

Given there is no prior theory that can readily explain the many possible relationships between the presence of D&I dimensions in SMC and volume of engagement, and there is a lack of systematic evaluation of these relationships (across dimensions and platforms) in SMC, we adopt an empirics-first approach (Bombaij & Mokarram-Dorri, 2024; Golder et al., 2023). Rather than testing theory-driven hypotheses, an empirics-first approach focuses on discovery from observed data using descriptive and predictive methods. In this paper, relevant findings on this emerging phenomenon are uncovered, which can inspire further theoretical development in this domain and inform practice. In keeping with the approach, we propose a theoretical lens that can help to explore explanations for our findings.

In particular, we have conducted empirical studies in the context of the professional sports industry (football), which is an important industry in terms of revenue, employment and visibility (Deloitte, 2025). The sports industry is well suited for this study as D&I issues are evident and directly observable, both on and off the field (Fonti et al., 2023). Moreover, sports are entertainment products that can directly change society's ethical standards (Cheng et al., 2023). This is apparent from several campaigns of the European Football Association, for example the FootbALL campaign,¹ which sees football as a driver of positive change. Our study consisted of two phases. In phase 1, we conducted qualitative research and identified seven key D&I dimensions that football organizations feature in their SMC (RQ1). This offers an organic starting point for a purposeful quantitative analysis, in keeping with the empirics-first approach (Golder et al., 2023). In phase 2, we analyzed real-world social media data (from Facebook and Instagram) over the course of 10 months related to 9 different football associations, obtained from Bright Data via the Bright Initiative. These social media posts were annotated by 294 annotators with respect to the D&I dimensions identified in phase 1.

We abstract our empirical results, aided by Social Identity Theory, to develop explanations and formulate generalizable theoretical insights and contributions to the field of business ethics, at the intersection of D&I and marketing. A first notable aspect is the identification of seven key dimensions of D&I that are relevant for organizations' SMC (i.e., age, gender, body and mind, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, social class and social status, and religion and cultural diversity), which is more comprehensive than prior research.

¹ <https://www.uefa.com/news-media/news/0282-18347853d50c-a7dc7e9a6e33-1000--uefa-launches-football-programme-to-highlight-importance-of/>

Second, by examining not only overall D&I but more granular dimensions, we extend prior research on the relationship between D&I and social media engagement. Indeed, our findings reveal that the relationships between specific D&I dimensions and engagement volume vary notably across dimensions, but less so across social media platforms. In particular, our results show that age and gender are associated with less engagement, while race is associated with more engagement. It is important to note that the specific patterns of variability may not readily generalize to other sectors. However, we believe the abstract idea of variability in volume of engagement, as can be explained by Social Identity Theory in different contexts, is generalizable.

In the next section, we review research on different types of D&I content in social media communication and the possible relationships with engagement volume (likes and comments). After we present the method, we outline the findings of our (qualitative and quantitative) research phases. In keeping with the empirics-first approach of this study, we end by discussing theoretical and ethical contributions, as well as managerial implications, limitations, and future research opportunities.

Background and Research Questions

D&I Content in Social Media Communications

SMC has been widely investigated by previous literature, which shows how organizations can use a diverse set of ongoing content strategies that help them to obtain business objectives, such as building brand image or driving traffic to a website (Lee et al., 2018; Lysyakov et al., 2025; Meire et al., 2019; Ordenes et al., 2019; Yang & Basile, 2022). Notably, such content strategies also serve inclusive marketing goals, as SMC is expected to be aligned with the organization's positioning and to be reflective of the targeted market segments (Lysyakov et al., 2025). Moreover, SMC can also be considered from an ethical perspective, in particular with D&I content that signals a nuanced understanding of differences among and identities of individuals and groups (Ferraro et al., 2023).

Diversity refers to the differing attributes of people (van Bommel et al., 2024), and its representation in public communication can be seen as an organizational commitment to equity (Ro et al., 2024) and a means of promoting justice by remedying the historical underrepresentation of certain groups (Gjesdal, 2024). Arsel et al. (2022) provide a good starting point to capture the broad spectrum of D&I, with the identification of 4 axes: (1) gender, age, and body types; (2) religion and cultural identity; (3) social class and status; and (4) race and ethnicity. Engaging in SMC that emphasizes balanced and fair representation allows organizations to help

shape dominant narratives and foster social conditions that normalize and celebrate diversity (Ro et al., 2024). Furthermore, inclusive communication—rooted in the idea of *inclusion* as a “feeling of being valued and integrated” (van Bommel et al., 2024, p. 497)—can be viewed as a moral and social obligation, particularly for highly visible organizations with a strong digital presence that draw attention from different stakeholders (Park et al., 2023; Ro et al., 2024). The expectations for D&I content in SMC notably stem from the consumer stakeholder group (Bombaij & Mokarram-Dorri, 2024).

Despite the relevance of D&I content in SMC, research attention remains scarce. Recent work in this area has either focused on only one dimension or treated D&I as a composite variable. As to the former, Wang et al. (2022) and Ro et al. (2024) consider the race dimension, respectively focusing on Blackout Tuesday from the Black Lives Matter movement and examining facial characteristics in relation to (Black) race representation. As to the latter, considering D&I as a composite variable, Bombaij and Mokarram-Dorri (2024) measure if brands post any type of D&I content (based on a list of keywords) in a given month, thus without detailed analyses of individual D&I dimensions in a single post. Even more broadly, some research has considered D&I topics in SMC aggregated at the level of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Dong et al., 2024; Hartmann et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2013; Park et al., 2023; Yang & Basile, 2022). In sum, what is absent from the literature on SMC is a granular and comprehensive consideration of D&I dimensions in SMC strategies. With our first research question, we aim to shed light on the use of D&I dimensions by organizations in their SMC.

RQ1: What dimensions of D&I do organizations communicate about on social media?

D&I Content and Social Media Engagement

The primary measure of success related to posting social media content for organizations is engagement with users (Qian et al., 2025), which has been linked to downstream business performance benefits such as increased sales (Kumar et al., 2016; Liadeli et al., 2023). Social media engagement is typically evaluated in terms of the number (or volume) of reactions (e.g., likes or comments) a social media post receives, which has been shown to vary depending on the posted content (Lysyakov et al., 2025). Prior research that has examined engagement with social media posts including (some) D&I dimensions, is currently not converging toward a uniquely positive or negative view. For example, Wang et al. (2022) observe a negative relationship between the presence of race content on engagement volume (followers and likes on X and Instagram). Instead, Ro et al.

(2024) find overall positive effects of featuring Black people in posts on the number of likes on Instagram, but only when they conform to low-threat cues (i.e., low perceived aggression) and beauty norms, which points to potential subtle racial biases. Finally, Bombaij and Mokarram-Dorri (2024) find that when organizations post about D&I topics, there is more social media engagement (likes on X) and that several other message characteristics influence the magnitude of this effect.

Social media is notably different from the one-directional delivery of advertising, an area in which there is a more established body of research on the effectiveness of D&I content (Campbell et al., 2025), as social media enable individuals to build their identity through community affiliation and engagement behavior (Karahanna et al., 2018; Mikhaeil & Baskerville, 2024). There are important differences in the features and audiences across social media platforms, therefore one could expect relationships between D&I topics in social media posts and engagement to differ across platforms (e.g., Karahanna et al., 2018; Ordenes et al., 2019; Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). However, most prior research at the intersection of D&I content and social media engagement analyzes a single platform, likely due to the challenges of obtaining rich social media data (Bombaij & Mokarram-Dorri, 2024; Nasr et al., 2024; Saxton et al., 2019). For instance, prior research has used data from X (e.g., Bombaij & Mokarram-Dorri, 2024) or Instagram (e.g., Ro et al., 2024). While Wang et al. (2022) obtained data from both Instagram and X, X was used as a control platform for a natural experiment; hence, the study does not offer insights into the different relationships across platforms. The lack of consistent insight about social media engagement related to D&I content across social media platforms has motivated our second research question.

RQ2: How does the perceived presence of D&I in social media content relate to the volume of user engagement, and do the relationship patterns differ by (a) D&I dimension and (b) social media platform?

Social Identity Theory

In the previous sections, we have established that there is a dearth of research at the intersection of D&I content and social media (engagement) and empirical studies have so far not provided consistent findings. Considering this, social identity theory (SIT) emerges as a relevant theoretical lens through which these patterns may be interpreted (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory is promising because it has been used both in research on D&I in advertising and media (e.g., Campbell et al., 2025) and in social media research (e.g., Fujita et al., 2018; Ro et al., 2024). SIT postulates that identity construction is strongly influenced by the social groups

or categories within which individuals situate themselves (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Hartmann et al., 2021). In this regard, the notion of ‘prototypes’ has been introduced, defined as collectively created beliefs about “the collection of features that describe and prescribe what it means to be a member of a group” (Danbold & Wiesenfeld, 2026, p. 4). Notably, there are two routes through which social identification can happen: the first is based on shared interests or values (e.g., CSR associations; He & Li, 2011); the second is based on demographic variables or identity cues, such as age, gender, place of residence, and social class (Hudders & De Jans, 2022).

For the first route, SIT stipulates that consumers assess an organization’s communication in light of their own values. The more values expressed in communication align with an individual’s core values (i.e., value congruence), the stronger identification is (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Such alignment of values is associated with higher sales for the organization, as consumption is a form of identity expression driven by a desire for congruence (Chaney et al., 2019). Regarding D&I in SMC, value congruence would be associated with engagement behavior, not only to endorse the brand but also to signal one’s values to others (Karahanna et al., 2018). In particular, if diversity representation confirms pre-existing values, people are more likely to respond positively. In this sense, minority-inclusive SMC, which refers to the representation of both minority and majority groups, with the latter receiving more exposure in line with real-world distributions (Cheng et al., 2023), may result in value congruence for a larger group of people compared to minority-focused SMC, which features only or mainly minority people. This may be associated with an optimal or balanced diversity representation with maximal engagement (Cheng et al., 2023). The second route of SIT operates through identity cues (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003), which refer to characteristics in a post that signal one’s (social) identity (e.g., religion, gender, sexual orientation, race) (Chaney et al., 2019). Individuals can actively draw on such characteristics to construct and express their identities and, through social norms, associate them with specific behaviors (Hudders & De Jans, 2022). In doing so, they categorize themselves and others into social groups, giving rise to in-group and out-group distinctions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This categorization is not static but part of a continuous process in which individuals engage in social comparison with both in-group and out-group members to evaluate themselves (Hudders & De Jans, 2022). Therefore, while prototypes typically align with dominant groups in a context, this can shift over time, not just in terms of what dimensions are paramount, but also in their relative importance weights (Danbold & Wiesenfeld, 2026).

Consistent with this mechanism, including more D&I content on social media can appeal to a more heterogeneous audience by incorporating a broader range of identity cues,

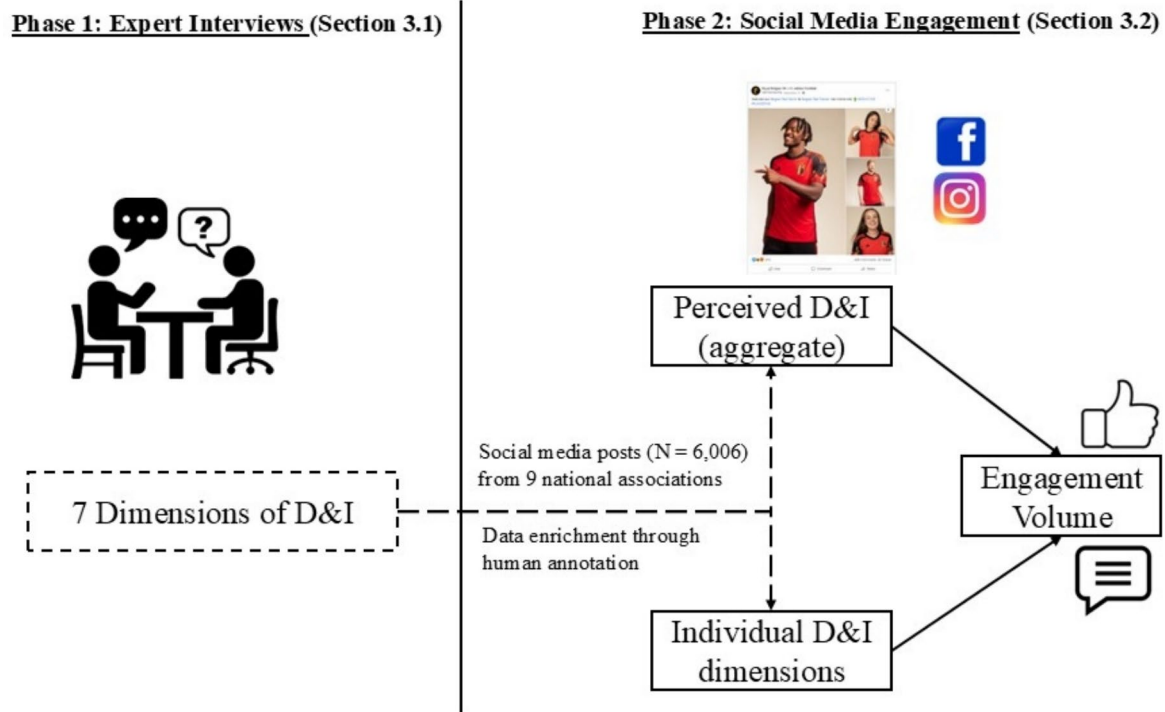


Fig. 1 Study overview

thereby expanding the perceived in-group. When individuals recognize characteristics that align with their own identities, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and identification, which can enhance engagement with the content (Hudders & De Jans, 2022). This is again consistent with a minority-inclusive focus, as it helps to foster the “accuracy of representation” or the extent to which the communicated diversity is consistent with real-world representation of minorities, which has been shown to have positive effects in advertising (Campbell et al., 2025). At the same time, this broadening of representation may also have unintended consequences. As the in-group becomes more inclusive, some individuals who previously identified strongly with the group may perceive a weaker identity match or reduced distinctiveness, which can diminish their sense of belonging and, in turn, result in lower engagement (Kyrychenko et al., 2024). Moreover, if the SMC is heavily minority focused, the identity cues may be lost for a large part of the original group, resulting in weaker engagement (Cheng et al., 2023; Ro et al., 2024).

Empirical Studies

Our research focuses on the professional sports industry, and European football associations in particular. Deloitte estimates total revenue generated in European football in

the 2023–2024 season at € 38 billion, an 8% year-on-year increase (Deloitte, 2025). In terms of spectators, 240 million people attended live football matches in Europe,² while globally the sport is estimated to have 3.5 billion fans. Also, D&I issues are very prominent in football, as exemplified by the public criticisms of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar or by incidences of racist abuse of Real Madrid’s Vinicius Jr. in Spain’s La Liga. At the same time, specific programs are set up to foster inclusivity and openness by UEFA (e.g., the FootbALL campaign³) and national associations are formally structured as member-based, aiming for representation of the diverse audiences in countries. The strategic importance of D&I in football enhances the relevance of this context for studying D&I within SMC.

We applied an exploratory sequential mixed methods design (Jacobs, 2023), informed by the empirics-first approach. The two phases of our design are depicted in Fig. 1. First, the qualitative phase aims to address RQ1, based on interviews with 11 experts in D&I (Sect. “Phase 1: Expert Interviews”) at national football associations in

² <https://www.uefa.com/news-media/news/029d-1eb17a852a6-fa4e86c59d7d-1000--five-european-football-trends-from-record-attendances-to/>

³ <https://www.uefa.com/news-media/news/0282-18347853d50c-a7dc7e9a6e33-1000--uefa-launches-football-programme-to-highlight-importance-of/>

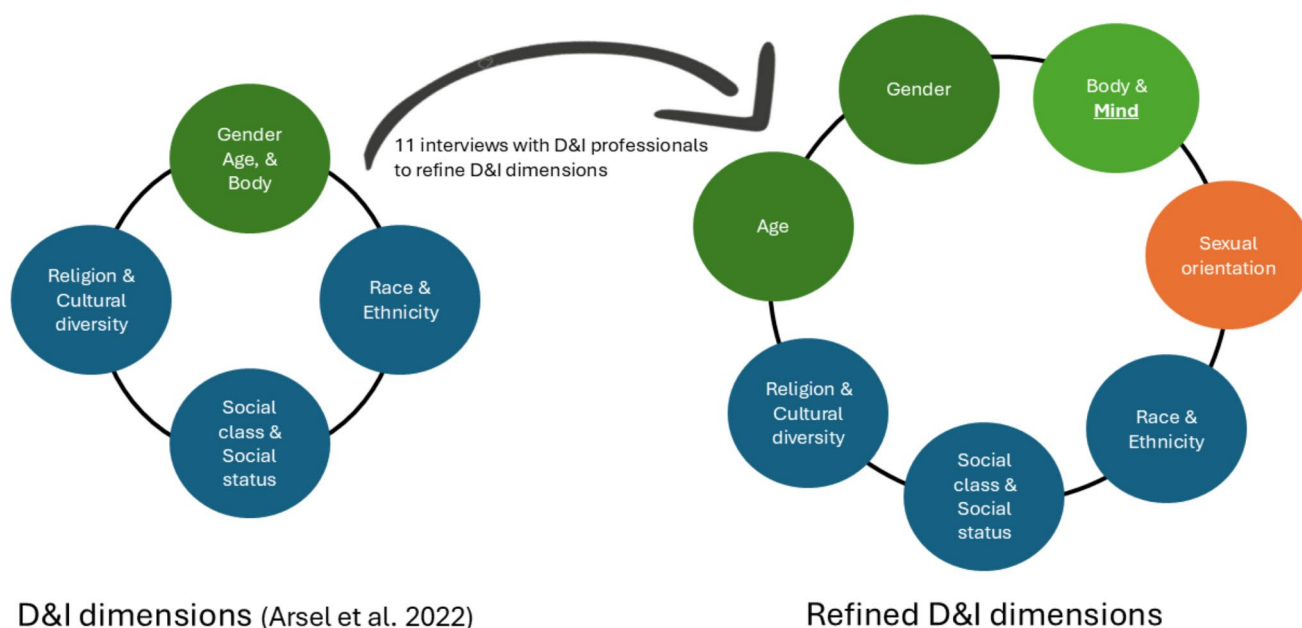


Fig. 2 Identification and validation process of key D&I dimensions

Europe, which provide practice-based insights into SMC strategies at these organizations. Second, building on these insights, we undertake quantitative analyses of social media posts, based on data collected for 9 European football associations (Sect. “[Phase 2: Social Media Engagement](#)”) in our attempt to answer RQ2.

Phase 1: Expert Interviews

Considering the emerging and complex nature of D&I phenomena, the first phase is exploratory (Jacobs, 2023), and with it, we pursue two main goals: (1) to develop a set of D&I dimensions relevant to the football and sports context (RQ1) and (2) to obtain insights into how D&I dimensions might be integrated into SMC strategies (background for RQ2). In this sense, we leverage our qualitative research to gain specific input for the analytical framework of the subsequent, quantitative study.

Data and Analysis

We interviewed 11 D&I experts from football associations (FAs) through purposeful and snowball sampling techniques (Patton, 2002) and made sure to include experts based on their responsibility for D&I issues. FAs oversee their national teams as well as various professional and amateur competitions in their respective focal country. The associations, representing Belgium, England, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Portugal, Romania, the Netherlands, and Wales, are geographically distributed across Europe

and culturally diverse. We purposefully sought diversity at the association level, in terms of the number of members they have, their budgets, and ages, to help achieve theoretical saturation (Guest et al., 2006). More practical details about the semi-structured interview procedure are available in Online Appendix 1, and the interview guide is provided in Online Appendix 2.

In our effort to identify and validate a set of D&I dimensions, we relied on deductive coding and started with the four axes proposed by Arsel et al. (2022): (1) gender, age, and body type; (2) religion and cultural identity; (3) social class and status; and (4) race and ethnicity. The authors assert that these “define the visible contours of everyday life” and “may not be exhaustive” (Arsel et al., 2022, p. 920). We applied continuous two-way integration of the theory- and data-based coding that allowed us to consider Arsel et al.’s axes while remaining open to identify themes that emerged from the interviews and secondary data.

Phase 1 Discussion

Based on our qualitative analysis, we propose seven D&I dimensions, which are used as a basis for Phase 2: age, gender, body and mind, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, social class and social status, and religion and cultural diversity (see Online Appendix 3). This set is generally consistent with the axes of Arsel et al. (2022), but we split “age, gender, body” into constituent elements, because our analysis indicates that each dimension is uniquely prevalent. Our interviews also prompted us to

expand the “body” dimension to include mental health issues, captured with the label “mind.” Finally, we add a separate “sexual orientation” dimension, in line with findings that indicate it merits its own category, distinct from the gender dimension (Fig. 2).

We also observe that the emphasis on specific D&I dimensions differs substantially across football associations from different countries, both in general and in SMC. For example, some focus less on gender, perhaps because the share of male and female football players is already almost equal. In other countries, quotas for employing members of diverse groups (e.g., with physical disabilities) were already being legally enforced such that less attention and resources are dedicated to communicating about these dimensions to stakeholders. The extent to which an association emphasizes a specific dimension also appears related to, or perhaps in response to, the intensity with which particular issues (e.g., racism, misogyny) have been manifest in the national society at particular moments in time. Nevertheless, across associations, we observed that some dimensions were already well established in the football context (e.g., race and gender), while others came only recently to the fore (e.g., religion and social class and social status).

The specific insights related to SMC reveal that D&I-related messages usually get posted on organizations’ main social media accounts, rather than on a dedicated account. The experts we interviewed also reported that some messages are designed to relate to D&I campaigns, in which case they generally feature-related hashtags. Overall, it seems there is a core understanding of D&I matters within interviewed associations when it comes to SMC, but D&I-specific dimensions are not yet systematically included. Nevertheless, we note an evolution toward efforts to ensure that social media posts incorporate D&I dimensions, through combinations of text, pictures, and videos. In some nations, these efforts involve the use of inclusive language. However, no one—not even the football federations that belong to the top five in both women’s and men’s football in the UEFA association rankings—reported any explicit targets or performance indicators related to social media engagement with posts that included D&I dimensions.

The findings of Phase 1 lay the groundwork for the next, quantitative phase. Consistent with our Phase 1 objectives,

the discovery of the seven key D&I dimensions used by football associations, as well as insights into the lack of systematic monitoring of social media engagement, prompted us to further explore the significance of D&I content along the seven dimensions on SMC and its associations with engagement.

Phase 2: Social Media Engagement

The second phase encompasses the analysis of social media posts of the football associations (FAs) of multiple countries. We selected the FAs of the top 10 European countries on the FIFA world ranking at the end of 2021, except for Denmark, for which data could not be used due to the lack of an Instagram profile from the FA and a limited number of Facebook posts. The nine remaining countries are as follows: Belgium, England, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Switzerland. We first present details on the data collection, followed by technical details on how to measure engagement metrics, perceived D&I and control variables. Finally, we present the observed relationship between perceived D&I and engagement levels.

We collected social media data from the official FA accounts on the two major META platforms, i.e., Facebook and Instagram, through the Bright Initiative by Bright Data. Over a period of 10 months, during which no major tournaments took place (e.g., World or European championships), from August 1, 2021 to May 31, 2022, we obtained all 6006 social media posts by the FAs: 3810 on Facebook, and 2196 on Instagram. For each post, we identified the time stamp and gathered both textual and visual content. In keeping with common engagement volume metrics (Lee et al., 2018), we also obtained the numbers of likes and comments on each post. Table 1 indicates popularity on Facebook and Instagram, in terms of the average likes and comments the posts receive. These engagement volumes are overdispersed, exhibiting large standard deviations; we take this status into account in our analysis.

To enrich this data set, we asked human annotators to determine our main variable of interest, the perceived presence of each D&I dimension in each post, as well as to assess the purpose of each message and the persuasiveness of the D&I in each post, as control variables. In detail, the

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

Social media platform	Total posts (daily average)		Engagement volume					
			Likes			Comments		
			Mean	SD	[Min–max]	Mean	SD	[Min–max]
Facebook	3810	(12.64)	3,138.15	33,502.24	[0–2,003,666]	110.15	346.82	[0–8386]
Instagram	2196	(7.29)	45,986.63	73,301.26	[36–789,090]	174.63	541.43	[0–10,584]

study used 294 Prolific annotators (European and active on Facebook/Instagram) selected to be diverse across the seven D&I dimensions and trained via a video plus practice assignment with feedback before annotating the real content. All 6006 posts were annotated exactly three times. The annotators coded text and visuals separately for each D&I dimension (with 1 equals D&I dimension present, and 0 otherwise), treating a D&I dimension as present if detected in text or visual, and we classified a post as containing a D&I dimension when at least two of three annotators agreed. The post-level classifications were used for our subsequent analyses. Table 2 presents an overview by country of the total number of posts and the number of posts that include a perceived D&I dimension. We outline the annotation task in more detail in Online Appendix 4, the annotation survey appears in Online Appendix 5, and we note that the study received ethical approval from the authors' institutional research board.

Perceived D&I

The main variable of interest is Perceived D&I, as coded by the annotators. The percentage of posts that the annotators code as related to at least one D&I dimension (based on the text and/or visual) is similar across platforms: 55% for Instagram and 49% for Facebook. This result also aligns with our Phase 1 results, which suggest that organizations mostly try to include at least one D&I dimension.

The annotators coded each of the seven identified D&I dimensions separately, based on the definitions provided in Table 3.

Table 4 provides more detailed annotation results for all seven D&I dimensions per platform and specifies the percentage of annotated posts (based on the entire post, or only visual or only text) that pertain to each dimension. We classify a post (visual or text) to the respective perceived D&I presence dimension if at least two of three annotators agree.

The similar patterns across platforms (Table 4) indicate that age, gender, and race dimensions are the ones most

Table 2 Post-statistics per country

	Country								
	Belgium	England	France	Germany	Italy	Netherlands	Portugal	Spain	Switzerland
Total number of posts	586	1298	495	246	347	235	1323	1123	373
Number of posts containing									
Perceived D&I (at least one D&I dimension)	403	856	264	126	239	119	644	296	137
Perceived D&I—age	233	94	113	8	181	47	100	48	53
Perceived D&I—gender	140	522	161	21	126	76	250	219	103
Perceived D&I—race	225	464	117	90	22	29	435	26	20
Perceived D&I—sexual orientation	18	2	2	2	0	9	0	5	0
Perceived D&I—disability	16	24	11	9	13	8	7	16	1
Perceived D&I—religion	8	12	12	3	4	9	12	14	2
Perceived D&I—social class	4	8	10	19	7	13	6	29	1

Table 3 Definitions of the seven D&I dimensions

D&I dimension	Definition
Age	A social media post can express a variety of elements linked to age, for instance, including and protecting children, inclusion or well-being of elderly people, etc.
Gender	A social media post can express elements linked to gender (identity), including for instance respecting that football is for all genders, appreciation of women in various roles (referee, coach, player), equality in terms of salary and exposure, etc.
Sexual orientation	A social media post can express elements linked to sexual orientation, including respecting that the football community welcomes all sexual orientations (e.g., lesbian, gay, and bisexual), etc.
Body and mind	A social media post can express elements linked to body and mind, for instance welcoming people with physical and/or mental disabilities as players or fans, highlighting physical or mental health issues, etc.
Religion and cultural diversity	A social media post can express elements linked to religion or cultural diversity, for instance respecting and celebrating various religious festivals and cultural habits
Social class and status	A social media post can express elements linked to people affected by their social class or status, including refugees or homeless people and including highlighting human rights
Race and ethnicity	A social media post can express elements linked to race or ethnicity, for instance condemning or acting against racism or highlighting the inclusion of ethnic minorities

Table 4 Summary statistics of the annotation task: D&I dimensions

D&I dimension	Facebook			Instagram		
	Post	Text	Visual	Post	Text	Visual
Age	15.72%	11.73%	12.34%	12.52%	7.47%	10.29%
Gender	24.49%	13.33%	22.23%	30.97%	8.52%	28.96%
Race	19.79%	2.07%	18.90%	30.51%	1.18%	29.74%
Sexual orientation	0.68%	0.52%	0.60%	0.55%	0.46%	0.46%
Disability	2.02%	1.50%	1.50%	1.28%	0.77%	1.09%
Religion	1.18%	0.68%	0.79%	1.41%	0.73%	0.96%
Social class	1.63%	1.26%	1.05%	1.55%	0.91%	1.05%
At least one dimension	48.95%			55.15%		

frequently perceived by annotators. The age dimension gets evoked both textually and visually, whereas the perception of gender and race dimensions tends to be present mostly through visuals. All other D&I dimensions (sexual orientation, disability, religion, and social class) appear less frequently in both the text and visuals with appearance ranging from 0.46 to 2.02%.

We create the following variables on perceived D&I for subsequent analysis. First, we create one overall perceived D&I variable, *Perceived D&I*, which represents the count of all perceived D&I dimensions present in the post. Second, we address the seven D&I dimensions separately, by conceptualizing dummy variables (*Perceived D&I–Age*, *Perceived D&I–Gender*, *Perceived D&I–Race*, *Perceived D&I–Sexual Orientation*, *Perceived D&I–Disability*, *Perceived D&I–Religion*, *Perceived D&I–Social Class*), each of which takes a value of 1 if the dimension is perceived as present in the post (by at least two of three annotators) and 0 otherwise.

Control Variables

We account for several factors that might influence engagement (Lee et al., 2018; Ordenes et al., 2019). First, beyond its actual text and visuals, we capture the purpose of the message in the post, which can be conveyed through illocutionary speech acts (Searle, 1969) and is often included as a control variable in social media literature (e.g., Ordenes et al., 2019). In the annotation task, the human coders assigned a single speech act (i.e., expressive, assertive or directive) to each post. To include this purpose, we establish three dummy variables, *Message Purpose–Expressive*, *Message Purpose–Assertive* and *Message Purpose–Directive* that take a value of 1 if that purpose is present and 0 otherwise. If all dummy variables equal 0, the message purpose is thus inconclusive.

Second, we include two time-related variables: a dummy variable indicating if the post appeared during the weekend (*Weekend*) and the hour of day of the posting (*Hour of the Day*) (Bombaij & Mokarram-Dorri, 2024). Third,

following De Vries et al. (2012), we account for the level of interactivity by adding dummy variables that reflect whether a post contains a question (*Interactivity*) or URLs (*URLs*), along with count variables reflecting the number of hashtags (*Hashtags*) and mentions (*Mentions*).

Fourth, several control variables relate to the post text in line with previous social media engagement literature. We control for the complexity of writing by adding a SMOG readability score (*SMOG readability score*): higher scores indicate a less readable post (Lee et al., 2018). We also include the length of the post, measured as the number of words (*Post-length*); the sentiment of the post, as determined by SieBERT after automatic translation to English (Hartmann et al., 2023) (*Sentiment*); and two dummy variables that reflect whether the post contains a picture (*Picture*) or video (*Video*) (e.g., Bombaij & Mokarram-Dorri, 2024; De Vries et al., 2012). Fifth, a control variable indicating the persuasiveness of the D&I dimensions (*Persuasiveness*) relies on assessments by the annotators (see Online Appendix 4 for details).

Sixth, we control for explicit inclusions of D&I content in posts with a dummy variable that indicates whether a post contains a D&I hashtag (*D&I hashtags*). These hashtags were identified through a process of manual inspection of all hashtags used in the dataset, combined with a structured procedure in which Google’s GenAI tool Gemini was prompted to identify hashtags potentially related to D&I. These GenAI-based suggestions were then manually verified to ensure their relevance and consistency with our conceptualization of D&I. This results in a total of 49 D&I-related hashtags across the 9 associations and capturing all 7 D&I dimensions, such as “#stoplgbtphobia,” “#diainternacionaldelamujer,” and “#kinderfussball” (for the full list, see Online Appendix 6). We note that these hashtags identify intended D&I communications by the FAs, and may or may not overlap with the Perceived D&I of a post. Seventh, we control for the elapsed time since the preceding D&I post, incorporating potential carry-over effects (*Time since last D&I post*). We summarize all the

Table 5 Descriptive statistics

Variables	Facebook			Instagram		
	Mean	SD	[Min–max]	Mean	SD	[Min–max]
Dependent variables						
Likes	3138.15	33,502.24	[0–2,003,666]	45,986.63	73,301.26	[36–789,090]
Comments	110.15	346.82	[0–8,386]	174.63	541.43	[0–10,584]
Variables of interest						
Perceived D&I	0.66	0.79	[0–5]	0.79	0.85	[0–5]
Perceived D&I—age	0.16	0.36	[0–1]	0.13	0.33	[0–1]
Perceived D&I—gender	0.24	0.43	[0–1]	0.31	0.46	[0–1]
Perceived D&I—race	0.20	0.40	[0–1]	0.31	0.46	[0–1]
Perceived D&I—sexual orientation	0.01	0.08	[0–1]	0.01	0.07	[0–1]
Perceived D&I—disability	0.02	0.14	[0–1]	0.01	0.11	[0–1]
Perceived D&I—religion	0.01	0.11	[0–1]	0.01	0.12	[0–1]
Perceived D&I—social class	0.02	0.13	[0–1]	0.02	0.12	[0–1]
Control variables						
Message purpose—expressive	0.29	0.45	[0–1]	0.37	0.48	[0–1]
Message purpose—assertive	0.50	0.50	[0–1]	0.42	0.49	[0–1]
Message purpose—directive	0.13	0.34	[0–1]	0.11	0.31	[0–1]
Weekend	0.22	0.41	[0–1]	0.24	0.43	[0–1]
Hour of the day	13.68	4.42	[0–23]	14.05	4.35	[0–23]
Interactivity	0.03	0.18	[0–1]	0.03	0.16	[0–1]
Hashtags	1.15	1.29	[0–14]	1.37	1.31	[0–11]
Mentions	0.03	0.52	[0–14]	0.57	1.03	[0–19]
URLs	0.24	0.43	[0–1]	0.01	0.09	[0–1]
SMOG readability score	11.6	4.53	[3.13–32.81]	9.98	3.96	[3.13–32.26]
Post-length	27.49	21.92	[0–323]	22.31	22.14	[0–223]
Sentiment	0.95	0.22	[0–1]	0.95	0.22	[0–1]
Picture	0.66	0.47	[0–1]	0.97	0.16	[0–1]
Video	0.30	0.46	[0–1]	0.05	0.22	[0–1]
Persuasiveness	3.18	0.68	[1–5]	3.23	0.67	[1–5]
D&I hashtags	0.03	0.16	[0–1]	0.03	0.17	[0–1]
Time since last D&I post	0.16	0.24	[0–2.2]	0.28	0.36	[0–2.94]

variables in Table 5 and provide the correlation matrices for the continuous variables in Online Appendix 7.⁴

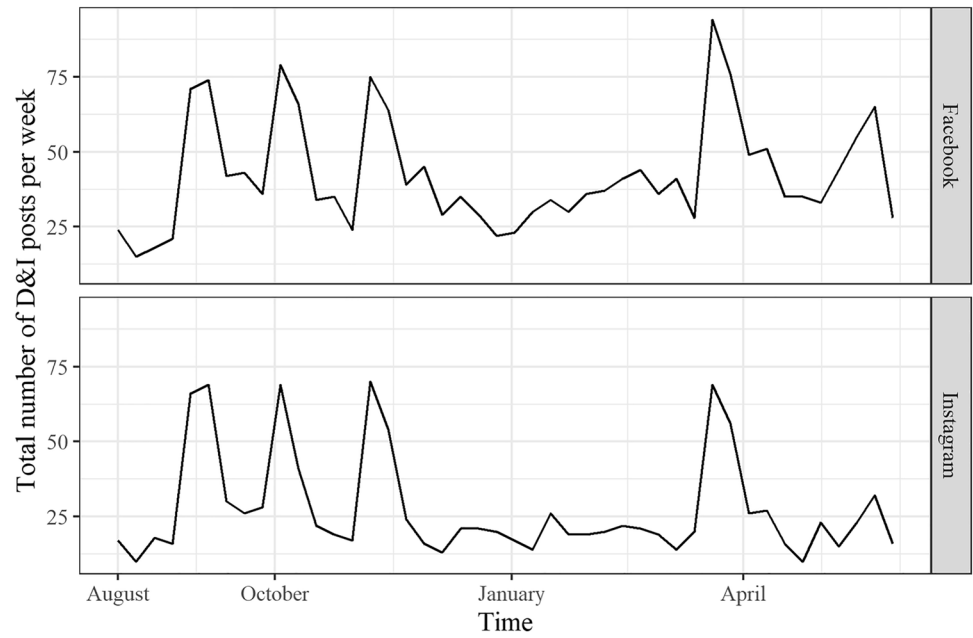
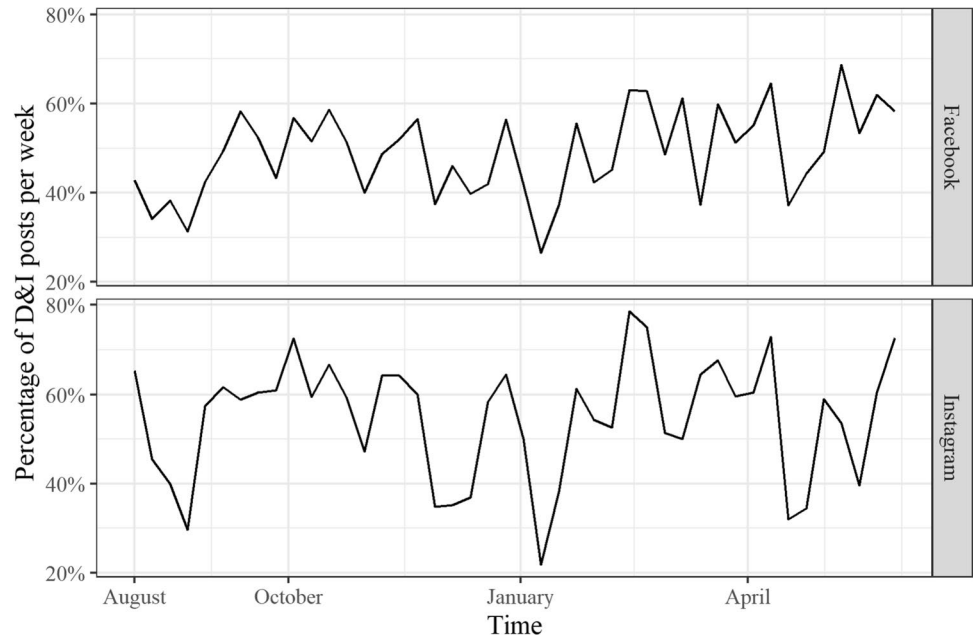
Relationships Between Perceived D&I and Engagement Volume

Descriptive Analysis Figure 3 depicts the weekly trends in the total number of social media posts that contain at least one D&I dimension, while Fig. 4 indicates this as a percentage of social media posts on each platform. As the figures demonstrate, the patterns across the two social media platforms are similar. Although we find a large absolute

number of D&I messages across the entire study period, there is some variation: both August–December 2021 and March–May 2022 feature notably high D&I social media presence, whereas the period in-between (December 2021–March 2022) constitutes a relatively lower D&I social media presence timeframe. The FAs posted at least 15 D&I posts per week, with a peak of 94 posts on Facebook. Relative to the total number of posts, we observe that in several weeks more than 60% of the social media posts contained at least one D&I dimension (across all associations).

Model and Results To examine the association between perceived D&I and social media engagement volume (*Likes* and *Comments*), we estimate linear regression models, which include robust standard errors to account for heteroscedasticity in the data set. Formally,

⁴ All data and models are available on an anonymized Github repository, available at: <https://anonymous.4open.science/r/D-I-Engagement-04E2>.

Fig. 3 Total D&I posts per week**Fig. 4** Percentage of D&I posts per week

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Likes} \sim & \beta_0 + \beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I}} \text{Perceived D\&I} \\ & + \beta_i X_i + \beta_{\text{lag(Likes)}} \text{lag(Likes)} + \delta_c + \varepsilon, \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Comments} \sim & \beta_0 + \beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I}} \text{Perceived D\&I} + \beta_i X_i \\ & + \beta_{\text{lag(Comments)}} \text{lag(Comments)} + \delta_c + \varepsilon, \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

where the dependent variables *Likes* and *Comments* are measured on the post-level and are log-transformed; β_0 is the intercept term; $\beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I}}$ refers to the effect of *perceived D&I* across the seven D&I dimensions; and X_i comprises the

control variables, with β_i as the corresponding effects on the respective post-engagement metrics. We add lagged versions of our dependent variables, lag(Likes) , and lag(Comments) , to account for carry-over effects of engagement to subsequent posts (Ordeneš et al., 2019); finally, δ_c denotes the country fixed effects. The maximum variance inflation factor (VIF) is 3.29 and the maximum correlation is 0.48 (see Online Appendix 7), suggesting no major multicollinearity concerns. Note that *Likes* and *Comments* might be considered as count data, so we have tested multivariate negative binomial regressions for which the results are available in

Online Appendix 8. The negative binomial regressions lead to the same conclusions as the linear regression models presented below.

Furthermore, we do recognize the potential for endogeneity concerns related to our variable of interest, *Perceived D&I*, which could correlate with the error term. As suggested by previous literature (Park & Gupta, 2012), we apply the Gaussian copula approach to test for endogeneity in the regression models. We comply with the non-normality of the potentially endogenous regressor (as confirmed by Cramér-von Mises and Anderson–Darling tests, with p values >0.05 across platforms) to partial out exogenous variation. The copula term is operationalized as $\phi^{-1}(H(\text{Perceived D\&I}))$, where ϕ^{-1} is the inverse of the cumulative normal distribution function, and $H(\text{Perceived D\&I})$ is the empirical distribution of the *Perceived D&I*. This copula term is not significant, suggesting that endogeneity is not a concern. Therefore, in Table 6, we present the linear regression results for likes and comments for both Facebook and Instagram without the copula term (van Ewijk et al., 2021; Wlömert & Papies, 2019).

Table 6 reports negative, statistically significant associations between *Perceived D&I* and *Likes* on Facebook ($\beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I}} = -0.11, p \leq 0.001$) and Instagram ($\beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I}} = -0.05, p \leq 0.01$). In other words, on both platforms, posts characterized by higher levels of perceived D&I tend to receive less likes by the FAs' followers' base. Importantly, these results assume the absence of explicit D&I hashtags (since the coefficients show the effect when the control variable D&I hashtags is equal to 0). Posts that include perceived D&I content are thus linked to lower liking engagement, including decreases of 10.42 and 4.88% in the number of likes on Facebook and Instagram, respectively. Further, the results in Table 6 confirm a similar significant association between the presence of D&I in social media posts and the number of comments, as the number of comments for posts that include D&I content are on average 18.37% lower on Facebook and 11.48% lower on Instagram, compared to posts not including D&I content.

Next, we discuss the D&I-specific control variables. In line with previous research (e.g., Ordenes et al., 2019), we find that expressive posts are linked to significantly higher liking engagement, on both Facebook (*Likes*):

Table 6 Regression analysis results: relationships of perceived D&I with engagement volume

Variables	Likes		Comments	
	Facebook	Instagram	Facebook	Instagram
Variable of interest				
Perceived D&I	−0.11 (0.02)***	−0.05 (0.02)**	−0.20 (0.03)***	−0.12 (0.03)***
Control variables				
Message purpose–expressive	0.19 (0.07)**	0.12 (0.05)*	0.06 (0.08)	−0.01 (0.08)
Message purpose–Assertive	−0.05 (0.06)	−0.02 (0.05)	−0.02 (0.07)	−0.13 (0.09)
Message purpose–directive	−0.37 (0.07)***	−0.07 (0.06)	−0.09 (0.09)	0.14 (0.11)
Weekend	0.06 (0.04)	0.04 (0.03)	0.01 (0.05)	−0.01 (0.05)
Hour of the day	0.03 (0.01)***	0.01 (0.01)***	0.01 (0.01)**	0.02 (0.01)**
Interactivity	0.03 (0.09)	0.03 (0.10)	0.17 (0.13)	0.30 (0.20)
Hashtags	0.01 (0.02)	−0.06 (0.02)***	−0.06 (0.02)***	−0.10 (0.03)***
Mentions	−0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)	0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)
URLs	−0.14 (0.04)**	−0.30 (0.14)	−0.17 (0.06)**	−0.03 (0.32)
SMOG readability score	−0.03 (0.01)***	−0.01 (0.01)*	−0.03 (0.01)***	−0.02 (0.01)**
Post-length	0.01 (0.01)***	0.01 (0.01)***	0.01 (0.01)***	0.02 (0.01)***
Sentiment	0.01 (0.08)	−0.04 (0.06)	−0.12 (0.09)	−0.11 (0.12)
Picture	0.47 (0.11)***	0.21 (0.14)	0.52 (0.11)***	−0.09 (0.17)
Video	0.20 (0.12)	−0.24 (0.09)*	0.01 (0.11)	−0.34 (0.13)*
Persuasiveness	−0.01 (0.03)	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.00 (0.03)	−0.07 (0.04)
D&I hashtags	−0.35 (0.11)**	−0.44 (0.08)***	−0.01 (0.12)	−0.33 (0.14)*
Time since last D&I post	0.11 (0.07)	−0.10 (0.04)*	−0.02 (0.09)	−0.06 (0.07)
Lag(likes/comments)	0.25 (0.02)***	0.26 (0.02)***	0.25 (0.02)***	0.23 (0.03)***
Intercept	3.63 (0.22)***	5.13 (0.23)***	1.50 (0.20)***	2.02 (0.25)***
Number of observations	3810	2196	3810	2196
Log-likelihood	−5243.81	−2128.48	−6068.26	−3209.35

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$

Notes: Significance is based on two-tailed tests, and values in parentheses represent standard errors. All models include country fixed effects, which are omitted from the table for brevity

$\beta_{\text{Message purpose-expressive}} = 0.19, p \leq 0.01$) and Instagram (*Likes*: $\beta_{\text{Message purpose-expressive}} = .12, p \leq 0.05$). Further, we find significant negative associations between the use of hashtags and URLs in the posts and the engagement behavior. The more hashtags and URLs are used in the posts, the lower the engagement.

Furthermore, the results show that longer posts are associated with more liking and commenting engagement behavior across both social media platforms (*Facebook: Likes*: $\beta_{\text{Post-length}} = 0.01, p \leq 0.001$ —*Comments*: $\beta_{\text{Post-length}} = 0.01, p \leq 0.001$; *Instagram: Likes*: $\beta_{\text{Post-length}} = 0.01, p \leq 0.001$ —*Comments*: $\beta_{\text{Post-length}} = 0.02, p \leq 0.001$), while lower readability of the posts is associated with lower engagement (*Facebook: Likes*: $\beta_{\text{SMOG Readability Score}} = -0.03, p \leq 0.001$ —*Comments*: $\beta_{\text{SMOG readability score}} = -0.03, p \leq 0.001$; *Instagram: Likes*: $\beta_{\text{SMOG Readability Score}} = -0.01, p \leq 0.05$ —*Comments*: $\beta_{\text{SMOG readability score}} = -0.02, p \leq 0.01$). Further, posts with pictures on Facebook have a significant positive association with engagement (*Facebook: Likes*: $\beta_{\text{Picture}} = 0.47, p \leq 0.001$ —*Comments*: $\beta_{\text{Picture}} = 0.52, p \leq 0.001$), while Instagram posts that include videos have significant negative associations with engagement (*Instagram: Likes*: $\beta_{\text{Video}} = -0.24, p \leq 0.05$ —*Comments*: $\beta_{\text{Video}} = -0.34, p \leq 0.05$).

Finally, *D&I hashtags* show significant negative associations with *Likes* on Facebook ($\beta_{\text{D\&I hashtags}} = -0.35, p \leq 0.01$) and Instagram ($\beta_{\text{D\&I hashtags}} = -0.44, p \leq 0.001$) with similarly negative patterns for *Comments* on Instagram ($\beta_{\text{D\&I hashtags}} = -0.33, p \leq 0.05$). These patterns suggest that extensive use of D&I hashtags tends to coincide with lower visible engagement, a result which is in line with Wang et al.'s (2022) findings of negative effects of overtly explicit Black Lives Matter support.

Analysis of Individual D&I Dimension To address research question 2, we zoom in on the separate relations of the underlying perceived D&I dimensions and social media engagement. Specifically, we slightly modify the original engagement models to address these more detailed dimensions:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Likes} \sim & \beta_0 + \beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I age}} \text{Perceived D\&I age} \\ & + \beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I gender}} \text{Perceived D\&I gender} \\ & + \beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I Race}} \text{Perceived D\&I Race} \\ & + \beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I Sexual Orientation}} \text{Perceived D\&I sexual orientation} \\ & + \beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I disability}} \text{Perceived D\&I disability} \\ & + \beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I religion}} \text{Perceived D\&I religion} \\ & + \beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I social class}} \text{Perceived D\&I social class} \\ & + \beta_i X_i + \beta_{\text{lag(Likes)}} \text{lag(Likes)} + \delta_c + \varepsilon, \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Comments} \sim & \beta_0 + \beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I Age}} \text{Perceived D\&I Age} \\ & + \beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I gender}} \text{Perceived D\&I gender} \\ & + \beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I race}} \text{Perceived D\&I race} \\ & + \beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I sexual orientation}} \text{Perceived D\&I sexual orientation} \\ & + \beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I disability}} \text{Perceived D\&I disability} \\ & + \beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I religion}} \text{Perceived D\&I religion} \\ & + \beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I social class}} \text{Perceived D\&I social class} + \beta_i X_i \\ & + \beta_{\text{lag(Comments)}} \text{lag(Comments)} + \delta_c + \varepsilon. \end{aligned} \quad (4)$$

Table 7 Regression analysis results: relationships of *perceived D&I* dimensions with engagement volume

Variables	Likes		Comments	
	Facebook	Instagram	Facebook	Instagram
Variables of interest				
Perceived D&I—age	−0.18 (0.05)***	−0.04 (0.05)	−0.41 (0.06)***	−0.22 (0.07)**
Perceived D&I—gender	−0.27 (0.04)***	−0.21 (0.03)***	−0.29 (0.05)***	−0.25 (0.05)***
Perceived D&I—race	0.12 (0.04)**	0.09 (0.03)*	−0.01 (0.05)	−0.01 (0.05)
Perceived D&I—sexual orientation	−0.25 (0.20)	−0.27 (0.22)	0.47 (0.34)	0.25 (0.42)
Perceived D&I—disability	−0.20 (0.12)	−0.03 (0.13)	−0.21 (0.14)	−0.07 (0.19)
Perceived D&I—religion	0.06 (0.14)	0.09 (0.10)	0.13 (0.19)	−0.04 (0.13)
Perceived D&I—social class	−0.05 (0.12)	0.10 (0.10)	−0.27 (0.16)	0.49 (0.19)*
Control variables				
Message purpose—expressive	0.17 (0.06)**	0.12 (0.05)*	0.06 (0.08)	−0.01 (0.08)
Message purpose—assertive	−0.06 (0.06)	−0.01 (0.05)	0.00 (0.07)	−0.12 (0.09)
Message purpose—directive	−0.38 (0.07)***	−0.07 (0.06)	−0.09 (0.09)	0.15 (0.11)
Weekend	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.03)	−0.02 (0.05)	−0.01 (0.05)
Hour of the day	0.03 (0.00)***	0.01 (0.00)***	0.01 (0.01)**	0.02 (0.01)**
Interactivity	0.04 (0.09)	0.03 (0.10)	0.18 (0.13)	0.29 (0.21)
Hashtags	0.01 (0.02)	−0.06 (0.02)***	−0.06 (0.02)**	−0.10 (0.03)***
Mentions	−0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)
URLs	−0.13 (0.04)**	−0.28 (0.14)	−0.17 (0.06)**	−0.04 (0.33)
SMOG readability score	−0.02 (0.01)***	0.01 (0.00)*	−0.03 (0.01)***	−0.03 (0.01)**
Post-length	0.01 (0.00)***	0.01 (0.00)***	0.01 (0.00)***	0.02 (0.00)***
Sentiment	0.03 (0.08)	−0.03 (0.06)	−0.12 (0.09)	−0.11 (0.12)
Picture	0.47 (0.11)***	0.20 (0.14)	0.52 (0.11)***	−0.08 (0.18)
Video	0.21 (0.11)	−0.24 (0.09)*	0.02 (0.12)	−0.33 (0.13)*
Persuasiveness	−0.01 (0.03)	−0.03 (0.02)	0.00 (0.03)	−0.07 (0.04)
D&I hashtags	−0.32 (0.11)**	−0.39 (0.08)***	−0.13 (0.12)	−0.35 (0.14)**
Time since last D&I post	0.12 (0.07)	−0.09 (0.04)*	−0.01 (0.09)	−0.06 (0.07)
Lag(Likes/comments)	0.24 (0.02)***	0.26 (0.02)***	0.24 (0.02)***	0.22 (0.03)
Intercept	3.60 (0.22)***	5.16 (0.23)***	1.50 (0.20)***	2.02 (0.25)***
Number of observations	3810	2196	3810	2196
Log-likelihood	−5217.37	−2105.65	−6045.32	−3197.00

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$. Notes: Significance is based on two-tailed tests, and values in parentheses represent standard errors. All models include country fixed effects, which are omitted from the table for brevity

In these formulas, *Perceived D&I* variables refer to whether the annotators code a post as containing indications of age/gender/race/sexual orientation/disability/religion/social class diversity (based on text and/or visual). Control variables and fixed effects are the same as those included in Eqs. (1) and (2).

The analyses reveal clear patterns between engagement metrics and perceived D&I for the age, gender and race dimensions across the platforms and across engagement measures, as shown in Table 7. Instead, the perceived D&I of sexual orientation, disability, religion and social class have not been found to show significant associations with engagement in our dataset (except for a positive association between social class presence on Instagram comments,

which is difficult to generalize given the low presence of this dimension).

With regards to the volume of likes, there is a significant and negative coefficient for age diversity ($\beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I age}} = -0.18$, $p \leq 0.001$), while the association is non-significant on Instagram. For gender diversity, significant and negative coefficients are observed for likes across both platforms (*Facebook*: $\beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I gender}} = -0.27$, $p \leq 0.001$; *Instagram*: $\beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I gender}} = -0.21$, $p \leq 0.001$). Finally, for race diversity, significant and positive associations with likes are observed on both platforms (*Facebook*: $\beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I race}} = 0.12$, $p \leq 0.01$; *Instagram*: $\beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I race}} = 0.09$, $p \leq 0.05$). As to the volume of *Comments*, the results are similar for age and gender: we observe significant and negative coefficients for age diversity on

Facebook ($\beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I age}} = -0.41, p \leq 0.001$) and Instagram ($\beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I age}} = -0.22, p \leq 0.01$), as well as for gender diversity (Facebook: $\beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I gender}} = -0.29, p \leq 0.001$; Instagram: $\beta_{\text{Perceived D\&I gender}} = -0.25, p \leq 0.001$). For race diversity, no significant associations with the volume of comments are observed.

Phase 2 Discussion

In keeping with our empirics-first approach, we look for potential explanations of our empirical findings using the theoretical lens of social identity theory (as introduced in Sect. “[Social Identity Theory](#)”). First, we observe a significant negative association between Perceived D&I and engagement across both platforms, for both *Likes* and *Comments*. Based on the value congruency path, this finding suggests that in general, D&I values of FAs, as represented by their D&I content, are not aligned with the values of their social media audiences. It is of critical importance though to also consider the analysis of individual D&I dimensions, which show differing relationships with engagement. This finding is in contrast with arguments claiming fluidity across D&I topics (Bombaij & Mokarram-Dorri, 2024) and instead urges organizations to zoom in and consider each dimension individually when developing SMC strategies. Notably, while relationships differ across dimensions, the differences across platforms are minimal. The latter suggests that audiences on both platforms may be similar in our context.

FAs’ target audiences thus react differently to specific dimensions of perceived D&I on social media, which we can again explain through SIT arguments. On Facebook and Instagram, posts that include gender-related D&I cues are negatively associated with engagement volume: like counts are 23.66 and 18.13% lower, and comment counts are 25.17 and 22.12% lower, respectively. These negative associations between gender diversity (i.e., more female representation) and engagement volume may be explained by both SIT routes: gender diversity does not align with the value expectations of a large part of the pre-existing user base or there is limited identity recognition by the predominantly male audience. Indeed, a predominantly male audience can be observed (The Gemba Group, 2020) in the football context. Similarly, we find a negative association between age and engagement (-16.47% *Likes*, -33.64% *Comments* on Facebook, and 18.75% fewer *Comments* on Instagram). This result may again be explained by the limited identity recognition of the existing audience, which is typically middle-aged. Posts about the main national teams will typically result in stronger identity cues, and hence posts with a focus on the youth can be expected to attract less engagement.

Social media posts including racial diversity, on the other hand, are associated with higher levels of *Likes* on both Facebook (12.75%) and Instagram (9.42%). Importantly, our definition and coding of Racial diversity do not explicitly distinguish between minority-inclusive and minority-focused representation (see Sect. “[Social Identity Theory](#)”). While not explicitly coded, most pictures depict several team members and tend toward minority-inclusive race representation (in contrast to age and gender dimensions, as these do not mix that naturally within team posts and pictures). According to SIT, racial diversity in a post can be associated with more identity congruence as it makes it easier for multiple racial groups to connect to the social media posts, and hence results in more overall engagement. In line with the results from (Cheng et al., 2023), this may also match better with the pre-existing values of a broader audience (i.e., both non-white audiences as well white audience with favorable race attitudes).

A notable control variable in our models concerns the use of D&I-specific hashtags. Our findings indicate that the use of these hashtags is negatively associated with engagement (especially likes). This observation resonates with Wang et al.’s (2022) findings of negative effects of overtly explicit Black Lives Matter support. Moreover, we find that the negative association linked to including D&I-related hashtags is larger compared to the association of our key variable of interest, Perceived D&I. For example, when considering *Likes*, the coefficients for perceived D&I are relatively small (-0.11 on Facebook and -0.05 on Instagram), whereas the coefficients for D&I hashtags are substantially stronger (-0.35 and -0.44 , respectively).⁵ SIT might also explain this consistently observed pattern. First, D&I hashtags typically indicate a post dedicated to one of the 7 D&I-related dimensions, with a hashtag specifically oriented toward this dimension. Hence, by default it would be minority-focused, which can be associated with less identity congruence, and may also be in conflict with the values of certain social media users. Moreover, the use of hashtags points to the post being part of a larger campaigns. This can be associated with perceptions of inauthenticity (Wang et al., 2022), which disrupts value congruence and weakens identification (Campbell et al., 2025), potentially even leading to perceptions or accusations of woke washing (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Finally, we note that the associations found across models seem somewhat stronger for likes compared to comments: negative effects are weaker for likes, while positive effects

⁵ Note that using standardized coefficients yields a very similar pattern of results.

are stronger. One possible explanation lies in the differing levels of effort and expressiveness required by these engagement types. Indeed, social media engagement can be considered as a form of “identity work” involving prosocial work, which is activated through the moral dimension of identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Prior research suggests that liking is a low-effort, low-commitment form of engagement, whereas commenting requires higher cognitive and social investment, as it involves publicly articulating an opinion (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021).

From an SIT perspective, this distinction is meaningful. Likes can function as weak signals of affiliation that do not strongly bind the user to a particular social identity, allowing users to engage even when identity congruence is partial or ambiguous. In contrast, comments constitute more explicit and identity-revealing behaviors, making users more selective and more likely to engage only when content strongly aligns with their salient social identities. As a result, identity-incongruent content may still receive some level of passive endorsement (likes), while discouraging more effortful and identity-expressive forms of engagement (comments) (Swani & Labrecque, 2020).

Contributions and Implications

Our empirics-first study advances the underexplored research domain at the intersection of D&I and SMC. Based on our qualitative study, we have identified seven D&I dimensions that are relevant for SMC strategies (RQ1). Based on our quantitative study, we have unraveled the detailed relationships between D&I presence and social media engagement volume in general (RQ2), across individual dimensions (RQ2a) and platforms (RQ2b).

Theoretical Implications

First, our research makes a significant contribution to the field of business ethics, at the intersection of D&I and social media communication. D&I represents a mechanism for justice and unbiased representation, which are critical, ethical marketing practices that can increase well-being and contribute to a better world (Kipnis et al., 2021). Despite the importance of D&I content from a business ethics standpoint, current knowledge about the role of underlying D&I dimensions in marketing communication is limited (Gjesdal, 2024). Review papers have summarized D&I dimensions that were previously used in academic work on consumer research (Arsel et al., 2022) and in advertising (Campbell et al., 2025), but did not take a holistic view on D&I communication in social media communication.

Using a two-way approach (iterating between theory and themes emerging from the interview data in the (European)

football context), we identified seven dimensions of relevance to SMC (RQ1): age, gender, body and mind, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, social class and social status, and religion and cultural diversity. Our interview analysis also surfaces D&I dimensions underrepresented in prior research (Arsel et al., 2022), as we find them to be emerging (e.g., religion). Despite the fast-moving nature of this domain, we contend that our expert-informed approach, conducted in a relatively advanced context, produces a set of dimensions with enduring relevance. A convenience sample of six additional interviews in other industries (including retail, automotive, and consumer goods) supports the relevance of these dimensions. By uncovering underrepresented dimensions and showing how multiple identity markers coexist, more nuanced theorizing on identity-based responses, value congruence, and social identification processes in digital contexts becomes possible. At the same time, our descriptive analyses (Table 4) reveal low frequencies for some dimensions, pointing to the practical difficulty of representing them on social media despite their relevance.

Second, we contribute to prior marketing research on SMC by investigating how all the perceived dimensions of D&I, as identified in Phase 1 and as evaluated by annotators in Phase 2, are quantitatively associated with engagement on social media. By analyzing not only D&I content at an aggregate level but the underlying, granular D&I dimensions (RQ2a), we expand previous research insights, as the results indicate that D&I dimensions can have opposing relationships. We argue, based on SIT (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003), that the values communicated through D&I posts may not resonate with the target audience’s social identity and therefore decrease engagement. However, our findings also point out that a lack of enthusiasm for D&I topics is not universal in that not all user groups necessarily appreciate all D&I dimensions in the same way (Campbell et al., 2025). In our case, we see notable differences in engagement volume across different D&I dimensions (RQ2a). While sector-specific patterns of variability may occur, we contend that the broader insight, namely that engagement volume varies in systematic ways that can be explained through SIT, is generalizable across contexts.

While our empirical context is football and it is known that sports fans often strongly identify with teams (Meire et al., 2019), the theoretical lens based on SIT holds for other contexts as well (see for instance Fujita et al. (2018) for an application in the education sector). It is important to note, however, that the baseline, relative to which D&I is perceived, may differ across industries and companies (Danbold & Wiesenfeld, 2026), as consumers make assumptions of the type and extent of D&I commonly displayed (Chaney et al., 2019). Therefore, perceived D&I may be influenced by historical prosocial activities of organizations, based on

which users develop an implicit mental model (Campbell et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2022).

Third, our findings related to RQ2b suggest that differences across social media platforms are negligible. While not all significant relationships were mirrored across the platforms, there were also no relationships found in opposite directions. One difference observed is that while the presence of age diversity has a significant negative relationship with engagement volume on Facebook, this relationship is not significant on Instagram. A possible explanation is that the audience on Instagram tends to be younger (Sheikh, 2026), which translates into more value congruence with age diversity in SMC.

Ethical Implications

As a whole, our work contributes to business ethics scholarship on moral responsibilities and ethical behavior, which has thus far received limited attention in social media contexts (Neumann & Rhodes, 2024). Also, in keeping with Bhattacharya and Sen (2003), we interpreted our findings along two distinct routes of SIT (see Sect. “Phase 2 Discussion”), namely based on value congruence and identity cues. Some prior research on SMC (and advertising) has examined route 1 (value congruence) (e.g., Chowdhury et al., 2024; Mikhaeil & Baskerville, 2024), while others have focused on route 2 (identity cues) (e.g., Hudders & De Jans, 2022), yet our work reinvigorates the notion of considering both. Indeed, we suggest that D&I is a unique topic to investigate the role of social identity in social media engagement through the dual route, as it can be associated both with values and identity cues. This offers opportunities for future theoretical development, for instance, about the comparative strengths of both routes in relation to engagement (Qian et al., 2025).

Our findings also open an important avenue for ethical evaluation that extends beyond engagement metrics. While we observe heterogeneous relationships between individual D&I dimensions and engagement, it is important to go beyond descriptive specificity to open normative registers (Greenwood & Islam, 2025). Rather than treating these dimensions as ethically equivalent or evaluating them solely based on audience response, it is important to interpret our findings with contextual understanding, nuance, and judgment (Greenwood & Islam, 2025). In particular, we emphasize that different dimensions may carry different moral weights depending on their historical marginalization and the vulnerability of the groups involved (Danbold & Wiesenfeld, 2026; Gjesdal, 2024; Kipnis et al., 2021). In the context of European football, where documented histories of racism, misogyny, and homophobia are well established (Dashper & Fletcher, 2013), this ethical imperative imposes stronger ethical obligations on organizations to ensure fair

and visible representation regardless of short-term engagement outcomes.

This creates a meaningful tension between instrumental considerations (i.e., engagement outcomes that are descriptively associated with D&I dimensions) and normative principles (Greenwood & Islam, 2025). While gender diverse content is associated with lower engagement in our data, gender equity is widely recognized as a paramount D&I obligation in football governance. Moreover, some dimensions that carry significant ethical weight are inherently harder to represent in a subtle but still perceived way on social media. Sexual orientation and cultural diversity, for instance, are rarely legible through the visual team imagery that dominates football communications, which may explain their low annotated presence in our data. Yet their absence from posts does not diminish their ethical relevance; if anything, it reflects the additional communicative effort required to include them authentically. At the same time, the positive engagement association for race diversity content should not be taken to indicate that race is the most ethically prioritized dimension, as it likely reflects the dynamics of minority-inclusive team imagery rather than the moral urgency of the dimension itself. Indeed, the ‘prototype’ or dominant group of football players (Danbold & Wiesenfeld, 2026), has shifted over the past decades and engagement metrics may thus reflect prevailing social norms rather than ethically desirable outcomes, and managers should interpret them accordingly.

Building on prior literature on inclusive marketing and moral responsibility (Gjesdal, 2024; Kipnis et al., 2021), we therefore propose that organizations complement performance evaluation with an ethical evaluation that attends to who is represented, how they are depicted, and which structural inequalities the communication seeks to address. This ethical lens extends naturally to the question of who engages with D&I content, as even ethically motivated communications may fail to reach or resonate with the groups they seek to include. Thus, from an ethical perspective, the diversity of engagers matter, defined as the extent to which the engager base reflects equitable participation (Park et al., 2023). D&I content may contribute to a more diverse and inclusive follower base even when it does not maximize engagement volume (Ro et al., 2024). Moreover, customer equity theory (Rust et al., 2004) posits that breadth and diversity contribute to the value of a customer base. Thus, increasing diversity of engagers may advance both societal and long-term business objectives (Bombaj & Mokarram-Dorri, 2024). While our interviews support the view that actions to increase diversity of engagers carries intrinsic value in the football context, such pursuits appear likely to continue gaining importance, considering demographic trends and societal pressures (Park et al., 2023).

Based on a collaboration with one of the football associations (i.e., the Royal Belgian Football Association), we were able to capture profile pictures of the engagers to conduct a more fine-grained, but exploratory study of the relationship between post content and the composition of the engaging audience. We describe this in more detail in Online Appendix 9. In short, we approximate the diversity of engagers using AI-inferred demographic appearance of visible profile images of the engagers. The results of this analysis show that, in our football context, organizations can indeed foster a more diverse engager base using D&I content (especially gender and race dimensions). That is, we observe more gender (resp. race) diversity among engagers for posts containing gender (resp. race) D&I content. Drawing upon SIT, these patterns follow the path of users perceiving their own identity cues reflected in posts (Hudders & De Jans, 2022). As these exploratory findings suggest, understanding the true span of D&I efforts requires considerations beyond volume of engagement, addressing the question of whether and how an inclusive user base can be engaged (Kipnis et al., 2021).

Managerial Implications

Our research provides some managerial implications for organizations that seek to manage their social media content effectively and to design appropriate D&I strategies. Considering that SMC is a crucial driver of brand performance (Liadeli et al., 2023), understanding how D&I content relates to engagement is important. Our results in the sports industry show that there are various relationships between D&I content and social media engagement. Within the sports context, perceived age and gender inclusion are associated with lower engagement, while Race is associated with higher engagement on both Facebook and Instagram. The effect sizes may be specific to brands or industries (Uduehi et al., 2025), but our results establish that the differences across D&I dimensions are more important than differences across platforms. Therefore, organizations must anticipate such specific and distinct outcomes if they want to include D&I in their SMC while avoiding damage to their social media metrics.

More specifically, we argue that companies should tailor their social media post design to contain certain D&I dimensions, with clear labeling and tracking of the D&I dimension upfront, in order to better follow up on their performance. The seven D&I dimensions we identify serve as an overview companies can use for this purpose. Indeed, our interviews have revealed that, while these dimensions are considered relevant for SMC by organizations, they do not typically follow up on how many posts are made on each dimension, or how they perform. Our classification offers managers a structured and actionable lens to design and evaluate D&I

strategies, helping them move beyond ad hoc or overly narrow representations. We thus argue that organizations should adopt a multi-dimensional evaluation framework that balances performance metrics with ethical considerations, while supporting more balanced and inclusive communication strategies that better resonate with diverse audiences. Such a framework would recognize that some forms of D&I communication may be ethically necessary even when they are not immediately rewarded by audiences. In the context of football, where organizations have significant cultural influence, this responsibility may be particularly pronounced.

Finally, many organizations include hashtags to indicate D&I initiatives, but our findings caution against this common practice, due to the association with reduced engagement, for both the number of likes and comments. The negative association is also much stronger for these explicit D&I messages in comparison to Perceived D&I. Such negative effects might be attributed to suspicions of woke-washing (Vredenburg et al., 2020) or lower perceived authenticity (Wang et al., 2022), but regardless of the cause, they suggest that organizations should include explicit signals of D&I sparsely.

Future research

This paper contributes to the underexplored intersection of D&I with online communication, on the basis of both theoretical and methodological advancements. However, we also identify some shortcomings and related areas for future research.

We gathered data from various platforms, for various national football associations. The focus on a single industry offers the advantage of obtaining a rich context-specific insights, but also leaves room to study the effects further in other organizational and cultural settings. Although D&I in sports and entertainment is insufficiently studied, we also recognize that the results reflect the customer base (Uduehi et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2022), and therefore there is a vast interest to study D&I considerations in other industries (with other customer bases). In addition to industry, contextual factors that may change the relationship of D&I content with engagement include post-level information such as the position on the image, and brand-level authenticity related to the image and historical prosocial activity of the organization (Campbell et al., 2025). A particularly fruitful avenue for future research pertains to distinguishing minority-focused from minority-inclusive SMC, in particular in relation to value congruency measurements (Cheng et al., 2023).

Although we included a broad set of football associations, our findings cannot simply be considered relevant for any association. In line with the findings from Ro et al. (2024), we would urge for more research on the audience of social

media messages, in order to assess who engages with the (D&I) content. We have taken a first step in this direction with our exploratory study on engager diversity (see above and in Online Appendix 9). Finally, the real-world context we study represents a strength of our research but also prevents us from testing causality or underlying mechanisms. Our findings suggesting that D&I dimensions have differential relationships with engagement, are based on posts that were created using intuition (according to our qualitative insights), without strategy or metrics, which reduces endogeneity concerns. However, caution is needed when making causal claims based on observational data. In summary, our empirics-first approach (Golder et al., 2023) aimed to illuminate the observed phenomena and inspire future theoretical development, and a fruitful avenue for future research would be a replication of the study in an experimental setup, where identification could be measured as a mediator.

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Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest or financial interest.

Ethical Approval The data used in this research are from open-access sources. The authors received ethical approval for the conducted studies from their institutional research board.

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