

How Do Liberals Respond to Pro- vs. Anti-DEI Brand Messaging? The Intersectional Role of Ethnic and Political Identity

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The Intersectional Role of Ethnic and Political Identity

Abstract:

As Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) becomes increasingly politicized in the U.S., little is known about how consumers interpret pro- versus anti-DEI brand messaging. This research examines how liberal consumers evaluate DEI-related brand statements and how these evaluations depend jointly on consumer and spokesperson ethnicity. Adopting an intersectional perspective, we integrate political and ethnic identity to develop competing predictions for People of Color (PoC). For PoCs, an anti-DEI message delivered by a PoC spokesperson may evoke ingroup leniency or, alternatively, backlash due to perceived group betrayal. Evidence from our experiment ($N = 251$) shows that PoCs evaluated anti-DEI positions less negatively when delivered by a PoC (vs. White) spokesperson, consistent with ingroup leniency; whereas White participants were unaffected by spokesperson ethnicity. Our findings underscore the need for intersectional approaches to understanding identity-based consumer responses.

Keywords: *Diversity, Equity & Inclusion; Brand activism; Intersectionality*

Track: *Social Responsibility & Ethics*

1. Introduction

On January 20th, 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump signed Executive Order 14151, directing the termination of all federal Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs (Office of the Federal Register, 2025), effectively dismantling organizational practices aimed at improving representation, fairness, and inclusion for historically marginalized groups. Within days, federal agencies removed DEI materials from public websites and paused related contracts and trainings. Beyond the public sector, this action signaled broader pressure on private-sector DEI initiatives, particularly for companies dependent on federal contracts, which began distancing themselves from practices perceived as politically sensitive (Niko, 2025). Major retailer *Target*, for instance, discontinued its DEI programs following political scrutiny, prompting lawsuits, nationwide boycotts, and substantial financial loss (Holman & Creswell, 2025). These developments illustrate the growing politicization of DEI efforts and reinforce the notion that DEI has become a partisan symbol, with support interpreted as liberal and rejection as conservative.

As public attention to DEI has intensified, consumer research has increasingly examined how marketplace structures, justice perceptions, and stigma shape the experiences of vulnerable and diverse consumers (see Arsel et al., 2022, for a review). A related stream has examined how consumers respond to brand positioning on sociopolitical issues, often referred to as corporate political advocacy or brand activism (Hydock et al., 2020). Yet despite these developments, no work has investigated how consumers react to publicly articulated pro- versus anti-DEI corporate statements, nor whether such reactions depend simultaneously on consumer ethnicity and the ethnicity of the company spokesperson delivering the message.

The present research addresses this gap by adopting a U.S.-focused, intersectional perspective. We concentrate on liberal-leaning consumers, those for whom DEI norms are especially salient (Jost et al., 2009), and analyze how their reactions to pro- versus anti-DEI brand stances depend not only on political identity but also on their own ethnic identity and the ethnic identity of the brand spokesperson. Existing research suggests that ethnic identity can heighten the symbolic meaning of DEI messaging for People of Color (PoC), potentially amplifying or complicating identity-based responses (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008).

Consequently, we ask: *How do liberal-leaning consumers respond to pro- versus anti-DEI corporate statements, and how are these responses shaped by the interaction of consumer and spokesperson ethnicity?*

We draw on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and complementary identity-based frameworks to propose competing predictions for PoCs and test these in a controlled experimental design. In doing so, this research advances understanding of how DEI-related brand communication is interpreted through multiple, intersectional identity lenses within an increasingly polarized marketplace.

2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

Theoretically, we anchor our research in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) as a foundation for understanding how consumers respond to corporate communication, particularly when such communication touches on politically charged topics such as DEI. According to social identity theory, individuals define themselves partly through their membership in social groups and aim to maintain positive distinctions between their in-groups and out-groups, for example, by evaluating information in ways that affirm in-group norms and distance them from out-group positions (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Both ethnic group membership and political ideology function as salient social identities that strongly shape perception, evaluation, and judgment (Crowder-Meyer & Ferrín, 2021; Devine, 2015). For politically liberal consumers, DEI is normatively aligned with in-group values related to egalitarianism, social justice, and concerns for historically marginalized communities (Jost et al., 2009). Supporting DEI therefore represents an ideologically congruent stance, whereas opposing DEI constitutes an out-group, conservative-aligned position. Consistent with research showing that consumers evaluate brands more favorably when they reflect positions aligned with their ideological in-group (e.g., Hydock et al., 2020; Schoenmueller et al., 2023), we expect liberal consumers to respond more positively to firms endorsing rather than rejecting DEI. This response should be reflected in a more positive brand attitude as a brand-level outcome and in greater purchase intention as a behavior-level outcome. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H₁: *Liberal consumers are likely to respond more favorably to pro-DEI (vs. anti-DEI) corporate positions, reflected in more positive brand attitude and greater purchase intention.*

Beyond social identity theory, identity-based motivation (Oyserman, 2009) further explains how multiple social identities, such as ethnicity and political ideology, interact to shape liberals' responses to DEI-related communication. Identity-based motivation proposes that individuals are particularly responsive to information that is relevant to their salient

identities and interpret such information in ways that protect or affirm those identities (Oyserman, 2009). Because DEI explicitly concerns the representation, treatment, and advancement of historically marginalized groups, it is not only politically but also ethnically self-relevant for most PoCs (Arsel et al., 2021). For liberal PoCs a brand's position on DEI does not merely signal ideological alignment or misalignment; it may also be perceived as affirming or threatening the status and recognition of their ethnic in-group. In contrast, for White liberal consumers, DEI is politically meaningful but not significantly tied to their ethnic identity (Davenport, 2018). As a result, anti-DEI positions may evoke a stronger negative response among PoCs than among White consumers, whose reactions are shaped primarily by political identity rather than a combination of political and ethnic self-relevance. We therefore hypothesize:

H₂: *The positive effect of pro-DEI (vs. anti-DEI) corporate positions is stronger among liberal PoCs than among White liberals.*

Building on *H₂*, the ethnicity of the company spokesperson adds an additional identity cue that may further shape how liberal consumers, particularly PoCs, interpret DEI-related messages. Prior work indicates that when observers notice visible traits of a communicator, these traits can activate relevant social identities and influence how political or moral messages are judged (e.g., White & Argo, 2008; White & Dahl, 2006). For PoCs, a PoC spokesperson may signal ingroup membership and shared experience, whereas a White spokesperson does not carry this group-based relevance. As a result, the ethnicity of the communicator may meaningfully alter how PoCs evaluate an anti-DEI stance, which is already highly self-relevant for them.

Intersectionality research emphasizes that identities do not operate independently; rather, their joint salience can produce reactions that cannot be predicted from any single identity alone (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991). For PoCs, an anti-DEI message implicates both political and ethnic identity, making the reaction to the spokesperson especially consequential. Two theoretically grounded mechanisms suggest competing predictions.

The first is ingroup leniency: consumers tend to show greater trust, empathy, and benefit of the doubt toward ingroup members, even when they violate normative expectations (Brewer, 1999). Under this mechanism, a PoC spokesperson communicating an anti-DEI stance may be evaluated less negatively than a White spokesperson. This leads to our first competing hypothesis:

H_{3a}: *Among liberal PoCs, anti-DEI positions are evaluated less negatively when delivered by a PoC (vs. White) spokesperson.*

The competing mechanism is the black sheep effect, which predicts that ingroup members who violate central group norms are judged more severely because such violations are experienced as morally deviant and identity threatening (Marques et al., 1988). From this perspective, a PoC spokesperson who rejects DEI may be punished more harshly due to the perceived betrayal of core group-relevant values. Hence, our second competing hypothesis:

H_{3b}: *Among liberal PoCs, anti-DEI positions are evaluated more negatively when delivered by a PoC (vs. White) spokesperson.*

For White liberal participants, the spokesperson's ethnicity is generally less tied to their own sense of ethnic identity (Davenport, 2018), and thus we do not expect it to substantially influence their evaluations. This leads to our final hypothesis:

H₄: *Among White liberals, responses do not differ by spokesperson ethnicity.*

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model derived from our hypotheses.

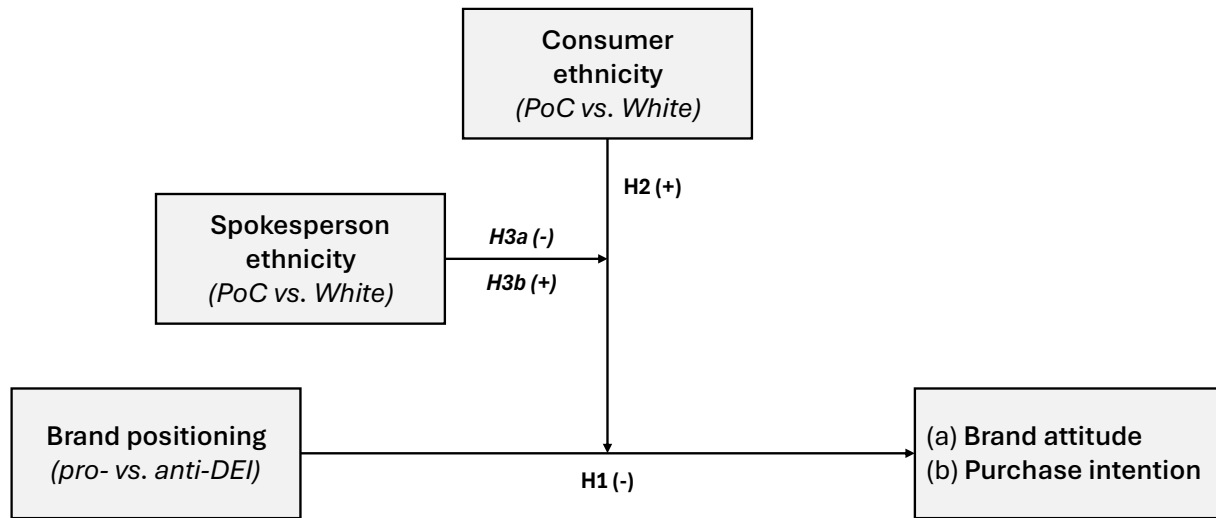


Figure 1: Conceptual model

3. Methodology

We designed the study to directly test our hypotheses by creating a controlled experimental environment that isolated the effects of brand positioning, participant ethnicity, and spokesperson ethnicity on brand attitude and purchase intention. To recruit an ideologically homogeneous sample, we used Prolific's prescreening tool and targeted U.S. participants who self-identified as politically liberal. We additionally applied demographic

filters to obtain an even split between PoCs and White participants. In total, 251 individuals ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.9$; 51% female) successfully completed the study. To verify that the prescreening procedure successfully captured liberal participants, we measured political ideology at the end of the study using a 7-point single-item scale (1 = strongly liberal, 7 = strongly conservative). A one-sample t-test against the neutral midpoint of 4 confirmed that our sample leaned liberal, $t(250) = -25.87, p < .001, M = 2.10$.

We employed a 2 (brand positioning: pro-DEI vs. anti-DEI) $\times$ 2 (spokesperson ethnicity: PoC vs. White) between-subjects design. Participants received information that they would watch a brief brand message delivered by *Michael Renn*, the spokesperson of a fictional consumer electronics retailer named *Nuovano*. We randomly assigned each participant to one of the four experimental conditions. In each condition, participants watched an AI-generated video created with *Synthesys.io* in which the spokesperson either supported or rejected DEI and appeared either as Black or as White (videos averaged about 30 seconds in length). To ensure that participants watched the video with audio, we included an attention check immediately afterward. We asked participants to identify the content of the video using three response options. Only those who selected the correct description (*"The video shows a brand message delivered by a spokesperson who explains the company's position on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion"*) were able to proceed and complete the study.

The pro-DEI video communicated *Nuovano's* commitment to DEI. For example, the spokesperson stated: *"At Nuovano, we support Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, also known as DEI. This means we recognize and value differences in backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences. We aim to provide fair opportunities, and we strive to create an inclusive environment where everyone can contribute and succeed."* The anti-DEI video communicated the opposite stance. For example, the spokesperson stated: *"At Nuovano, we do not implement formal DEI programs. Instead, we focus on a merit-based approach. We believe this approach best supports clarity, fairness, and effectiveness in our workplace."*

After viewing the video, participants completed the dependent measures. First, we measured brand attitude using the four evaluative adjective pairs introduced by Spears and Singh (2004) on a 7-point scale. These items capture participants' overall judgment of the brand (e.g., *"I find this brand..."*; 1 = extremely unappealing, 7 = extremely appealing). The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.98$). Second, we assessed purchase intention with three items adapted from Grewal et al. (1998) on a 7-point Likert scale (e.g., *"I would consider buying products from Nuovano"*; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The scale also demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .97$).

4. Analysis and results

We tested our hypotheses using two multiple regression models, one predicting brand attitude and one predicting purchase intention. In each model, we entered brand positioning (pro-DEI = 0, anti-DEI = 1), spokesperson ethnicity (PoC = 0, White = 1), and participant ethnicity (PoC = 0, White = 1) as predictors and included all two-way and the three-way interaction terms. To account for potential demographic confounds, we added age, income, education, and gender as control variables. Appendix A reports the full regression tables, and Appendix B visualizes the estimated effects on brand attitude.

Regarding brand attitude, the analysis revealed a strong main effect of brand positioning, confirming H_1 : participants reported more positive brand attitudes toward pro-DEI than anti-DEI statements, $b = 1.97$, $t(239) = 5.73$, $p < .001$. Interestingly, the interaction between brand positioning and participant ethnicity was not significant, $b = -0.01$, $p = .98$, providing no support for H_2 . PoC and White participants did not differ in how strongly they reacted to pro-DEI versus anti-DEI brand positions.

Crucially, the three-way interaction among brand positioning, spokesperson ethnicity, and participant ethnicity was significant, $b = -1.27$, $t(239) = -2.01$, $p = .046$. This pattern aligns with H_{3a} rather than H_{3b} . Among PoC participants, anti-DEI messages triggered less negative evaluations when delivered by a PoC spokesperson compared to a White spokesperson. This pattern reflects an ingroup leniency mechanism and provides support for H_{3a} . Among White participants, spokesperson ethnicity did not alter evaluations, consistent with H_4 .

We observed a similar pattern of results for purchase intention. Brand positioning again produced a strong main effect, supporting H_1 : participants expressed higher purchase intention in response to pro-DEI compared to anti-DEI messages, $b = 1.68$, $t(239) = 3.99$, $p < .001$. The interaction between brand positioning and participant ethnicity was not significant, $b = 0.55$, $p = .32$, offering no support for H_2 . PoC and White participants did not differ significantly in the strength of their responses to pro- versus anti-DEI brand positions.

The three-way interaction showed a marginal effect, $b = -1.31$, $t(239) = -1.69$, $p = .092$. Although not conventionally significant, the pattern mirrors the brand attitude results: among PoC participants, anti-DEI messages produced less negative purchase intentions when the spokesperson was a PoC. This trend again points toward ingroup leniency and offers marginal support for H_{3a} . As expected, White participants did not vary in purchase intention based on spokesperson ethnicity, which supports H_4 .

5. Discussion

This research aimed to examine how liberal-leaning consumers respond to pro-DEI versus anti-DEI corporate statements and how these reactions depend simultaneously on consumer ethnicity and the ethnicity of the spokesperson communicating the message. Our results indicate that liberal consumers evaluate brands more favorably across both attitude and purchase intention when brands endorse rather than oppose DEI, aligning with prior work showing that consumers prefer value-congruent corporate positions (e.g., Hydock et al., 2020).

Beyond this main effect, the present study offers initial evidence for an intersectional pattern in consumer responses to DEI communication. By considering both political identity and ethnic identity, we reveal a nuance in how PoCs process identity relevant brand messaging. Specifically, PoCs evaluated anti-DEI statements less negatively when a PoC spokesperson delivered the message. This pattern is consistent with the ingroup leniency mechanism proposed in H_{3a} (Brewer, 1999) and runs counter to the black sheep effect predictions outlined in H_{3b} (Marques et al., 1988). Overall, our results highlight the importance of integrating intersectional identity frameworks into marketing research and directly respond to the recent call by Uduehi et al. (2024) to incorporate overlapping identity dimensions into consumer analyses.

Our study has several limitations. We focus exclusively on liberal consumers, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other ideological audiences like conservatives or moderates. In addition, we did not manipulate spokesperson gender, although gender represents another identity domain that is closely linked to the broader DEI discourse. Future research should therefore examine how conservative and moderate consumers react to DEI related brand messaging. It should also investigate whether gender shapes responses to DEI positioning, especially given ongoing gender-based inequities such as the gender pay gap and the low proportion of women in leadership roles.

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Appendix A. Regression models predicting *brand attitude* and *purchase intention*

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	<i>Brand attitude</i>		<i>Purchase intention</i>	
Brand Positioning (Pro- vs. Anti-DEI)	1.966***	(0.344)	1.675***	(0.420)
Participant Ethnicity (PoC vs. White)	0.042	(0.356)	-0.639	(0.435)
Spokesperson Ethnicity (PoC vs. White)	-0.935**	(0.368)	-1.036**	(0.449)
Age	0.002	(0.006)	-0.008	(0.007)
Gender	-0.017	(0.153)	0.021	(0.188)
Income	0.087	(0.055)	0.118*	(0.068)
Education	0.138**	(0.067)	0.148*	(0.082)
Brand Positioning x Participant Ethnicity	-0.011	(0.450)	0.551	(0.549)
Brand Positioning x Spokesperson Ethnicity	1.147**	(0.457)	1.179**	(0.559)
Participant Ethnicity x Spokesperson Ethnicity	1.159**	(0.501)	1.444**	(0.612)
Brand Positioning x Participant Ethnicity x Spokesperson Ethnicity	-1.270**	(0.634)	-1.307*	(0.775)
Constant	3.139***	(0.634)	3.126***	(0.576)
<i>Adjusted R²</i>	0.467		0.381	
<i>F-Statistic</i>	20.95***		15.02***	

Note. Coefficients reflect changes relative to pro-DEI positioning × PoC.

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix B. Three-way interaction of *brand positioning*, *participant ethnicity* and *spokesperson ethnicity* on brand attitude

