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Rainbow Washing in Human Resource Management: A Systematic Literature Review of Diversity Rhetoric and Authentic Inclusion

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Abstract

This study presents a systematic literature review (SLR) on the phenomenon of "rainbow washing"—the practice of promoting diversity rhetorically without enacting substantive change—within the context of Human Resource Management (HRM). While Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) have become widely discussed in organizational discourse, there remains a lack of comprehensive analysis that critically examines the gap between symbolic commitments and authentic inclusion. This review addresses that gap by synthesizing existing research on how performative DEI efforts manifest, their operational mechanisms, and their impact on marginalized employees. A systematic search of Scopus and Web of Science databases was conducted in accordance with PRISMA guidelines, focusing on literature published between 2000 and 2024 using keywords such as “authentic inclusion,” “performative allyship,” “rainbow washing,” and “diversity rhetoric.” From an initial pool of 582 records, 25 studies met the inclusion criteria after a rigorous screening and quality appraisal process. The review identifies three critical patterns: (1) symbolic communication practices, including the use of simplified language

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and visual performativity; (2) the decoupling of HR systems, where recruitment, training, and accountability mechanisms serve reputational goals rather than internal transformation; and (3) the lived consequences for marginalized employees, such as heightened identity strain, workplace cynicism, and emergent forms of micro-resistance. Theoretically, this review contributes to the concept of Symbolic Inclusion by framing rainbow washing as a self-perpetuating organizational cycle. Practically, it provides HR professionals and policymakers with evaluative tools to distinguish between performative and impactful DEI initiatives. The study concludes that rainbow washing is a systemic organizational process with tangible psychosocial costs and calls for a paradigm shift from performative rhetoric to evidence-based, accountable inclusion practices. Future research should examine this phenomenon in non-Western contexts and explore the pivotal role of middle managers as agents of inclusive change.

Keywords: Authentic Inclusion; Diversity Rhetoric; Human Resource Management; Rainbow Washing; Symbolic Inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) has become a crucial aspect of modern human resource management (HRM) and has become deeply ingrained in the business world. Social identity theory supports this change. It states that people derive a significant part of their sense of self from the groups they join. Because of this, Ashforth and Mael (1989) argue that welcoming workplaces are crucial for people to feel safe and valued, fostering a sense of belonging. As a result, companies are increasingly making their commitment to DEI more public and using it as a strategy to build their workplace brand and attract talented individuals (Shen et al., 2009).

However, the rise in business DEI programs has led to a serious problem that hasn't been thoroughly examined: "rainbow washing." Similar to 'greenwashing' in environmental sustainability, rainbow washing occurs when individuals use diversity language and symbols without actually implementing them or creating a culture that is truly inclusive and welcoming (Vredenburg et al., 2020). This kind of fake allyship makes it hard for organisations to match up with the real lives of their employees who come from marginalised groups.

It is possible to understand this conflict by examining the concept of symbolic versus real management. Researchers have long noted that, in order to cope with institutional pressures from outside the company, Meyer and Rowan (1977) suggest that companies often separate their official frameworks and public statements from their day-to-day operations. This separation is evident in DEI when HRM policies are formulated for external authority rather than internal, radical change (Tatli et al., 2012).

This work aims to fill a major research gap by providing a thorough understanding of how rainbow washing manifests in HRM systems. The body of research on the gap between diversity talk and practice remains scattered, despite growing interest in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and symbolic management. Existing data is spread across different fields, such as sociology, critical management studies, and human resource management, and there is no single summary that provides a clear picture of what causes what in an internal organisational setting (Janssens & Zanoni, 2014). As a result, the body of knowledge is fragmented, with various studies providing only partial answers and insufficient information to construct a comprehensive framework for LGBTQ+-focused projects.

Because there isn't a compiled body of evidence, a thorough literature review is not only helpful but also required. As Siddaway et al. (2019) note, a systematic review is the best way to map a fragmented field, identify subject patterns, and, most importantly, reveal the precise shapes of the existing knowledge gaps. This problem is very important for two reasons. Firstly, workers who perceive fake diversity efforts may become more skeptical and lose faith in their leaders (Avery & McKay, 2010). According to Lindsay et al. (2023), organisations face significant image risks when these dishonest practices are eventually discovered.

The following research questions (RQs) were made to help guide this systematic literature review and ensure it is an organised and thorough analysis:

Research Question 1: What are the main ideas and terms that have been used to describe and study the gap between talking about diversity and really including everyone in HRM, especially when it comes to LGBTQ+ programs?

Research Question 2: What are some of the organisational, institutional, and leadership factors that cause diversity practices to be symbolic instead of substantive? What are the effects of these practices on employees and the organisation?

Research Question 3: What are the most important holes in the existing study, and what is the suggested plan for more empirical and theoretical studies?

The main goal of this systematic literature review is to carefully map out the conceptual limits and empirical evidence of rainbow washing in HRM. In order to reach this main goal, the study aims to meet the following particular goals:

- To find, combine, and evaluate the existing academic studies on the gap between organisations' words about diversity and their real actions of including everyone, with a focus on LGBTQ+-related projects.
- To create a complete framework that clearly shows the main signs of symbolic versus real inclusion in HRM.
- To find important gaps in the current study and suggest a clear plan for future empirical research that can help us understand this event better in both theory and practice.

This study is important for both academic and practical reasons. To explain the phenomenon of rainbow washing, this study contributes to the fields of critical HRM and organisational studies by combining ideas from institutional theory and social identity theory. Its goal is to provide future research with a critical view that will enable it to examine corporate DEI claims with greater factual rigour (Oswick & Noon, 2014).

According to this review, the results have a significant real-world impact on HR workers and business leaders. This study provides stakeholders with a framework to assess and refine their own DEI strategies by clearly distinguishing between symbolic and substantive practices (Kulik, 2014). For workers and campaigners, this study also provides a standard by which they can hold companies accountable.

METHODS

Protocol and Review Procedure

This systematic literature review (SLR) adheres to the widely accepted principles outlined by Page et al. (2021) in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement, ensuring that the methods used are sound, the results are clear, and the study can be replicated. Finding, selecting, evaluating, and synthesizing important research is outlined in the PRISMA system. The process was carried out in

separate steps, from searching databases for the first time to finally including all the studies, which are explained in more detail below and shown in the PRISMA flow map (Figure 1).

Information Sources and Search Strategy

A thorough and organized search was carried out in various internet sources to find all the different types of research that had been done on the subject. Scopus and Web of Science were the primary sources searched because they contain a wealth of high-quality, peer-reviewed literature in the business and social sciences. A second search was conducted using Google Scholar to identify important grey literature, such as key working papers and meeting transcripts, and to mitigate the risk of publication bias. In addition, the reference lists of all included studies were manually searched to identify any other relevant publications that the database searches might have missed. The search approach used an organised mix of terms and Boolean operators to find results that included the main ideas of the study, which were "rainbow washing," "HRM," "diversity rhetoric," and "authentic inclusion." The search string was changed to fit the style of each database. This is an example of a search word that can be used in Scopus:

("rainbow washing" OR "diversity washing" OR "performative allyship" OR "symbolic diversity") AND ("human resource management" OR HRM OR "talent management" OR "inclusion") AND ("LGBTQ+" OR "gender diversity" OR "workplace diversity") AND ("authentic" OR "substantive" OR "rhetoric" OR "discourse")

Eligibility Criteria

Clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria were established prior to the screening process to ensure that only the most relevant and high-quality studies were selected.

- *Inclusion Criteria:*

✓ Journal pieces, meeting papers, and books/chapters that have been reviewed by other experts.

✓ Research papers that discuss the disparity between how companies discuss diversity and their actual inclusion of everyone, particularly LGBTQ+ issues, and employ terms such as "rainbow washing," "diversity washing," and "performative allyship."

✓ Research that takes place in or analyses closely organisational and HRM settings.

✓ Works that are written in English.

✓ Studies published between 2000 and 2024 demonstrate how business DEI language has evolved over time.

- *Exclusion Criteria:*

✓ Editorials, opinion pieces, and magazine or blog posts that aren't checked by other researchers.

✓ The studies focused solely on "greenwashing" in the environmental field, and there was no clear link or comparison to other diverse problems.

✓ The rhetoric-reality gap isn't seriously examined in research on diversity management in general.

✓ Books and magazines written in languages besides English.

Study Selection and Screening Process

To ensure everything was done quickly and correctly, the study selection process was divided into two separate steps, which were handled using the reference management software Zotero. The initial scans of the database yielded a total of 582 records. After eliminating 114 duplicates, 468 original records remained to be screened.

- Phase 1: Look over the titles and abstracts. The first author reviewed all 468 titles and abstracts to ensure they met the requirements. As a result of this process, 412 records that were clearly not relevant were excluded, leaving 56 papers for full-text review.

- Phase 2: Evaluation of the whole text. The first author carefully read the full texts of all 56 papers to determine eligibility. To ensure agreement between raters, a second researcher independently reviewed 20% of these full-text pieces. Any differences were resolved by discussing them until everyone agreed. Of the 56 reports sought for removal, 56 could not be retrieved, and 31 studies were excluded after full-text review. 18 were not specifically focused on HRM, and 13 lacked sufficient analytical depth, typically providing excessive descriptive detail. As a result, 25 studies were selected for inclusion in the final qualitative report.

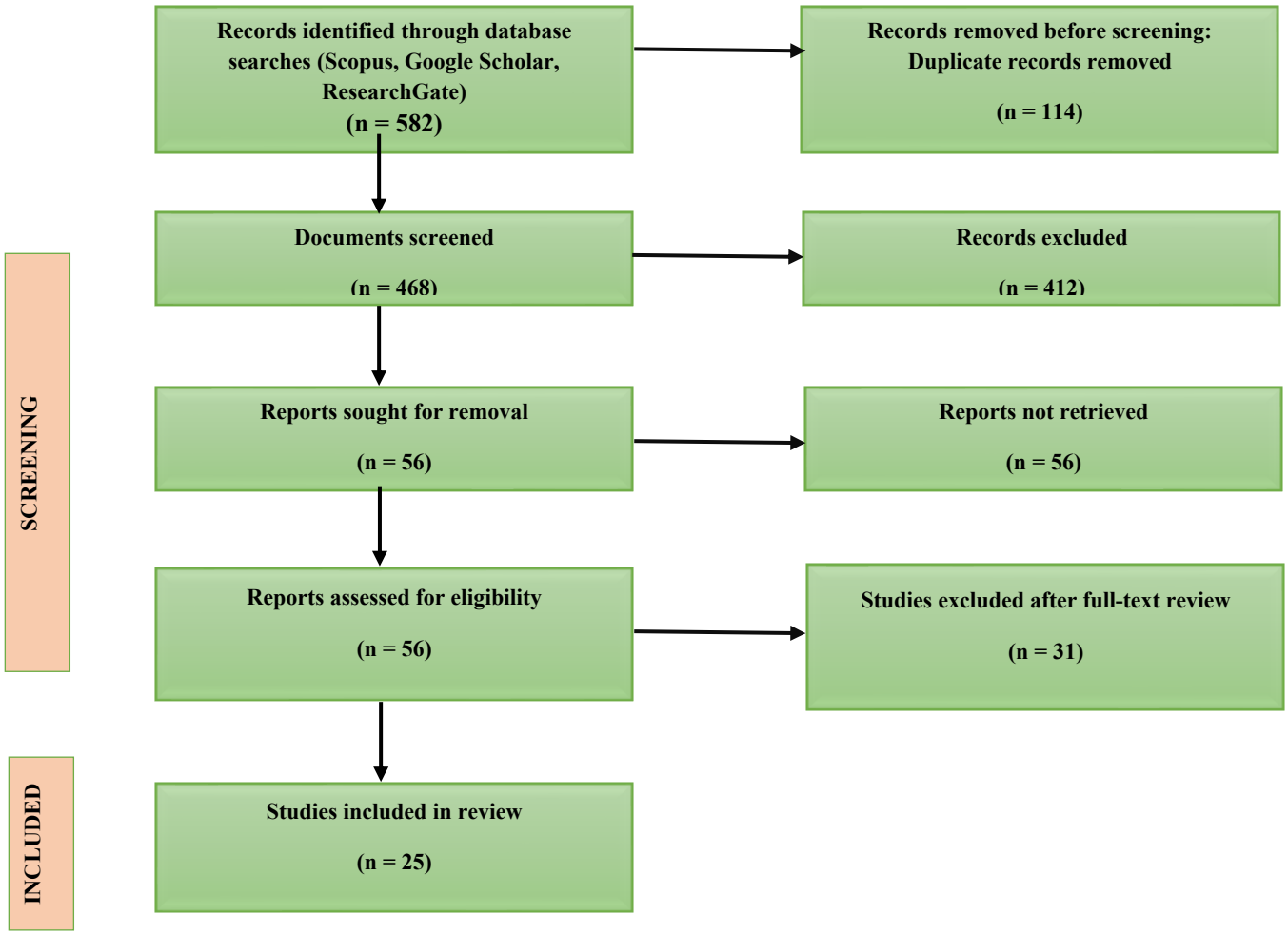


Figure 1. PRISMA Model

Quality Assessment

A custom checklist, based on the work of Long et al. (2017), was used for a quality review to examine the scientific rigour and reliability of the included studies closely. The 25 studies that were looked at were judged on the five points below, with "Yes," "Partially," or "No" answers given for each:

- Clarity of Aims: Are the study questions or goals clearly stated?
- Methodology Appropriateness: Is the type of study (qualitative, quantitative, or conceptual) clearly explained and shown to be the best way to reach the goals?
- Research Design and Data Analysis: Is there a lot of information on how the study was planned and carried out, including how the data was collected and analysed?

- Clarity of Findings: Are the results easy to understand, and do they make sense after the analysis?
- Value of Contribution: Does the work add anything important to the field's theory or practice?

This evaluation wasn't intended to rule out studies; instead, it aimed to provide a thoughtful examination of the current body of literature's strengths and weaknesses, which would then inform the critical summary in the analysis section that followed.

RESULTS

The main studies that comprise this review are summarized in this section, which presents the results of the comprehensive analysis. First, the results give a detailed picture of the academic world. Then, they provide a theme summary that delves deeper into the main ideas in the study, exploring the gap between diversity talk and genuine inclusion in HRM.

Descriptive Analysis

The detailed analysis provides a comprehensive overview of the patterns in publications, research methods, and geographical areas that comprise this important field of study.

Publication Trends and Journal Distribution

Critiques of the gap between diversity policies and their implementation have evolved from early criticisms to a substantial body of writing. Based on our research, a significant number of factual and theoretical articles have been written about this "implementation gap" over the last fifteen years. The material is presented in a wide range of high-impact, peer-reviewed papers, which demonstrates it importance across various disciplines. Human Relations, the Academy of Management Review, Gender, Work & Organisation, and the Journal of Management Studies are among the most important outlets for reading about this topic. They examine it through the lens of critical management, organisational theory, and industrial relations.

Geographical and Methodological Focus

According to geography, most scientific studies have taken place in Western, developed economies. For example, much of the research originated from the UK, the US,

and other European countries. This shows how important it is to study in Asian, African, Latin American, and non-Western organisation settings.

Methodologically, the field is marked by a strong influence of conceptual and qualitative methods. There is a significant amount of writing that employs qualitative methods, such as in-depth case studies and critical discourse analysis of business strategies (Zanoni et al., 2010). Surveys are often used in quantitative studies to determine how employees perceive the diversity environment and its impact it their work (e.g., McKay & Avery, 2015). Conceptual studies, like Janssens & Steyaert's (2019), have helped us think about how splitting works in diversity management. This shows that strong mixed-methods research is still needed.

Table 1. Descriptive Summary of Included Studies

Characteristic	Categories	Number of Studies	Percentage
Methodology	Qualitative	14	56%
	Quantitative	8	32%
	Conceptual/ Theoretical	3	12%
Geographical Context	Anglo-Saxon (US, UK, Canada, Australia)	13	52%
	European	7	28%
	Multiple/ Comparative	2	8%

Thematic Analysis

The iterative coding and synthesis of the literature revealed three dominant, interlocking themes: (1) The Architecture of Symbolic Communication, (2) The Decoupling of HR Systems, and (3) The Experiential Consequences and Employee Agency.

- *Theme 1: The Architecture of Symbolic Communication*

This theme describes the symbolic and verbal methods that organisations use. One important finding is that the "business case" for diversity is used strategically, but it is viewed primarily as a means to gain a competitive edge and generate new ideas, rather than as a moral or socially right approach (Zanoni et al., 2010). This approach is often accompanied by vague, idealistic language about "belonging" and "inclusion" that is intentionally difficult to quantify. Studies also show that visual symbols, such as depicting diverse workers in employment materials, are very common. These serve as a sign of

loyalty, but they are often separated from real internal change (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2013).

- *Theme 2: The Decoupling of HR Systems*

Instead of just discussing it, this theme examines how the disparity between policy and practice is illustrated in everyday HRM tasks. The combination shows that symbolic execution is more than just not having any programs; it's also a way of organising things. Some important signs are:

✓ *Advertising and Hiring:* Businesses often employ "diversity branding" to attract top talent, but they also perpetuate unconscious biases and hiring practices that perpetuate the status quo (Atewologun et al., 2016).

✓ *Training and Development:* Diversity training is often conducted as a one-time event for show, to protect the organisation from accusations of silence, without actually changing the power structures at play. This has been referred to as a "quick fix" (Noon, 2018).

✓ *Accountability and Metrics:* A major problem identified in many studies is that managers are not held accountable for the results of their inclusion efforts. Kalev et al. (2006) suggest that diversity policies are largely ineffective without clear measures that are directly linked to performance reviews.

- *Theme 3: The Experiential Consequences and Employee Agency*

The third theme discusses the long-term effects of symbolic diversity practices, highlighting how unfavorable outcomes for employees can lead to acts of pushback and ultimately undermine simple organisational solutions. When workers perceive a significant disparity between the company's claims about inclusivity and their actual experiences, it leads to negative mental and behavioral effects, such as widespread cynicism, emotional exhaustion, and a loss of trust in leadership (Leslie, 2019). This burden is unfairly shared, falling most heavily on workers from disadvantaged groups. These empty actions don't feel like support to them, but rather as a form of psychological invalidation that makes "identity strain" and "stereotype threat" more intense (Roberson, 2019). A body of research demonstrates how workers effectively utilize the company's stated values to challenge staged actions (Creed et al., 2020). This is in reaction to what they see as a lack of truthfulness. However, this kind of lobbying isn't always effective; it depends on a particularly supportive environment, as a lack of it often leads to psychological detachment

and the loss of effort that could have been used elsewhere. People who work on programs intended to fix problems often end up making things worse. For example, diversity training is often referred to as a "technocratic approach" that fails to effect meaningful change when employed as a quick fix without examining the underlying power structures (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021).

Table 2. Thematic Framework of Diversity Rhetoric and Inauthentic Inclusion in HRM

Core Theme	Key Concepts	Representative Citations
Architecture of Symbolic Communication	The Business Case, Aspirational Language, Visual Symbolism	Zanoni et al. (2010); Ashikali & Groeneveld (2013)
Decoupling of HR Systems	Diversity Branding, Training as "Quick Fix," Lack of Accountability	Atewologun et al. (2016); Noon (2018); Kalev et al. (2006)
Experiential Consequences & Employee Agency	Cynicism & Emotional Exhaustion, Identity Strain & Stereotype Threat, Micro-resistance and Voice, Technocratic Failure	Leslie (2019); Roberson (2019); Creed et al. (2022); Dobbin & Kalev (2022)

DISCUSSION

The goal of this comprehensive literature review was to synthesize and evaluate the expanding body of research on the disparity between diversity rhetoric and genuine inclusion in HRM. This is commonly known as "rainbow washing." The results show that there is a field trying to figure out how symbolic corporate communication, disconnected HR practices, and their profound effects on people and organisations all work together. This talk combines these results, explains their implications, and outlines the path for future research and practical applications.

This review of the data repeatedly shows that rainbow washing is not a single act but a widespread process of giving symbols legitimacy (Boiral, 2007). Institutional pressure on organisations to look morally advanced leads them to separate their outward messaging from their internal working practices (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017). The thematic analysis shows a clear path: it starts with the strategic use of cheap and ineffective language (Zanoni et al., 2010), which is then put into practice through HR systems that are made for compliance rather than cultural transformation (Kalev et al., 2006), which has big human costs, especially for employees who are already on the outside (Roberson, 2019).

Although there is increasing evidence, significant gaps remain. First, there is a clear lack of culture and regional diversity. Most studies have been done in Anglo-Saxon and Western European settings. This makes it more challenging for us to determine how rainbow cleaning appears in regions such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where laws, institutions, and cultures differ. Second, there is a significant methodological gap; most of the work in this area is qualitative or critical theoretical, but there are few quantitative, longitudinal, or mixed-methods studies that can test the causal relationships between symbolic actions and specific organisational outcomes. Third, there has been limited research on the role of middle managers as key players who can either amplify or mitigate the effects of corporate speech. This is because they are stuck between strategic directions and the realities of working as a field employee.

The main study questions are directly answered in this review. In response to RQ1 (key conceptual themes), the literature review has been organized into a logical framework based on three main ideas: symbolic communication, disconnected HR systems, and experiential effects. The combination shows that institutional forces and the importance of the business case are the main causes of RQ2 (antecedents and consequences). The consequences range from organisational pessimism to identity strain for individuals. Regarding RQ3 (methodological techniques), it is evident that the field relies on critical and qualitative methods, which highlights the need for a broader range of methods.

The main theoretical addition of this review is the Integrated Model of Symbolic Inclusion. This model suggests that rainbow washing is a continuous loop that perpetuates itself. Symbolic communication leads to HR practices that aren't connected to each other, which in turn creates bad experiences for employees that hurt trust even more and support the negativity that makes real change hard. This model combines Institutional Theory with Social Identity Theory. It states that failing to meet identity-based needs through real action triggers a feedback loop that perpetuates the cycle of symbolic commitment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). It takes the talk from naming the problem to describing how it affects the whole system.

The review's results have important effects for practice and make it clear how to move from criticism to positive action.

- *For HR professionals and business leaders:* stop talking about "diversity branding" and start talking about "inclusion auditing." This involves conducting thorough, open audits of HR

systems that encompass data on hiring and promotions, pay equity, and employee satisfaction, in order to identify and address gaps between policy and actual outcomes. Clear, measurable DEI goals should be linked to senior pay and performance reports, ensuring leaders are held accountable (Kulik, 2014).

- *For policymakers and investors:* Develop and implement clear guidelines for how companies should report on DEI. This includes more than just number data. It also includes measurements on aspects such as pay fairness, leadership diversity, and the environment for inclusion. Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) models can help investors scrutinise and invest in businesses that show real, not just symbolic, inclusion practices.
- *For Teachers and Consultants:* Instead of merely teaching the "business case" for diversity, business schools and consulting firms should examine the ethics of authenticity more closely and equip future leaders with the tools they need to effect real change. This includes learning how to deal with change, being an open leader, and identifying and addressing issues with disconnected systems.

Finally, the business world has become adept at using inclusive language, but this review highlights the importance it matching words with actions promptly. Rainbow washing costs money by eroding trust, making people less happy, and perpetuating injustice. This review consolidates all the existing evidence. It gives experts a base to build on and makes it clear to practitioners what they need to do to make inclusion more real and meaningful.

CONCLUSION

This careful study of the literature has carefully mapped out the tricky and important area of "rainbow washing" in the field of Human Resource Management. This study extends beyond personal reports by compiling a body of research from various fields. It does this to build a strong, evidence-based knowledge of how organisations have a staged gap between their diversity language and their actual inclusion practices. The study shows that this isn't just a problem with communication; it's a fundamental organisational process marked by strategic separation caused by pressures from institutions to be seen as legitimate.

The main points of this review come together to form a cohesive narrative. We've found that rainbow washing is built around certain ways of talking, such as downplaying the importance of diversity and using passive-aggressive language to convey the impression of dedication. These symbolic messages are put into action through disconnected HR systems in areas like hiring, training, and holding people accountable. Policies are in place for show, but they don't have the power to truly include everyone. Ultimately, this rhetoric-reality gap has significant effects on individuals. It leads to organisational cynicism and, worst of all, it puts a lot of psychological stress and "identity strain" on the employees that these programs are supposed to help, which leads to micro-resistance and disengagement.

This work is important in two ways. Its main theoretical contribution is the creation of an Integrated Model of Symbolic Inclusion, which combines Institutional and Social Identity Theories to demonstrate how rainbow washing perpetuates itself in a loop. This model lays the groundwork for future studies that will test the connections between symbolic acts, how employees make sense of things, and the results of the organisation. In real life, this review serves as both an important diagnostic tool and a call to action. It provides HR professionals, business leaders, and lawmakers with a clear understanding of the signs of fake practice, emphasizing the importance it transitioning from "performative allyship" to "substantive, accountable, and impactful inclusion" from both an ethical and practical perspective. To truly have equal rights at work, we need to go beyond the rainbow image and undertake the challenging task of transforming the entire system.

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