

# Guest editorial: Inclusive marketing introduction to the special issue: communication

Having witnessed significant growth and evolution over the past decade, inclusive marketing (IM) has emerged as a necessary element of business strategy. This change has been driven by broader societal shifts towards diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) (Grieco, 2024). IM encompasses business efforts to foster a more representative culture that embraces a broader spectrum of identities, communities and histories (Ferraro *et al.*, 2024; Xavier, 2020). Today, inclusivity as an idea is not limited to the practice of marketing, as it has found itself extended into management strategy, where it is being considered as a mechanism for improving well-being and enabling businesses to fulfil their role as agents for positive societal change (Mende and Scott, 2021). In this strategic sense, inclusivity is based on a deep understanding of stakeholder diversity and a commitment to developing strategies as well as content that resonates with stakeholders from all backgrounds through appropriate channels to drive businesses towards more inclusive outcomes (Park *et al.*, 2023).

It is needless to say that the landscape of IM continues to evolve, presenting both challenges and opportunities for researchers and practitioners alike. Studies have predominantly focused on the evaluation of the business case for IM, assessing the impact on brand loyalty and sales (Eisend *et al.*, 2023), purchase decisions and brand perception (Burgess and Wilkie, 2023). However, these findings are often short-term, leaving a significant gap in our understanding of the long-term effects of sustained IM strategies.

While representation in advertising has increased, research indicates that this is largely due to demographic shifts rather than intentional inclusion efforts (Rößner and Eisend, 2023). This underscores the need for more deliberate strategies in representation and a deeper examination of authenticity in portrayal. The field has also seen a growing interest in digital inclusivity, particularly in response to the rise of virtual influencers and artificial intelligence (AI)-generated content (Ferraro *et al.*, 2024). However, this area remains underdeveloped, with limited research on accessibility and the ethical implications of AI in IM.

Cross-cultural effectiveness of IM strategies remains understudied, despite the increasingly global nature of markets (Khan *et al.*, 2015). Similarly, intersectionality in marketing research is nascent, with few studies exploring the nuanced effects of marketing to consumers with multiple diverse identities (Kipnis *et al.*, 2021). The relationship between internal organisational diversity and external marketing success is another area requiring further investigation (Tang, 2024).

Emerging trends and future research directions point towards a more holistic and interdisciplinary approach to IM. The integration of AI and technology in marketing presents new challenges for inclusivity, necessitating research on ensuring AI-generated content remains inclusive and trustworthy (Ferraro *et al.*, 2024). Digital accessibility is becoming increasingly crucial, calling for studies on making digital marketing more accessible to all consumers, including those with disabilities (Muralidharan *et al.*, 2024).

The field is also moving beyond communication to explore inclusive product development and innovation (Grieco, 2024). This shift requires research on how inclusivity principles can inform product design and how diverse teams drive innovation in marketing and product development. There is a growing need for standardised methods and metrics to assess the effectiveness and authenticity of IM campaigns, as well as their long-term impact on brand equity and social progress (Eisend *et al.*, 2023).

Generational differences in response to IM warrant further exploration, building on existing studies of attitudes towards diverse representations in advertising (Muralidharan



*et al.*, 2024). The development of more inclusive market research methodologies is also crucial to ensure that insights are gathered from a comprehensive spectrum of individuals (Kipnis *et al.*, 2021).

It is thus apparent that the theory related to IM is evolving in a multitude of interesting directions. The special issue in IM communication is an attempt to bring together studies that reflect emerging and established themes. While the practice of IM is gradually maturing, despite recent political challenges, the theoretical foundation for IM, however, is still quite nascent and has not been adequately integrated or appropriately linked together. As a consequence, new scholars who are trying to contribute to and develop theory in this domain find it very difficult to piece together a comprehensive review of the relevant literature and connect developments in this emerging area. The aim of this special issue is to offer a platform for discussing emerging theory and present the domain of IM as a coherent and functional body of research. Scholars contributing to this special issue present interesting new insights connected to IM and attempt to advance theory. Being one of the first such special issues on IM, this special issue also serves the purpose of creating a space for IM within the larger marketing theory.

Authors in this special issue address some of the gaps in IM research. Iyer and Dani (2025) investigate the phenomenon of “femvertising,” examining whether advertisements marketed as empowering to women truly challenge gender norms or instead serve to commodify feminist ideals. Through a semiotic content analysis of internationally awarded advertisements from 2013 to 2023, the study explores the presence and evolution of post-feminist discourses. The findings suggest that while femvertising has increased the use of post-feminist themes like commodity feminism and self-surveillance, it often reinforces existing stereotypes and undermines genuine female empowerment, even in advertising for products not exclusively aimed at women. The research highlights a disconnect between the purported goals of femvertising and its actual impact, suggesting a superficial engagement with feminist values for marketing purposes.

Marceau and Pons (2025) delve into inclusive sponsorship activation using the telecommunications company Orange’s sponsorship of French football (both men’s and women’s teams) as a central case. The authors investigate the perceived altruism and attitudes towards the sponsor, along with other factors such as the involvement in women’s football and identification with national teams. Through a survey with 1,228 individuals across France, the UK and South Africa, the study uncovers the importance of a strong connection between the brand and the cause (gender equity in this instance) in fostering perceived altruism, which in turn positively influences consumer attitudes. The paper highlights the potential benefits for sponsors investing in inclusive activations to improve consumer perception.

Srivastava *et al.*’s (2025) study focuses on the influence of IM communication on brand love and brand attitude. Through mixed methods research focused on the LGBTQ + community, the authors explore how IM affects consumers’ emotional connections to brands and their overall opinions. The study also examines the mediating role of social identity and the moderating impact of stigmatisation on these relationships. The study found that IM communication can help consumers to perceive brands as authentic while providing visibility to underrepresented groups within society. The paper provides insights on how to build stronger connections with diverse consumer bases through authentic communication.

Chatzopoulou *et al.*’s (2025) study explores the impact of firm-generated content on LGBTQ + influencers and their capacity to enhance brand engagement and loyalty through IM strategies. Employing structural equation modelling, the research demonstrates that firm-generated content significantly impacts LGBTQ + influencers. This leads to strengthening consumers’ place identity and social bonding, exerting a positive effect on brand loyalty. The findings highlight the importance for firms to engage in IM practices by partnering with LGBTQ + influencers who can authentically communicate the brand values of diversity and inclusion. This study contributes to the literature by introducing a conceptual framework that positions place attachment as a mediating mechanism between influencer marketing and brand

loyalty, offering empirical evidence of the effectiveness of leveraging LGBTQ + voices in fostering deeper consumer-brand relationships.

[Gulzar et al. \(2025\)](#) investigate the relationship between internal knowledge dissemination and employee-based brand equity among faculty members in Pakistani universities through a quantitative study of 362 individuals from an IM perspective. The study highlights the importance of an inclusive culture in knowledge dissemination for further enhancing employee brand equity and provides practical guidelines for universities to focus on faculty engagement and knowledge sharing. The findings have practical implications for university management and the Higher Education Commission managers in Pakistan, guiding them to focus on faculty engagement, knowledge sharing and inclusive communication practices to strengthen their brand equity.

[Poulis et al. \(2025\)](#) explore the landscape of Muslim modest fashion within Western societies. It investigates how global brands are engaging with this market, the perceptions of Muslim women regarding these efforts and the significant role of social media influencers in shaping trends. The study uses qualitative interviews to understand the experiences and viewpoints of both hijab-wearing and modestly dressed Muslim women, examining themes of identity, religious observance, inclusivity and potential commercial exploitation. The paper concludes by underscoring the importance of authenticity and genuine representation for fashion brands to respectfully engage with the global Muslim consumer market.

[Magtiba et al. \(2025\)](#) explore consumers' perceptions of virtual influencers, examining the influence of anthropomorphism, social presence and information quality on their trust and attitudes and how these factors subsequently affect purchase intentions. The study also investigates whether the ethnicity of the virtual influencer moderates these relationships. The study conducted an online survey with 258 respondents and found that trust improved consumer attitudes and increased purchase intentions while revealing no significant effect of the virtual influencer's ethnicity on the relationships between the variables in the study.

Future research must also address the delicate balance between authentic engagement with societal issues and the risk of appearing opportunistic ([Burgess and Wilkie, 2023](#)). This includes exploring how brands can contribute meaningfully to social progress through IM while maintaining commercial viability. In conclusion, the future of IM research calls for a more nuanced, interdisciplinary approach. By addressing these emerging trends and research gaps, the field can advance both theoretical understanding and practical application, ultimately contributing to more effective, authentic and socially responsible marketing practices ([Grieco, 2024](#); [Kipnis et al., 2021](#)).

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