

# (Un)transparently Communicating Diversity, Equality, Equity, and Inclusion in the Car Transportation Sector

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## Abstract

The rise of social movements (#MeToo, LGBTQIA+ activism, Black Lives Matter) has influenced corporate practices and communication about diversity, equality, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The increasing demand for transparency (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016) and socially responsible behaviour has led to the publication of disclosures including this type of information, such as CSR and ESG reports and DEI web sections (Point & Singh, 2003). However, little research has examined the discursive construction of DEI (e.g., Malavasi 2023) and whether it is communicated transparently. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining a corpus of 2020-2023 CSR/ESG reports and web sections, written in English by American international companies operating in the sectors of car rental and ride-sharing. The dataset is investigated using the tools of corpus-assisted discourse studies (Partington et al. 2013): the analysis of the lexical keywords and normalised frequencies of DEI related terms sheds light on the most and least represented aspects of DEI; the close reading of their extended concordance lines aims to identify their lexico-phraseological patterns (Sinclair 2004), to reveal the linguistic choices employed by the companies to discursively construct and (un)transparently communicate about DEI. Multimodal resources, such as images, are also examined to assess if their choice supports the linguistic findings.

**Keywords:** CSR/ESG, DEI, Transparency, Corpus-assisted discourse studies, Images, Car transportation

## 1. Introduction

In the field of corporate communication and management, Diversity, Equality, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) have gained significant importance over the past two decades, largely in response to social movements such as #MeToo, LGBTQIA+ activism, and Black Lives

Matter. These movements have influenced how companies conduct business and shape their communication strategies, increasing awareness of the need to demonstrate socially responsible behaviour. This is reflected in the publication of corporate documents disclosing information on these issues (Point & Singh, 2003). These include Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports, Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) reports, Annual Reports, Modern Slavery Statements, Diversity Statements, and dedicated web sections, such as About-Us Sections, Mission Statements, and People & Communities.

However, academic research, particularly in management studies (e.g., Oswick & Noon, 2014), explains that discussions on diversity management began in the 1990s. Over time, inclusion emerged as an approach aimed at ensuring the effective and efficient management of diversity. Subsequent studies have focused on the reasons that drive companies to adopt specific strategies to promote inclusion, equality, and equitable treatment for all employees, regardless of their differences (e.g., Singh & Point, 2004; Ravazzani, 2016).

In linguistics, while most studies have focused on aspects such as the discursive construction of trust (e.g., Fuoli, 2018; Bondi & Nocella, 2023) and themes such as sustainability (e.g., Lischinsky, 2015; Fuoli & Beelitz, 2023), in recent years there has been growing interest in how companies communicate their approach to DEI (Malavasi, 2023; Nocella, 2023; Turnbull, 2023; Cifalinò & Catuli, 2024; Zaua, 2024a). However, scarce attention has been given to whether this kind of information is communicated transparently or vaguely, despite the importance for enterprises to be transparent in disclosing information relevant to CSR to positively shape stakeholders' perceptions (Kim & Lee, 2018). Furthermore, multimodal elements, such as images, play an increasingly significant role in shaping DEI narratives, yet the interplay between textual and visual elements in corporate DEI communication is still poorly explored.

This study attempts to address these gaps by conducting a corpus-assisted discourse and multimodal analysis of CSR/ESG reports and DEI web sections from leading North American companies in the car rental and ride-sharing sectors. These industries were chosen due to their global reach and highly diverse workforce, which make DEI a particularly relevant aspect of their corporate communication: as car rental services are increasingly viewed as a sustainable option in tourism (Nhamo et al., 2020) and ride-sharing is chosen for its affordability and flexibility (Rabbitt & Ghosh, 2013), both sectors “have established themselves globally, opening stations and locating riders worldwide”, leading to “the involvement and interconnection of diverse communities of customers and employees” (Zaua, 2024a, p. 28). This provides a suitable context for examining how companies construct and communicate their DEI commitment, both linguistically and visually.

In terms of the structure of this paper, Section 2 briefly reviews the studies on CSR communication and DEI, both from a management and linguistic perspective, and also discusses the notion of transparency and vague language. Section 3 illustrates the research questions (Sub-section 3.1), the dataset (Sub-section 3.2), and explains the methodological procedures (Sub-section 3.3) adopted to address the research questions. Section 4 presents the

main quantitative (Sub-section 4.1) and qualitative (Sub-section 4.2) results of the research, and Section 5 makes some concluding remarks and provides suggestions for further research.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 CSR and DEI: A Management Perspective

While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), it is generally understood as the incorporation of environmental, social, and economic concerns into a company's strategies and operations (e.g., Carroll, 1979; Dahlsrud, 2008). Since the 20th century, CSR communication has developed significantly, encompassing various genres – including CSR reports, press releases, and corporate websites – in which companies show their ethically and socially responsible behaviour. More specifically, CSR reports outline corporate policies and practices related to social issues, targeting key stakeholders like investors, employees, and customers (Breeze, 2012). In recent years, many companies have shifted from CSR to ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) reporting, reflecting a transition from a philosophical focus on responsibility to a more quantifiable approach that incorporates measurable sustainability practices, although both CSR and ESG reports primarily address social issues and ethical practices.

This growing emphasis on corporate responsibility has become even stronger with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has sharpened already existing social inequalities (Zaupa, 2024c, p. 335). The growth and birth of social movements such as women's rights advocacy, LGBTQIA+ activism, and Black Lives Matter, has encouraged companies to reconsider their business practices and communication strategies in relation to Diversity, Equality/Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). As a result, businesses have increasingly sought to demonstrate their commitment to these topics through various forms of corporate disclosure, including CSR and ESG reports, Modern Slavery Statements, Diversity Statements, and dedicated web sections such as About Us pages, Mission Statements, and People & Communities sections.

Studies on DEI in CSR have been conducted mainly from a management perspective. In this field, *diversity* is understood as recognizing that differences – such as age, ethnicity, biological sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, disabilities, learning disorders, and religious beliefs (Litvin, 1997) – are valuable assets. *Inclusion* is defined as “an individual's sense of belongingness, uniqueness, and empowerment” (Wolfgruber et al., 2022, p. 1844), and encompasses the various measures enacted to support, empower, and enable employees with diverse backgrounds to cooperate effectively and contribute to a company's growth. Despite the apparent similarity between *equality* and *equity*, the two terms have been defined differently: for studies across various disciplines, including law, politics, and economics, *equality* means that “all individuals should have the same chances and opportunities” (Neugebauer 2021, p. 293); on the other hand, the notion of *equity* is associated with the allocation of different resources or opportunities according to the different backgrounds or needs (Minow 2021, p. 180) to create equal opportunities.

In management studies, numerous contributions have categorised the different strategies adopted for managing diversity in companies. One example is the study conducted by Singh and Point (2004) on web-based diversity promotion in a sample of European companies, in which they identified six stages of diversity management:

1) *Invisible Stage*: companies in this category do not mention diversity or equal opportunities in their corporate materials or websites; there is little to no recognition of diversity-related issues in their organisational discourse.

2) *Avoid Discrimination Stage*: companies at this stage acknowledge anti-discrimination principles, often as a compliance measure, but do not actively engage in diversity management; their focus is on legal obligations rather than proactive diversity initiatives.

3) *Equal Opportunities Stage*: at this level, organisations commit to ensuring equal opportunities for all employees, emphasising fairness and non-discrimination, although they do not necessarily promote diversity as a strategic advantage.

4) *Respect for Individual/Capabilities Stage*: companies recognise and value individual differences and express their commitment to the creation of an inclusive work environment; they may adopt policies that promote respect for diverse backgrounds and capabilities.

5) *Diversity Management Stage*: this stage consists in a structured approach to diversity management, where companies not only acknowledge diversity but implement policies to foster it. However, organisations in this category may still lack a clear business rationale for their diversity strategies.

6) *Diversity as Competitive Advantage Stage*: this is the most advanced stage, in which diversity is integrated into business strategy; companies recognise diversity as a driver of innovation, market expansion, and competitive advantage, and they actively implement and manage diversity initiatives with a clear understanding of their benefits.

Another significant contribution is Ravazzani's (2015) investigation of diversity management in Italy, from which she illustrated three key approaches that companies have adopted to address diversity. The first, namely the *assimilating minorities* approach, aims to guarantee equal opportunities for historically underrepresented groups, as well as for individuals with legally protected statuses. According to the second approach, i.e., the *integrating diversity* approach,

“diversity is acknowledged as a reality inside and outside organisations, and companies adopt voluntarily actions to address social expectations, [including] the expansion of the recruitment pool, training and communication” (p. 157).

Finally, the *leveraging variety* approach focuses on gaining an edge by exploiting employees' diverse skills and knowledge. This strategy involves actions such as creating diverse teams and encouraging collaboration to enhance organisational learning. It is supported by a structured plan, allocation of financial resources, and a company-wide management framework. The key benefits include greater innovation and the expansion into new markets.

## 2.2 CSR and DEI: A Linguistic Perspective

Very recently, also linguists and discourse analysts, including those using the tools of corpus-assisted discourse studies (Partington et al., 2013) have turned their attention to DEI communication within corporate social responsibility, examining it across various channels, including CSR/ESG reports (Malavasi, 2023; Nocella, 2023; Zaupa, 2024a) and social media (Cifalinò & Catuli, 2024).

Malavasi (2023) carried out a corpus-based diachronic study focused on the discursive construction of DEI in sections titled “Our People,” “Our Values,” and “Corporate Governance” within 2015 and 2020 CSR reports, integrated reports, and sustainability summaries from nine companies operating in USA, UK, and Japan. The study confirms that DEI has become a fundamental aspect of CSR communication across industries and regions. However, notable differences emerge in how companies from the USA, UK, and Japan present these issues. Enterprises in the USA dedicate extensive sections of their CSR reports to DEI, emphasising programmes, initiatives, and concrete actions aimed at fostering diversity, with a strong focus on racial and gender representation. Their disclosures frequently highlight inclusion efforts targeted at specific groups, such as women, Black communities, and LGBTQ+ individuals. British companies, by contrast, tend to adopt a more performance-driven approach, focusing on measurable progress in workplace inclusion and diversity goals. Their reports emphasise corporate commitments and achievements, often supported by statistical evidence. Japanese firms place greater emphasis on corporate values and long-term commitment, promoting unity, respect, and social harmony. Across all three geographical areas, the linguistic analysis reveals a reliance on standardised, formulaic expressions and lexico-phraseological units that reinforce corporate responsibility, such as *commitment to* and *support for*.

Using the same methodological procedures, Nocella (2023) investigated a corpus of CSR reports of transportation companies focusing on the representation of employees. Her analysis revealed an increasing interest in employee engagement, diversity, inclusion, well-being, and professional development, with a wider range of terminology reflecting growing attention to minority groups, including LGBTQI+ communities. Mental health and well-being have gained visibility, particularly in North America and Europe, likely influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, while in Asia, these themes have remained stable over time but are primarily framed within a happiness and workplace well-being narrative. Furthermore, while North American and European companies increasingly emphasise gender equality and female empowerment, Asian firms place greater importance on family-oriented values within their corporate culture. In the field of transport, Zaupa (2024a) also explored, through a synchronic approach, the discursive constructions of *equality* and *equity* in 2022 reports of companies operating in the car rental and ride-sharing sectors. He found that equity is preferred over equality, reflecting a shift toward action-oriented discourse. Equity is frequently linked to corporate policies, while equality occurs less often, is typically used in more abstract terms, and is framed as a broader social aspiration with less strategic focus.



Finally, similarly to Malavasi (2023), Cifalinò and Catuli (2024) analysed a varied dataset comprising 2018-2022 reports but extended their study to include posts published by companies on the social media platform X, aiming to shed light on the similarities and differences between the two communication channels in the discursive construction of diversity. They found that companies consistently represent diversity in a positive light, linking it to corporate progress and sustainable growth. However, diversity is often framed passively, with expressions such as *diversity is something to foster or embrace*, suggesting that it is viewed as an external goal rather than an active force shaping corporate practices. While some instances frame diversity as a force for change, it is more often represented as a symbolic value rather than a driving factor in corporate decision-making. A comparison between CSR reports and Twitter further highlights differences in how diversity is communicated. More specifically, X, compared to the reports, presents a more dynamic and interactive style, engaging stakeholders through storytelling, advocacy, and awareness campaigns. This suggests that while reports reinforce corporate commitments, social media allows for a more immediate and engaging approach to diversity communication.

### 2.3 Transparency and Vagueness in CSR

Simply stating an organisation's commitment to CSR-related issues, including DEI in this context, is not sufficient to maintain a positive reputation with stakeholders. Effective communication on these issues also requires that related information is communicated transparently. Transparency goes beyond openly sharing information – it must be complete, clear, accurate (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016), easily accessible, and free from vague language (Turilli & Floridi, 2009). Transparent disclosures and practices contribute to stakeholders' trust in a company's commitment to shared values (Kim & Lee, 2018), whereas providing false, misleading, or incomplete information can challenge its credibility (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004). However, communicative transparency is determined not only by the writer's intentions but also by how recipients perceive the message. Since the degree of transparency is subject to interpretation, identifying linguistic choices that convey transparency can be challenging. In this regard, vague linguistic choices may represent indicators of non-transparent communication.

Studies in linguistics and pragmatics have proposed different definitions of vague language, describing it as either intentionally ambiguous or imprecise (Channell, 1994) or as having an inherently undefined or underspecified meaning depending on the context in which it appears (Cheng & Warren, 2003). In her study of academic and economic discourse, Channell (1994) classified vague linguistic expressions into three main categories: vague nouns (e.g., *things*, *stuff*), vague categories (e.g., *stuff like that*, *or something like that*), and vague approximators (e.g., *about*, *around*). Linguists examining vagueness in different contexts, such as professional communication (e.g., Koester, 2007) and spoken interactions (e.g., O'Keeffe & Cheng, 2015), have largely followed these classifications. They have also identified key functions of vague language, which include making social interactions more informal, indirect, and natural (e.g., McCarthy, 1998); mitigating impoliteness and face-threatening exchanges (e.g., Carter, 1998); and adapt the amount of information provided to the context (Koester, 2007, p. 44). Many studies attribute the use of vague language to shared prior

knowledge between the speaker and the listener, enabling implicit understanding without requiring precise wording. However, in situations where interlocutors do not have the same level of background knowledge, imprecise language can lead to a lack of transparency.

In the context of CSR communication, Jin (2022) examined CSR reports from the cosmetics industry and identified several types of vague linguistic expressions. These included vague references to quantity, time and frequency, degree, and stance-softening strategies. Terms related to quantity, such as *more than*, *many*, *various*, and *some*, are frequently used to avoid disclosing exact numerical values (p. 85). Similarly, vague expressions related to time and frequency, such as *early*, *recent*, *often*, *by the end of*, and *always*, appear when precise temporal details are not provided (p. 90). Words indicating degree, such as *important*, *well*, *significant*, *better*, *appropriate*, *effective*, and *good*, help companies present their practices in a positive light, even in the absence of concrete data measuring actual improvements (pp. 88–89). Additionally, stance-softening expressions, including perspective-taking verbs (e.g., *suggest*, *think*) and possibility markers (e.g., *possible*, *may*), allow flexibility in communication, leaving room for negotiation in case of unexpected developments or negative feedback (p. 92). Jin also pointed out that while vague language can signal a lack of transparency, it can also serve strategic purposes, such as adjusting the level of disclosed information, fostering solidarity, enhancing persuasion, and protecting the company's image (p. 77).

### 3. Research Questions, Data and Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Gaps and Questions

Despite the growing interest in the linguistic-discursive construction of DEI concepts in corporate social responsibility, to the best of my knowledge, there is still a paucity of studies specifically focusing on the transparent or vague communication of these topics, as well as on interplay between text and images in genres of CSR communication. In light of these gaps, this study aims to address the following research questions:

- RQ1: Which DEI aspects are most represented in the car rental and ride-sharing sectors?
- RQ2: How are DEI-related issues discursively constructed and communicated?
- RQ3: Which linguistic strategies are employed by companies to (un)transparently disclose information about DEI practices and initiatives, as well as the specific management approach to DEI?
- RQ4: Do multimodal resources, such as images, contribute to the linguistic expression of companies' approach to DEI?
- RQ5: Is it possible to find similarities or differences between reports and web sections, and across sub-sectors?

### 3.2 Data

This study is based on the DEI Car Rental and Sharing Corpus (henceforth, DEI CarRS corpus), which comprises English-language social sections of non-financial reports, whose financial results refer to the period 2020-23, and DEI web pages published by major North American companies in the car rental and ride-sharing industries. For the car rental sector, *Avis Budget Group*, *Enterprise Mobility*, and *Hertz* were selected, as they are among the largest car rental companies in the United States. Similarly, *Lyft* and *Uber* were chosen for the ride-sharing sector. The corpus was subdivided into two sub-corpora corresponding to the specific sub-sectors, namely the *Rental* and *Sharing* sub-corpora. For each of these two sub-corpora, a further subdivision was made between the texts from the reports and those from the web pages. As a result, the final corpus is structured into four sub-corpora: the *Reports Rental* sub-corpus (36,822 tokens); the *Reports Sharing* sub-corpus (53,281 tokens); the *Web page Rental* sub-corpus (1,145 tokens); the *Web page Sharing* sub-corpus (984 tokens). Given the complementary focus of this study on multimodal resources, images integrated into the texts were screenshotted and collected in a separate visual corpus, which contains a total of 168 images.

### 3.3 Methodology

#### 3.3.1 Linguistic Analysis

The dataset was first linguistically investigated by adopting a synchronic corpus-assisted approach (Baker, 2006; Partington et al., 2013; Marchi & Taylor, 2018), and this level of analysis involved two phases, quantitative and qualitative.

The quantitative phase was primarily conducted to identify the DEI aspects most frequently addressed within the two sub-sectors. More specifically, it began with the extraction and examination of the lexical keywords, as they highlight salient discourses and key topics within a corpus, due to their nature of unusually frequent words in a corpus compared to another corpus of larger or equal size (Baker et al., 2006). For this study, lexical keywords were generated using AntConc 4.2.0 (Anthony, 2022), comparing car rental and ride-sharing sub-corpora against each other. To complement the inquiry into the most salient DEI topics across sub-corpora, normalised frequencies (per 1,000 words) of DEI-related words were generated and observed.

The final step of the quantitative phase consisted in calculating the keywords' collocations, as identifying recurring lexical patterns around specific objects, people, or concepts may unveil "the most salient and obvious lexical patterns surrounding [them], from which a number of discourses can be obtained" (Baker, 2006, p. 114). Specifically, this phase made it possible to preliminarily observe the most recurring discursive associations around DEI keywords referring to company employees. Collocations were generated using a 5L-5R span of co-text and setting the minimum frequency at five occurrences. Non-relevant collocates, such as words appearing repeatedly in section titles or project names, were excluded (Alessi & Partington, 2000; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008).



The qualitative phase focused on the extended concordance analysis of the keywords' collocations and the DEI words from the frequency lists, to explore the most typical lexico-phraseological patterns (Sinclair, 2003, 2004) used to communicate the companies' approach to DEI. A 10L-10R span of co-text was considered, but manual close reading of larger textual portions was conducted when patterns identified through AntConc software were not immediately clear. The first aim of this analysis was to explore the linguistic-discursive strategies used by companies to construct and communicate DEI to their stakeholders. Based on these findings, it was possible to identify their prevalent management strategy to address DEI, relying on the categories proposed by Singh and Point (2004) and Ravazzani (2015). In this respect, given the companies' holistic approach to DEI highlighted in previous studies, it was decided to extend their diversity stages and strategies to DEI in general. In more detail, the revisited categories are specified below.

- *Invisible DEI*, namely the non-commitment to DEI.
- *Assimilating DEI*: this strategy may be suggested by the reliance on the stages *avoid discrimination*, *equal opportunities*, and *respect for DEI*;
- *Integrating DEI*: this strategy may be supported by the reference to the stage *DEI management*, which may be suggested by the reporting of DEI support and its value;
- *Leveraging DEI*: this strategy may be signalled by the reference to the stage *DEI as competitive*.

These new categories were applied in the linguistic qualitative analysis to investigate how different DEI management stages and strategies are realised linguistically and vice versa.

The second aim was to assess whether information about DEI was disclosed in a transparent or vague manner. This aspect was explored by identifying linguistic expressions that suggest completeness, accuracy, and understandability (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016), as well as those that convey vagueness. For this last aspect, I relied on Jin's (2022) categories of vague language, but I also considered the possible presence of words with generic meanings and quality assessment expressions (see, e.g., Zupa, 2024b, p. 176). However, no attempt was made to quantify linguistic-communicative strategies, as these forms occur in variable ways, making it impractical to isolate them – attempting to do so would have meant “counting the uncountable” (Hunston, 2004).

### 3.3.2 Visual Analysis

A second level of analysis examined the images integrated with the texts to assess whether their choice supports the linguistic findings. This phase was conducted through an ad-hoc readaptation of Van Leeuwen's (2008, pp. 141, 147) framework for the visual representation of social actors, which is exemplified below (Figure 1).

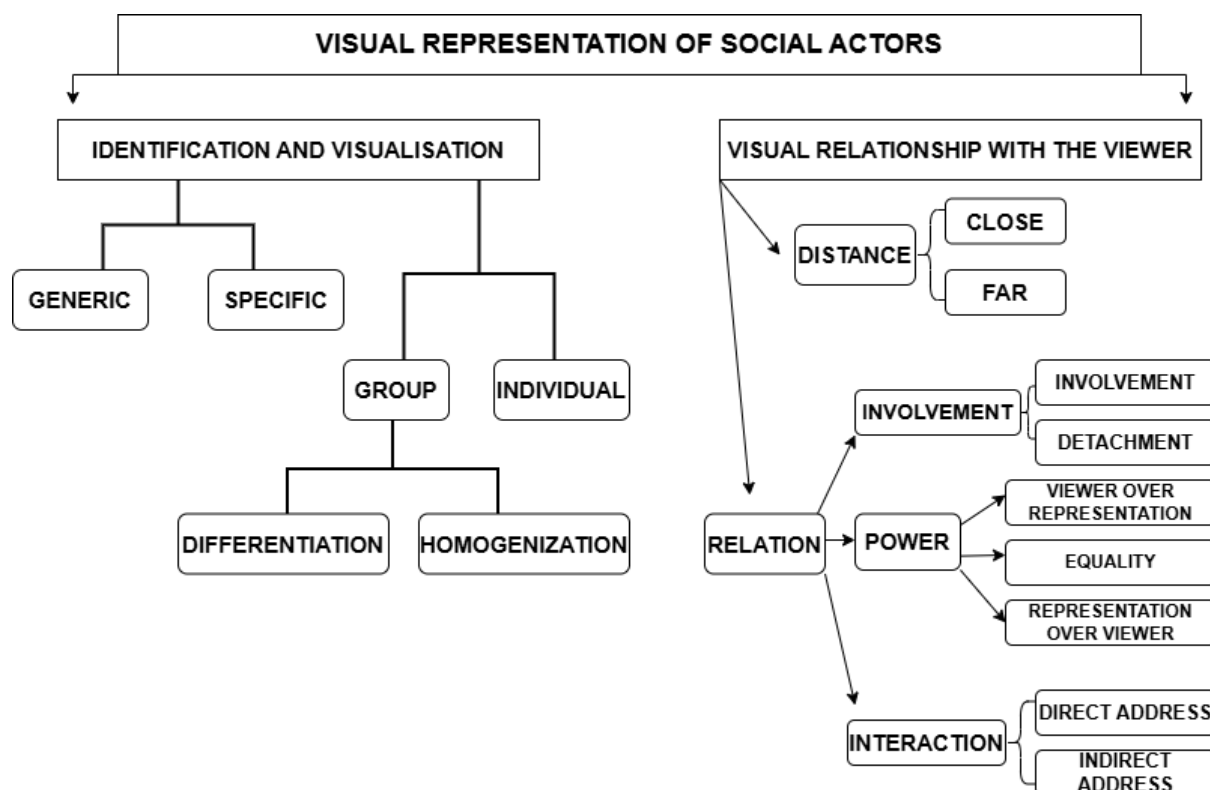


Figure 1. Visual analysis readapted from Van Leeuwen (2008, pp. 141, 147)

As outlined in the framework above, the visual analysis was conducted on two levels. The first was aimed at identifying which social actors are included and how they are visually presented to the viewer. This level considers two categories from Van Leeuwen's model, namely *specific* vs. *generic* social actors and *individual* vs. *group* representation. The former refers to whether individuals are represented with identifiable traits (e.g., physical characteristics indicative of specific ethnic backgrounds) that allow them to be recognised as members of a particular social group, or as generic, decontextualised subjects whose identity remains undefined in the image. With regard to the latter, social actors may be represented individually or within groups. In group representations, two other sub-strategies may be distinguished: the first is *differentiation*, according to which individuals, despite being represented in interaction with others, present specific traits that are indicative of their identity group; the second is *homogenization*, whereby a multitude of individuals – despite showing some visible differences (e.g., geographic origin) – is represented as a unified collective actor, making it difficult to recognise their individual identity features.

The second level of analysis was conducted to interpret the visual relationships constructed with the viewer, drawing on the categories of *distance* and *relation*. The former examines how the spatial proximity of the represented subjects to the viewer creates a specific relationship with addressees: a *close* distance implies intimacy and engagement, whereas a *far* distance suggests detachment. The latter category is divided into three sub-categories, namely *involvement*, *power*, and *interaction*. *Involvement* and *power* are conveyed through

the angle of the image. According to the first sub-category, a frontal angle suggests *involvement*, while an oblique angle may imply *detachment*. As for *power*, a high angle suggests that the viewer has power over the represented actor, and vice versa for a low angle; an eye-level angle implies equality between them. Finally, *interaction* with the viewer is conveyed through the presence or absence of direct gaze. In a direct address, i.e. when the represented social actors look at the viewer, a visual connection is created between them. Conversely, an indirect address, marked by an averted gaze, suggests distance and disengagement.

In relation to the research questions of this study, the second level of analysis served as a tool to examine whether the images reinforce the corporate communicative approach, particularly the company's commitment to its stakeholders. This is suggested by visual strategies that suggest a strong and mutual engagement between the represented social actor and the viewer, such as close distance, involvement, equality, and direct address. As for the complementary investigation of the communicative choices conveying transparency or vagueness, the first level of analysis was conducted to assess whether the use of images reinforces the linguistic findings. According to Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 147), the representation of homogeneous groups tends to downplay the individual characteristics and differences of social actors. In the context of this study on DEI, applying this observation to the analysis of communicative transparency, it may be assumed that such a visual representation strategy, in addition to the use of generic subjects, may contribute to a certain degree of vagueness regarding the measures and policies implemented by the companies to promote the inclusion of specific forms of diversity. Among all the images selected for analysis, visual strategies were quantified only in those representing people. The quantification of the strategies was carried out on the entire corpus and any differences between sub-corpora were observed manually.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Quantitative Results

As suggested in the table below (Table 1), the keyword analysis in the sub-corpora showed that workers are more represented than customers in the report sections. This is evidenced by the keywords *employee(s)*, *career*, *driver(s)* and *rider(s)*. In a similar way, the web sections feature keywords related to workers, including pay, hiring and drivers. Another relevant finding concerns the prominence of keywords referring to ethnic groups – such as Black, Latinx, Asian, and immigrants – which appear more frequently in the ride-sharing sub-corpora than in the car rental sector. This result apparently suggests a more explicit focus on specific ethnic diversities.

Table 1. Lexical keywords in the *DEI CarRS corpus*

Sub-corpora	Lexical keywords and keyness scores
Reports (Rental vs. Sharing)	<i>employees</i> (258.227); <i>customers</i> (119.972); <i>our</i> (90.373); <i>employee</i> (60.583); <i>training</i> (56.708); <i>physical</i> (36.150); <i>opportunity</i> (33.608); <i>emotional</i> (33.352); <i>career</i> (32.122)
Reports (Sharing vs. Rental)	<i>drivers</i> (201.479); <i>riders</i> (138.832); <i>access</i> (114.459); <i>driver</i> (63.844); <i>black</i> (62.956); <i>couriers</i> (62.021); <i>income</i> (52.557); <i>people</i> (49.816); <i>Latinx</i> (39.939); <i>rider</i> (33.632)
Web pages (Rental vs. Sharing)	<i>you</i> (9.950); <i>support</i> (7.458); <i>pay</i> (4.968)
Web pages (Sharing vs. Rental)	<i>allies</i> (15.491); <i>community</i> (10.837); <i>black</i> (4.636); <i>Asian</i> (4.636)

However, the low relative frequencies of DEI-related terms across all sub-corpora, as reported in Table 2, may imply a generally limited engagement with these issues. Nonetheless, a comparatively higher relative frequency is observed in the sub-corpus of web pages, possibly signalling a slightly greater emphasis on DEI topics within this communication channel.

Table 2. Frequencies of DEI words in the *DEI CarRS corpus*

Sub-corpora	Words and normalised frequencies (ptw.)
Reports (Rental)	<i>diversity</i> (2.01); <i>diverse</i> (1.41); <i>equity</i> (1.33); <i>inclusive</i> (1.14); <i>dei</i> (1.00); <i>inclusion</i> (0.92); <i>mental</i> (0.92)
Reports (Sharing)	<i>black</i> (2.03); <i>equity</i> (1.93); <i>diversity</i> (1.43); <i>racial</i> (0.96); <i>income</i> (0.94); <i>rights</i> (0.79); <i>latinx</i> (0.73); <i>dei</i> (0.71); <i>equitable</i> (0.66); <i>asian</i> (0.49); <i>veterans</i> (0.45); <i>african</i> (0.45); <i>military</i> (0.41); <i>race</i> (0.39)
Web pages (Rental)	<i>diversity</i> (7.86); <i>equity</i> (7.86); <i>inclusion</i> (5.24); <i>dei</i> (4.37)
Web pages (Sharing)	<i>allies</i> (10.16); <i>diversity</i> (9.15); <i>inclusion</i> (9.15); <i>diverse</i> (5.08)

The analysis of keywords collocates in the report sub-corpora, as illustrated in the table below (Table 3), reveals the co-occurrence of the words *physical*, *emotional*, *financial*, and *mental* in the car rental sector. This finding suggests that these companies also prioritise the physical and mental health of stakeholders, which is intrinsically linked to their financial stability.

Regarding the ride-sharing sector, similarly to what was observed in the car rental sub-corpus, there is a pronounced tendency for words denoting different ethnic groups to co-occur. This pattern suggests a holistic approach by these companies toward ethnic differences.

Table 3. Keywords' lexical collocates in the reports' sub-corpora of the *DEI CarRS corpus*

Sub-corpus	Keyword	Collocates and Likelihood
Reports (Rental)	<i>employee*</i>	<i>our</i> (91.226); <i>all</i> (25.034); <i>customers</i> (19.591); <i>survey</i> (18.711); <i>passionate</i> (15.490)
	<i>physical</i>	<i>being</i> (105.567); <i>emotional</i> (103.762); <i>well</i> (100.285); <i>financial</i> (90.641); <i>mental</i> (59.318); <i>measures</i> (46.053); <i>physical</i> (41.257); <i>as</i> (18.871)
	<i>emotional</i>	<i>being</i> (123.476); <i>well</i> (111.439); <i>physical</i> (103.762); <i>financial</i> (77.009); <i>mental</i> (50.408); <i>support</i> (26.222); <i>health</i> (16.408)
	<i>opportunity</i>	<i>equal</i> (128.628); <i>employment</i> (34.769); <i>inclusion</i> (28.086); <i>equity</i> (22.663); <i>employer</i> (18.592)
Reports (Sharing)	<i>career</i>	<i>opportunities</i> (34.586); <i>development</i> (26.853); <i>students</i> (26.354); <i>advancement</i> (19.655)
	<i>driver*</i>	<i>couriers</i> (214.038); <i>delivery</i> (142.152); <i>riders</i> (96.203); <i>rider</i> (42.709); <i>people</i> (32.649); <i>courier</i> (24.453); <i>our</i> (20.108); <i>we</i> (17.868); <i>person</i> (16.395)
	<i>rider*</i>	<i>drivers</i> (102.574); <i>driver</i> (32.844); <i>allow</i> (24.434); <i>can</i> (20.047); <i>see</i> (16.787); <i>find</i> (16.555); <i>disability</i> (15.400)
	<i>black</i>	<i>owned</i> (133.685); <i>Latinx</i> (120.574); <i>African</i> (99.748); <i>American</i> (93.025); <i>businesses</i> (86.176); <i>women</i> (46.354); <i>Hispanic</i> (33.829)
	<i>people</i>	<i>delivery</i> (126.223); <i>drivers</i> (45.914); <i>disabilities</i> (44.416); <i>we</i> (20.526); <i>move</i> (18.532)
	<i>Latinx</i>	<i>black</i> (120.574); <i>Hispanic</i> (84.959); <i>women</i> (42.430)



Although these preliminary results suggest a growing interest among companies in these sectors in implementing corporate policies that promote workers' well-being and the inclusion of individuals from diverse ethnic groups, a more comprehensive analysis of these words in their context is necessary. The following sections are aimed at discussing to what extent DEI is promoted and identifying the specific linguistic and discursive strategies employed by the companies to communicate their approach to these issues.

#### 4.2 Qualitative Results: Linguistic Analysis

##### 4.2.1 Well-being

Limited to the sub-corpus of reports of car rental operators, the close reading of the extended concordance lines of the collocates *physical* and *emotional* revealed a strong discursive association between the word *employees* and the concept of well-being. This is supported by a significant number of instances in which these three words frequently co-occur with the collocates *our* and *financial*. In many of these examples, the companies either express their commitment to employees' well-being, as signalled by the expression *we are dedicated to* in (1), or they state the various practices to ensure it, as suggested by the words *programs* and *activities* in (2).

- (1) At Hertz, we are dedicated to the mental, *physical*, *emotional*, and financial well-being of our workforce. Our *employees* are the reason we are able to deliver best-in-class service to our customers. (Hertz – 2022 Sustainability and Impact Report)
- (2) Our Live Well program focuses on helping *our* people achieve all aspects of well-being through habits and activities that promote physical, financial, and emotional well-being. (Avis Budget Group – 2021 ESG Report)

The discourse of well-being that emerges in this sub-corpus is further reinforced by instances of the collocates *survey* and *passionate* referring to the employees' satisfaction regarding the learning opportunities and the working environment, as exemplified in (3) and (4), respectively.

- (3) We also believe that our learning culture encourages self-development and accelerates employee growth in areas about which our *employees* are *passionate*. (Hertz – 2023 Sustainability and Impact Report)
- (4) employees responded to the first *survey* (...) agreeing or strongly agreeing that they would recommend ABG as a Great Place to Work. (Avis Budget Group – 2022 ESG Report).

##### 4.2.2 Employment Opportunities

In both sub-corpora, DEI is discursively linked to workforce recruitment. With regard to the rental sector, this discursive pattern is testified by the numerous instances of the collocates *opportunity* and *career* reporting practices promoting equal employment opportunities for people from diverse groups, as exemplified in (5) and (6).

(5) Hertz is an Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) employer, and we have an Employment and Equal Opportunity Policy (EEO Policy) that governs our actions. (Hertz – 2022 Sustainability and Impact Report)

(6) ERGs provide opportunities for diverse employee groups and their allies to come together and shape a culture of inclusion through networking opportunities, business growth, career development, mentoring, community involvement, and cultural awareness. (Hertz – 2023 Sustainability and Impact Report)

The same discourse pattern was also observed in the sub-corpus containing reports of the ride-sharing sector, as could be explored in the context of most of the keywords collocates reported in Table 3. More precisely, (7) refers to Uber's strategy to hire people from minority groups, (8) is an example of commissive statements, suggested by the presence of the verb *continue* expressing continuity. (9) denotes both corporate positive results in relation to the issue of equal employment.

(7) The Mansfield Rule was fully implemented by June 2021, ensuring that we actively consider women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, *people* with *disabilities*, and underrepresented talent by requiring that a certain percentage of candidates for leadership roles come from historically underrepresented groups (Uber – 2021 ESG report)

(8) We continue to focus on hiring *Black* or *African American* talent and are building more strategic partnerships for sourcing this talent as well as enforcing the Mansfield Rule. (Uber – 2022 ESG Report)

(9) We've also seen progress in the representation of *Black* or *African American* and *Hispanic* or *Latinx* people in leadership roles since 2021 (Uber – 2024 ESG Report)

#### 4.2.3 DEI and Belonging

The examination of the remaining collocates across all sub-corpora and the DEI-related words from Table 2 revealed a tendency for *diversity*, *equality/equity*, and *inclusion* to co-occur collectively, suggesting a holistic corporate approach to DEI. In most instances, the use of commissive statements – signalled by words expressing goals (e.g., *priority* in (10) and (11), and *believe* in (11) and (12)), commitment and effort (e.g., *our commitment to* and *strive* in (11)), and continuity (e.g., *continue* in (13)) – contributes to discursively frame DEI as a core corporate value.

(10) *Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)* is a priority for Enterprise Holdings, and we have further strengthened our commitment in this area in recent years. (Enterprise Mobility – 2022 ESG Report)

(11) At Hertz, we firmly believe that *diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)* are critical components of our sustainability strategy. Our commitment to DEI means striving to create a culture where employees feel valued and respected, and where every person can apply their unique identities and backgrounds to advance the way the world moves. (Hertz – 2023 Sustainability and Impact Report)

(12) There is no Lyft without our team members. They are our greatest strength and most valuable resource. We believe that achieving more visible and invisible *diversity* in workforce representation is an important priority (Lyft – 2022 ESG Report)

(13) We will continue raising the bar for Inclusion and Diversity. (Lyft – Web page)

*Belonging* is another salient discourse in web pages, which emerges from the analysis of the keywords *you* and *allies* in context. This discursive construction is reinforced by the use of dialogic *you*, along with the expressions *feel a sense of belonging* and *people who truly see you* in (14). Additionally, the word *ally* in (15) appears alongside terms referring to diverse ethnic and age groups, gender identities, and sexual orientations, thereby suggesting a shared commitment to DEI values by the communities engaged in corporate life.

(14) As a member of our team, you can expect (...) to feel a sense of belonging amongst a group of people who truly see you. (Avis Budget Group – Web page)

(15) Los Ubers Uber's community for Hispanic and Latinx employees and allies; Parents at Uber Uber's community for parents and caregivers, and allies; Pride at Uber Uber's community for LGBTQ+ and allies; Sages at Uber Uber's community for employees of all generations; Veterans at Uber Uber's community for veterans and allies; Women at Uber Uber's community for women and allies. (Uber – Web page)

#### 4.2.4 General Management Strategies

The linguistic and discursive strategies outlined above, including the use of commissive statements and references to practices aimed at valuing and supporting diversities, predominantly align with the management stage of *DEI Management*, suggesting a prevalent management strategy of *integrating DEI*. An additional indication of this managerial approach is the recurring presence of lexical items belonging to the semantic field of care throughout the corpus, as suggested, for instance, by the use of the verbs *support* and *help* in (16), (17), and the expression *we are dedicated to* in (18).

(16) we remain partners with EatOkra, Operation HOPE, and National Urban League to *support* Black-owned business across the U.S. (Uber – 2023 ESG Report)

(17) In addition to our \$10 million commitment to help Black-owned businesses not only survive but thrive, (...) (Uber – 2021 ESG Report)

(18) At Hertz *we are dedicated to* the mental, physical, emotional and financial well-being of our workforce. (Hertz – 2022 Sustainability and Impact Report)

In general, only a few examples were found to be associated with the stages of *Equal Opportunities*, *Respect for Individual(s)*, and *DEI as Competitive*. The phraseological and lexical patterns that indicate these stages include, respectively, the recurrence of the word *opportunity* in the context of employee recruitment (see examples (5) and (6) above), as well as the expressions *be heard*, *treated with respect*, and *truly see you* in extract (19), which expands on example (14).

- (19) As a member of our team, you can expect to *be heard, treated with respect*, for every one of your ideas to carry real weight, and to feel a sense of belonging amongst a group of people who *truly see you*. (Avis Budget Group – Web page)

Despite their rarity, instances suggesting the *DEI as Competitive* stage and, hence, the strategy *Leveraging DEI* can still be found. In the following examples, employees are discursively represented as an asset to the company, as indicated by the expressions *the reason we are able to* in (20) and *our greatest strength* in (21), which reinforce the motto *there is no Lyft without our team members*.

- (20) At Hertz, we are dedicated to the mental, physical, emotional, and financial well-being of our workforce. Our employees are *the reason we are able to* deliver best-in-class service to our customers. (Hertz – 2022 Sustainability and Impact Report)
- (21) There is no Lyft without our team members. They are our greatest strength and most valuable resource. We believe that achieving more visible and invisible diversity in workforce representation is an important priority (Lyft – 2022 ESG Report)

#### 4.2.5 Transparency vs. Vagueness

Moving on to the final level of the linguistic analysis, namely whether companies communicate their approach to DEI in a transparent or vague way, a few instances with transparent linguistic choices were found. In this respect, the most frequent linguistic resource used that might convey transparency in terms of information accuracy is the use of numbers to refer to employees' satisfaction and recruitment, as exemplified in (22) and (23), respectively.

- (22) Seventy percent of employees responded to the first survey, with 79% of responders agreeing or strongly agreeing that they would recommend ABG as a Great Place to Work. (Avis Budget Group – 2022 ESG Report)
- (23) We've also seen progress in the representation of Black or African American and Hispanic or Latinx people in leadership roles since 2021 (+0.6 percentage points and +0.9 percentage points, respectively) (Uber – 2024 ESG Report).

Few instances were also identified where car rental companies, before outlining their corporate practices in support of DEI and related topics, such as well-being, provide their own definition of these concepts, as exemplified in (24) and (25).

- (24) How does Enterprise Holdings define diversity, equity, and inclusion? We define DEI through three distinct lenses: talent and opportunity, inclusive culture, and community engagement. (Enterprise Mobility – 2022 ESG Report)
- (25) Physical well-being is the ability to get the most out of our daily activities without undue fatigue or physical stress. (Avis Budget Group – 2022 ESG Report)

This linguistic choice could not only help companies contextualise their corporate policies but also make them more accessible to diverse addressees.

However, the analysis also suggested a general lack of transparency in the communication of the companies' DEI practices and policies, as illustrated below in extracts displaying words used with a generic meaning, often co-occurring with quality assessment nouns or adjectives. In (26), for instance, the use of the word *accommodations* with the adjective *reasonable* is vague. Although it is specified that the accommodations are targeted to disabled people, no specific information is provided regarding the features which make them suitable to this specific group.

- (26) We provide *reasonable accommodations* for qualified individuals with disabilities who require such accommodations, as well as for employees who need accommodations due to religious practices. (Hertz – 2023 Sustainability and Impact Report)

In a similar manner, the word *programs* in (27) is vague, as no details are available in relation to activities and initiatives that may qualify the programmes as *robust*.

- (27) Workforce Health and Well-Being Programs: Offering robust programs and engagement to support the mental, physical, emotional, and financial well-being of our workforce. (Hertz – 2022 Sustainability and Impact Report)

Likewise, the use of the quality assessment verbs *strengthen* and *expand* in (28) fails to quantify or specify any prior initiatives targeted at Black-owned businesses and contractors, making it difficult to assess the progress made by the company.

- (28) We're *strengthening* and *expanding* our supplier diversity programmes with the goal of *doubling* spending with Black-owned businesses and contractors and have begun identifying suppliers to partner with. (Uber – 2021 ESG Report)

Additional linguistic items that undermine information transparency include the use of vague expressions related to quantity, as indicated by the word *several* in (29), which expands on (25), and *certain percentage* in (30).

- (29) Physical well-being is the ability to get the most out of our daily activities without undue fatigue or physical stress. We offer *several* ways for employees and their families to become and stay physically healthy. (Avis Budget Group – 2022 ESG Report)

- (30) The Mansfield Rule was fully implemented by June 2021, ensuring that we actively consider women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, people with disabilities, and underrepresented talent by requiring that a *certain percentage* of candidates for leadership roles come from historically underrepresented groups. (Uber – 2021 ESG Report)

In a similar way, in (28) above, the word *doubling* is vague because initial expenses are not specified. Finally, it should be noted that even quantifications do not fully convey transparency. In example (22) above, in fact, the percentage of those who completely disagree that *Avis Budget Group* is a great place to work is not specified.



### 4.3 Visual Analysis

The following graphs show the distribution of the visual representation strategies in the corpus images according to the analytical categories outlined in Sub-section 3.3.2. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the results of the first and second level of visual analysis, respectively.

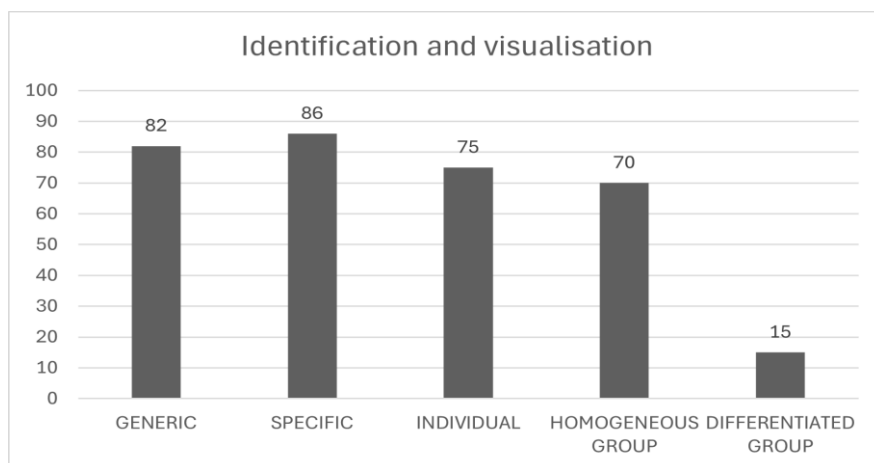


Figure 2. Results from the visual analysis – First level of analysis

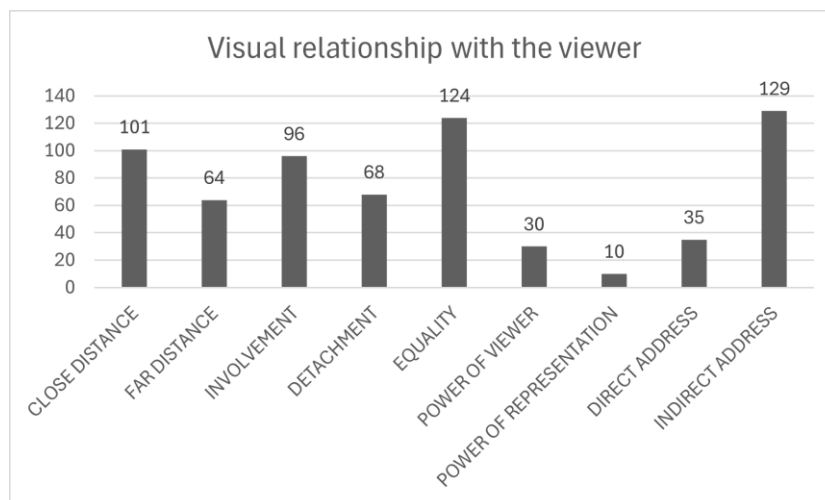


Figure 3. Results from the visual analysis – Second level of analysis

The findings from the first level show a balanced distribution of visual representation strategies across most of the sub-categories. In detail, the images primarily show employees, as well as users benefiting from the services provided by the companies. An equal number of generic images were also present, in which no specific identity traits of the represented subjects could be clearly identified. A noteworthy finding pertaining to individual representations is that the preponderance of these images shows African Americans at workplace (see Image 1), suggesting a degree of corporate awareness of the previously discussed social movements, particularly Black Lives Matter.

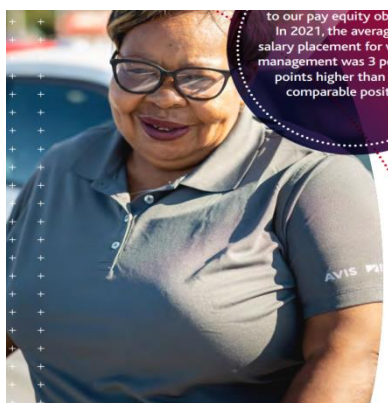


Image 1

Source: Avis Budget Group – 2022 ESG Report

Only in relation to group representations, the strategy of *homogenization* clearly prevails over that of *differentiation*. In most of these images, it was difficult to discern the specific characteristics of the people portrayed (see Images 2 and 3). This type of visual representation largely supports the holistic approach to DEI themes observed in the linguistic analysis, as well as a vague approach to the inclusion of specific diversities.



Image 2

Source: Enterprise Mobility – 2022 ESG Report



Image 3

Source: Lyft – Web page

Moving on to the second level of analysis, most of the represented subjects appear in close proximity to the viewer, both when eye contact is maintained (see Image 4) and when their gaze is directed elsewhere (Image 5).



Image 4

Source: Enterprise Mobility – Web page



Image 5

Source: Uber – 2022 ESG Report

As evidenced in both the second chart and the two images above, the predominant strategies within the sub-categories of *involvement* and *power* are *involvement* and *equality*, respectively.

Despite the predominantly holistic approach to DEI that also emerges from the visual analysis, the examples above suggest a close relationship with the viewer, reinforcing the commitment to diversity and inclusion observed at the linguistic level. Additionally, this direct visual relation with the texts' addressees reinforces the persuasive aim of the companies to convince their stakeholders about their significant DEI efforts.

To sum up, while the second level of visual analysis confirmed that the choice of images supports the communication of corporate commitment to DEI, the findings from the first level – particularly the balanced distribution between generic and specific representation strategies, along with the prevalent use of homogeneous group images – suggest a random selection of images, thereby contributing to the vagueness identified in the linguistic analysis.

Another visual element reinforcing this generic approach to DEI is the scarcity of images featuring people with disabilities, a particularly significant form of diversity in the car transportation sector, given the importance of accessible transport. In this regard, only one image of an Afro-American woman in a wheelchair was found on the web page of Enterprise Mobility (see Image 6), despite the inclusion of disability in the linguistic holistic approach adopted by companies in their DEI commitments.



Image 6

Source: Enterprise Mobility web page

Finally, it is important to note that the results discussed above were consistent across the sub-corpora, suggesting similarities between sectors and communication channels.

## 5. Conclusion

This study explored the discursive construction and transparency of DEI communication in CSR/ESG reports and web sections from car rental and ride-sharing companies. The findings provide insights into how corporations represent DEI issues, the strategies they use to (un)transparently disclose their commitments and management strategies to DEI, and whether the choice of images supports the linguistic findings.

In relation to the DEI aspects most represented (RQ1), the quantitative analysis of keywords and relative frequencies revealed that DEI communication primarily focuses on workforce-related issues, particularly equal employment opportunities and diversity in the rental sector. While both sectors address these themes, differences emerge in their emphasis. Car rental companies place a stronger focus on well-being, which appears with higher relative frequency in their reports. On the other hand, ride-sharing companies prioritise ethnic diversity and racial inclusion initiatives, as reflected in the higher relative frequency of terms related to race, ethnicity, and social justice.

Regarding the linguistic-discursive construction and communication of DEI (RQ2), companies in both sub-sectors communicate this issue through commissive statements,

expressing commitment, goals, and ongoing efforts, and discursively construct DEI as one of their key values. The frequent co-occurrence of *diversity*, *equity*, and *inclusion* in CSR reports suggests a holistic corporate approach to DEI. Regarding the level of transparency or vagueness in the companies' communication of DEI-related information (RQ3), the analysis revealed the use of communicative strategies that conveyed both, although vague linguistic items were more prevalent. These included vague expressions of quantity, as well as quality assessment adjectives and verbs, which may prevent stakeholders from assessing the actual impact of corporate DEI commitments.

In terms of multimodal choices (RQ4), the visual analysis revealed a balanced distribution of images featuring employees from diverse ethnic backgrounds, mostly African American, reflecting the impact of recent social movements on CSR communication. The choice of people represented from a close distance from the viewer reinforces the commitment and efforts to DEI observed at the linguistic level. However, the presence of both images with generic individuals and the choice to include pictures portraying very homogeneous groups reinforce the generic, holistic, and vague approach to DEI observed from a linguistic perspective.

Finally, from a cross-sector and generic perspective (RQ5), ride-sharing companies displayed a stronger emphasis on ethnic diversity, while car rental firms focused more on well-being and equal opportunity hiring. Additionally, web sections, compared to reports, adopted a more engaging approach, often using dialogic structures (e.g., second-person pronouns, community-oriented language).

Future research developments may include the possibility of conducting a diachronic analysis, examining both the years preceding 2020 and the present. This would facilitate an investigation into the evolving debate on the disadvantages of DEI policies in corporate communication (see, e.g., Iyer, 2022), as well as the impact of recent legislative measures opposing their implementation, particularly in the United States.

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