Navigating Societal Expectations in the Fashion Industry

Balancing Brand Image, Marketing Strategies, and Workplace Diversity

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Abstract

This research investigates the dynamic relationship between evolving societal expectations and the fashion industry, with a focus on how brands adapt their marketing strategies, hiring practices, and leadership structures to align with these demands. The study explores the challenges brands face in balancing their core identity with the need to address inclusivity, diversity, and sustainability. By examining literature, social media interactions, and case studies, the research provides insights into the ways fashion brands can remain culturally relevant while fulfilling stakeholder and consumer expectations. This research aims to provide answers to these research questions by the end of the research:

1. To what extent can a brand shift their approach to fulfill society needs without completely changing their brand image and positioning?

2. How can a brand change their marketing approach to fulfill societal standards without missing the mark on their target market?

3. When and how does a hiring process involving diverse groups become hiring just for diversity (diversity hire)?

Key findings reveal that brands increasingly integrate diversity into marketing and recruitment strategies, which is motivated by public accountability and social media activism. The study highlights the importance of genuine representation in leadership and creative teams as a key driver of long-term success. Practical recommendations will also be presented including inclusivity into organizational values, leveraging transparent marketing strategies, and implementing recruitment practices that prioritize meaningful diversity over superficial representation. This research underscores the growing interdependence between social responsibility and business success, emphasizing the need for thoughtful and strategic adaptation in the fashion industry.

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Introduction

Social expectations and the fashion industry interact actively; hence brands nowadays operate and communicate differently than how they did 10 years ago. As a powerful tool, social media helps many marginalized communities challenge brands about representation and discrimination, which leads to important changes in hiring practices, marketing, and product development. With many consumers and employees increasingly demanding not only variety in advertisements but also in leadership teams, brands confront an important challenge that involves balancing social values with the need to maximize profits and satisfy stakeholders.

Apparel, being one of the crucial parts of individuals physical appearance, can closely be linked to an individual's identity. Lieshout worded it perfectly: "Dressing the body is always an extension of the 'experience of the self'" (Lieshout 2012). It may reflect a person's background, socioeconomic status, or simply how they want to be perceived by others. The fashion industry has one of the biggest markets with their revenue estimated to reach US$1.79 trillion worldwide, with US$0.94 trillion acquired by women's apparel. This market is also projected to have an annual growth rate of 2.65% between 2024 and 2029 (Statista Market Insights 2024). Although changes in diversity representation in the fashion industry started even before the existence of the new media, social media has catalyzed the change in societal expectations within the fashion industry. This is because the barrier to infinite possibilities has been broken with new technology, especially in Digital Fashion (Nunes 2023). Therefore, it is important for brands to recognize that there are infinite number of ways that humans want to express themselves through their apparel. This also means accommodating those needs by meeting them through product variety and sizing inclusion. Fulfilling this demand also means shifting production needs and marketing practices. However, fashion companies heavily rely on their brand identity and image to acquire and retain its consumers (Ross 2011). Therefore, brands must find the right balance when shifting its internal practices to meet societal expectations and preserving its true brand identity.

Research Methodology

Methods used will involve a mix between qualitative and quantitative data. In particular, exploratory design where qualitative data is to be collected first while quantitative data is used to support or validate the findings. Content analysis from media, databases, and journals will be performed to accumulate findings. The use of case studies will also be applied for this research to serve as a guide when answering the research questions through real life experiences or outcomes. Then, data from surveys and financial reports will be used to support the qualitative findings.

Methods

1. Literature Review

   Multiple peer-reviewed journals, reports, and iterative journals will be used, while theories and key concepts are contextualized. This method aims to give insights into behavioral theories, statistics and key metrics, and the industry's history.

2. Social Media Observations

   This method involves analyzing social media platforms to see how different brands approach diversity in their marketing attempts, consumer interaction, and what discussions are held digitally. This method aims to give the most up-to-date insights into brands marketing practices, whether it is directed to consumers or potential candidates.

3. Case Study Analysis

   Select case studies of prominent fashion brands are examined to identify successful and unsuccessful responses to societal demands. Examples include shifts in branding, marketing, and hiring practices to align with expectations for diversity and inclusivity.

Analytical Tools and Frameworks

1. Thematic Analysis: Used to identify recurring patterns and themes within literature reviews.

2. Sentiment Analysis: Applied to social media data to gauge public reactions to brand messaging and image.

3. Stakeholder Theory Framework: Guides the analysis of how fashion brands balance diverse stakeholder needs while maintaining reputation and profitability.

4. Comparative Analysis: Applied to case studies to assess differences in strategies and outcomes.

Societal Expectations and Brand Positioning

Fulfillment of diverse representation demand in the fashion industry has risen this past decade. A lot of brands have started to take actionable steps in fostering inclusivity for its customers and diversity in their workplace. The conceptual model below provided by Bhattacharjee links gender-role stress theory with demand on body positivity representative. He found that in high gender role stress environments, body
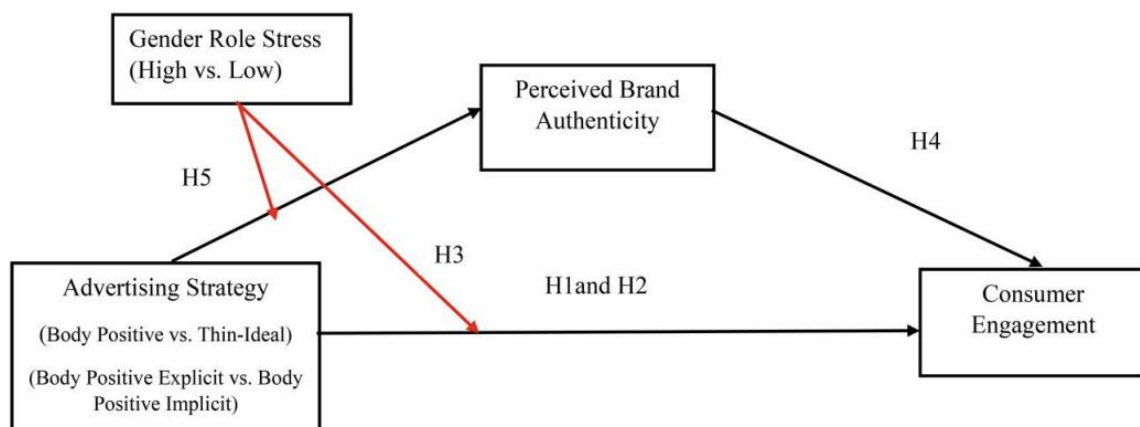
positive advertisements are more favored at 5.86 compared to low gender role stress environment at 5.24 (Bhattacharjee 2024). There has been pressure on brands to meet diversity demand through their marketing efforts due to the pressure women face every day through the gender-role expectations set by society that they are in. Therefore, shifts of diverse representation in the fashion landscape is necessary.

Case Study: Victoria's Secret

Victoria's Secret is a retail women's lingerie brand founded in 1977. Their product selection includes underwear, sleepwear, perfumes, etc. As a part of their brand, they conduct annual runway show called The Victoria's Secret Fashion Show, which birthed Victoria's Secret Angels: a group of models and face of the brand. Their brand and marketing approach revolves around lean and toned bodies, beautiful face, and bombshell hair, which those Angels possess; hence, they became the face of the brand. However, the brand were highly criticized for its lack of inclusivity shortly after its 2018 Fashion Show, which led to the cancellation of its 2019 Fashion Show (Ratnadewi 2022). According to research conducted by Demsar, there has been an increase in customer resistance in recent years by way of cancellation, or popularly known as cancel culture (Demsar 2023). Meaning that consumers now, more than ever, are not afraid to take actionable steps to hinder company's profitability in order to have their needs met. This push stems from women's sheer belief systems and values that has been deeply rooted in society where women must adhere to the conventional feminine gender role (Bhattacharjee 2024). This puts pressure on women to physically present themselves well, resulting in pressure when trying to find flattering apparel to meet said societal expectations. This method of cancellation clearly worked on Victoria's Secret when they undergo a rebrand after the company noticed the uproar of criticisms and declining sales. Ratnadewi concluded from her quantitative analysis by hypothesis testing that their rebrand has a positive impact on brand loyalty and love (Ratnadewi 2022). This is because body positive marketing can inspire its audience and serve as a reminder of the brand's values that go beyond just achieving short-term commercial goals; hence, fostering trust and community building (Bhattacharjee

2024). Below are a comparison between the models who walk the Fashion Show in 2017 and 2024

collected from Google Images:

However, this seemingly positive rebrand also comes with some backlash claiming that the rebrand is

inauthentic in many ways. The main two being inauthentic from Victoria's Secret original brand image

and identity, and the rebrand only came following the criticisms, not due to the brand's nature of being

receptive to change. Below are some of the criticisms posted on TikTok by viewers of the recent

Victoria's Secret Fashion Show and discussions surrounding the brand's attempt at a comeback. These

shows consumers intelligence in detecting inauthentic attempts to turn brand image positively, which turned out to be ineffective.

This case study shows how shifting brand positioning to adapt to changes in societal demands and standards could lead to a brand's longevity and continuous relevance to the ever-changing market. However, repositioning could lead to the loss of initial consumer base in order to acquire new ones. Additionally, it also emphasizes the importance of authenticity when adapting to those changes by staying true to the brand identity and values. This is to ensure consumers of brand's intelligence and honesty; hence, strengthening trust between brands and its consumers that fosters lasting relationships.

Product Development and Inclusivity

Fulfilling inclusivity demands has significantly influenced product development processes in the fashion sector. Brands are increasingly designing products that cater to diverse demographics, including gender-neutral clothing lines, expanded size ranges, and adaptive apparel for individuals with disabilities. These

developments stem from a growing recognition of underrepresented consumer groups and their purchasing power. Inclusivity in product offerings has become a strategically crucial, as diverse collections not only meet societal expectations but also open new revenue streams for brands targeting previously overlooked market (Boon 2018).

However, implementing inclusive product development poses challenges, including balancing inclusivity with cost efficiency and maintaining a coherent brand identity. The demand for inclusive products often requires extensive research and innovation to accommodate a broader range of consumer needs (Boon 2018). This pushed brands to become innovative with their product offering because innovation ensures that the product meets consumer needs, especially in the eyes of the consumer. Therefore, increasing product purchase intention, which Mangalindung also concluded that product innovation has a positive significant effect on purchasing decision (Mangalindung 2024). Product innovation in the fashion landscape could come in different ways such as functionality, design, material, etc. However, it is important to note that merely expanding product lines without genuine representation in leadership and decision-making roles may undermine a brand's authenticity in the eyes of critical consumers.

Diversity in Hiring Practices

The pressure in changing marketing approach to lead to inclusivity also affects companies hiring practices and workplace landscape. The increase in meeting consumers diversity needs has led to an increase in diversity in the workplace demand. This stems from consumers needing to see brands valuing diversity through their internal practices to ensure brand authenticity. When consumers believe that brands are being thoroughly authentic, it highly influences their behavioral decisions towards their brand by influencing their self-reinforcing assets (Oh 2019). Nowadays, companies reflect their value on inclusivity not only through their B2C marketing attempts, but also through their employees and internal representation. A diverse workforce enhances creativity and innovation by bringing together varied

perspectives and problem-solving approaches, leading to more innovative solutions. Research by the Boston Consulting Group found that companies with diverse management teams report 19% higher revenue due to innovation (Lorenzo 2018). In addition, diverse teams make better decisions, with a study in the *Harvard Business Review* showing they are 87% more effective at decision-making (Rock & Grant 2016). Diversity also attracts and retains top talent, Glassdoor reported that 67% of job seekers value workplace inclusivity, which fosters employee satisfaction and reduces turnover (Glassdoor 2020). Furthermore, diverse teams better understand a globalized customer base, tailoring products and services to meet diverse needs, it is found that companies with higher racial and ethnic diversity are 35% more likely to outperform their industry peers financially (Hunt 2020). This inclusivity boosts employee engagement, morale, and productivity, creating a positive and collaborative workplace culture. Beyond internal benefits, organizations with strong diversity practices enhance their reputation as ethical employers. Brands can leverage the power of inclusivity to achieve innovation, competitive advantage, and financial success.

Diversity in hiring practices within the fashion industry has become a pivotal focus as the industry is historically criticized for exclusionary practices. Thus, many companies are now revising their recruitment strategies to ensure their workforce reflects the diversity of their consumer base. However, there are challenges in balancing genuine inclusivity with avoiding tokenism (Boon 2018). Their attempt in fostering a diverse workplace has received great help from the advancement of technology, such as AI, that allows screening of candidates through cutting-edge technology without taking into account their gender, ethnicity, or other personal qualities. Thus, eliminating unconscious prejudices in the initial steps of the hiring process (Vevahare 2023).

Case Study: SKIMS

SKIMS started as a shapewear brand that has now turned into a brand a lot of people turn to when looking for reliable basics, underwear, sleepwear, etc. The brand launched and positioned themselves as a size inclusive brand with sizes ranging from 2XS to 4XL. As size inclusivity has become their brand identity, their workplace also reflects the brand's value on diversity. Although the company is female dominated, males still acquired in a few of the decision-making roles according to their LinkedIn. Furthermore, their LinkedIn page also shows the different areas of origins of their employees, such as India and Atlanta. The picture below, posted on their LinkedIn page, also shows not only the diversity of SKIMS employees, but also their participation in the LGBTQ+ march. This further strengthen their company values and brand identity. Their attempt on diversity hiring becomes successful because they also focus their diversity initiatives on corporate and managerial roles. Therefore, the effects will naturally trickle down to entry level positions (Prasad 2021).

On the other hand, there has been misunderstanding of the term 'diversity hiring' that leads to tokenism and/or 'diversity hires'. Diversity hiring becomes 'diversity hires' when candidates hired are underqualified for the role offered. In addition, this hiring method becomes negative when only superficial efforts are made with no solid retention plan to help the candidate grow and thrive in the workplace (Pon Staff 2021). It is one of the greatest signs of hiring just to fill diversity quotas, which further pains minority groups and productivity of the company itself. This is because those individuals might not be the best match for the role, hence would be deemed unqualified by their colleagues. Therefore, further imposing prejudices onto other individuals from that minority group (Cook-Campbell 2021).

Findings and Analysis

A. Preserving Brand Identity while Adapting to Changes

The fashion industry has witnessed a significant shift in its approach to representation and inclusivity, driven by societal pressures and consumer demands. The case of Victoria's Secret illustrates how brands can adapt to these demands while faced with the challenge of preserving their core identity. Historically associated with a narrow definition of beauty embodied by the "Victoria's Secret Angels," the brand faced criticism for its lack of diversity and inclusivity. This led to a rebranding effort that included the introduction of diverse models and body-positive marketing campaigns (Ratnadewi 2022). The rebrand has shown a positive impact on consumer trust and loyalty by aligning with societal values that emphasize inclusivity and diversity (Bhattacharjee, 2024). These adaptations show the importance for brands to evolve with cultural and societal shifts to maintain relevance and foster a deeper connection with their audience.

Despite these positive outcomes, shifts in brand image or positioning often face scrutiny regarding authenticity. Victoria's Secret's rebranding efforts have been criticized for appearing reactionary rather than proactive, as they followed a public backlash and declining sales rather than emerging from a genuine desire to change (Demsar 2023). Such inauthentic approaches may alienate both the original consumer base and potential new customers, making the long-term impact of the rebranding ineffective. Consumer perception highly determines the success of inclusive marketing strategies, emphasizing that brands must balance shifts with their original foundation of identity. This balancing act is particularly important in high-gender-role-stress environments, where inclusive advertisements resonate more strongly (Bhattacharjee 2024).

Ultimately, the Victoria's Secret case highlights the importance of authenticity and strategic alignment when adapting brand image to meet societal expectations. This can be done by embracing inclusivity in a way that reflects core brand values and authenticity. However, these efforts must come hand-in-hand with genuine intent and long-term commitment rather than short-term responses to criticism. Thus, brands can build lasting trust and loyalty with consumers while addressing societal critiques. This dual focus on authenticity and strategic adaptation ensure that brands are able to navigate the complexities of societal demands seamlessly while maintaining their market position and brand equity.

B. Product Development to Increase Inclusivity

The integration of inclusivity into product variety has transformed how fashion brands approach product development processes. Gender-neutral clothing lines, adaptive apparel, and expanded size ranges are now common strategies used by companies to meet the demands of different demographics. Boon highlights that these initiatives serve a dual purpose: addressing societal calls for representation while unlocking access to markets with considerable purchasing power (Boon 2018). These efforts contribute

to consumer loyalty and brand equity as consumers increasingly seek products that align with their values of inclusivity and representation.

Despite its benefits, inclusive product development also poses significant challenges, particularly with cost efficiency. Brands often need to invest in research and innovation to produce items that appeal to a broader customer base without sacrificing quality or affordability (Boon 2018). Product innovation positively impacts consumer purchase decisions by enhancing functionality and perceived value (Mangalindung 2024). For example, innovations in materials, such as sustainable fabrics that are also adaptive for diverse body types, reflect how brands can merge inclusivity with sustainability.

Inclusivity-driven product development is a powerful tool for aligning brands with societal values while expanding their market reach and stream of income. However, the process must be guided by authenticity and strategic intent. No single brand could satisfy all the different demographic needs; hence it is important to stay close to the intended target market to preserve brand image and be cost-conscious. Furthermore, consumers' trust in inclusive products is significantly influenced by a brand's ability to meet their evolving needs through innovation. Companies that genuinely incorporate inclusivity into both their product lines and leadership structures are better positioned to achieve long-term success while maintaining alignment with consumer expectations. This approach not only enhances the appeal of their offerings but also strengthens the brand's overall identity.

C. Diversity Hiring and Recruitment Marketing

The rising demand for workplace diversity has significantly shaped hiring practices within the fashion industry, as companies strive to align their internal representation with their external values. Brands that visibly reflect inclusivity through their workforce fosters consumer trust by enhancing their authenticity. SKIMS, for instance, exemplifies this alignment by imposing diversity into its corporate

identity. The brand not only promotes inclusivity through its products, such as its expansive size range, but also ensures its workforce reflects these values, with diverse representation in both entry-level and managerial roles. This dual commitment to inclusivity strengthens SKIMS' brand identity and authenticity, demonstrating how workplace diversity initiatives can complement external marketing strategies (Prasad, 2021).

Technology has played a pivotal role in mitigating biases in initial recruitment processes, which helps brands in fostering diverse workforces. By employing such technologies, companies can improve their ability to recruit individuals based on skills and qualifications while advancing their diversity goals. However, Pon Staff at HBR argues that success in diversity hiring depends not only on recruitment but also on retention strategies that provide a supportive environment for employees from diverse backgrounds to thrive (Pon Staff 2021). Brands like SKIMS have effectively illustrated this by extending their inclusivity efforts to corporate leadership roles, ensuring that diversity exists at each and every organizational levels.

However, misinterpretation of the term often leads to tokenism or "diversity hires," where candidates are chosen to fulfill quotas rather than for their qualifications or fit for the role. This approach can backfire, leading to reduced morale and worsened stereotypes within the workplace. Hiring without a comprehensive retention and development plan can hinder both the individual and organizational growth, reinforcing prejudices against minority groups (Cook-Campbell 2021). To avoid these pitfalls, companies must integrate diversity initiatives with robust hiring frameworks and long-term strategies. By doing so, they ensure that diversity efforts are substantive and sustainable, fostering an environment where inclusivity enhances both organizational culture and productivity.

Research Limitations

The methodologies used in this study presents several limitations that may affect the comprehensiveness of the findings. First, while the use of literature reviews, social media observations, and case study analysis provides diverse perspectives, the reliance on publicly available data may overlook significant internal practices of fashion brands that are not publicly disclosed. Second, social media observations are inherently limited by the demographic biases of platform users, which may not fully represent all consumer groups. Additionally, sentiment analysis and thematic analysis may be subject to researcher interpretation, introducing potential bias. Lastly, the case study approach, while offering detailed insights, only focuses on a limited number of brands and may not capture industry-wide trends. These limitations suggest the need for future research incorporating broader datasets, direct interviews, or surveys with industry professionals for a more comprehensive understanding.

Discussions

1. To what extent can a brand shift their approach to fulfill society needs without completely changing their brand image and positioning?

The findings reveal that brands can shift their approach to fulfill societal needs without completely altering their brand image by strategically integrating inclusive practices into their identity. For instance, Victoria's Secret transitioned from an exclusive focus on "Angels" to more diverse representations without abandoning its core focus on lingerie and femininity. This demonstrates how brands can reimagine their messaging and marketing strategies to resonate with modern audiences while preserving elements of their established identity. However, authenticity plays a critical role as some consumers are quick to detect and reject superficial changes made solely to counter criticism. Thus, the key lies in aligning these shifts with long-term values, as seen in SKIMS, where both product development and

internal representation reinforce inclusivity, which ensures alignment with consumer expectations and brand identity.

To meet societal standards without disregarding their target market, brands need to employ data-driven marketing strategies that reflect their understanding of their audience. Marketing campaigns should not only highlight inclusivity but also maintain relevance to the core consumer base to avoid cancelling out the benefits of these attempts and lose initial customers. For instance, SKIMS has successfully catered to a broad demographic by expanding its size ranges while retaining its reputation as a high-quality, reliable brand. Such strategies ensure that the shifts in marketing appeal to new consumers while retaining loyal ones, balancing innovation with consistency in brand positioning and image.

2. When and how does a hiring process involving diverse groups become hiring just for diversity (diversity hire)?

There happens to be a thin line between authentic diversity hiring and tokenism. The findings suggest that diversity hiring becomes problematic and inauthentic when it prioritizes fulfilling quotas over merit and qualifications, leading to unqualified "diversity hires". To avoid this, brands must focus on fostering inclusivity at all levels of the organization, as SKIMS has demonstrated by diversifying leadership roles. Incorporating technologies like AI can further enhance fairness in recruitment, ensuring that hiring decisions are merit-based while eliminating unconscious biases (Vevahare, 2023).

Lastly, the discussion highlights that while inclusivity is essential, its implementation must be authentic and strategic. A brand's ability to adapt without losing its identity depends on embedding inclusivity into its foundational values rather than treating it as an afterthought. Whether through product innovation, marketing, or hiring, the goal should be to create meaningful change that resonates with consumers, employees, and the brand identity. By maintaining transparency and commitment, brands can build trust

and foster lasting relationships with its consumer base, ensuring their relevance in an ever-evolving societal landscape.

Recommendations

For Brand Managers and Marketing Teams

Main objective: balance societal expectations with brand authenticity by communicating inclusivity without abandoning core values and consumer base.

1. Storytelling tool for authenticity

   Using genuine and relatable narratives, such as brand history, helps brands align their identity with societal values while maintaining their edge. This approach creates a deeper emotional connection with consumers and enhances the brand's image and unique positioning.

2. Keep catering to core customer segment

   When adopting new inclusive marketing strategies, keep in mind the loyal customers. Tailor original campaigns to better reach the new demographic, but leaving in elements that captures the brand essence.

3. Stay informed

   Be proactive in responding to changing customer expectations by keeping up with trends and changes to better anticipate societal shifts.

These suggestions are inspired by Kimberly Flanders Journal published by Georgia Southern University in 2024. These strategies help ensuring shifts in a brand's marketing approach stays true to its core identity to preserve its authenticity. Therefore, strengthen business and consumer trust and relationship, which leads to brand loyalty and increased customer retention; hence, ensures repeat business and sales, and shareholder satisfaction.

For HR Teams

Main objective: Practices to ensure diverse hiring is impactful and sustainable.

Listed are recommendations on how to minimize "diversity hires" and ensures that the attempt becomes sustainable as concluded through Harvard Business Review: Why diversity hiring efforts often fail written by Pon Staff (2021):

1. Overcome unconscious biases and systematic issues by changing internal company culture

2. Enhance incentives when candidates fulfill a lot of the job criteria

3. Add solid structures within the hiring process to eliminate diversity hires being hired through multiple interviews with different recruiters, which minimizes biases and ensure honest hiring

4. Regularly review and revise hiring and onboarding processes to ensure inclusivity and maximize productivity

Conclusion

In conclusion, the fashion industry continuously undergoes a transformation as it aligns with evolving societal expectations. This research highlights the balance brands must maintain between adapting to societal changes and preserving their core identity. By examining marketing strategies and diversity hiring practices, the study reveals that while these shifts can enhance a brand's relevance and authenticity, they must be executed thoughtfully to avoid tokenism and maintain trust among stakeholders. Fashion brands that embrace these changes with a genuine commitment to inclusivity and innovation are better positioned to thrive in a competitive and socially conscious landscape.

Moving forward, it is essential for brands in the fashion industry to approach societal alignment as a long-term strategy rather than a reactive measure. Incorporating diverse leadership, authentic representation, and inclusive marketing practices not only fosters brand loyalty but also drives creative

and organizational innovation, such as through recruitment and product development. However, challenges such as balancing profitability with stakeholder expectations and avoiding superficial implementations of diversity attempts must be carefully navigated. Future research could expand on these findings by incorporating quantitative data, exploring the impact of these shifts on consumer behavior, and analyzing smaller or emerging brands to gain a broader perspective.

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