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The diversity washing dilemma: When signaling diversity enhances image and credibility – And when it backfires

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how different presentations of diversity influence perceptions of a company and whether discrepancies between diversity self-presentation and actual diversity cause backfire effects. Additionally, it explores whether these effects occur only in corporate self-presentation or also in product advertising. Two online experiments were conducted. In Experiment 1, participants viewed a company presenting itself as highly, somewhat, or not diverse, with perceptions measured before and after revealing its actual lack of diversity. Experiment 2 tested whether diversity claims in self-presentation or product advertising influenced perceptions, again measuring responses before and after revealing the company's true diversity. Results show that presenting a company as diverse enhances its image, credibility, and behavioral intentions, whether through self-presentation or product communication. However, once a lack of diversity is exposed, perceptions of image and credibility decline, along with application and purchase intentions. Interestingly, companies that misleadingly claimed diversity still received higher ratings than those that were honest about their lack of diversity, but their credibility suffered more when the truth was revealed.

Demographic changes and an increasingly diverse society have made diversity a central issue in the corporate world (Allen et al., 2008; Köllen, 2019). Ideally, a company's workforce should reflect societal diversity as diverse teams can provide valuable benefits (Uysal, 2013; Zhang, 2022). As a result, many organizations are actively working to integrate diversity into their structures and operations, aiming to leverage its direct and indirect contributions to economic success (Roberson, 2019; Uysal, 2013). Direct benefits come from diverse teams that offer different perspectives and expertise, while indirect effects come from the company's portrayal as diverse, which enhances its reputation and public perception (Roberge & van Dick, 2010).

This creates a dilemma for companies: While they may feel the pressure to communicate their commitment to diversity, they face the challenge of reconciling this with their actual level of diversity (Wulf et al., 2022). When companies are not as diverse as they claim, they risk presenting an image that does not reflect reality (Beckert & Koch, 2025). This is often manifested in the use of diverse presentations of employees, focusing on gender and ethnicity for example, in external corporate communications. However, many companies exaggerate their diversity, creating a gap between their diversity communication and actual practices—a phenomenon known as diversity washing (Baker et al., 2024; Beckert & Koch, 2025). Despite its prevalence, little is known about its effects: Does a diverse presentation enhance a company's image and credibility, or does it backfire? How do consumers respond when they discover that a company is less diverse than it claims—does it damage the company's image and credibility, or do they appreciate the effort to appear diverse?

This study attempts to address these questions by conducting two consecutive experiments. The first experiment investigates how a company's self-presentation of diversity affects its image, credibility, and applicants' intention to apply, as well as whether discrepancies between communicated and actual diversity affect these outcomes. The second experiment followed a similar design but extends the analysis to product communication.

1. Corporate diversity communication

Diversity in an organizational context means having a mix of different individuals who interact and work together, bringing both similarities and differences in various ways. These "can include any dimension (or category) whereby people share a specific manifestation of that dimension with one another, or, conversely, whereby people

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differ from one another in terms of a specific manifestation of the dimension" (Köllen, 2019, p. 262). These dimensions are context-dependent, limitless, and cannot be confined to specific categories like ethnicity or gender alone (Köllen, 2019). In fact, there are an infinite number of potential dimensions, which can be categorized into surface-level and deep-level characteristics (Beckert & Koch, 2025). Surface-level characteristics are externally visible traits, such as age or ethnicity, which can be easily observed and measured. These visible attributes often serve as the basis for biases and stereotypes (Beckert & Koch, 2025; Harrison et al., 2002). In contrast, deep-level characteristics, such as personality, attitudes, and values, are not immediately visible but emerge through social interactions over time (Harrison et al., 2002; Roberge & van Dick, 2010).

This distinction between surface- and deep-level diversity is critical to understanding how companies communicate their commitment to diversity. By strategically highlighting certain dimensions of diversity, companies can shape stakeholder perceptions. This can be explained by Signaling Theory, which suggests that organizations send targeted signals to reduce information asymmetry with stakeholders (Spence, 1973, 2002). Diverse self-presentations can serve as signals which shape a company's image (Bear et al., 2010; Bianchi et al., 2019). Therefore, gender- and ethnically diverse leadership teams can have a positive impact on a company's image (Bear et al., 2010; Navarro-García et al., 2020). In addition to image, credibility is crucial, as CSR efforts have been shown to positively influence it (Hur et al., 2014). This suggests that diversity communication could have similar effects. Given that diversity is increasingly recognized as a fundamental aspect of CSR (Wolfgruber et al., 2021; Zhang, 2022), this is particularly relevant. Stakeholders often expect companies to demonstrate a commitment to diversity. Organizations use diversity communication strategically to signal their alignment with these social expectations (Allen, 2008; Köllen, 2019). Thus, both CSR and diversity communication serve as moral and prosocial signals that can enhance stakeholder perceptions of credibility.

The company's culture—including its approach to diversity—can be a significant factor for potential employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). As a result, companies are increasingly using websites to showcase diversity through curated images, videos, and diversity-driven mission statements (Windscheid et al., 2018). Other strategies include employer branding campaigns (Confetto et al., 2023), CSR reports on diversity (Zhou, 2021), and public initiatives like networking programs, gender quotas, or diversity ambassadors (Windscheid et al., 2018). Since potential applicants have limited information about a company, companies need to send signals about their employer brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Taj, 2016). CSR-related messaging has been shown to increase applicants' willingness to apply (Greening & Turban, 2000), especially when diversity is emphasized as a core value (Avery et al., 2013). While diverse leadership teams enhance employer attractiveness (Dauth et al., 2023), we hypothesize that the presentation of a diverse workforce also influences potential applicants. Based on these insights, we propose the following hypothesis (H1): *The more diverse a company presents itself, the more positively its a) image and b) credibility are perceived, and c) the more likely individuals are to apply.*

2. Diversity washing

To capitalize on the positive effects of diversity, companies have made diversity efforts a key part of their corporate communication strategies (Du et al., 2010; Gillberg, 2024). However, some companies present themselves as more diverse than they truly are (Wulf et al., 2022). When there is a discrepancy between a company's diversity communication and its actual practices, this phenomenon is referred to as diversity washing (Gillberg, 2024). It is considered a subset of CSR-washing (Pope & Wæraas, 2016; Viererbl & Koch, 2022) and "occurs when organizations exaggerate their diversity commitments, leading to a gap between symbolic communications and actual practices" (Beckert & Koch, 2025, p. 5). This happens when companies present an incomplete or misleading picture of their diversity efforts, often by highlighting only the most favorable aspects or inflating their commitment to diversity to appear more substantial than it actually is (Gillberg, 2024).

Despite the growing relevance of diversity washing, little research has explored its impact on corporate perceptions. Studies on other forms of CSR-washing, particularly greenwashing, suggest that it undermines a company's credibility, image, and perceived integrity (Chen & Chang, 2013; de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Keilmann & Koch, 2023). Even minor discrepancies between environmental claims and actual sustainability practices can harm corporate credibility and reputation (Koch & Denner, 2025; Jong et al., 2020). Similarly, research shows that when stakeholders recognize deceptive CSR claims, their trust in the company declines and their willingness to support it decreases (Park et al., 2021). Comparable effects have been observed with rainbow washing (Wulf et al., 2022).

These effects can be explained with Expectancy Violations Theory, which posits that individuals develop expectations about others' behaviors based on social norms, contextual factors, and previous experiences (Burgoon, 1993; Burgoon & LePoire, 1993). When behavior deviates from these expectations, it causes an expectancy violation, which can be either positive or negative (Burgoon, 2016). A positive violation occurs when behavior surpasses expectations and is perceived favorably, while a negative violation happens when behavior fails to meet expectations, leading to disappointment or skepticism. This violation prompts a cognitive reassessment of the entity responsible for the behavior (Burgoon and LePoire, 1993). Applied to diversity washing, this theory suggests that when a company presents itself as diverse but fails to deliver on those claims, stakeholders may experience a negative expectancy violation, resulting in a reassessment of the company's image and credibility.

When stakeholders recognize insincere diversity efforts, companies are often evaluated more negatively than before, resulting in the opposite of the intended outcome: attempts to improve public perception lead to greater reputational harm (Keilmann & Koch, 2023). These are referred to as backfire effects, where an action that is intended to produce a positive result instead produces the opposite result and makes the situation worse (Koch & Viererbl, 2022). As the Expectancy Violations Theory suggests, the severity of stakeholder backlash depends on the magnitude of the discrepancy between corporate claims and actual behavior (Einwiller et al., 2019; Koch & Denner, 2025). Keilmann and Koch (2023) found that even minor inconsistencies in environmental claims harm corporate image and credibility, with larger discrepancies amplifying these negative effects.

Based on these findings, it is likely that diversity washing will produce similar backfire effects in terms of image and credibility. Furthermore, since authentic diversity efforts should enhance employer attractiveness, recognized diversity washing may discourage job applications. Potential applicants are likely to avoid companies that fail to align their stated values with actual workplace practices (Park et al., 2021). Thus, we assume (H2): *A company's diverse self-presentation will backfire if it is later revealed to be lacking in diversity (i.e., diversity washing), resulting in a more negative evaluation of its a) image, b) credibility, and c) likelihood of job applications, compared to a transparent company.*

3. Study 1

3.1. Method

Sample. We recruited 281 participants (52.3 % female, 47.0 % male, 0.7 % non-binary; $M_{\text{age}} = 51.10$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 15.32$) via an online social science research panel. All participants were located in Germany. Participation was anonymous and voluntary with no compensation.

Design and Manipulation. We conducted an online experiment in which a company presented itself as highly diverse, semi-diverse, or not diverse on its website. After measuring participants' perceptions at time point t1, we showed them a graphic revealing that the company was actually not diverse, and their perceptions were measured again at time point t2. To implement this, participants viewed a webpage from the fictitious textile company PORTER & PINE which featured the heading "Meet a Part of Our Team" and displayed eight employee portraits (Appendix, Figure A.1). We included eight photos to align with Windscheid et al. (2016), who used the same number in their experiments on perceptions of diversity mixed messages.

Our manipulation varied the composition of these eight employee portraits, creating three different versions. (1) In the non-diverse condition, all eight portraits depicted white male employees. (2) In the semi-diverse condition, six portraits showed white males, while the remaining two depicted women—one white and one from a different ethnic background. This setup was informed by Windscheid et al. (2016), who found that diversity perceptions shifted when two out of eight individuals were women. (3) In the diverse condition, the eight portraits included four men (two white, two from different ethnic backgrounds) and four women (two white, two from different ethnic backgrounds). After this stimulus, participants rated the company's image, credibility, and their intention to apply for a job.

Next, participants viewed a webpage from the fictitious platform BizStats, which provides industry and company statistics (Appendix, Figure A.2). It displayed the company's demographics, revealing that 90 % of employees were male and 95 % were white. This setup created varying degrees of discrepancy between the company's presented and actual diversity, which constituted the core manipulation. In the first group (non-diverse presentation), there was no discrepancy with the actual demographic data. In the second group (semi-diverse), a small discrepancy indicated light diversity washing. In the third group (diverse), a large discrepancy reflected strong diversity washing. After viewing the website, participants reassessed the company's image, credibility, and application intentions, and were subsequently debriefed.

Measures. The company's *image* was measured using a five-point semantic differential scale developed by Koch et al. (2019). Participants rated three adjective pairs (unfriendly – friendly, not empathetic – empathetic, not likeable – likeable) in response to the statement "I believe the company is…". These variables were combined into an index, measured both before (t1: $M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.79$, $\alpha = .86$) and after the second stimulus (t2: $M = 2.81$, $SD = 0.84$, $\alpha = .88$).

The company's *credibility* was assessed using a five-point scale from Newell and Goldsmith (2001). Participants rated three adjective pairs (not trustworthy – trustworthy, not credible – credible, not honest – honest,) in response to the statement "I believe the company is…". The three variables were measured before (t1: $M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.81$; $\alpha = .91$) and after the second stimulus (t2: $M = 2.72$, $SD = 0.99$; $\alpha = .94$).

The *intent to apply* for a job was measured using a five-point scale by Wei et al. (2016), with one adjective pair (very unlikely – very likely) in response to "If I were job hunting, I would apply to PORTER & PINE". This was also measured both before (t1: $M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.21$) and after the second stimulus (t2: $M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.11$).

Manipulation Check. To assess whether participants recognized the manipulation, we asked them to estimate the number of men and women on the displayed company website. In the non-diverse group (8 men, 0 women), participants perceived 8.39 men ($SD = 1.70$) and 0.08 women ($SD = 0.38$). In the semi-diverse group (6 men, 2 women), they reported 6.12 men ($SD = 1.93$) and 2.37 women ($SD = 1.03$), while in the very diverse group (4 men, 4 women), they saw 4.26 men ($SD = 0.85$) and 4.11 women ($SD = 0.93$). Perceptions significantly differed for both men, $F(2277) = 166.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .55$, and women, $F(2277) = 543.69$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .80$, with all groups differing significantly (Bonferroni's post hoc test, $p < .05$). Thus, participants accurately recalled the gender distribution.

We also tested whether participants noticed the discrepancy between the website's self-description and the actual statistics. Participants indicated on a slider (0−100) how much the description aligned with the website's information, ranging from "not at all" to "completely". In line with the manipulation, the non-diverse group indicated high alignment ($M = 79.55$, $SD = 26.17$), the semi-diverse group gave a middle value ($M = 50.56$, $SD = 31.73$), and the highly diverse group reported little alignment ($M = 20.72$, $SD = 17.93$). A one-way ANOVA confirmed the manipulation's success, $F(2277) = 121.63$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .47$, with Bonferroni's post hoc test indicating that all group differences were statistically significant (all $p < .05$).

4. Results

Hypothesis H1a. suggests that the more diverse a company appears, the more positively its image will be perceived. An ANOVA revealed a significant effect of diversity presentation on the company's image, $F(2, 278) = 10.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$. All groups differed significantly according to Bonferroni's post hoc test (all $p < .05$; see Table 1), with the non-diverse group receiving the lowest rating, followed by the semi-diverse group, and the highly diverse group. Thus, H1a is supported.

Hypothesis H1b. proposed that the more diverse a company appears, the more positively its credibility will be perceived. An ANOVA revealed a significant effect on credibility, $F(2, 278) = 4.95$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Credibility was lowest for the non-diverse presentation, slightly higher for the semi-diverse group, and highest for the diverse presentation. Bonferroni's post hoc test showed a significant difference only between the non-diverse and diverse presentations ($p < .05$, Table 1), with no significant difference between the semi-diverse group and the others. Thus, H1b is partially supported.

Hypothesis H1c. stated that the more diverse a company appears, the higher the intention of individuals to apply for a job. The ANOVA revealed a significant effect on application intention, $F(2, 278) = 10.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Application intention was significantly lower for the non-diverse presentation compared to both the semi-diverse and highly diverse presentations. However, no significant difference was found between the latter two groups according to the Bonferroni post hoc test (Table 1). Thus, H1c is partially supported.

Hypothesis H2. suggests that a company's diverse self-presentation will backfire when it is revealed that it lacks actual diversity (i.e., diversity washing), leading to a more negative evaluation of its a) image, b) credibility, and c) likelihood of job applications compared to a transparent company. To test this, we conducted separate RMANOVAs with the level of diverse self-presentation (non-diverse, semi-diverse, diverse) as a between-subject factor and measurement time (before vs. after revealing actual diversity) as a within-subject factor. The interaction between self-presentation and the disclosure of actual diversity (time) did not significantly affect image perception, $F(2, 278) = 1.51$, $p = .224$, $\eta^2 = .01$. As shown in Table 1, all groups rated the company's image approximately 0.7 scale points lower after the disclosure of actual diversity. However, this effect was due solely to the revelation of the company's true demographic profile, not amplified by diversity washing, as indicated by the lack of interaction. Thus, H2a is not supported.

For job application intent, we observed a similar pattern: although a small significant interaction effect emerged, $F(2, 278) = 7.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$, Table 1 shows no backfire effect. Participants still preferred to apply to companies that presented themselves as (semi-)diverse, even if untrue. Thus, H2c is not supported. Notably, companies that initially misleadingly presented themselves as more diverse continued to receive more positive ratings and had a higher likelihood of job applications even after diversity washing was exposed, compared to companies that had been transparent about their non-diversity.

Table 1
Means of image, credibility, and intention to apply by the degree of discrepancy between stated and acutal diversity of the company.

	Image t1	Image t2	Credibility t1	Credibility t2	Intent to Apply t1	Intent to Apply t2
	M(*SD*)					
Not Diverse (No Discrepancy)	3.23(0.85)[a]	2.60(0.80)[a]	3.21 (0.80)[a]	2.83(0.97)[ab]	2.22(1.14)[a]	1.94(1.13)[a]
Semi Diverse (Small Discrepancy)	3.50(0.73)[b]	2.87(0.82)[b]	3.38(0.78)[ab]	2.82(0.95)[a]	2.78(1.22)[b]	2.31(1.09)[b]
Diverse (High Discrepancy)	3.75(0.75)[c]	2.95(0.87)[b]	3.58(0.82)[b]	2.25(1.01)[b]	2.99(1.16)[b]	2.22(1.08)[ab]

Note. Mean values that do not share the same superscript differ significantly at $p < .05$ (Bonferroni post hoc test).

Regarding credibility (H2b) we observe a different pattern. A significant interaction effect emerged between the level of diversity self-presentation and the revelation of the company's actual diversity, $F(2, 278) = 18.55$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$. Initially, the group exposed to the most diverse self-presentation rated the company as the most credible. However, after learning that the company's actual diversity was significantly lower, this group rated the company's credibility the lowest compared to the other two groups. In contrast, the group with a moderate discrepancy between perceived and actual diversity showed a less pronounced decline, and the group that had been honest about its low diversity from the start showed the smallest drop in credibility (Table 1). Since a backfire effect occurs, we find support for H2b. Presenting a company as highly diverse initially enhances its credibility, but when this claim is revealed to be false, the company's credibility suffers more than if it had been transparent from the start.

5. Discussion

In Study 1, a company presented itself as highly, somewhat, or not diverse on its website. After measuring participants' perceptions at t1, they were shown a graphic revealing the company's actual lack of diversity, and perceptions were measured again at t2. The results at t1 show that a diverse self-presentation positively influences perceptions of the company, improving its image and credibility, and increasing the intent to apply. However, after revealing that the company is not diverse (t2), participants rated its image and credibility more negatively, and intent to apply declined across all groups. However, companies that misleadingly presented themselves as more diverse still received higher image ratings and application intentions than those that had been honest. In contrast, backfire effects emerged in credibility assessments: initially presenting a company as highly diverse enhances its credibility, but when this claim is revealed to be false, the company's credibility suffers more than if it had been honest from the start.

6. Effects of diversity washing in corporate self-presentation vs. product communication

Building on Study 1, we extend the idea that a company's self-presentation can positively influence its image, credibility, and attractiveness as an employer to the domain of product communication. While both self-presentation and product communication are forms of corporate communication, they differ in focus. Self-presentation refers to how a company portrays its identity, culture, and values—typically through corporate websites, mission statements, or employer branding efforts (Edwards, 2009; Wilden et al., 2010). Product communication, by contrast, concerns how companies market and promote their goods, including through advertising, packaging, and product design. Although these forms of communication do not necessarily involve diversity, our study focuses specifically on cases where diversity is emphasized (Chu et al., 2015; Confetto et al., 2023). For example, a company may highlight diversity by showcasing a diverse workforce in its self-presentation or by featuring diverse models in product advertisements. Because the context of communication may influence stakeholder interpretations of diversity signals, it is important to examine whether these effects differ between self-presentation and product communication.

In the case of product communication, such signals may generate halo effects—where favorable impressions of the product spill over to shape broader perceptions of the company (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Previous research also shows that CSR-related product communication can positively influence stakeholder evaluations (Arachchi & Samarasinghe, 2023; Bianchi et al., 2019). Diversity cues in product advertising may operate in a similar way, positioning the company as inclusive, socially responsible, and aligned with progressive values, thereby enhancing its image and credibility. Consistent with Study 1 and prior findings (Bear et al., 2010; Bianchi et al., 2019), we propose the following hypothesis (H3): *A company's a) image, b) credibility, and c) intention to purchase its products will be positively influenced by more diverse product communication.*

However, Study 1 also highlighted that when diverse self-presentations do not align with a company's actual diversity, it can lead to negative consequences. These findings are consistent with previous research on CSR-washing, which has shown that such discrepancies can damage both credibility and image (Einwiller et al., 2019; Jong et al., 2020), and negatively impact purchase intentions (Smith & Rhiney, 2020; Wei & Jung, 2022). Despite these findings, limited research has explored whether the detrimental effects on image, credibility, and purchase intentions vary depending on whether diversity washing occurs in a company's self-presentation or in its product communication.

Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958) suggests that the distinction between corporate self-presentation and product communication may be significant. According to this theory, people attribute behavior to underlying motives to make sense of it (Heider, 1958). The perceived motive behind an action influences how individuals evaluate it, shaping their attitudes. When a company presents itself as diverse in its communication, stakeholders are likely to attribute this to the company's core values. In line with Expectancy Violations Theory (Burgoon, 1993), this sets expectations about the company's diversity. If discrepancies between communicated and actual diversity are revealed later, it may be perceived as a violation of core values, not just a misrepresentation of facts (Burgoon, 1993). As a result, the negative impact on image, credibility, and purchase intention is expected to be more severe.

In contrast, diversity claims in product communication may be attributed differently. Consumers generally recognize that product marketing often reflects market trends and social movements, rather than a company's true values (Broussard-Goldsmith, 2024). Consequently, discrepancies between diversity in product communication and actual company diversity may be viewed as a marketing tactic, rather than deliberate deception, or even as a sign that the company is striving for a diverse customer base. Therefore, the negative effects on image, credibility, and purchase intention are likely to be weaker in product communication than in corporate self-presentation. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis *(H4): The negative effects of a discrepancy between stated and actual diversity on (a) image, (b) credibility, and (c) purchase intention are weaker when diversity washing occurs in product communication than when it occurs in corporate self-presentation.*

6.1. Study 2

6.1.1. Method

Sample. We recruited 377 participants through an online access panel for social science research (53.6 % female, 43.2 % male, 1.9 % non-binary, and 1.3 % did not respond; $M_{age} = 52.03$, $SD_{age} = 15.72$). All participants were located in Germany. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and uncompensated, with respondents free to exit the survey at any time.

Design and Manipulation. We conducted an online experiment where a company presented itself or advertised its products (Factor 1) as highly diverse or not diverse (Factor 2) on its website. After participants received the stimuli, their perceptions were measured at t1. Then, they were shown a graphic revealing the company's lack of diversity, and their perceptions were measured again at t2. This resulted in a 2 (diverse vs. non-diverse self-presentation) x 2 (company vs. product presentation) between-subjects design with an additional repeated measure.

The first factor we manipulated was whether the webpage presented a part of the company's workforce or its products. Participants viewed a webpage from the fictitious textile company PORTER & PINE, as used in Study 1. In one condition, they again saw a website featuring eight employees under the heading "Meet a Part of Our Team" (Appendix, Figure A.3). In the other condition, participants viewed a page showcasing the company's products, gender-neutral bags (Appendix, Figure A.4). To maintain visual consistency with the workforce presentation, the product page also displayed eight individuals, each holding a bag. Thus, there were two versions of the website: one with eight photos of employees and another with eight photos of models holding the company's bags.

The second factor we manipulated was the composition of these eight photos. In the non-diverse condition, all eight photos depicted white male individuals. In the diverse condition, the eight photos featured four men (two white and two from different ethnic backgrounds) and four women (two white and two from different ethnic backgrounds). This setup was consistent with Study 1 as well as the study by Windscheid et al. (2016).

After viewing the stimulus, participants rated the company's image, credibility, and their intention to apply for a job. Next, as in Study 1, participants viewed a webpage from the fictitious platform BizStats, which displayed the company's demographics, revealing that 90 % of employees were male and 95 % were white (Appendix, Figure A.2). This ensured that the non-diverse self-presentation group had no discrepancy with the actual demographic data, while the diverse self-presentation group had a significant discrepancy, reflecting strong diversity washing. After viewing the website, participants reassessed the company's image, credibility, and their intent to apply. The study concluded with a debriefing.

Measures. The company's *image* and *credibility* was measured as in Study 1. For image we used the five-point semantic differential scale by Koch et al. (2019), measured both before (t1: $M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.70$, $\alpha = .88$) and after the second stimulus (t2: $M = 3.03$, $SD = 0.73$, $\alpha = .89$). The company's *credibility* was assessed using the five-point scale from Newell and Goldsmith (2001), measured both before (t1: $M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.86$; $\alpha = .92$) and after the second stimulus (t2: $M = 2.73$, $SD = 0.97$; $\alpha = .93$).

Purchase intention was measured using a five-point semantic differential used by Brugman et al. (2024). The scale consisted of an adjective pair (very unlikely – very likely), which participants used to respond to the statement, "If I plan to buy a bag soon, I would buy it from PORTER & PINE". This variable was measured both before (t1: $M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.12$) and after the presentation of the second stimulus (t2: $M = 1.90$, $SD = 1.02$).

Manipulation Check. To assess whether participants recognized the manipulation, we asked them to estimate the number of men and women displayed on the websites. In the non-diverse condition (eight men), participants perceived an average of 7.67 men ($SD = 1.63$) and 0.10 women ($SD = 0.50$). In the diverse condition (four men and four women), participants reported an average of 4.06 men ($SD = 2.04$) and 4.12 women ($SD = 0.98$). These results indicate that participants accurately recalled the gender distribution, confirming that the manipulation was successful. Additionally, t-tests revealed significant differences in the perceived number of men, $t(374) = 19.02$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.96$, and women, $t(374) = -50.86$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 5.17$.

To further test whether participants recognized the discrepancy between the presentation and the actual statistics, we asked them to rate on a scale from 0 to 100, how much the presentation aligned with the actual data. The non-diverse group reported a high alignment ($M = 74.60$, $SD = 26.14$), while the diverse group indicated a low alignment ($M = 25.44$, $SD = 21.49$). A *t*-test confirmed the manipulation's success, $t(373) = 20.00$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 2.06$.

7. Results

First, we examine the effects of diverse and non-diverse self-presentation, excluding the groups that saw a product presentation and thus testing H1 which hypothesized that a company's a) image and b) credibility would benefit from a more diverse self-presentation (Table 2). The results show that the company's image is more positively rated when presented as diverse compared to non-diverse, $t(187) = -4.10$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.60$, thus supporting H1a. Similarly, the company's credibility is rated higher when presented as diverse versus non-diverse, $t(187) = -3.68$, $p = <.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.53$, supporting H1b. Additionally, a positive effect on purchase intention was observed: when the company presents itself as diverse, purchase intention is higher compared to when it presents itself as non-diverse, $t(187) = -4.92$, $p = <.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.71$.

Next, we examine the effects of diverse and non-diverse product presentation, excluding the self-presentation groups, and thus test H3, which states that a company's a) image, b) credibility, and c) intention to purchase products benefit from a more diverse presentation of a company's products (Table 2). The results confirm that the company's image is more positively evaluated when it advertises its products with diverse models compared to non-diverse models, $t(186) = -5.87$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.86$, thus supporting H3a. Similarly, the company's credibility is rated higher when it advertises its products with diverse models versus non-diverse models, $t(186) = -3.22$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.47$, supporting H3b. Moreover, when the company advertises its products with diverse models, purchase intentions are higher compared to when it advertises with non-diverse models, $t(186) = -2.81$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.41$, supporting H3c.

Finally, we compare both self-presentation and product presentation in H4, which hypothesized that a discrepancy between diversity in product communication and actual company diversity would have weaker negative effects on a) image, b) credibility, and c) purchase intention than a discrepancy between the presented and actual diversity within the company. To test this, separate RMANOVAs were conducted for each dependent variable with diversity presentation (diverse vs. non-diverse) and entity (company vs. product) as between-subjects factors, and time of measurement (before vs. after disclosing actual diversity) as the within-subjects factor.

Regarding image, we observed a main effect of time (i.e., washing effects), indicating that the company's image was rated more negatively after the actual demographics were revealed, $F(1373) = 217.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .37$. However, the three-way interaction was not significant, $F(1373) = 0.01$, $p = .93$, $\eta^2 = .00$, which would have been required to support H4a. The hypothesized effect implies that the effect of disclosing actual diversity (time of measurement) depends on both the type of diversity presentation (diverse vs. non-diverse) and the entity

Table 2
Means of image, credibility, and intention to apply by the degree of discrepancy between stated and acutal diversity of the company's self-presentation and product presentation.

Company's Self-Presentation						
	Image t1	Credibility t1	Intent to Apply t1	Image t2	Credibility t2	Intent to Apply t2
	M(*SD*)					
Not diverse (No Discrepancy)	3.44(0.73)	3.19 (0.78)	2.13(1.02)	2.98(0.82)	2.74(1.06)	2.02(1.07)
Diverse (High Discrepancy)	3.86(0.67)	3.66(0.76)	2.89(1.13)	3.18(0.62)	2.57(0.99)	2.12(1.01)
Product Presentation						
	Image t1	Credibility t1	Intent to Apply t1	Image t2	Credibility t2	Intent to Apply t2
	M(*SD*)					
Not Diverse (No Discrepancy)	3.21(0.56)	3.11 (0.78)	1.71(0.94)	2.85(0.65)	2.80(0.80)	1.63(0.92)
Diverse (High Discrepancy)	3.74(0.67)	3.48(0.79)	2.13(1.09)	3.15(0.76)	2.82(1.03)	1.84(1.07)

(company's self-presentation vs. product presentation). A significant three-way interaction would indicate that the negative effect of a discrepancy varies depending on whether diversity is presented regarding a company's self-presentation or a product presentation. As this interaction was not observed, we cannot conclude that diversity washing regarding product presentations is less damaging than diversity washing regarding the self-presentation of a company. Therefore, we reject H4a.

Regarding credibility, we also observed a main effect of time, showing that the company's credibility was rated more negatively after the actual demographics were revealed, $F(1373) = 173.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .32$. Additionally, a significant interaction between time (washing) and diversity presentation was found, $F(1373) = 27.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$, suggesting backfire effects on credibility. However, no three-way interaction was found, $F(1373) = 2.23$, $p = .14$, $\eta^2 = .01$, leading us to reject H4b.

Finally, regarding purchase intentions, we again observe a main effect of time, showing that consumers are less likely to purchase products from a company that engages in diversity washing, $F(1373) = 53.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .13$. Additionally, a significant three-way interaction was found, $F(1373) = 7.48$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .02$ (Fig. 1). The reduction in purchase intention is significantly greater when the discrepancy concerns the company's self-presentation, $t(92) = 6.95$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.72$, $M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.13$, t2: $M = 2.12$, $SD = 1.01$, compared to the product communication, $t(87) = 2.39$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.26$, $M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.09$, t2: $M = 1.84$, $SD = 1.07$. Furthermore, within the group with no discrepancy, purchase intention only significantly decreases for the company's self-presentation, $t(95) = 2.57$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.26$, $M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.02$, t2: $M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.07$. For the product communication group with no discrepancy, there is no significant change in purchase intention after the actual diversity disclosure, $t(99) = 1.58$, $p = 0.06$, $d = 0.16$, $M = 1.71$, $SD = 0.94$, t2: $M = 1.63$, $SD = 0.92$.

Overall, the discrepancy between actual and presented diversity in the company's self-presentation has a stronger effect on purchase intention than the discrepancy in product communication. The negative impact of the discrepancy is weaker for product communication. In summary, the results show that, as hypothesized, people react less strongly to a discrepancy between actual diversity and presented diversity in product communication with a decrease in purchase intention compared to a discrepancy in the company's self-presentation. Thus, H4c is supported.

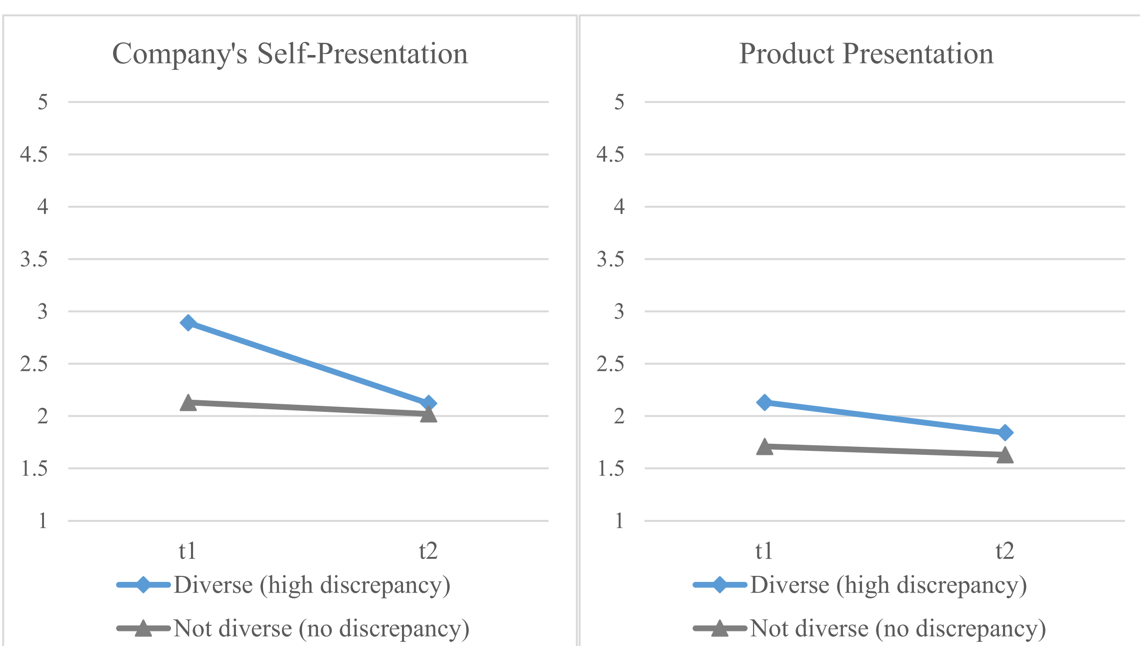

Fig. 1. Purchase intention depending on the degree of discrepancy in the company's self-presentation and in the product communication (interaction).

8. Discussion

Study 2 presented an online experiment in which a company either portrayed itself or advertised its products (Factor 1) as highly diverse or not diverse (Factor 2) on its website. After measuring participants' initial perceptions, a graphic revealing the company's lack of diversity was shown, followed by a second round of perception measurements. The results again confirm that a diverse self-presentation of the company positively impacts its evaluation. Furthermore, this effect extends to product communication: when products are advertised using diverse models, participants rate the company's image and credibility more positively and showed higher purchase intentions.

9. General discussion

This study examined how corporate diversity presentations influence perceptions of a company's image, credibility, and behavioral intentions. It further explored the impact of discrepancies between communicated and actual diversity, focusing on both corporate and product-related diversity portrayals. The first key finding from both experiments is that corporate diversity presentations positively influence perceptions of companies. Specifically, participants rated companies more favorably in terms of their image and credibility when presented as diverse and showed higher purchase intentions or intent to apply for a job. Study 1 highlights that these effects are stronger when organizations present themselves as more diverse. Study 2 extends these findings to product communication, revealing that people also respond to the way products are presented in terms of diversity, which in turn generates positive inferences about the company.

These effects can be explained through Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973). Through their communication, companies send various signals, and when these signals convey diversity, people draw conclusions based on them. They assume that a more diverse company must be more inclusive, progressive, and potentially more attractive to work for or purchase from (Beckert & Koch, 2025). The signals of diversity imply that the company values varied perspectives and may be more capable of innovation and meeting the needs of diverse consumer groups, leading to enhanced perceptions of credibility and image, as well as more favorable behavioral intentions.

The second key finding, also evident in both experiments, is that the positive effects of diversity communication are diminished when a discrepancy between communicated and actual diversity is revealed. When people realize that a company is not truly diverse, their perceptions are negatively impacted. This reaction aligns with Expectancy Violations Theory, which suggests that a gap between expectation and reality triggers a re-evaluation process (Burgoon, 2016; Burgoon & LePoire, 1993). However, these findings must be viewed through a nuanced lens, as two distinct mechanisms – Buffer and Backfire Effects – are at play, depending on whether the focus is on credibility or image (Koch & Viererbl, 2022; Koch et al., 2024). Regarding credibility, a clear backfire effect occurs when a company presents itself as diverse but is found not to be. Here, the initial positive perception of diversity is reversed, leading to a lower credibility rating than if the company had been truthful from the start. This is because people perceive the company as deceitful and lose trust.

In contrast, image perception follows a different pattern: despite the revelation of the company's lack of diversity, participants still rate the company's image more positively — illustrating a buffer effect in this context. The buffer effect refers to the idea that initial positive impressions, created by diversity cues, continue to shield or "buffer" the company's image from later negative information (Koch & Viererbl, 2022; Koch et al., 2024). This buffering also extends to the intention to apply: people are more likely to apply for a job at a company that misleadingly presents itself as diverse than at one that communicates its lack of diversity, even when the latter is truthful. This finding is particularly intriguing, as it suggests that individuals value a company's effort to strive for diversity, even if that effort is not entirely authentic. It can thus be concluded that communicating diversity is a recommended strategy for companies, particularly to enhance their image and attract employees. However, to avoid negative repercussions on credibility assessments, it is essential that companies also cultivate a culture that genuinely reflects diversity.

In addition to applying existing theoretical frameworks, this study contributes to their advancement. While prior research on Signaling Theory has shown that corporate signals influence stakeholder perceptions, our findings reveal that not all signals are processed the same way. Specifically, we demonstrate that diversity-related signals can produce different outcomes based on their perceived authenticity and the evaluative dimension in question. The divergence between image stability (buffer effect) and credibility loss (backfire effect) suggests the need to distinguish between performative signals, which reflect aspirational but possibly superficial commitments, and substantive signals, which are rooted in verifiable organizational practices. Additionally, based on attribution theory, we illustrate that stakeholders make domain-specific attributions when confronted with inconsistencies between a company's messaging and actual behavior. A lack of authenticity undermines perceived credibility, suggesting attributions of deceit or manipulation. However, image evaluations appear to remain favorable, possibly due to attributions of aspirational intent or perceived effort to align with social norms. These findings imply that stakeholders do not uniformly assign blame but instead evaluate intent and context differently.

Both studies are, of course, limited in various ways. Many of these limitations stem from the experimental approach. The experiments were conducted in a controlled, online environment, meaning participants may not have experienced the same motivations or decision-making processes as they would in real-world scenarios, potentially affecting the external validity of the results. Importantly, the company in our study did not explicitly state that it was diverse; rather, it visually implied greater diversity through the use of employee images. This distinction matters because it reflects a subtle but common form of diversity communication in practice, where companies may signal inclusiveness through visuals without making direct claims. Our findings suggest that even when such diversity cues are misleading, they can still positively affect stakeholder perceptions — and in some cases, these impressions persist even after discrepancies are revealed. However, the backlash we observed was limited to perceived credibility, not image or behavioral intentions. Future research could examine whether stronger forms of misrepresentation — such as explicit false claims about diversity — would produce more pronounced negative effects. This would help further differentiate the impact of visual implication versus verbal deception in diversity signaling.

Another important limitation concerns the cultural context of the study. Both experiments were conducted with German-speaking participants, reflecting a context that meaningfully differs from other countries. Cultural differences in attitudes toward diversity, workplace norms, and communication styles may influence how diversity signals are interpreted. Therefore, caution is warranted when generalizing these findings to other cultural contexts, particularly those with different social or political climates surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion. Future research could replicate and extend this work in diverse cultural settings to better understand how context shapes the effectiveness and consequences of diversity communication.

One significant limitation is the focus on only two dimensions of diversity: gender and ethnicity. This focus may overlook other important aspects of diversity, such as age or deep-level characteristics (e.g., religion, social background, or sexual orientation), thus limiting the scope of the findings. The decision to focus on gender and ethnicity was made to ensure accessibility and the ability to manipulate these factors in an experiment. However, this resulted in a binary approach to gender and an emphasis on external characteristics, which can reinforce stereotypes. In reality, the diversity spectrum is much broader (e.g., non-binary gender identities; deep-level characteristics, Roberge & van Dick, 2010).

Future research should consider incorporating a wider range and more depth of diversity dimensions. Additionally, the study used a fictitious company in the textile industry, which may not fully reflect the diversity-related dynamics in other sectors. The diversity communication was limited to the company's website and focused primarily on pictures, but in reality, diversity communication goes beyond simply displaying photos on a website. Future studies should aim to explore diversity communication in different sectors, with more comprehensive communication methods, to provide a more nuanced understanding of its impact in various real-world contexts.

The study has several implications for practice: Effectively communicating diversity — even subtly, through imagery — can improve a company's image, credibility, and behavioral intentions, enhancing its attractiveness to both potential employees and consumers. This type of communication can be a powerful tool in employer branding and may positively influence hiring intentions and consumer purchase behavior. However, we caution that the impact of diversity communication is likely to depend on both how it is framed and the cultural context in which it occurs. In our study, diversity was communicated visually — a "show, don't tell" approach that may be less politically charged than an explicit DEI statement. Particularly in regions where DEI efforts are controversial, explicit verbal commitments to hiring more women or people of color may provoke backlash rather than trust. Thus, while transparency and honesty are generally valuable, companies should consider audience attitudes and cultural climate when designing diversity communication strategies.

Moreover, the study also reveals a critical dilemma for companies — which we term the "diversity washing dilemma" — where the strategic advantage of portraying greater diversity conflicts not only with the risk of losing credibility but also with ethical concerns related to misleading stakeholders. When companies present themselves as more diverse than they truly are, they especially risk being less credible. Therefore, companies should be mindful of the risk of diversity washing. Consequently, it is crucial for companies not only to communicate diversity but also to ensure it is genuinely reflected in their organization. Nevertheless, the study also indicates that, in terms of image, purchase intentions, and attracting employees, portraying a company as more diverse than it actually is, can be beneficial, as people tend to appreciate these efforts. This paradox underscores the challenge organizations face in balancing authenticity with the strategic advantages of emphasizing diversity.

From an ethical perspective, however, this approach is concerning, as it leads to misleading presentations and a lack of true diversity. This can create false expectations among consumers, employees, and potential job applicants, leading them to believe the company is more diverse than it actually is. As a result, these individuals may make decisions based on inaccurate information—such as choosing to support the company or apply for a job—only to later discover that the company does not live up to its claims. Transparency could be key in this context—companies should embrace diversity in their communication, but also openly acknowledge that they still have a long way to go in this regard. By being honest about their current efforts and challenges, companies can build trust with their stakeholders and demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement, rather than presenting an idealized version of themselves. This approach would allow them to align their messaging with their actual practices, fostering greater authenticity and helping to prevent any potential backlash from misleading presentations.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Informed consent was obtained from all human participants involved in this study. All procedures involving human participants were conducted ethically and in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations. No conflicts of interest exist for any of the authors regarding the research presented in this manuscript.

Appendix

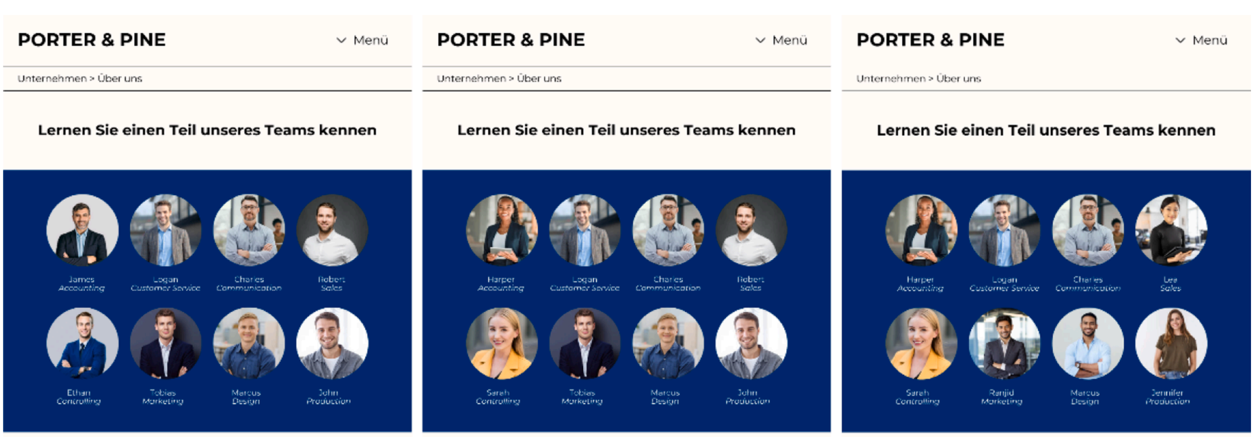

Figure A.1. *Stimulus 1 (Study 1):* Self-presentation of the company. *Note.* (from left to right) not diverse, semi-diverse, or highly diverse. The title of the website is "Meet a part of our team".

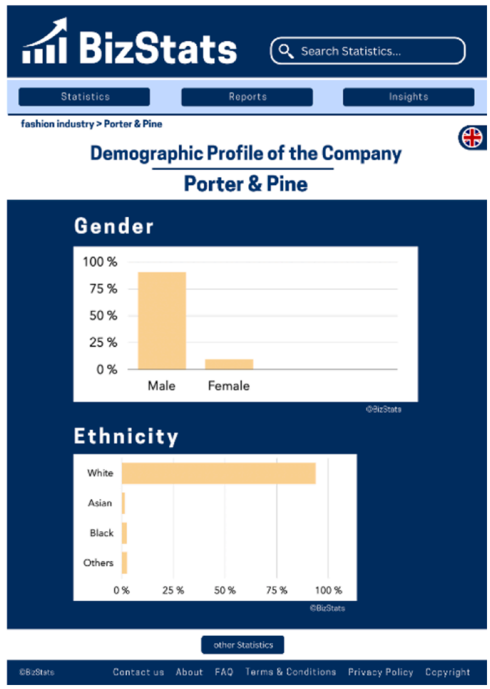

Figure A.2. *Stimulus 2 (Studies 1 & 2):* Graphic displaying the company's actual diversity.

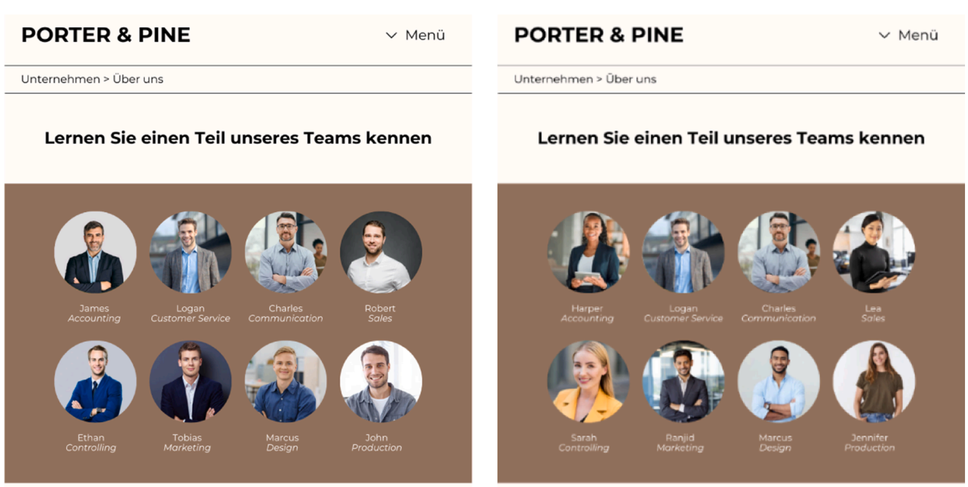

Figure A.3. *Stimulus 1 (Study 2):* Self-presentation of the company. *Note.* Left: not diverse, right: diverse. The title of the website is "Meet a part of our team".

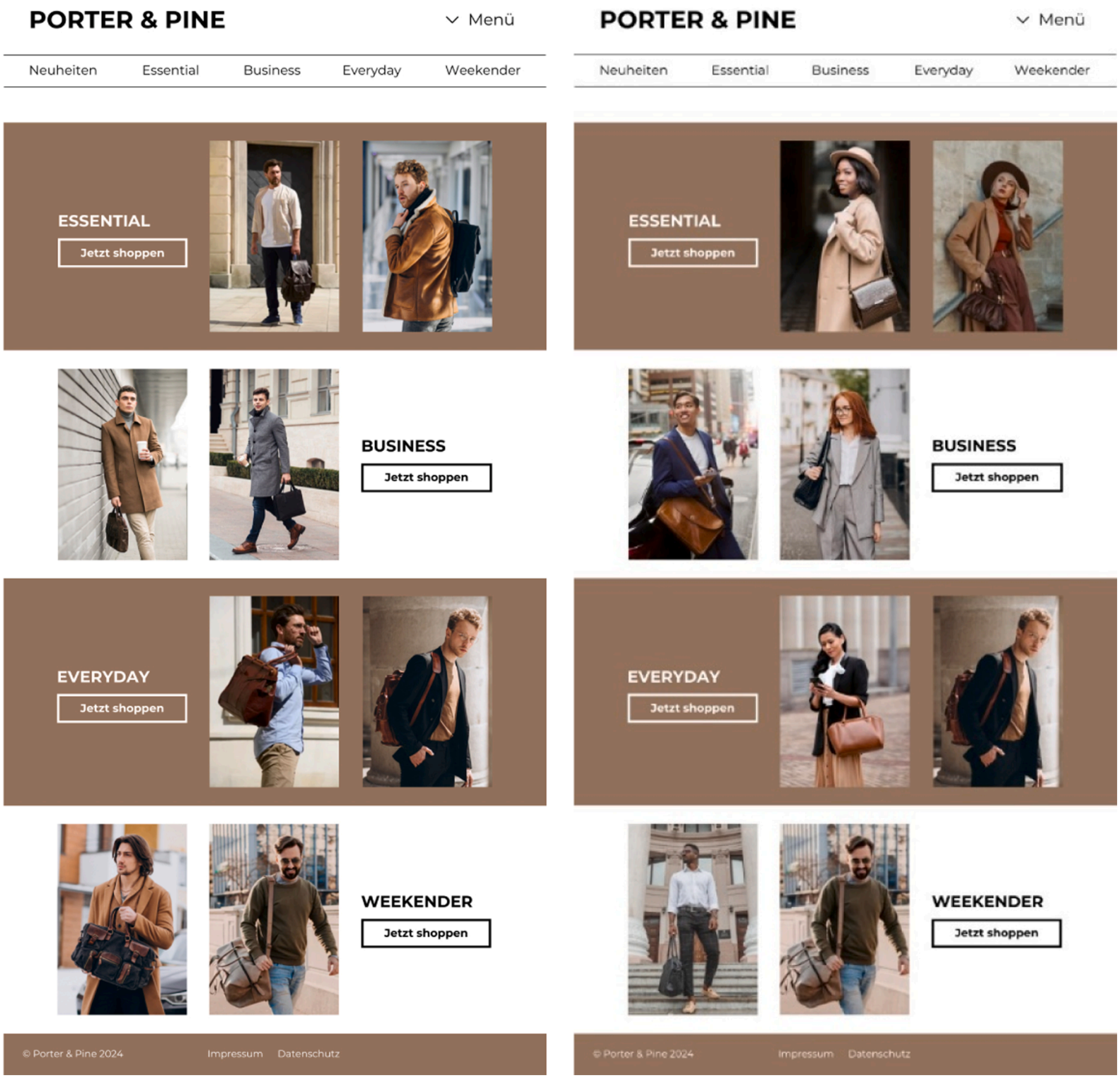

Figure A.4. *Stimulus 1 (Study 2):* Product presentation. *Note.* Left: not diverse, right: diverse

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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