IMD

# Inclusive Language and Images

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Academic partner of
EqualVoice

This research on inclusive language and images is a project from IMD, conducted by Heather Cairns-Lee and Alexander Fleischmann. IMD is the academic partner of EqualVoice, an initiative by Ringier AG that advocates for equal visibility of women and men in the media.

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# Introduction





We live in an increasingly diverse and polarized world. We know that diversity is the spark that fuels new ideas and that inclusion is needed to create organizational cultures where individuals from all walks of life can thrive, but many people are unclear about how to create an inclusive culture and are fearful of saying the wrong thing or choosing the wrong images to represent their organization. Unless we address this conundrum, progress in creating inclusive conversations and communities will remain slow.

As the topic of inclusive language evolves, this white paper aims to support the journey toward more inclusive organizational cultures by providing an overview of the academic literature and suggestions for more inclusive language and image use.

This white paper follows on from IMD's Inclusive Future research (Fleischmann & van Zanten, 2022) that made three principal contributions:

1. It generated a model of inclusion comprising the individual's needs for belonging, uniqueness, and the need for authenticity and participation in an organization, with psychological safety and diversity as linchpins to create cultures where everyone feels safe to speak up.

2. It explored the role of social movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter as well as generational change and the COVID-19 pandemic in accelerating the push for a more inclusive society.

3. It proposed a new method to measure inclusion – the Inclusion Net Promoter Score (iNPS) – along with additional questions about the key components of inclusion to spur behavioral change. The research highlighted the need for leaders to engage in difficult conversations about diversity and inclusion as a way to create cultures of belonging.

The reports can be found at imd.org/inclusivefuture

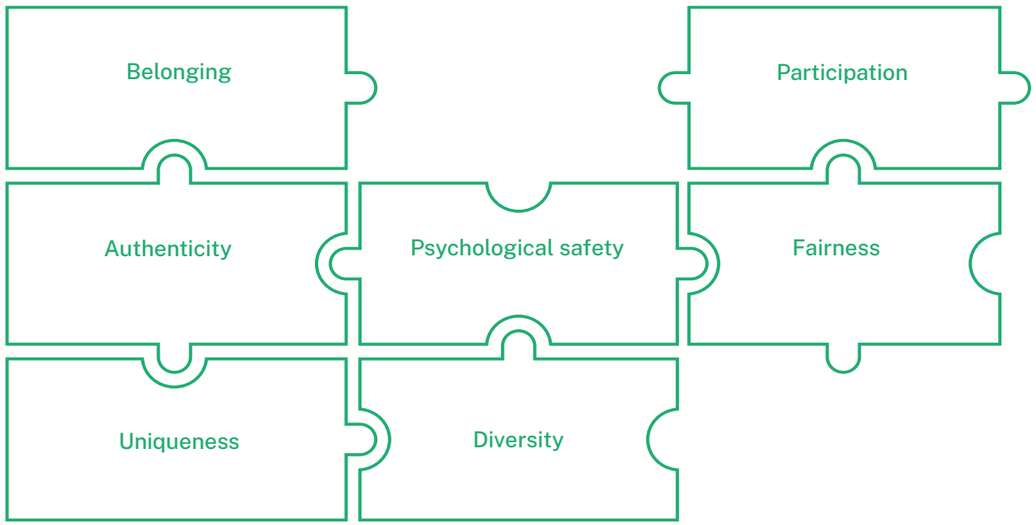



**Figure 1:** The Components of Inclusion (Fleischmann & van Zanten, IMD, 2022)

This paper furthers IMD's previous research by addressing the role of inclusive language and images to navigate conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion. It offers practical guidance about inclusive language and images for use in everyday business life, based on academic research and two scoping surveys. One survey was conducted with 70 executives from across Europe and South America and a second solicited perspectives from eight experts working in the fields of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

## DE&I

Like many sensitive issues, the terminology related to inclusion is subject to lively debates. Many organizations prefer the phrase Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DE&I), thus emphasizing diversity by placing it first, but others shift the focus by ordering the terms differently: Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity (EI&D). This paper follows the common nomenclature for DE&I.

The report that follows is structured into two parts. The first part (Sections I-V) includes a series of research-based sections that introduce and discuss:

I. Inclusive language and images
II. The role that language and images play in shaping culture
III. The ways that language and images in media shape biases around work life and individual perceptions
IV. The need for conversations about DE&I in contested times
V. The role of microaggressions also known as microinequities – subtle comments and gestures – that create exclusionary environments

Part 2 (Sections VI-VIII) is designed to function as a guide. It offers suggestions – informed by our scoping surveys and best practice – on how to create inclusive culture through language and images. The final section (IX) discusses specific identity-related language and images.



Inclusive Language and Images



Part 1

# Inclusive Language and Images





Language is a system – largely symbolic – that represents knowledge, values, beliefs, customs, and thoughts. It is the primary vehicle of communication through which people convey their thoughts, values, and emotions in spoken, written, visual, and signed forms.

Language may be the most important distinguishing feature of human beings as it is involved with almost every aspect of life. Similarly, the visual culture created through images reflects and shapes the values in which people are embedded.

Language and images reflect the personality, identity, and history of an individual, providing a medium to express their identity and subjectivity – through accent, choice of vocabulary, mother tongue, personal imagery, and sensory descriptions. Language and images also create and foster group identity and solidarity as they shape, reflect, express, and transmit culture. Language also brings visual images to mind. For instance, the word ‘manager’ is still largely associated with men, while the word nurse is still predominantly associated with women.

Language and images naturally emerge and develop in human groups through use, repetition, and transformation. Language is vastly diverse across geographies and cultures; current estimates suggest there are between 5,000 and 7,000 languages in the world. Language and images that represent culture evolve over time as people and society grow and change. Some of this change involves pronunciation, while some involves adding new words and images or retiring the words and images deemed outdated.

This process can both *reflect* changes in culture as well as *influence* changes in culture.

## Differentiating language and communication

### Language

A system of conventional spoken, manual (signed), or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves. The functions of language include communication, the expression of identity, play, imaginative expression, and emotional release.

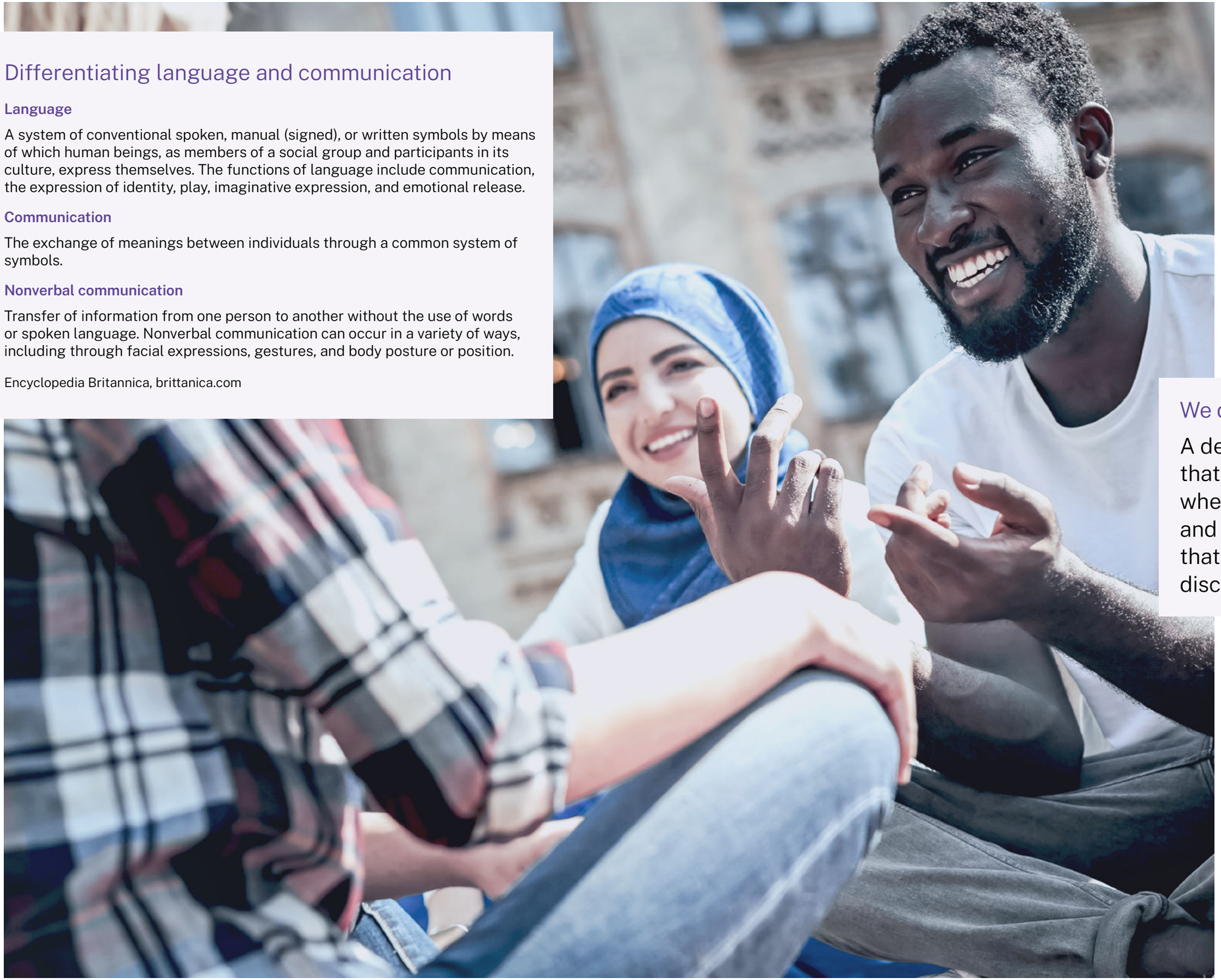
### Communication

The exchange of meanings between individuals through a common system of symbols.

### Nonverbal communication

Transfer of information from one person to another without the use of words or spoken language. Nonverbal communication can occur in a variety of ways, including through facial expressions, gestures, and body posture or position.

Encyclopedia Britannica, brittanica.com







Language and its influence on human thought, behavior, and culture has been studied for centuries. Debates in linguistics, cultural studies, cognitive science, and behavioral economics show that language and images are inextricably intertwined with culture. Therefore, if people wish to influence culture, awareness of the pervasive nature of language and its impact is essential. Intentional use of language promotes equitable and inclusive cultures in which people can thrive.

Although language includes spoken, written, visual, and signed forms, many people associate “language” with verbal expression only, rather than the use of visual images. Recognizing the influence of images on culture and behaviour, we use the term ‘inclusive communication’ to include spoken, written and visual language in this discussion.

## We define inclusive communication as:

A deliberate choice of words and images that supports an inclusive environment where everyone feels that they belong and can participate in an environment that limits bias, stereotypes, and discrimination.

Inclusive communication recognizes that language and images perpetuate culture, bias, and power structures. It therefore aims to avoid the terms and images that are harmful to people from underrepresented groups because these can recreate inequality in everyday situations. Instead, it favors the terms and images that convey openness to as many facets of difference as possible, recognizing that this inclusive communication better represents the diversity of society, employees, and customers. This practice can better shape organizational purpose in turbulent times.

# Creating Inclusive Cultures Using Inclusive Language and Images





## Inclusive communication is an integral part of inclusive leadership to create cultures of belonging.

However, many people are unclear how to use language effectively to promote greater inclusion. To address this gap, it is important to identify how inclusive communication can contribute to DE&I work.

A holistic approach to inclusive communication needs to be embedded in a broader DE&I strategy. The pragmatic House Model of Diversity and Inclusion proposed and used in multinational organizations by van Zanten (illustrated in Figure 2) is a useful starting point with a number of advantages:

1. It was designed to create a global diversity and inclusion strategy while allowing for adaptation to local requirements, hence it was often called a 80/20 model.
2. It provides a useful metaphor of a house in which all people can live along with a corresponding image that unifies the different components that contribute to inclusive culture.
3. It offers a useful frame for dialogue about how to bring inclusion to life in global organizations.

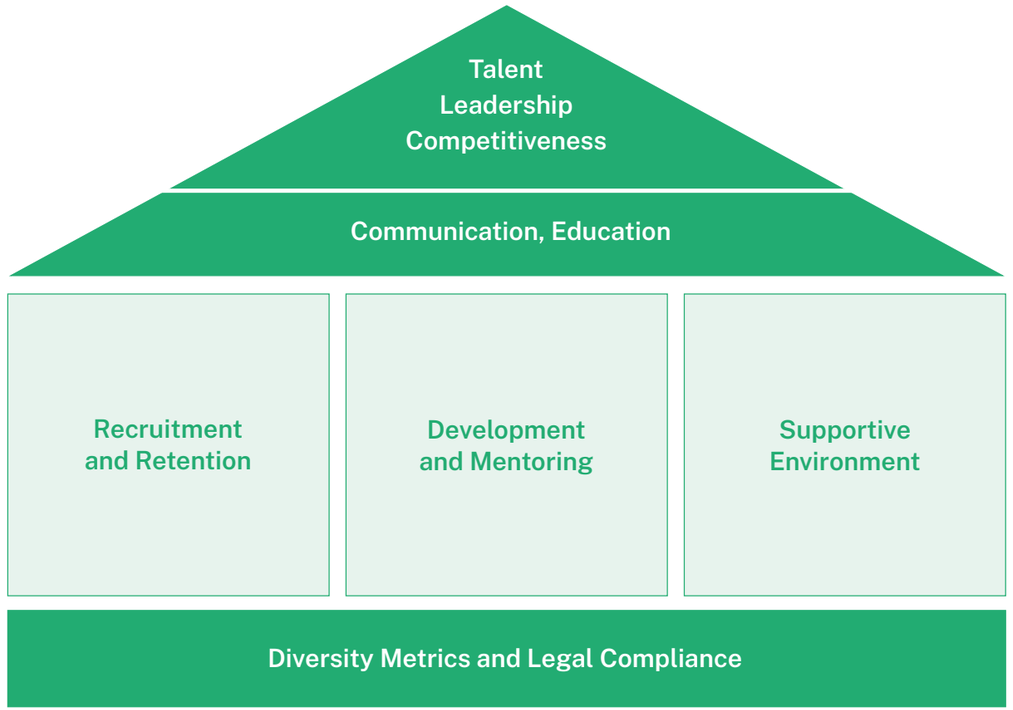



**Figure 2:** The House Model of Diversity and Inclusion (van Zanten, 2011, in Jonsen & Özbilgin, 2014)

Based on the House Model of Diversity and Inclusion, this report highlights the centrality of inclusive communication to link aspirations of inclusive strategy with actual practices of language and image use. Inclusive communication runs through all components, e.g., as part of inclusive leadership, education, the three pillars of 1) recruitment and retention, 2) development and mentoring, and 3) creation of a supportive environment based on the foundations of diversity metrics and legal compliance.

The House of Inclusive Communication (Figure 3, below) focuses on the specific role of language and images in creating cultures of belonging. Attention to how language and images are used in an organization's internal and external communication provides a useful barometer of the commitment to inclusivity and ongoing education that is necessary as society, organizations, and language evolve.

This focus on inclusive communication is supported by two pillars – language and images – that connect the aspiration and intent of inclusion with the everyday practices inherent in talent recruitment, review and development policies.

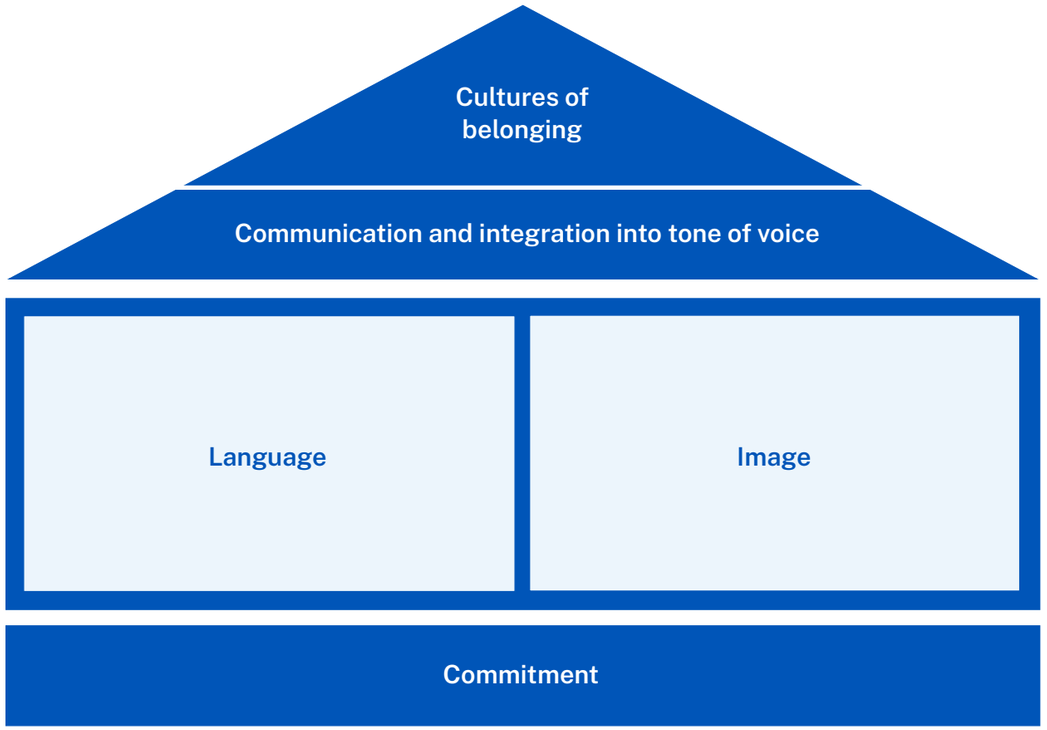



**Figure 3:** The House of Inclusive Communication to Create Cultures of Belonging (Authors, 2024)





"Inclusive language comprises open attitudes and the consistent use of a generally shared language."

Lauring & Klitmøller, 2017, p. 3

"Conversations are much more than a simple exchange of words. Consciously or not, every time we interact with someone, we're meeting some of their social needs and perhaps depriving them of others. That is, we're using language and engaging in behavior that either uplifts and motivates people, or causes them to withdraw or shut down."

NeuroLeadership Institute, 2019

# How Language and Images in the Media Shape Our Biases







Language and images are intrinsic to the expression and preservation of culture, including its traditions and values (e.g., Hall, 1997). They are also a way to contest traditions that are exclusionary and divisive. Language and images have a powerful impact; they come with historical associations and yet they are simultaneously subject to change. They are perpetuated by the media and have a pervasive effect on society and in organizations. Hence, it is important to be aware of the influence of language and images in society and how they shape perceptions and actions. It is also important to learn how certain words and images can re-establish exclusion along lines of gender, race and ethnicity, age, dis/ability, or sexuality – and how more inclusive choices are able to foster cultures of belonging. The impact of language and images is widely researched in media studies, as outlined below.

Analyses of mass media outlets show that they cultivate a “masculinity ideology”.

**25%** The Global Media Monitoring Project (2020) shows that only **25% of the subjects or sources of media reports are female**

**2087** Given the current pace of progress, **the gender equality gap in news media will by closed by the year 2087** (GMMP, 2020)

Men tend to be portrayed more often in the world of work, reinforcing the association between men and work, whereas women are portrayed in the home, and when at work, often in stereotypically female occupations (Ward & Grower, 2020).

The limited representation of people of color, or with disability or from the LGBTQ+ community reinforces stereotypes of leading characters as white, able-bodied, straight men. Figures from the Geena Davis Institute for Gender in Media (2022a) on the screen time of male and female characters in the most popular scripted TV shows indicate that the share of those with medium and dark skin tones is still low, even though it increased from 2010 to 2021:

**5.4%** **In 2021, 5.4% of characters were women with dark skin tones** (0.3% in 2010)

**6.9%** **In 2021, 6.9% of characters had medium skin tone** (2% in 2010)

**70%** Around **70% of screen time is taken by female and male characters with light skin tones**

Similarly, while in 2016 there were no characters with disability as leads or co-leads, this figure had increased to 19.4% by 2020. However, in those five years no LGBTQ+ lead or co-lead starred in the most popular scripted TV shows in the US.

In this time span, the screen appearances of large body types remained under 10% and women 50+ were underrepresented in comparison to men from the same age group (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2021).

# How the media shapes our understanding and biases in work life

The media has a tremendous impact on our understanding of work life, yet many depictions are biased.

Based on a study of over five million books published in English between 1800 and 2000, Jones et al. (2020) show that career and science terms are more connected to men, while family and arts more with women. Although these stereotypical associations have decreased over time, they are still present.

Analyzing 94 romantic films with around 250 leading characters revealed that minority women were most likely to be portrayed without a job or unemployed, while minority men were most likely depicted as entertainers or athletes.

When in paid work, white women often relied on their domestic skills, e.g. working in event planning or in bakeries. The plot often ended with men in stable professional careers, while women had creative or domestic roles (Ravoski, 2023).

From the 58 top executives portrayed, only two were women – compared to about a quarter in real life. Additionally, the occupations women and men hold are stereotypical with women predominantly portrayed as nurses, teachers, or in administrative work as secretaries and clerks. In films, women, people of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community and people with disabilities have marginal roles – and when they appear, they are often portrayed in a stereotypical way: women as hypersexualized, men as violent, LGBTQ+ characters as promiscuous, and people with disabilities in need of help or rescue (Giaccardi et al., 2019).

Stereotypical images of masculinity are fostered through language and images.Looking at how caregiving is depicted in scripted TV shows reveals that female caregivers were doing one third more caregiving tasks compared to male protagonists. While in more recent shows men do more housework, their contribution is still gender-stereotypical, such as fixing sinks, grilling, or painting. Cleaning, cooking or doing the laundry is still most often performed by female protagonists (Geena Davis Institute, 2022b).

Teenagers, influenced by heavy use of television, video games, and streaming platforms, are more likely to endorse views of masculinity associated with emotional detachment, dominance, toughness, and negative attitudes toward femininity (Scharrer & Warren, 2022). Research has found that the more men watch reality TV, movies, and sports programs, and the more they read men's magazines and play video games, the more they support traditional views on masculinity (Giaccardi et al., 2016).

Scharrer & Blackburn (2018) found that the more people watch sitcoms, police and detective programs, sports, and reality TV, the more they agree with traditional masculine role norms. Whilst this finding is similar for both men and women, the influence of the media on views of masculinity is especially marked for men.

These cultural stereotypes of femininity and masculinity also shape our organizational life and images of leadership.







## The impact of the media on attitudes

Prolonged exposure to consistent patterns of representation in the media, especially in television, can shape viewer perceptions of reality and influence their understanding of social issues and the world.

Coined by George Gerbner (1998), Cultivation Theory posits that heavy viewers of television are likely to perceive the world as it is presented on screen. This is amplified when viewers relate to the messages portrayed, amplifying social norms and perpetuating stereotypes about race, gender, and body image.

Dating back to research in the 1970s (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), the theory of Symbolic Annihilation describes how underrepresentation, trivialization, or the complete absence of representation of specific groups of people – often along the lines of race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic background, etc. – leads to the marginalization of these groups and maintains social inequalities. For example, when certain racial groups are underrepresented in media content their experiences and perspectives are silenced. When women are portrayed in traditional gender roles or when older people are depicted in negative ways, stereotypes are maintained. Representations including stereotypes that are constantly exposed in media are easily accessible from memory, and are likely to guide judgments and behaviors (Shen, 2004).

It is important to actively cultivate the inclusion of diverse voices and stories in the media to foster a more accurate portrayal of society that can educate the public and support social progress.

# How media use impacts our attitudes

Stereotypical representations depicted in media tend to be idealized in terms of appearance, confidence, and power. They therefore have an impact beyond the media and are used more often as role models (Ward & Grower, 2020).

This influence is apparent with children. Studies with eight-to nine-year-old girls have shown that after playing an internet game that focused on appearance ("Dream Date Dress Up") for only 10 minutes, girls expressed significantly higher preferences for traditionally female occupations in a subsequent survey (Slater et al., 2017). When exposed to television with stereotypical roles in STEM, girls are more likely to perceive scientists as men and express more interest in stereotypical careers (Bond, 2016).

Beyond traditional media, a recent study shows that gender stereotypical images in social media can damage women's leadership aspirations (Walsh et al., 2022).

When female students see counter-stereotypical images (i.e., female scientists) in textbooks, they have a higher comprehension of science lessons. This also applies to male students who have a higher understanding of science when they see a stereotypical image of a male scientist. Both perform almost equally well when they see mixed-gender images (Good et al., 2010). These findings confirm the saying, "If you can see it, you can be it."

Listening to music with lyrics that promote a pro-equality stance has a positive impact on attitudes and behavior toward women (Greitemeyer et al., 2015) and women exposed to images of women in counter-stereotypical roles show greater leadership aspirations and less negative self-perception (Simon & Hoyt, 2013).





## The effect of role models – the 'Scully Effect'

Dr. Dana Scully was one of the two main characters in the 1990s hit science-fiction drama series *The X-Files* – and her name became synonymous with a female medical doctor who became a detective for paranormal cases. She was one of the first "multidimensional female characters in a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) field to be featured on a popular television show." This had a significant impact on women's careers in the field of STEM, the so-called Scully Effect.

(Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2018)

**27%**

Were **more likely to have studied STEM**

**43%**

Of medium and heavy viewers **were more likely to have considered working in STEM** compared to light and non-viewers

**50%**

Were **more likely to have worked in STEM**

**56%**

Medium and heavy viewers of *The X-Files* **more strongly believed that young women should be encouraged to study STEM** compared to light or non-viewers (56% vs. 47%).

**63%**

Around two-thirds of women familiar with Dana Scully **report that her character increased their belief in the importance of STEM.**

# The impact of communication at work

### Job advertisements

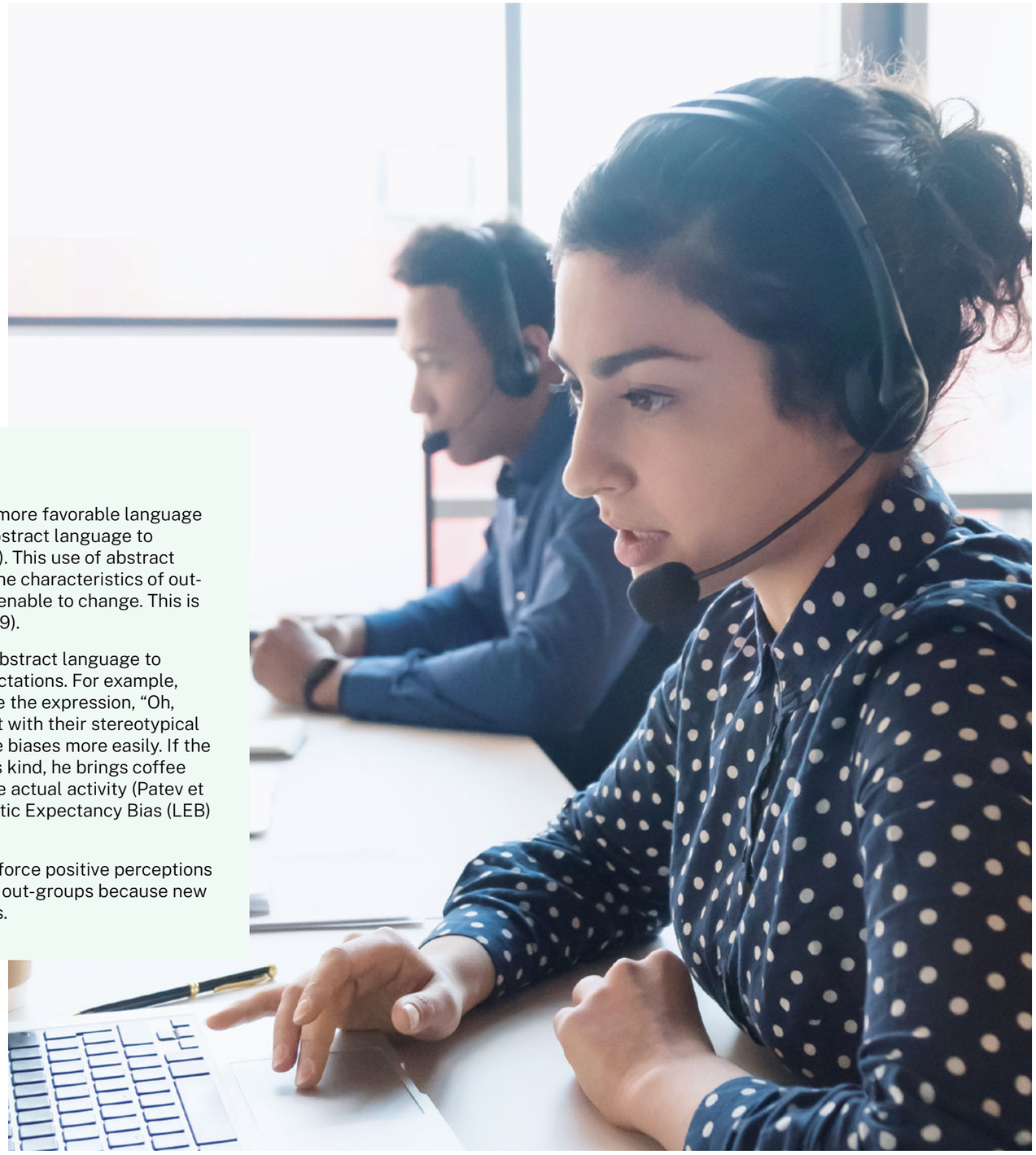
Stereotypical word choices have an impact on how occupations are perceived. These stereotypical associations are particularly present in job advertisements. When an advertisement included more masculine than feminine wording, people were more likely to associate men with these jobs – women found these job ads less appealing and they anticipated they would belong less within these workplaces (Gaucher et al., 2011).

## How language reinforces biases

Several studies have shown that individuals tend to use more favorable language to describe in-group members and more negative and abstract language to describe out-group members (e.g., “They are all greedy.”). This use of abstract language perpetuates stereotypes as it insinuates that the characteristics of out-group members are stable and inherent qualities not amenable to change. This is termed Linguistic Intergroup Bias (LIB) (Maass et al., 1989).

Research has also shown that people tend to use more abstract language to describe experiences that are consistent with their expectations. For example, when a female colleague brings coffee, people might use the expression, “Oh, she is so caring,” to describe a situation that is congruent with their stereotypical expectations. Using abstract language tends to reinforce biases more easily. If the same thing is done by a man, people might say, “Oh, he is kind, he brings coffee for everyone,” which is a more concrete description of the actual activity (Patev et al., 2019). The theory that describes this is called Linguistic Expectancy Bias (LEB) (Wigboldus et al., 2000).

These examples imply that language can be used to reinforce positive perceptions of “in-groups” while maintaining negative perceptions of out-groups because new information is processed in line with existing stereotypes.







### Accents and corporate lingua franca

In the workplace, the official language of an organization – and whether employees speak this language as their first language or with an accent – matters. Individuals who speak with an accent that is associated with an out-group are perceived more negatively (Fuertes et al., 2012). They can experience stereotype threat, anxiety, fatigue, status loss, and negative emotions. They may also avoid undertaking challenges that could expose them to appearing incompetent (Kim et al., 2019). People who speak with an accent can face additional challenges in being hired, promoted, or receiving higher earnings (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Hosoda & Stone-Romero, 2010). In global teams, asymmetries in language fluency in the lingua franca can foster an “us vs. them” dynamic, specifically in global teams in which power is contested. Differences in language fluency do not necessarily lead to in-group/out-group dynamics, rather power dynamics can activate such “dormant faultlines” (Hinds et al., 2014). Leaders who are aware of the potential challenges related to accent and language can help foster cultures of belonging. Part 2 provides simple, practical guidelines in this area.

### Impact of inclusive language use

With language being so closely intertwined with culture, the stereotypes ingrained in language have a significant impact on identities, beliefs, and aspirations. From observational studies in early childhood school settings, it is known that teachers’ use of exclusive language negatively impacts children’s learning, socialization, and emotional wellbeing as well as their motivation to learn (Ackah-Jnr et al., 2020). A recent study revealed that participants with negative attitudes toward transgender and gender-nonconforming (TGNC) individuals were more likely to perceive the use of gender-inclusive language as more difficult (Patev et al., 2019).

# The Need for Inclusive Communication in Contested Times

IV





Inclusive communication is an indicator and enabler of a commitment to engaging a broad array of people in conversations and communities. However, instilling inclusive communication is easier said than done. This may be even more complex in the wake of global social movements such as #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter. While these movements increase awareness of the need for progress in creating more equitable organizations, they have also increased concern about how to talk about difficult issues, as the quote from our scoping survey illustrates.

"It is hard to follow it all, not to make mistakes, and keep people happy."

Vice President, male, IMD Scoping Study

Some credit this discomfort to the "woke movement" – a term that has become pejorative to disparage calls for justice. Critics claim that inclusive language and inclusive images are ideological. However, calls for equal representation and social justice, as well as the resistance toward these calls, are a hallmark of pluralistic societies that are characterized by multiple co-existing attitudes and opinions. To address these differences, we need to create cultures that do not avoid discomfort but instead foster psychological safety so that all people feel free to speak up to address the ambiguities and discomfort of our times without fear of retribution.

According to the 2021 Language of Diversity report, 97% of people agree that language or words can influence or reinforce power dynamics in the workplace, and 87% believe it is important for workplace discussions to focus on how language can evolve to be equitable or inclusive (Institute for Public Relations, 2021). The importance of using inclusive language is highlighted by a 2021 study from the UK that claims that between 16% and 30% of people actively avoid talking about issues such as gender, religion, sexuality, race, or disability for fear of saying the wrong thing (The Unmistakables, 2023).

Similarly, a report from the Dialogue Project (2020) conducted with 5,000 citizens in India, the US, Brazil, Germany, and the UK shows that engaging in respectful dialogue with those who hold different perspectives, especially on topics of politics, race, sexual orientation, immigration, and religion, is rare and problematic.

Although the report identifies a desire to be more respectful when talking with people who hold different opinions, less than 49% of the respondents were willing to spend time with people who had different perspectives.

This reduces the ability to learn from others, does little to bridge differences, and can create echo chambers in which people are surrounded by others who are aligned with their own views, further justifying those original beliefs.

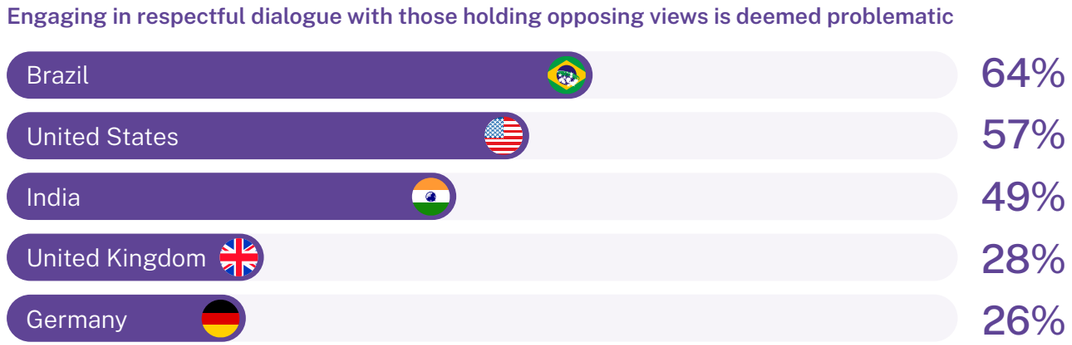



**Figure 4:** Percentage of people who see the ability to have a respectful dialogue with people holding opposing views as a major problem (Source: The Dialogue Project, 2020)

# Microaggressions and Microinequities: Inhibitors to Inclusive Communication

V





Organizational culture is created and recreated in everyday interaction based on language and non-verbal communication.

Language has the ability to include – or exclude. It is vital to be attentive to its origins, associations and impact.

To account for brief and often unintentional indignities caused by language, Chester M Pierce, a Harvard University psychiatrist, coined the term “microaggressions” in the early 1970s to describe the dismissals and insults that he witnessed toward African Americans (Pierce, 1974).

The term was popularized in 2010 by Derald Wing Sue, a psychologist who defined microaggressions as, “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership” (Sue, 2010, p. xvi). Although the term was originally focused on racial inequity, today microaggressions refer to subtle everyday verbal or behavioral expressions that communicate derogatory or negative messages about individuals or groups based on aspects of their identity or appearance such as gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, age, neurodiversity, disability, or other feature from any marginalized group (Nadal, 2008).

Sue at al. (2007) claim that microaggressions exist on a scale from less harmful to blatantly harmful (see Figure 5).

Microinvalidations are unintentional comments that, nevertheless, diminish a person’s experience. For example, when an Asian American is constantly asked where they “really” come from, this negates their experience and sends an exclusionary message that they do not belong.

Microinsults are rude comments that demean a person’s identity. For example, when an employee of color is asked, “How did you get your job?” This can convey an underlying message that underrepresented groups are not qualified and/or insinuate that they received the job through a quota or similar affirmative action.

Microassaults are blatantly discriminatory comments that are intentionally inflammatory or hurtful. For example, referring to a girl or woman as “bossy”. The 2023 Girls Index found that one out of two girls avoid taking up leadership because they do not wish to be categorized as such. Some authors claim that there is nothing “micro” about assaults as they are examples of blatant racism, sexism, ableism, or ageism.

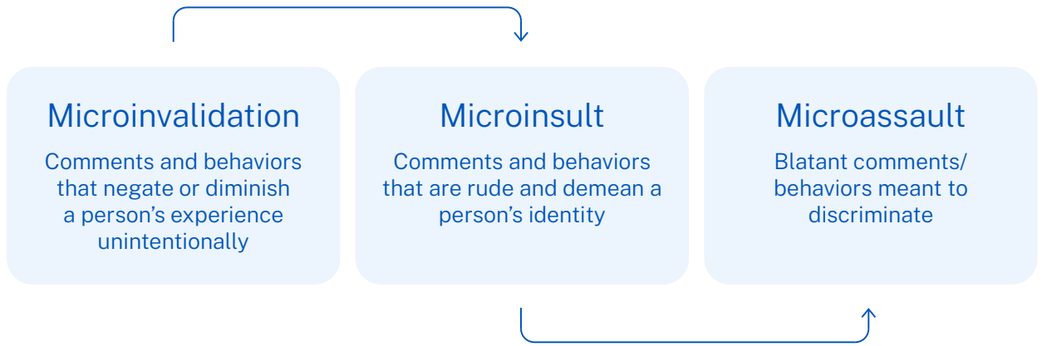



**Figure 5:** Forms of microaggression, adapted from Sue et al., 2007

Although the term ‘microaggressions’ is broadly used and many articles have been written in the popular press about how to identify and address them, the concept is a contentious one, producing lively debates about its usefulness. Most people agree that microaggressions are typically minor, often unintentional, and cumulatively onerous. The linguistic association between the word ‘aggression’ and violence is unfortunate at best and harmful at worst. This association is confusing as it suggests that the senders of microaggressions are intentional “persecutors” rather than people who may not understand the association or impact of their language, and the receivers of microaggressions are “victims”, justified in taking “offense” at the “inflicted” “harm”. In the previous sentence we put words with associations of aggression in quotation marks to highlight the subtle yet pervasive way that aggression permeates the conversation about microaggressions. An unfortunate side effect of this association with aggression is an increased tension between the sender and the receiver of microaggressions, exaggerating the intent to cause harm and heightening the fear of saying the wrong thing, which can lead to a reticence to engage in contentious conversations.

Critics of the term microaggressions claim that the association with violence can result in a “call out” culture that relies on authority figures to address differences. This can reduce people’s skills for engaging in differences of opinion and create a culture of overprotection from words and ideas that might cause offense, ultimately leading to cultures of fear rather than cultures of curiosity about difference (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). A critique against “equity language” claims that attempts to purify language can go to absurd lengths and reduce people’s ability to acknowledge differences and injustices in society as well as limit their capacity to work together to resolve them (Packer, 2023).





As not every communication can be characterized as aggressive, we use the term *microinequities* to refer to the subtle, often unintentional, seemingly innocuous, everyday acts of *othering*.

It is important to highlight that it is not only the intention of the sender but also how it lands with the receiver that has to be considered. Hence, even seemingly positive utterances may communicate a negative message as they can position someone as “other”, or excluded from the norm.

## Examples of microinequities

### Racial

Making assumptions about someone’s race, ethnicity, or culture. This is often a basis for subtle exclusionary practices. For example, asking an Asian person based in Europe, “Where are you *really* from?” The question implies that they do not belong in the European country, suggesting they are a perpetual foreigner. Seemingly well-intended statements like, “You are a credit to your race,” implicitly convey a message that people from a particular race are normally not considered to be so talented.

### Gender

Adopting stereotypical attitudes or using language that belittles or undermines someone based on their gender. For example, not shaking the hand of the only woman present in the meeting assuming that she is the secretary. Research shows that men interrupt women 30% more often than they do other men (Hancock & Rubin, 2015), which conveys the message that women are not seen as leaders. Or telling a man during a difficult conversation that “men don’t cry”. These behaviors and comments re-enforce traditional gender roles.

### LGBTQ+

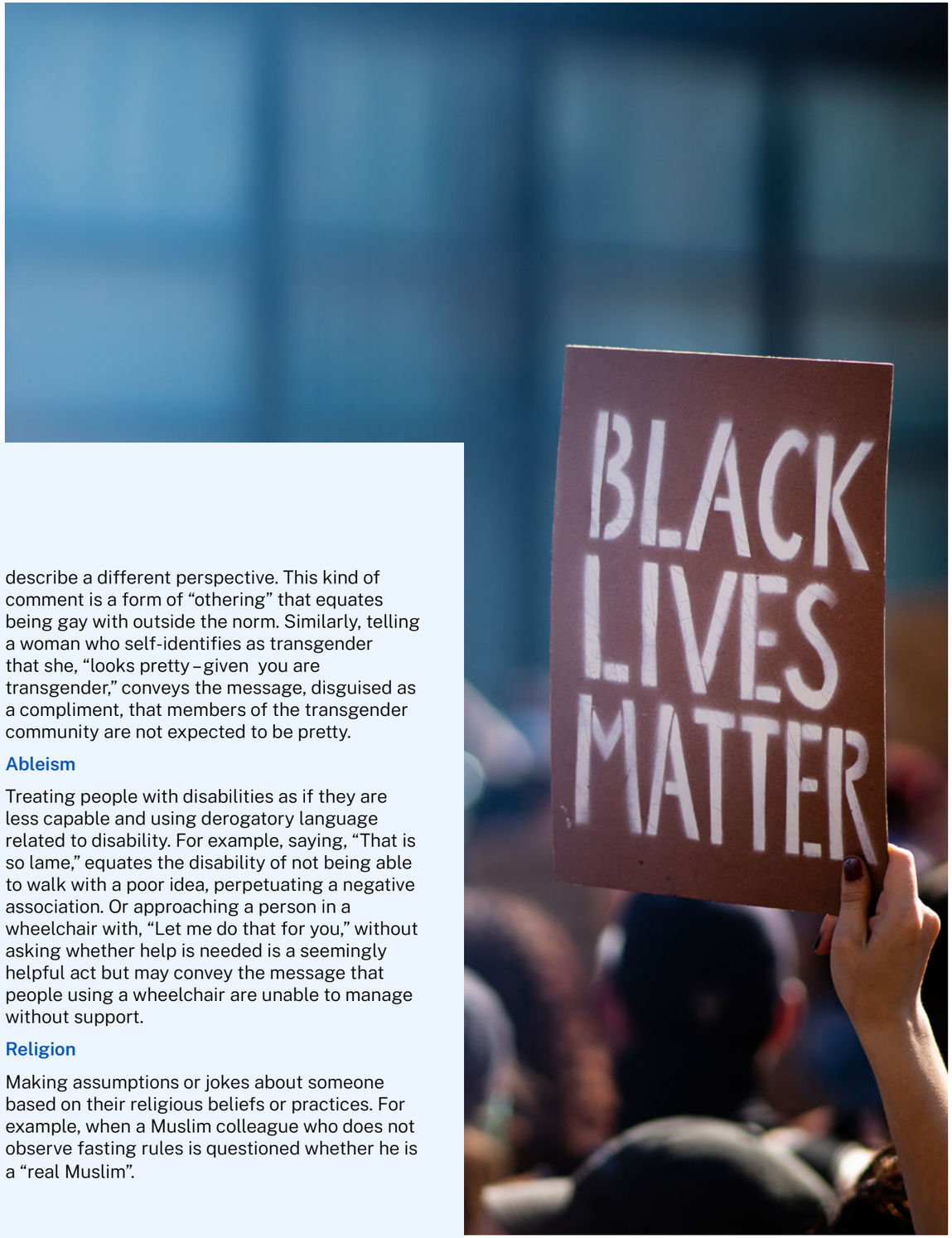
Making dismissive remarks about a person’s gender identity or sexual orientation. For example, using phrases like, “That’s so gay,” to describe a different perspective. This kind of comment is a form of “othering” that equates being gay with outside the norm. Similarly, telling a woman who self-identifies as transgender that she, “looks pretty – given you are transgender,” conveys the message, disguised as a compliment, that members of the transgender community are not expected to be pretty.

### Ableism

Treating people with disabilities as if they are less capable and using derogatory language related to disability. For example, saying, “That is so lame,” equates the disability of not being able to walk with a poor idea, perpetuating a negative association. Or approaching a person in a wheelchair with, “Let me do that for you,” without asking whether help is needed is a seemingly helpful act but may convey the message that people using a wheelchair are unable to manage without support.

### Religion

Making assumptions or jokes about someone based on their religious beliefs or practices. For example, when a Muslim colleague who does not observe fasting rules is questioned whether he is a “real Muslim”.



As microinequities typically originate in unconscious bias and are subtle, they can be tricky to address for both the sender and the recipient.

The sender may be unaware of the possible harm they cause, and even when they are made aware of the implication of their comments or behavior, they may laugh this off as an unintentional joke or misunderstanding that should not be blown out of proportion. Likewise, recipients may minimize the impact of a subtle microinequity or even reproach themselves for being oversensitive, even though the microinequity may be a form of covert racism (David, 2014), sexism, or homophobia.

Although microinequities may not be intended to cause harm, they can have a damaging impact on recipients as they reinforce discrimination and perpetuate stereotypes. Despite the term “micro”, the phrases or behaviors can have a “macro” impact. People who experience microinequities on a persistent basis may have lower levels of confidence and/or engagement, and this can strain their mental health (Wu & Schimmele, 2021).

A useful metaphor illustrating the difference between receiving an occasional microinequity and receiving multiple microinequities is a dripping tap. A single drop may go unnoticed, but multiple drops can cause an overflow and damage.

In terms of the dripping tap metaphor, this is an overflow of water. In terms of microinequities, this can be an overflow when recipients have simply had one ‘drop too many’. Persistent microinequities are detrimental, and can result in feelings of exclusion, an erosion of confidence, a decrease in creativity, engagement, and performance (see Figure 6).

Organizations must navigate this contested terrain. A way forward could be to see the “macro” impact of “micro” comments and how these reflect societal structures that constantly – like thousands of drops – tell people from minority groups that they do not belong. Learning about inclusive language and images can help a person understand how individual communicative acts create cultures where everyone can thrive – and which foster psychological safety to allow everyone to speak up and discuss contested issues.

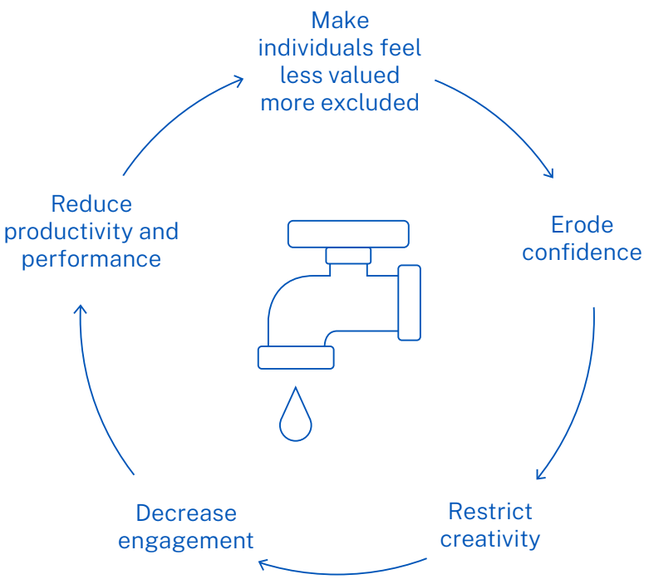



**Figure 5:** The Drip Drip Drip of Microinequities (Authors)

## Microaggressions toward women in STEM

**Invalidation of competence**

Downplaying or questioning skills, such as reassigning a task to a member of the majority group, speaking only to members of the majority group, or biased performance reviews.

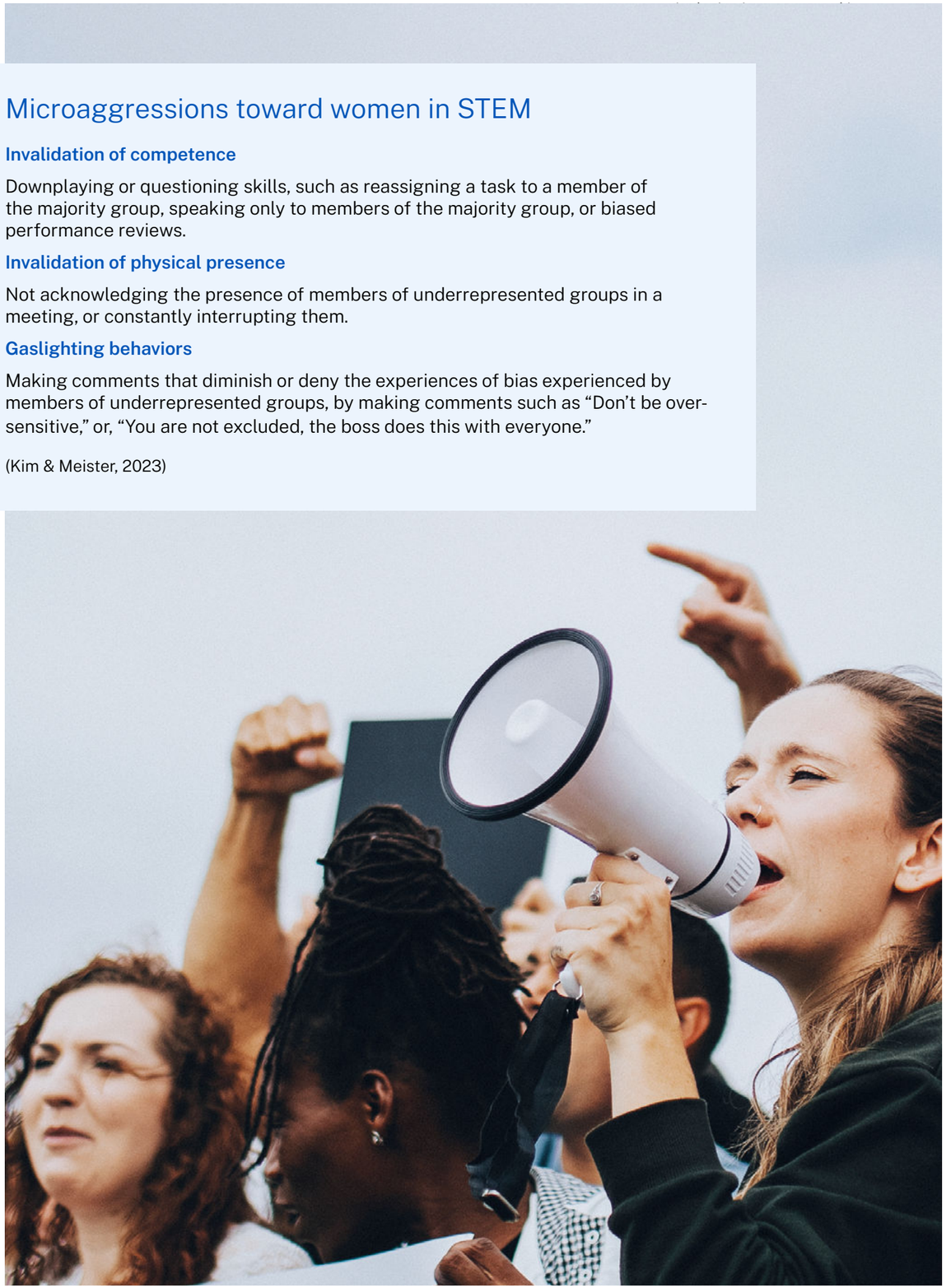
**Invalidation of physical presence**

Not acknowledging the presence of members of underrepresented groups in a meeting, or constantly interrupting them.

**Gaslighting behaviors**

Making comments that diminish or deny the experiences of bias experienced by members of underrepresented groups, by making comments such as “Don’t be over-sensitive,” or, “You are not excluded, the boss does this with everyone.”

(Kim & Meister, 2023)



Part 2

# Creating Inclusive Cultures Through Inclusive Language and Images

VI





The following practical suggestions to create inclusive culture through language and images stem from our research, the results of our scoping survey with DE&I experts, and expertise established at IMD working with executives from around the globe. The House Model of Inclusive Language depicted in Figure 7 illustrates guidelines for language and image use:

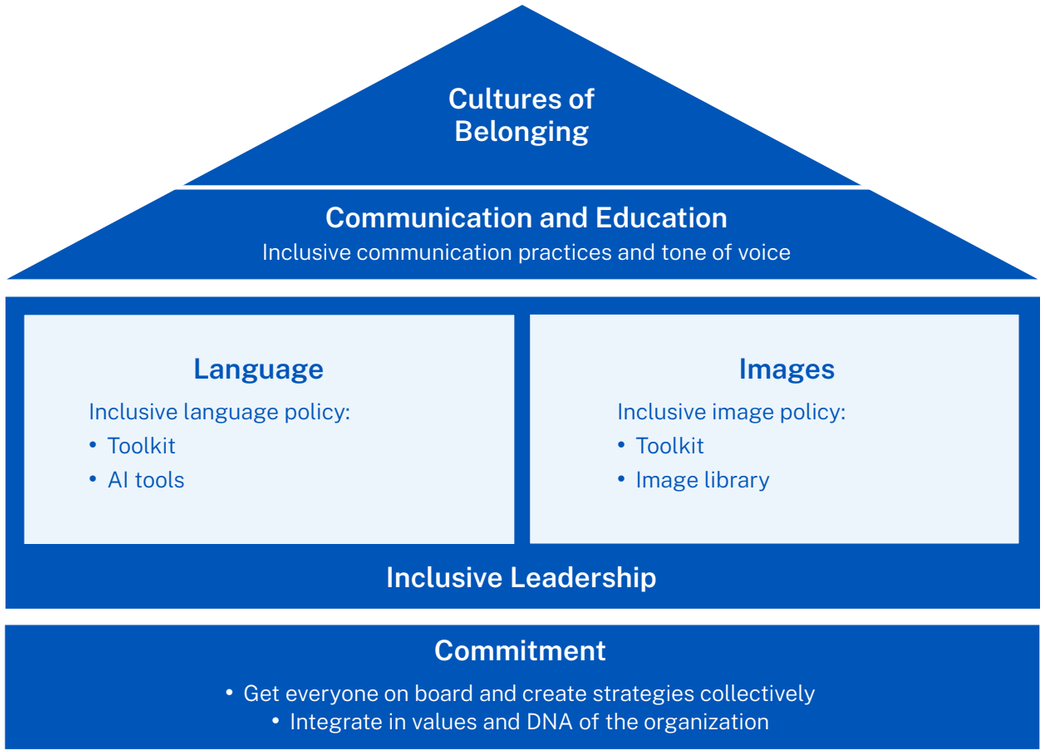



**Figure 7:** The House Model of Inclusive Communication to Create Cultures of Belonging (Authors, 2024)

The foundation for creating cultures of belonging is a broad commitment within the organization. Ideally, this commitment is led and signaled from the CEO and top management. Leading organizations create strategies for inclusive communication through a collective process to involve a broad and diverse spectrum of stakeholders and consult with Employee Resource Groups (ERGs).

This foundation is the basis for developing policies for inclusive language and image use. Inclusive language is like building a new muscle. It involves becoming aware of the nuances in language and images and the impact these can have through continuous learning and the willingness to seek different perspectives. It is a continuous journey that is sustained by curiosity and openness to feedback. The benefit of inclusive language is to amplify communication by enhancing engagement with all members of an organization as well as its partners, stakeholders, and clients.

Inclusive communication can be fostered through practices to ensure that all voices are heard in face-to-face, hybrid, and online meetings. This provides the lived experience of inclusion to organizational stakeholders and becomes part of the tone of voice of both internal and external communication.

“Inclusive language and images are a representation of our company values and priorities, and key in the recruitment and retention of staff.”

DE&I expert, IMD Scoping Study

“Inclusive communication is effective communication – respectful, accurate, and inclusive of all – enabling everyone to contribute diverse perspectives and to feel like they belong.”

Senior Manager, male, IMD Scoping Study

“The pitfall with inclusive language is that people see our handbook and they get scared talking about DE&I at all, as it can easily look overwhelming and difficult.”

DE&I expert, IMD Scoping Study





# What to do when you hear or say something non-inclusive? Act R E A L

People are often overwhelmed when they hear non-inclusive language, often choosing to do nothing for fear of saying the wrong thing or getting involved in a challenging situation. Rather than avoiding discomfort, we suggest using a four-step process to support conversations about the impact of language.

These steps are: Recognizing, Exploring, Acknowledging, and Learning. Although the steps follow a linear sequence in a conversation, REAL is an ongoing process of education that requires repetition, hence the circular visualization of these steps.

**R**

**Recognize and Regulate**

Being intentional about recognizing the impact of language is the starting point for making change happen. After recognizing a negative comment, it is helpful to pause for a moment to regulate your internal state to choose a response rather than reacting. Without regulating our inner state, it can be too easy to avoid or deflect a conversation. Signaling what you have noticed might sound like this:

**“I noticed you said X.”**

→

**E**

**Empathize and Explore**

It is most helpful to employ an empathic attitude to explore assumptions when seeking to understand a negative comment. Rather than calling a person out, which can create a culture of blame and shame, fostering curiosity is more conducive to exploration. For example, asking a colleague to explore in an empathic way may sound like this:

**“I wondered what you mean by... would you be willing to share?”**

↓

**A**

**Acknowledge differences and Accept impact**

Acknowledging different perspectives is an opportunity to understand difference – and although you may not agree, it is a starting point for dialogue. Accepting that the impact of communication is true for someone else builds bridges of connection. For example,

**“Thank you for explaining your perspective. I can see how this is your experience. To me, this word/image/ behavior has different associations.”**

←

**L**

**Lead and Learn**

Acknowledging that communication is complex and evolving requires a growth mindset, to be open to examine taken for granted assumptions. This epitomizes inclusive leadership that is open to learn. For example,

**“Language is constantly evolving and it can be hard to keep up. Thanks for the conversation, it helps my commitment to being a more inclusive leader.”**

↑

If you use exclusive language, acknowledge that you made a mistake and apologize if your remark might have offended, then rephrase your sentence using a more inclusive alternative.

## Accents in language

Accents are a natural variation in language. They are distinctive to countries and regions, can signal socioeconomic status, and they affect pronunciation in a foreign language. Because accents carry both prestige and stigma, they can heighten the risk of stereotype threat – along with the risk of confirming negative stereotypes. Human beings are very sensitive to accents and typically judge people with non-native accents as inferior, less competent, less educated, and less intelligent (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). Due to the negative bias associated with non-native accents, foreign-born speakers often experience a heightened anxiety around speaking up as they fear being marginalized or negatively evaluated.

To build strong relationships between native and non-native speakers, the following guidelines can be helpful:

### Individual

- Recognize that natural variations in accents are a part of diversity and seek understanding if something is not clear.
- Deliberately encourage native and non-native speakers to swap communication roles in meetings. i.e., ask non-native speakers to share perspectives first, rather than having native speakers speak first.
- Acknowledge that it can be frustrating when trying to understand someone with an accent, vocabulary, or speaking pace that is different from yours.

### Group

- Create a safe 'check-in' to speak about the experiences of communication between native and non-native speakers.
- Acknowledge that differences in accent and pace of communication can lead to frustration, reinforce in-groups, and create barriers to inclusion.

### Organization

- Encourage a pluralistic culture that publicly endorses language and accent diversity.
- Aim at eliminating language concerns for promotions.
- Promote non-native speakers to leadership positions.
- Think about holding job or promotion interviews in various languages.
- Provide support with pronunciation.

(Adapted from Kim et al., 2019)







## A growing number of organizations recognize that communication can discourage, silence, or exclude others, or it can encourage and include.

All DE&I experts who participated in our scoping survey mentioned that they are promoting the use of inclusive language and images to some degree – with several of them saying that they are not doing enough. Some leading companies incorporate commitments to inclusive communication in guidelines, thus aiming to integrate it into their DNA. The examples provided below – as well as tech giants Microsoft and SAP, plus the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne – emphasize the role of language in helping promote equity.

“In my understanding, inclusive language and images are ways to communicate your thoughts in a non-judgmental way and make the other person belong to your group.”

Senior manager, male, IMD Scoping Study

## How to create cultures with less fear of “saying the wrong thing”?

### Organizations

1. Recognize that because language evolves to reflect changes in society, people are on a learning curve and that unintentional mistakes and misunderstandings are inevitable.
2. Aim to create a culture of psychological safety where everyone feels safe to speak up without fear of retribution.
3. Plan to have conversations about diversity and inclusion throughout the year. For example, using special days that recognize, celebrate, and educate about different aspects of diversity such as International Women’s Day, Pride month, International Day of Persons with Disabilities, and different religious holidays. See the calendar on the opposite page, which is illustrative of diversity rather than comprehensive.

### Individuals

1. See inclusive leadership and inclusive communication as skills that can be developed. Like muscles, these need training and mistakes can be a learning opportunity.
2. Assume good intent and that people are not deliberately offensive; encourage people from underrepresented groups to speak about their experiences.
3. Commit to educating yourself and understanding the work of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). Commit to being a role model for inquiry. For example, share your own impressions and inquire: “To me this sounded like… was this your intention?”
4. Be clear about the consequences for those who work against creating inclusive and psychologically safe cultures.





## Illustrative DE&I Calendar

### January

### February

**11 February**
International Day of Women and Girls in Science

**Black History Month (North America)**

### March

**8 March**
International Women’s Day

**13-19 March**
Neurodiversity Celebration Week

**31 March**
Trans Day of Visibility

### April

### May

**26 May**
National Sorry Day

### June

**Pride month**

**20 June**
World Refugee Day

### July

**14 July**
International Non-Binary People’s Day

### August

**26 August**
Wear it Purple Day

### September

**Mid-September**
SDG Action Week

### October

**1 October**
International Day of Older Persons

**8 October**
International Lesbian Day

**11 October**
World Mental Health Day

### November

**11 November**
Remembrance Day

### December

**3 December**
International Day of People with Disabilities

**18 December**
International Migrant Day

Religious dates often change yearly, as in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism

# Case Examples From Practice

# VII





## Sunrise

Embedded in the broad DE&I program YouBelong!, Sunrise measures the representation of women in its communications using the EqualVoice Factor. On LinkedIn the company raised the representation of women from 5.6% in 2021 to 30% in 2022 – although this is not the end point.

**Sunrise and its diversity, equity & inclusion strategy**

Sunrise, a wholly owned subsidiary of Liberty Global, is the largest private telecommunications company in Switzerland. Employing 2,700 people from 70 countries, Sunrise generates a revenue of more than CHF 3 billion and segment-adjusted EBITDA of over CHF 1 billion. The company serves more than three million mobile customers, and over a million broadband customers as well as more than a million TV customers.

Based on the Global Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Benchmarks (GDEIB), the YouBelong! DE&I program orientates along four areas:

- **Drive the strategy –** work alongside a strong vision for DE&I, hold leaders accountable for achieving results, and make sure we always have the right structure in place to effectively implement DE&I.
- **Attract and retain people –** ensure equitable recruiting, development, and promotions are in place, alongside equitable compensation and benefits and flexible work options.
- **Align and connect –** have DE&I metrics in place, tangible communication with focus on belonging, training and education to achieve a culture where everyone belongs, and connect DE&I and ESG initiatives to increase effectiveness.
- **Listen to and serve society –** leverage communities and networks, and embed DE&I in services and product development as well as within marketing efforts and responsible sourcing.

The motto of the DE&I program is “a culture where #EveryONE belongs and is able to realize their full potential to grow as individuals and as a company overall.” The Sunrise DE&I program is guided by a steering committee, a core team, and single points of contact for each business unit. It has four employee networks sponsored by executives: Gender, Rainbow, Ability & Neurodiversity, and Race & Ethnicity. Sunrise works with external partners – Advance and EqualVoice – to support its work.

To measure their progress, Sunrise developed specific KPIs for YouBelong! These KPI’s relate to pay equity (certification), inclusion (increase in inclusion index and employee net promotor score and decrease in absences), diversity (increasing the share of women in management positions), active and sponsored employee networks, and an increase in EqualVoice Factor. From 2023, these KPIs were part of the ESG executive compensation bonuses.

**EqualVoice Factor**

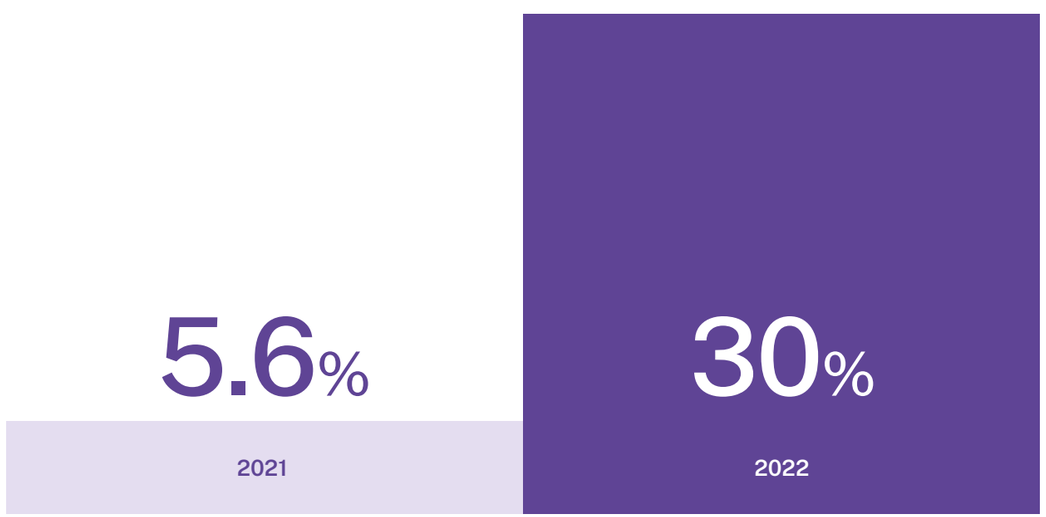
The Ringier EqualVoice initiative aims to make women more visible in media and to give women and men an equal voice. They developed the EqualVoice Factor, a semantic algorithm, to analyze the gender visibility gap between women and men in text, images, and video content.

Sunrise measures the representation of women in their press statements and on LinkedIn using the EqualVoice Factor analysis. The score for their press releases is 6.66% female voices. This low score is partly because most press releases quote Sunrise's CEO, who is male – but the company seeks to advance that by bringing more voices from female experts into the media. For LinkedIn, Sunrise realized that they could increase their score from 5.6% in 2021 by being more attentive to the representation of men and women in their posts.

This simple act of measuring which gender was represented in the posts enabled Sunrise to support female voices to become more visible with a rise to 30% in 2022.

Sunrise also organized inclusive language training for people working in Sunrise's internal and external communication as well as in marketing. The company is exploring expanding the EqualVoice Factor to other channels in the future.

Sunrise EqualVoice Factor LinkedIn










## Perspectives on inclusive language from Nike Möhle, Vice President Communications, Sustainability & DE&I

**Why is inclusive language important to Sunrise?**

Language is powerful. We see this in the immense public debate around language, and as a company we can have a calibrating impact: we reach out to a variety of target groups and communities, whether they are customers or employees. And because the views and expectations are so diversified, we have a crucial role in taking a less polarized and balanced approach in a heated debate. So, for DE&I, this means that we focus on the principle of being inclusive toward underrepresented groups, and also toward majorities.

Inclusive communication is not about distorting reality but about creating common ground and visibility for everyone.

**How do you implement this in your company?**

Communication has the ambition that all audiences feel addressed and that they receive the message. This is exactly what inclusive language is about. In Switzerland, we live in a multi-language country. Ensuring that our internal communication is translated is a key element to ensure that people feel included and receive the messages we send. First, get the foundation right before having sophisticated debates on small elements in specific languages. Second, engage in a dialogue. There is no simple right or wrong solution to many of the questions around inclusive language. It has a lot to do with sensitivity, with reflecting on how content may be perceived, and then deciding which way to go. Initiating this dialogue again and again is crucial: there is never a perfect output, but we can always strive to make our communication more inclusive. Finally, we also see that content producers within the organization crave guidance in today's polarized debate. So we work on standards and guiding principles and we organize training to engage jointly on the rationale for these guidelines.

**Where do you see the challenges to inclusive communication?**

Today, I see substantial awareness for DE&I in society, business, and politics, and communication has played a crucial role in achieving this over the past years. While there was initially a great level of tolerance in our society that underrepresented groups should have a stronger voice, we are, in my view, entering a phase where more people feel that their personal territory or habits are impacted by the related requests. Language is a good example: being asked to acknowledge specific groups in their language, some people feel annoyed or feel they are hindered in their natural way of expressing themselves. So, after a boost phase, we are entering a phase where many aspects – whether it is language or other topics – are actually negotiated in our society, which is an important process.

In the public debate, we just need to keep in mind that underrepresented groups, by definition, do not have an equally strong voice in such a negotiation. And that's why we need programs such as EqualVoice.

# Swiss Post

The logistics company with three working languages has launched guidelines for gender-neutral language use in German, French, and Italian. Designed in teams from various departments, the guidelines provide an overall framework while being open to the specifics of each language and their audiences.

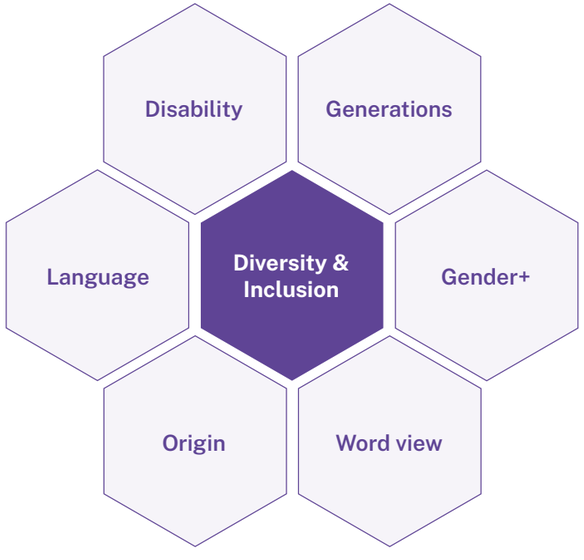
**Swiss Post and its diversity & inclusion strategy**

“Powering a modern Switzerland” is the motto of Swiss Post, a company with a tradition of serving Switzerland with postal services for 175 years. Swiss Post employs 46,500 people across the country, serving four language areas: German, French, Italian, and Romansh. Swiss Post’s employees come from 147 nations and speak 85 different languages.

Women account for 40% of the Board of Directors and 22% of management positions – with a target of increasing this number to 30% by 2024. As German is the dominant language in the company, the Swiss Post also aims to increase the number of non-German speakers to 20% of management positions by 2024.

These targets are embedded in their inclusion and diversity strategy, which focuses on several dimensions of diversity – including language. Swiss Post actively supports multilingualism by providing language courses and language tandems (groups of two employees who speak their respective native language with each other) to learn and professionalize in another company language.

Four self-organized employee networks have been created: Women@Post, a community for women across all units and generations, Young Voice, a network to give young staff the opportunity to make themselves heard, Rainbow, for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and non-binary staff and their allies, and Mosaico, dedicated to linguistic and cultural diversity. Among its activities are round table events to spark discussions on and improve the multilinguism strategy of the company.






**Creating guidelines for gender-neutral language in multi-functional groups**

Operating in three and often four languages – German, French, Italian as well as English – Swiss Post has had specific language departments for a long time. Their purpose is to create and translate internal and external messages. Being confronted with an increasing number of inquiries about standards for gender-neutral and inclusive language, Evelyne Campana, Head of French Language Services, wanted to move away from ad hoc questions and answers toward guidelines that provide a framework for all communication within the company and with its outside audiences. Bringing this idea to the monthly group-wide meeting of the communications team, she got a green light to start the project.

"For a long time, German has been the dominant language in Swiss Post, but over recent years, language plurality has been actively reinforced. So we deliberately started with a guideline in French. The process of developing the guideline should mirror our diversity and inclusion strategy."

Evelyne Campana

Having the support of the Head of Communications, a project team was assembled to bring together a broad range of functions: the language team and representatives from HR, sales, and legal. Each member kept their own department up to date about the discussions in the project group to ensure the guidelines mirror a broad consensus within the company. For German and Italian, language-specific guidelines were created rather than setting up one framework and translating it into the other company languages.

**Positioning Swiss Post in the field of gender-neutral language**

In a first step, the French project group looked at existing guidelines and recommendations. With universities and advocacy groups encouraging the use of newer forms in gender-neutral language (e.g., a * to represent non-binary individuals, neo-pronouns like iel/ellui in French), the question arose how Swiss Post should position itself in these debates. The project group made a strategic decision. As a traditional company close to the Swiss federation, it opted for neutrality in this often political debate with a preference for forms used in standard grammar.

"We do not intend to be a laboratory for linguistic experimentation, upsetting grammar, or introducing controversial terms."

Alexander Fleischer, Head of Communications 2019-2023 in the foreword of the guidelines

Hence, the guidelines in all three languages recommend using existing gender-neutral or plural forms whenever possible to list both the female and the male form (an English equivalent for this rule would be "actresses and actors"). A key reason to opt for this was the accessibility of texts, as screen readers are often incapable of reading out new forms appropriately (coupling female and male forms with a *, for instance). Over the course of the project, these issues were discussed with the Rainbow group and external stakeholders. The final guidelines were signed off by the Head of Communications and the CEO.





**Guidelines with leeway for language-specifics, channels & audiences**

Given that all three languages have their specific traditions and that Swiss Post communicates with a broad range of audiences so "all employees and everyone in Switzerland feels addressed by Swiss Post", variations exist in guidelines. For instance, in the title of job advertisements, given the limited number of characters available, female and male forms are combined. In social media channels targeting younger audiences, newer forms of gender-neutral language are preferred. Moreover, specific sub-brands, such as PostFinance, have specific rules, as they use the gender-neutral * throughout their communication in German. To ensure that the entire communication of Swiss Post is gender-neutral, the guidelines are part of the Post's intranet that provides information on corporate wording and corporate design to employees and advertising agencies working for the company as well as the press. This aims to get everyone on board with the journey toward gender-neutral language.

**Visual design and next steps**

Swiss Post has guidelines to be inclusive in visual design: "We show real people, and pleasant and natural personalities – as different and diverse as those we encounter in everyday life." This means selecting and styling models to show a mix of rural and urban, different age groups and ethnicities – not well-known people who are styled in a neat "mask-like make-up". Swiss Post also shows diversity in their images in terms of members of the LGBTQ+ community, people with visible tattoos, bald people, and people with disabilities.

The guidelines are one step in the process of establishing gender-neutral communication. Over time, all online tools and interfaces, as well as automated emails and notifications, should adopt a gender-neutral language. As languages are constantly evolving, project groups should also regularly discuss whether the guidelines need adaptations.

**EqualVoice Factor**

As part of the EqualVoice initiative, Swiss Post also used the EqualVoice Factor for their press releases, media blogs, and news releases on post.ch/aktuell.

The EqualVoice Factor analyzes the share of female voices in Headlines, so called 'Teasers' and also in the main body of text, so called 'Body'.

30% **Teaser Score** (female voices in headlines, teasers)

35% **Body Score** (female voices in text body)

Women are represented in 30% of the teasers and titles and in 35% of the texts. For reference, 22% women in leadership positions and both the CEO and the Chair of the Board of Directors are men.

# Guidelines for Inclusive Language and Images

VIII





This section provides general guidance on inclusive language and image use. Specific identity-related issues are explored in Chapter IX.

## Inclusive language

"Inclusive language doesn't offend another person or group and keeps an open perspective."

Senior Manager, male, IMD Scoping Study

### 1. Use people's preferred terms

When referring to individuals or groups, or to geographic regions, use the terms preferred by those you address and keep in mind that language is changing constantly.

The preferred terms can be *people-first language*, which emerged out of the disability rights movement. This approach centers on the people and not on their characteristics, e.g., "people with disabilities", "person with autism", "person with diabetes", etc. This humanizes the individual and removes labels such as "disabled", "autistic", etc. Similarly, the use of "people of color" puts people first.

Although seemingly contradictory, there are also advocates for an *identity-first language*. Identity-first approaches are rooted in the idea that the designated term is part of the individual's identity that they can be proud of and therefore puts the term first, e.g., "autistic person".

These opposing approaches highlight the complexity of using inclusive communication, as what is deemed inclusive for some is not accepted by others. When in doubt: 'ask the source', ask how people in your organization like to call themselves. Useful sources for clarification are is Employee Resource Groups (ERGs).

For a more comprehensive view, see specific identity-related information below.

### 2. Check automatic associations

It is normal for humans to make mental shortcuts. This is how the brain makes sense of the world, navigates social situations, deals with information overload, makes efficient decisions, and conserves energy. However, these mental shortcuts lead to prioritizing familiar patterns as a basis for judgments, which leads to cognitive biases.

Inclusive language is a deliberate practice to check our assumptions and stereotypes about gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, and other dimensions of diversity. For instance, heterosexuals may automatically ask a new male colleague about his "wife". A more inclusive practice would be to enquire about their "partner".

#### Example: Checking automatic associations

You have a meeting with a client who is running late. On arrival she says, "I'm sorry, my assistant told me to leave earlier because of the heavy traffic but I just couldn't make it!"

Without thinking, you respond, "Oh, no worries, but she was right, the traffic is really bad!".

Why assume that the assistant is a woman and refer to them as "she"?

This is an example of the automatic association of the word assistant with women who have traditionally occupied these support roles.

**Learn about the historical association of language and be open to learn from others**

All words come with a history, but the history of some words is rooted in sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia, and the like. Specific examples are provided in the section on identity-related concerns below.

Inclusive leaders are curious about the origins and associations of words and listen attentively to broaden their understanding of language.

If people feel the environment is open and that others are willing to learn, they may be willing to share why they find certain terms exclusionary, harmful, and diminishing.

Based on APA American Psychological Association, 2021; Brodzik, 2021; Forsey, 2022



Inclusive Language and Images



# Inclusive images

The conscious choice of images is key in creating inclusive cultures.

"We now have an approved imagery library for all employees that fits with our brand standards and has diverse representation. This supports our work on inclusive communication. It remains a challenge that people selecting images are sensitive to the message implied by images."

DE&I expert, IMD Scoping Study

It is important to look for images that represent diversity. However, beyond diversity, true inclusion means that people from underrepresented groups should be depicted with agency in the image composition rather than in stereotypical roles.

The following three checklists support the choice of inclusive images:

### 1. Demographic checklist

When choosing a picture, look beyond the "default" and try to include various identities from the following checklist (in alphabetical order) to reflect the world one operates in:

- Abilities
- Ages
- Body types, including sizes and heights
- Genders, including transgender and non-binary and other genders
- Races, ethnicities, and religions

Ask the questions:

- Is anyone missing or excluded from the image?
- Do people who see the image see someone who looks like them?
- Ask people different from yourself these questions.

When using stock photos, identify images beyond the "default" by using different search terms or different search engines. Both can return quite different results – see 'Bias in algorithms'.

### 2. Equity and inclusion checklist

Even if people from different walks of life are present in an image, check whether the composition of the image reinforces bias and stereotypes by asking the following questions:

- Where is the focus?
- Are some individuals prioritized? Are there "main" and "supporting" characters?
- Are people depicted in a stereotypical way? Or is a person depicted in an unexpected role?
- Does the composition reflect equity?
- Is anyone being tokenized?
- Could the image offend?
- Would I want to be portrayed this way?

### 3. Inclusive image libraries

Image libraries exist that specialize in portraying people from all walks of life (see Additional Resources). Even an approved library needs to be used with discernment, however, as the context in which an image is used must be taken into account.

- Does your company curate an image library with inclusive images?
- Does your company have a subscription to an existing inclusive library?

### 4. Consider setting up a sounding board

Consisting of people across your organization from all walks of life, a sounding board can be installed to get a broad array of opinions on language and image use.

Based on (Ashwell, 2020; Crawley, 2021), and results from IMD's DE&I expert scoping survey



Inclusive Language and Images

"Just because a photo includes many types of people it doesn't automatically mean that they are represented equally or in an inclusive way."

Crawley, 2021

"Inclusive images are images that take non-standard ways of depicting people into consideration. For example, a senior leader or executive can be presented as a young female or person of color – not just as a white, middle-aged male."

Manager, female, IMD Scoping Study








“Ensure the images have diverse people in many aspects and that the images do not strengthen stereotypes, i.e., representing women always smiling, or representing women and people of color not doing anything in the picture while white men are busy and active ‘with something important’.”

C-suite member, female, IMD Scoping Study

“We have also received feedback about diversity in graphics, which can be very challenging and tokenistic. For sensitive subjects such as mental health or ethics, we suggest using shapes/icons rather than actual people.”

DE&I expert, IMD Scoping Study

## Managing the balance between the status quo and aspirations in images

Imagine your organization has aspirational targets for DE&I but currently has a homogenous workforce and a very homogenous leadership team. Considering the above-mentioned demographic and equity and inclusion checklists, a dilemma arises:

Should you depict the homogenous status quo? For example, if your leadership team comprises mainly or exclusively of white men, then an image of these men in suits might be used. Or should you use aspirational images to depict the targeted diversity that is currently lacking in the workforce?

It is important for organizations committed to inclusive cultures to remain aspirational while not depicting a false image. The risks of tokenism or over-representation are illustrated in the following responses to the above dilemma:

### Tokenistic responses

Using a Black female executive in every picture may give the illusion of diversity, but this risks being seen as a tokenistic response. Unless the individual is given a genuine voice in the organization this could invite criticism that the image is being used to depict a diversity that that does not truly exist.

### Blatant over-representation

Organizations that blatantly depict a diversity that is not there risk being called out for "pink-washing", "rainbow-washing" or "woke-washing". Pink-washing or rainbow-washing refers to organizations that market LGBTQ+ issues without backing them up with practices that protect and promote the rights of members of the community. Similarly, woke-washing is used to describe how organizations purportedly promote progressive causes while not backing them up substantially. This over-representation can be perceived as superficial corporate opportunism that does not genuinely promote inclusion. Recent research has shown that overrepresentation in images can backfire: both women and men perceive organizations that counterfeit diversity (i.e., portraying a higher share of women in recruitment materials than exist in reality) as insincere, leading to a decreased interest in the organization and, moreover, evoking identity threat concerns among women (Kroeper et al., 2022).

Ideally, an aspirational approach to images is used – one that is backed up by sound and thorough policies and practices that aim to foster an inclusive culture where people from all walks of life can thrive – to avoid giving a wrong impression of the DE&I culture in your organization.

One organization in our scoping survey aims to limit "overrepresentation", by using no more than 10% of underrepresented groups or ethnicities in an image above the real distribution in the workforce.





"Employee network members request representation of women/ethnic minorities as no more than 10% of what we actually have in the business, otherwise it feels misleading. For example, in the UK, 30% of the workforce are women, therefore imagery should have female representation of 40%, otherwise it feels like false advertising or misrepresentation."

DE&I expert, IMD Scoping Study

"Regarding images, we are projecting the vision for the future in most instances. The discrepancy between the vision posted and the reality with staff numbers can be difficult for staff to digest. There's a lot of explaining to do when images do not reflect our actual staff. Trying to explain that we are building toward this can be a difficult exercise. Communication is important."

DE&I expert, IMD Scoping Study







## Exercise: Applying the diversity, equity & inclusion checklist

Take a look at the picture and apply the checklist provided above.

### Diversity

- Who is represented in the picture?
- What genders are represented?
- What racial diversity does this image convey?
- What body types and abilities?
- What ages?

### Inclusion

- Who is in the focus of the image?
- Are there main and supporting characters in the picture?
- What are the identities represented as main and supporting characters?

## Bias in algorithms and artificial intelligence

Images often mirror the stereotypes and biases ingrained in our cultures. For instance, an image search for “executive” in May 2023 on Bing gave the following results:

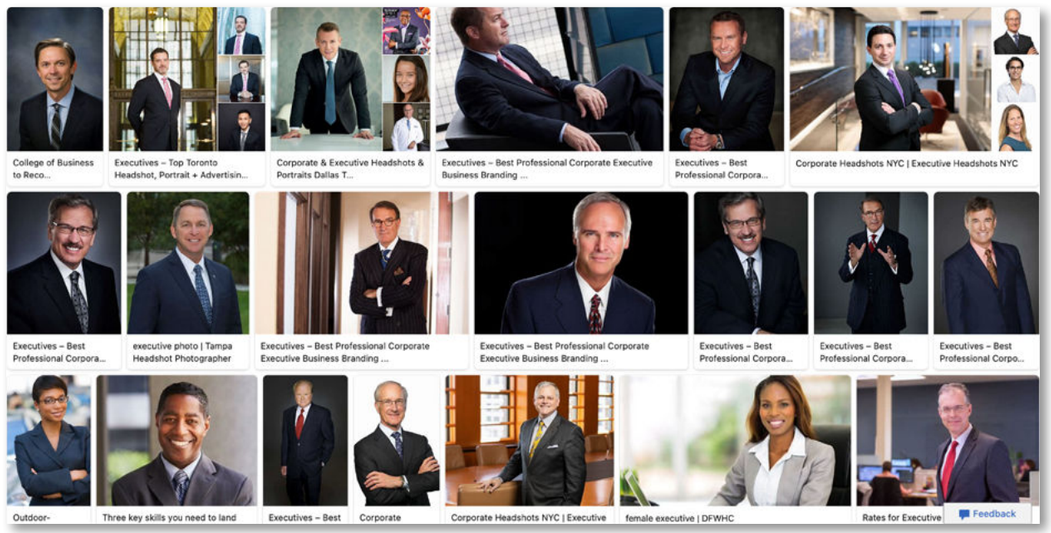



**Figure 10:** Bing search for “executive” (25 May 2023)

This is a classic example of “default” images. The search engine mirrors cultural stereotypes of what an executive looks like, he looks like a white man in a dark suit in front of a dark background. The first 13 images are of white men. Not until the 14th and 15th images do we see a Black woman and a Black man.





The same image search for “executive”, in May 2023 on Google, returned more diverse results:

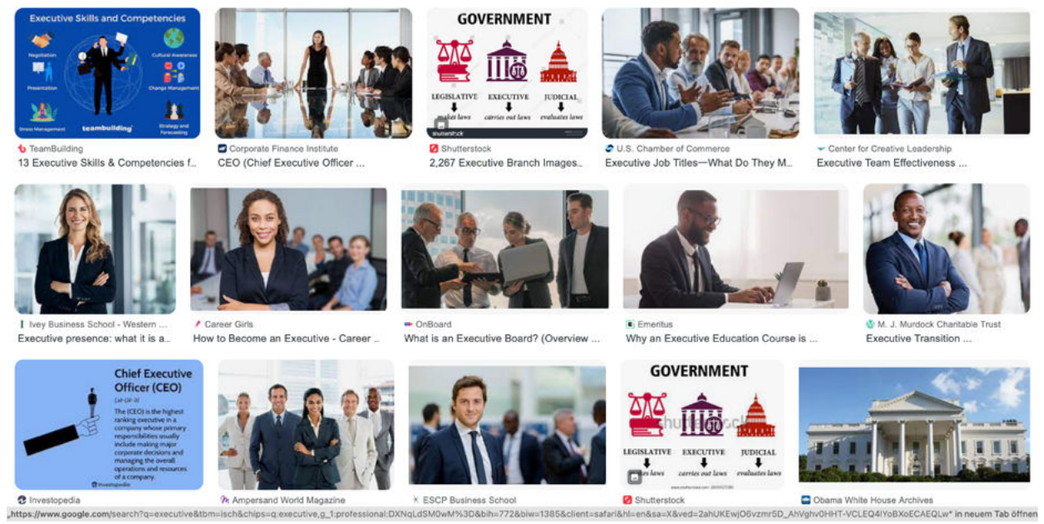



**Figure 11:** Google search for “executive” (25 May 2023)

This greater diversity in search results may be related to the protests that Google faced in 2019 from the LGBTQ+ community related to the image search results for the words “lesbian”. Until then, a search would return mainly sexualized or even pornographic images (Advocate, 2019). These depictions feed into stereotypes that reduce members of the LGBTQ+ community to their sexuality. Following the protests, Google responded and changed their algorithm. Although recent research shows that biases were only addressed superficially, as combinations of search terms (e.g., CEO + United States) still lead to stereotypical results (Fengh & Shah, 2022).

Artificial Intelligence also carries the stereotypes and biases of the cultures in which it is produced and from the data it is fed (see, e.g., Zhou et al., 2023). For instance, a prompt in DALL-E – the image generating AI of OpenAI's ChatGTP – to produce pictures of "black men", "black women" or "white women", returns the following results:

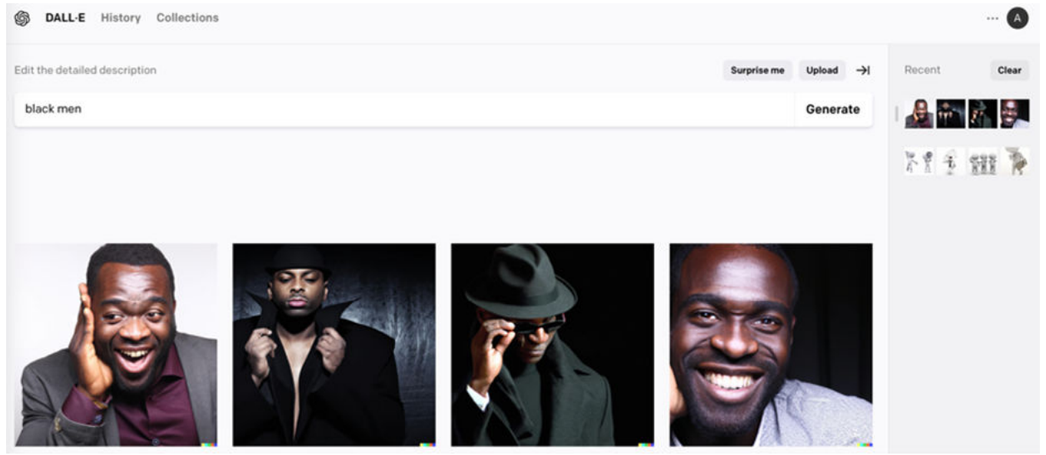



**Figure 12:** DALL-E results for "black men" (3 May 2023)

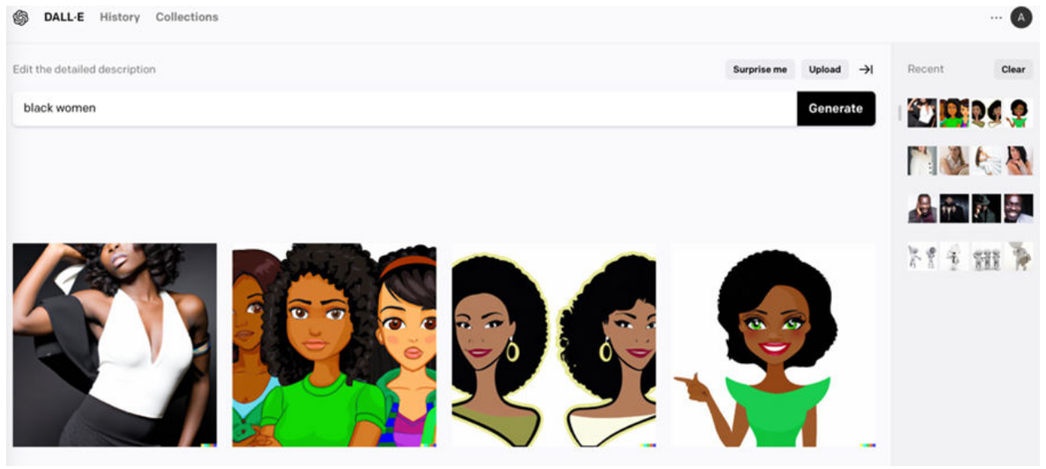



**Figure 13:** DALL-E results for "black women" (3 May 2023)





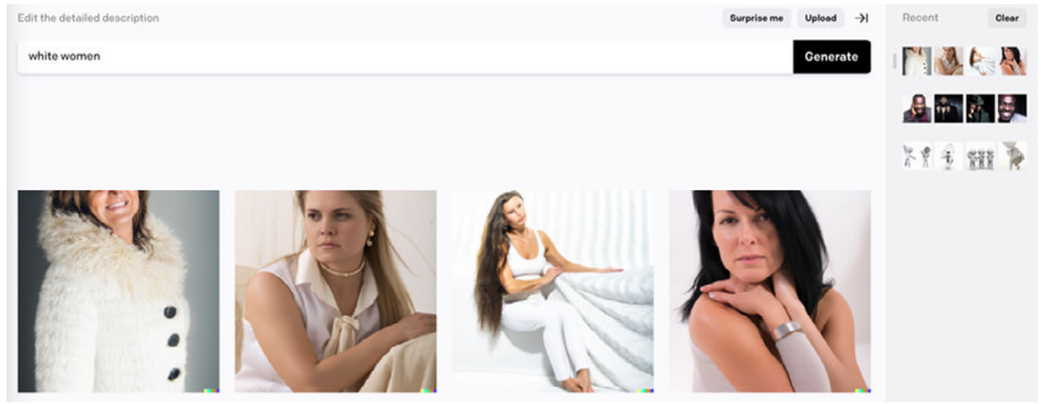



**Figure 14:** DALL-E results for "white women" (3 May 2023)

However, when prompted for "white men", the following images appear:

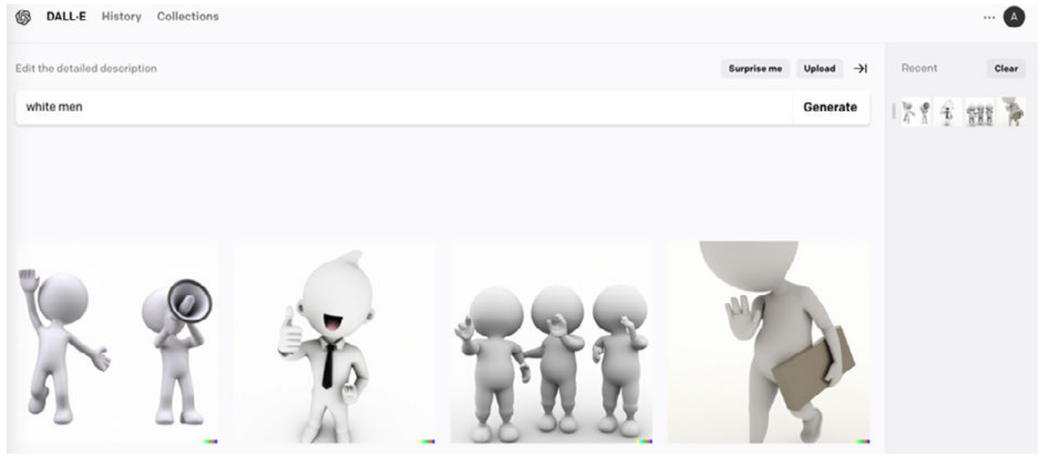



**Figure 15:** DALL-E results for "white men" (3 May 2023, inspired by Turner, 2023)

Why do we get such results? One explanation is that images of "white men" are not tagged as such; they are considered the norm that does not require a specific tag of "white men".

Does this image represent diversity to you? What different hands do you see? Is everyone represented? Can people who see the image see someone who looks like themselves?







Or would this image be more inclusive?



# Specific Identity-Related Dimensions

# IX





This section provides a glossary to support inclusive choices of language and images in five dimensions:

I. Gender
II. LGBTQ+
III. Race and ethnicity
IV. Dis/ability and neurodiversity
V. Age

This is not an exhaustive list but is intended to offer a succinct guide to support reflection about salient issues associated with these dimensions of diversity on stereotypes, biases, and microinequities with examples of more and less inclusive terms and images. The examples are illustrative, as there is a broad array of cultural settings and legal frameworks that might call for adjusting the use of vocabulary and images in addition to the evolving nature of language. Key principles for inclusive language and images are to enquire and discuss with the people concerned and be open to learn and adjust.

"There is no one size fits all when it comes to inclusive language. Know your audience and be curious."

Senior Manager, female, IMD Scoping Study

The following suggestions are mainly inspired by the American Psychological Association's guidelines (2021) and the Coalition for Diversity & Inclusion in Scholarly Communication guidelines (2022).

# Gender

**Avoiding gender stereotypes in language and images**

Many words have male or female connotations that reinforce stereotypes. For example, “assertive”, “competitive”, or “decisive” carry a male association because of their agentic and individualistic character, while “affectionate”, “gentle”, or “understanding” carry a female connotation because of their caring and relationship-oriented character (see, e.g., Gaucher et al., 2011; Olsson & Martiny, 2018).

“Inclusive language means using non-gender-specific terms when you normally would use a gender-specific one.”

Manager, male, IMD Scoping Study

Awareness of these associations and the stereotypes they promote is important for job descriptions, interviews, performance reviews, and daily interactions. Becoming aware of these associations and searching for alternatives helps to change the narrative in organizations.

One way to assess the stereotypical connotation is to “flip the script” and reverse the gender in a sentence and see if it sounds odd. For example, when describing the assertive behavior of a female colleague as “bossy”, changing the gender of the person might lead to the use of a different word.

Terms associated with the military, e.g., ‘war for talent’, ‘frontier’, or ‘conquer’ can also be problematic from a gender lens. The military metaphor is the most durable in leadership (Ashcraft & Muhr, 2018) and yet it has strong associations with masculinity. These associations shape behavior and can create barriers for women in leadership roles.

To counteract re-enacting stereotypes and to create cultures where both women and men see images they can relate and aspire to, aim to choose depictions of women in typically male roles and vice versa when choosing images.



## Both women and men are equally viewed as “taking charge”, but men are more likely to get rewarded for it

Women in the workplace face a dilemma: when they demonstrate stereotypically female traits (such as interpersonal skills or caring for others), they risk being viewed as lacking the agentic skills needed to be a leader. When they demonstrate traits typically associated with men (such as assertiveness or decisiveness) they risk being negatively evaluated for violating female stereotypes (Phelan & Rudman, 2010).

This is often called the “double-bind dilemma” of women in leadership (Catalyst, 2007)

- Women’s agentic behavior is more likely to be phrased negatively at all levels in organizations (Ciancetta & Roch, 2021)
- When breaking gender expectations, particularly related to personality and communication style, women and men receive negative evaluations (Correll et al., 2020):
- Women are more likely to be evaluated negatively for having too aggressive a communication style, while men face criticism for being too soft.
- Both women and men have less chance of getting the highest ratings that influence compensation and promotion when evaluations contain language that points to being helpful and community-oriented.
- While both women and men are equally viewed as “taking charge”, men are more likely to get highest ratings for this in performance reviews.
- Receiving future-oriented feedback, e.g., recommendations for improvements or development, leads to lower ratings for women but not for men.
- Men are more likely to be described as exceptional (e.g., as visionary or genius).





**Avoid the masculine generic**

In English and many other gendered languages, the “default” is often to use the masculine generic form, with the assumption that it represents “the universal”. An example for this would be statements about a hypothetical person as “the CEO, he”.

| More inclusive | Less inclusive |
|---|---|
| Hello everyone! | Hey guys! |
| Humankind | Mankind |
| Chairperson | Chairman |
| Human resources, staffing | Manpower |

### Machine translations

When using machine translation tools to translate text, be aware that many have been shown to perpetuate gender stereotypes. For instance, for translations into Italian, the English word “student” will most likely become male “lo studente”, as will doctor, which gets translated to the masculine form “I dottori”, but nurses to female “le infermiere” (Piergentili et al., 2023).

**Use gender-neutral rephrasing instead of she/he**

When referring to hypothetical people, aim to use gender-neutral alternatives to “she or he”:

- Use the plural form

| More inclusive | Less inclusive |
|---|---|
| All managers can access their… | Every manager can access his… |

- Use the second person

| More inclusive | Less inclusive |
|---|---|
| Once you have obtained your… | Once the employee has obtained his… |

- Refer to the person’s role
- Use “singular they”

In English, the “singular they” is gaining popularity as a form to refer to individuals in a gender-neutral way. For example, “the CEO, they…”

These gender-neutral alternatives are also inclusive of transgender and non-binary identities.

# LGBTQ+

### Remember not everyone is heterosexual

When discussing matters related to lesbian, gay, and bisexual colleagues, the term “sexual orientation” is a more inclusive choice than the term “sexual preference”. Preference tends to suggest that a choice is involved, which can perpetuate stigmatization of the LGBTQ+ community, whereas orientation respects romantic attraction as an inherent part of identity.

| More inclusive | Less inclusive |
|---|---|
| Do you have a partner? | Do you have a husband? |
| All guests are invited to bring their partners | All guests are invited to bring their wives |

### Transgender and non-binary

Transgender refers to persons whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Non-binary is a self-identification used by people whose gender identity or gender expression goes beyond the binary categories of man/woman. Be aware of the impact of phrases like “ladies and gentlemen” that categorize people into binary genders.

| More inclusive | Less inclusive |
|---|---|
| Dear guests | Ladies and gentlemen |
| Assigned sex, sex assigned at birth | Birth sex, natal sex |

Do not ask people for their “real name” or their “real sex” and use appropriate pronouns.



**Allow for self-identification: pronouns**

In many cultures and languages, traditional gender pronouns have been binary, reflecting a view of gender as a division between male and female. As the LGBTQ+ movement has grown and more people openly embrace identities beyond the traditional binary (i.e., non-binary), awareness of gender diversity has led to a desire to use pronouns that accurately reflect and respect those identities. This increased visibility and recognition of gender diversity has brought the issue of gender pronouns to public consciousness. It is helpful to use the terms “pronouns” or “personal pronouns” rather than “preferred pronouns” to acknowledge these as an integral part of gender identity.

The use of gender pronouns is important for the following reasons:

1. **Respects identity:** Using someone’s correct gender pronouns is a way of acknowledging, supporting and respecting a person’s gender identity.
2. **Creates an inclusive environment:** Using people’s correct pronouns helps to foster an inclusive environment that is welcoming to all and respectful of gender identities.
3. **Avoids misgendering:** Misgendering is when someone is referred to using pronouns that do not align with their gender identity. This can be hurtful and invalidating. Using the correct pronouns helps avoid unnecessary discomfort.
4. **Promotes effective communication:** Addressing people in ways that align with their identity supports a respectful dialogue.
5. **Reflects changing norms in society:** Using pronouns is one way that language can be used to reflect changes in society as gender evolves beyond the binary.

In addition to the traditional gendered pronouns (she/he), gender-neutral pronouns (singular “they”) are used or new forms called neopronouns (for example zir/hir). Referring to people by their name is also a way to avoid relying on she or he, in particular when the pronoun is not known.

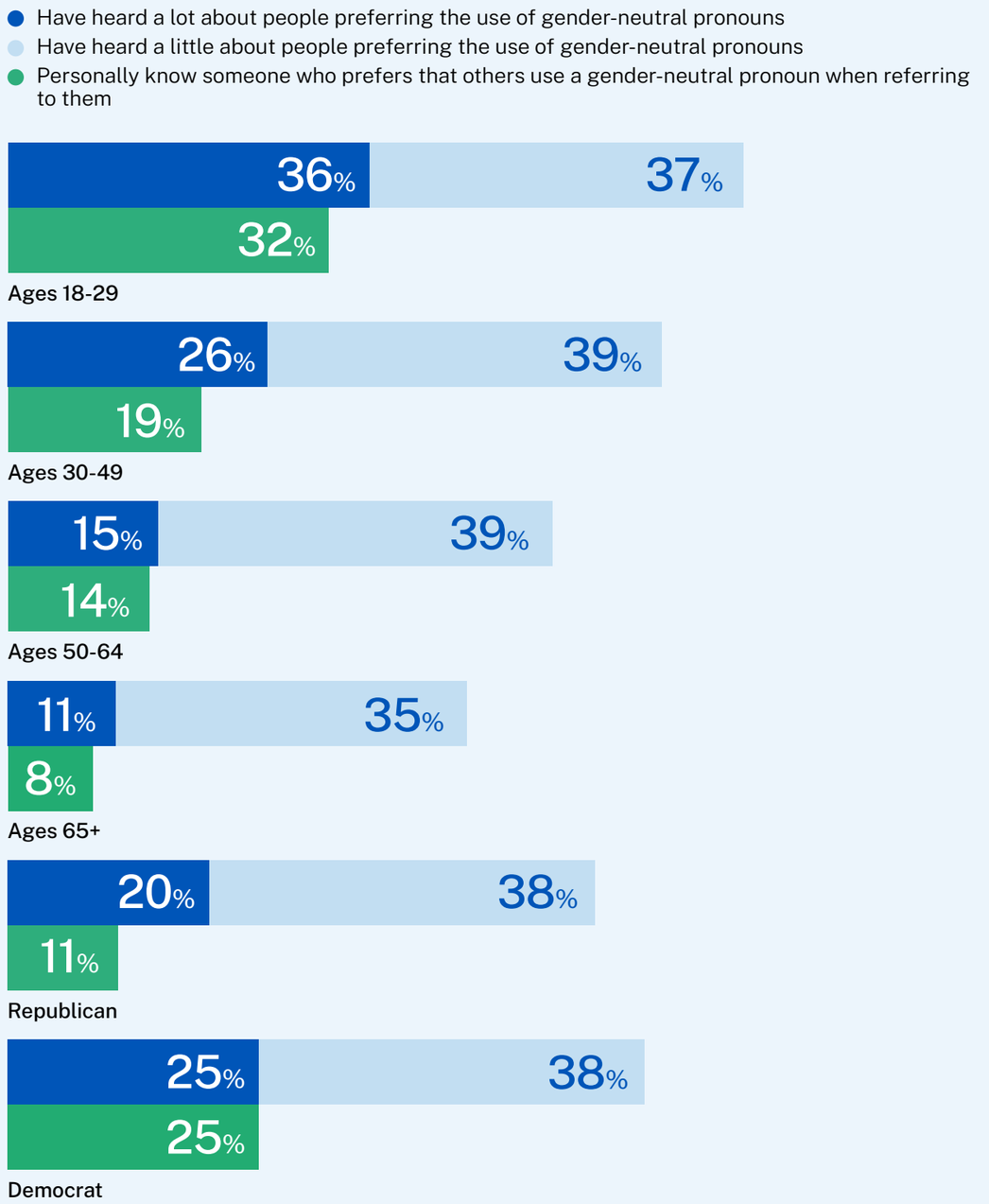
| Subjective | Objective | Possessive | Reflexive | Examples |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| She | Her | Hers | Herself | She is working.<br>I’m in a team with her.<br>The computer is hers. |
| He | Him | His | Himself | He is working.<br>I’m in a team with him.<br>The computer is his. |
| They | Them | Theirs | Themself | Alex is next door, they are working.<br>I’m in a team with them.<br>The computer is theirs. |
| Name | Name | Name’s | Name's self | Alex is working.<br>I’m in a team with Alex.<br>The computer is Alex’s. |
| Neopronouns, for example, Ze ("zee") | Zir (“zere”)/ Hir (“here”) | Zirs/Hirs | Zirself/Hirself | Ze is working.<br>I’m in a team with zir.<br>The computer is zirs. |

In several languages new gender-neutral pronouns are being used, like “hen” in Swedish (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2021).





## One in three younger adults in the US personally knows somebody who uses gender-neutral pronouns




**Source:** Pew Research Center, 2018

**Figure 15:** Knowledge of gender-neutral pronouns in the US

# Race, ethnicity & migration

**Avoid words rooted in racism and colonialism**

Terms related to race, ethnicity and geographic regions often have a history rooted in racism and colonialism. The following examples illustrate the colonial origins of certain words and why they are considered inappropriate today.

Oriental – this term was widely used between the 18th and 20th centuries by the West to refer to people or cultures from eastern regions including Asia and the Middle East. Due to the association of the term with the colonial period and the West's sense of superiority, it is now considered outdated and Eurocentric as it lumps together diverse and distinct cultures, thus diminishing the individuals involved and their cultures.

Half-Caste – this term was used in the colonial era to describe people of mixed race, especially those with one parent of European descent and the other with an African or Asian background. The term is rooted in racist attitudes of the time based on the beliefs that Europeans were racially and culturally superior and that other racial groups were less civilized and less valuable. The implication was that half-castes were somehow inferior and did not belong in European society. Today, half-caste is seen as a derogatory term and its use is discouraged in favor of more inclusive terms like "bi-racial" or "mixed-race".

"No comments from the peanut gallery" is an expression sometimes heard when remarks are considered unproductive or unwanted. The phrase can be traced back to late 19th century Vaudeville theatre, where the cheapest seats were in the gallery far from the stage. When dissatisfied with a performance, people threw objects toward the stage – and peanuts were the cheapest snacks available in those seats. The peanut gallery is associated with people from the lower class and in the racially segregated United States of that time, these seats were predominantly occupied by Blacks. Hence this term also has a racial connotation.

| More inclusive | Less inclusive |
|---|---|
| Outside opinions | Peanut gallery |
| Meeting, stand up | Pow wow |
| Expert | Guru |



**Carefully choose words to denote groups of people – or avoid when possible**

When referring to specific groups, first question whether it is absolutely necessary to identify them – if not, use general terms such as “employees” or “individuals”. When specific terms are needed, consider your geopolitical context and the scope of your text.

For example, when writing a text for a specific region that needs to name ethnic groups, enquire about the terms used locally. When writing a text for a global communication, consider listing several variants or indicate that your description might not be exhaustive. Getting in touch with your organization’s Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) is a useful way to jointly develop fitting terminology.

The following list provides general guidance. As with all other points raised here, it is important to keep in mind that language is constantly changing, so it is essential to be open to reconsider your choices when people raise concerns.

Whenever possible, use specific terms: “From the United States” instead of “American”, or “Chinese American” instead of “Asian American” (APA American Psychological Association, 2021; Coalition for Diversity & Inclusion in Scholarly Communication, 2022).

In the UK, the umbrella term “Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME)” has been used for a long time but is now considered outdated. Use other terms, such as Black Briton (APA American Psychological Association, 2021; Coalition for Diversity & Inclusion in Scholarly Communication, 2022).

“African-American” is considered appropriate by many to denote people from African descent in North America, focusing on cultural heritage. Jesse L Jackson, civil rights leader, states that “Black is a color” and prefers the term “African-American”. “We built the country through the African slave trade. African-American acknowledges that. Any term that emphasizes the color and not the heritage separates us from our heritage” (as cited in Eligon, 2020).

Others consider Black a more appropriate choice – and advocate that the word should be written with a capital B. Many argue that underrepresented groups should be written with a capital letter, while white and multiracial groups should remain in lower case (e.g. the Microsoft Style Guide, or the Associated Press). This aims to express that white people “generally do not share the same history and culture, or the experience of being discriminated against because of skin color” (Associated Press). There are many contradictory views about the capitalization of the word white. For example, white supremacist groups capitalize the word, which is a reason that others do not. However, Eve Ewing claims that White should be capitalized to contextualize it and to bring attention to its power:

“Whiteness remains invisible, and as is the case with all power structures, its invisibility does crucial work to maintain its power. In maintaining the pretense of its invisibility, Whiteness maintains the pretense of its inevitability, and its innocence.”

(Ewing, 2020)





The terminology People of Color is considered acceptable by some, while the abbreviation POC is not (Coalition for Diversity & Inclusion in Scholarly Communication, 2022).

Also, language related to migration and nationality needs to be considered. Avoid othering terms like “alien” or “illegal” and use more precise terms, such as “asylum seeker” or “undocumented” (Coalition for Diversity & Inclusion in Scholarly Communication, 2022). In German - and Swedish-speaking contexts, “people with a migration background” is considered appropriate, in other contexts this is not the case (European Parliament, n.d.)

**Race and ethnicity in image use**

When choosing images, consider the demographic checklist presented in the section on inclusive images and try to portray people in non-stereotypical roles – without tokenizing underrepresented groups or overrepresenting them.

When producing images in house, use equipment and light that captures all skin tones correctly.

# Dis/abilities and neurodiversity

There is a broad variety of physical and mental abilities as well as disabilities, health conditions, diseases, and disorders. Some individuals self-identify with or advocate for their condition and others mask as neurotypical or abled. Different cultures conceptualize this differently, and the legal status of what constitutes a recognized disability varies. Moreover, the social model of disability highlights that it isn't the *individual* who is disabled, but rather the social and built environments which are "disabling".

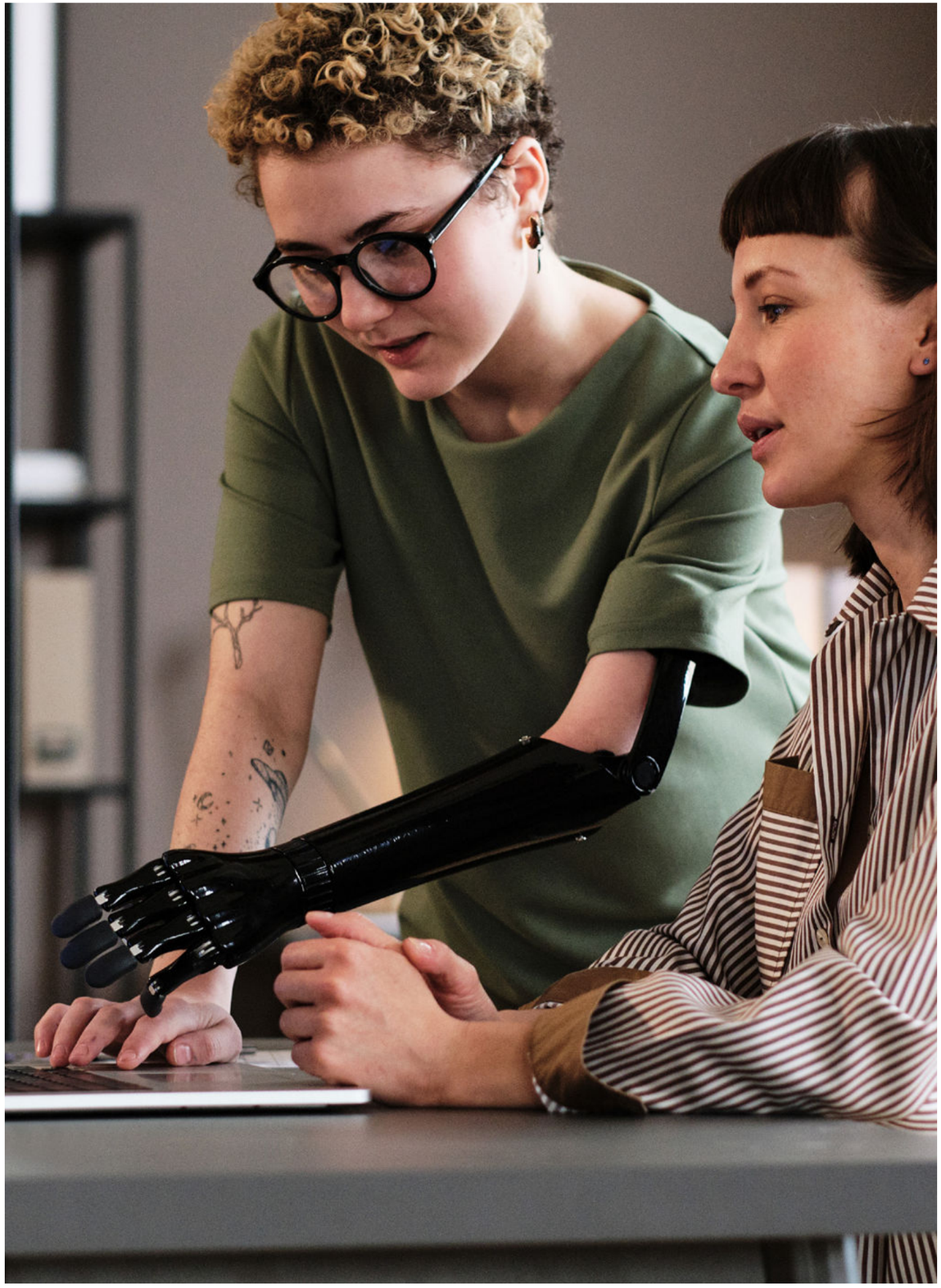
Hence, like with the other dimensions discussed here, enquire about the terms people use to identify themselves.

Consider using plain, simple language to ensure that readers with various abilities are capable of understanding your texts.

Be also aware when using newer forms, for instance a * in gender-neutral language in German (Manager*in) or Italian (tutt*), that screen readers often cannot pronounce special characters which limits the accessibility of texts.

The term 'neurodiversity' was advocated by Judy Singer to recognize that everyone's brain develops in a unique way. The term 'neurodivergent' means that people have different strengths and challenges from people who are 'neurotypical'.

Challenges can include learning difficulties and medical disorders. Strengths can include high levels of creativity, visual skills, or numeracy. Changing the narrative of neurodivergence as one of deficit to one of difference is an important enabler of inclusion. Sensitivity in language can also facilitate workplace adjustments that enable neurodivergent people to contribute effectively and feel a sense of inclusion.



## Inspiration porn

Criticism has been voiced against using the stories of disabled people to “inspire” non-disabled individuals – even if this action might be well-intended. Labelled “inspiration porn” by the late Australian disability activist Stella Young, these stories are characterized by a sentimental tone and often include a moral message. They aim to evoke pity and uplift a non-disabled audience, but they tend to objectify disabled people.

To avoid this, it is crucial to include ideas, quotes, and impressions from disabled people, ensuring they authorize how their circumstances and input are used. When these stories include a call to make changes to broader societal arrangements, they can be powerful advocates for change.

It is important to be aware of speaking about disability as a burden or tragedy as this imposes an ableist interpretation on the experience of a person with disability.

> “Finally, whenever possible, hand the pen, keyboard, microphone, or camera to the disabled person so they can tell their own story. Sometimes, that means passing on the irresistible chance to say something clever or show something cool about disabled people, something that’s otherwise guaranteed to win views, likes, and retweets. In the end, that may be the real challenge to avoiding inspiration porn – letting disabled people speak for themselves.”
>
> (Pulrang, 2019)





**Avoid words rooted in disablism**

Many words and phrases carry an ableist connotation, which means they can degrade people according to physical or mental conditions and render anyone who is different as “other”. A common example is to associate the term “lame” with something inadequate or unsatisfactory. The term originated in the physical disability of having difficulty walking, but over time it has become an adjective to describe something inferior or negative. This association can stigmatize those with physical disabilities and perpetuate stereotypes about disability. Similarly, avoid using terms like “bipolar” or “crazy” in your everyday language.

| More inclusive | Less inclusive |
|---|---|
| Uncool | Lame |
| Accessible parking | Handicapped parking |

**Carefully choose words to denote groups of people – or avoid when possible**

It is also key, with respect to disabilities and health conditions, to inquire how people identify themselves. In this context, the two approaches of either “people-first” or “identity-first” language is crucial.

In the Deaf and Deaf-Blind communities, many prefer the identity-first “deaf person” instead of “people with hearing loss” or similar (APA American Psychological Association, 2021). Autism communities also favor “autistic person” as an identity-first approach (Coalition for Diversity & Inclusion in Scholarly Communication, 2022).

In general descriptions, both “disabled people” and “people with disabilities” are currently used; it is advisable to inquire about preference whenever possible.

**Disability, neurodiversity, and health in image use**

When using images, select images in which people with various abilities and conditions are displayed in active roles.

# Age

Language and images can also convey ageism – prejudices, judgments, and discrimination against people because of their age. Even though ageism is most often associated with prejudice against older adults, it affects all age groups. For employees under 40, this is termed "reverse ageism" as studies show that this group reports age-related discrimination at the workplace.

Age-related biases can also be mitigated when considered within the frame of life phase instead of biological age. Examples of new life phases include starting a family or enrolling in an Executive MBA program and these may happen at various points in time. Being aware of this reality helps challenge age-related stereotypes.

Assumptions that older employees are more change resistant, less tech savvy, and more expensive to employ can result in age discrimination for experienced employees, who may be more likely to be selected for layoff during a restructuring than younger colleagues.

> The bias can work in reverse for younger employees, who may not be seen as having the requisite experience for a promotion.

Younger employees may face stereotypes about being overly dependent on technology, lacking a work ethic, or having fewer ideas to contribute to decision-making processes.

| More inclusive | Less inclusive |
|---|---|
| Experienced people | Older people, still working |
| Younger people | Kiddo |



# Additional Resources







Conscious style guide

Guide for various dimensions

Unspinning the spin

Encyclopedia of microaggressions

#WriteInclusion Factsheets

Tools that can be used in Word

Inclusive image libraries:

1 INVIQA library of photos, videos, icons, and illustrations

2 TONL culturally diverse stock photos

3 Nappy – beautiful stock photos of Black and brown people, for free

EqualVoice

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Inclusive Language and Images

# About IMD

Founded by business executives for business executives, we are an independent academic institute based in Lausanne and Singapore. We strive to be the trusted learning partner of choice for ambitious individuals and organizations worldwide.

Our executive education and degree programs are consistently ranked among the world's best by the Financial Times, Bloomberg, Forbes, and others.

Our leading position in the field is grounded in our unique approach to creating real learning, real impact. Through our research, programs, and advisory work we enable business leaders to find new and better solutions: challenging what is and inspiring what could be.

# About EqualVoice

The EqualVoice initiative was launched in November 2019 by Ringier CFO Annabella Bassler and is chaired by publisher Michael Ringier and CEO Marc Walder. EqualVoice aims to advocate gender equality in the media and reduce the gender visibility gap. The core of the EqualVoice initiative is the EqualVoice-Factor, an in-house developed algorithm analyzing text, images, and video. EqualVoice is not only focused on how often women are mentioned in the media, but also focuses on context, images, and language.





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