Inclusive Targeting: Rethinking the Concept of Inclusive Marketing

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Abstract

As cultures and markets become more connected, while societies grow increasingly fragmented, inclusive marketing is gaining prominence. Inclusive marketing is increasingly recognized as both a societal imperative and a strategic opportunity. Despite its appeal, inclusive marketing remains ambiguous in concept and difficult to implement in practice. In this manuscript inclusive targeting is introduced as a way to operationalise inclusivity within defined market segments. By anchoring inclusivity in the concrete marketing practice of targeting, this approach reduces strategic ambiguity, enhances ethical responsibility, and supports commercial effectiveness. To our knowledge, this study is the first to define and operationalize inclusive targeting, offering a framework for its implementation and demonstrating how marketing can be both socially responsible and commercially relevant.

Keywords

Social Marketing, Inclusive Marketing, Positioning

1. Introduction

The growing awareness of social inequality makes addressing equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in marketing not merely important, but essential. Marketing has been criticised for neglecting or even worsening fundamental issues that affect the well-being of society and the planet (Day, 2025; De Ruyter, et al., 2022). Simultaneously, initiatives increasingly emphasize humanity and the planet, including approaches like Inclusive Marketing, 'Marketing for the Good,' and 'Marketing Strategies for a Better World' (Chandy, Johar, Moorman, & Robert, 2021; Plangger, et al., 2025). Customers tend to respond positively to brand initiatives that showcase a concern for societal welfare, such as nurturing diversity and fostering inclusivity, as those initiatives align with communal norms (Bolton & Mattila, 2015; Hassan, McGowan, & Shiu, 2025; Licsandru & Cui, 2019; Melton & MacCharles, 2021). An ever-growing number of marketers have embraced inclusion, viewing inclusivity as an opportunity to both entice their current customers and increase their market penetration (D'Angelo, Dunn, & Valsesia, 2025). Inclusive marketing initiatives are often successful, as they are not only societally desirable but also financially rewarding.

Although inclusive marketing may sound highly appealing and desirable, many brands struggle to translate it into practice. A central challenge is the risk of tokenism: such gestures are increasingly recognized as insincere, leaving brands vulnerable to accusations of 'woke-washing' and undermining consumer trust (Burgess, Wilkie, & Dolan, 2023). Another common pitfall is relying on stereotypical portrayals that frame groups narrowly, restricting rather than expanding representation (Burgess, Wilkie, & Dolan, 2023; Schroeder & Borgerson, 2005). Another challenge lies in determining what exactly should be inclusive: the campaign, the product or service design, the pricing strategy, or other elements. Therefore, alongside all the successful initiatives, there are also failed ones, such as the controversy that arose after H&M posted an image of a Black boy wearing a hoodie with the text 'coolest monkey in the jungle,' and Swatch, which recently had to apologize for an ad featuring a Chinese model in a controversial pose. What is less visible, but nonetheless present, are the numerous intentions for inclusive marketing that are never actually implemented in practice. The prevalence of conferences and blogs on this topic shows that organizations are actively engaged with it, yet they face significant challenges in implementing inclusive marketing.

A key reason for the obstacles is the inherently broad scope of inclusive marketing, which raises the question: is it possible to render the entire concept of marketing inclusive, or only specific attributes thereof? To make it manageable and practical, we therefore propose to place the emphasis not on inclusive marketing, but on inclusive targeting. In this paper, we first analyse the emerging trend of inclusive marketing and diagnose its limitations. We then introduce inclusive targeting as a practical response to these shortcomings and present our concept of inclusive targeting. After that, we give meaning to inclusive targeting and present a straightforward 'how-to' framework designed to guide its implementation. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first scholarly work in the marketing domain identifying and defining inclusive targeting.

2. Inclusive marketing as a trend

Over the past decade, inclusive marketing has reshaped the agenda in both academia and practice (Tuli, Srivastava, & Kumar, 2025; Grieco, 2024). Inclusive marketing is currently described as a human-centred, value-driven and integrated marketing approach (Tuli, Srivastava, & Kumar, 2025). In this marketing approach the needs of underrepresented consumers are specifically embraced (Hollenbeck & Patrick, 2023). Inclusive marketing has

emerged partly in response to customer demands, partly from the prevailing societal 'zeitgeist' in which Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) is a salient theme, and partly from purpose-driven marketers themselves willing to put DEI into practice. According to a global survey by international marketing agency Wunderman Thompson, 60% of 5,000 respondents feel that brands not prioritizing inclusion will become irrelevant, 42% have themselves experienced feeling unwelcome due to their gender, race, age, religion, or sexuality, and 90% say that equality is now everyone's business (Wunderman Thompson, 2022). Inclusive marketing is therefore in the first place a strategic response to evolving societal needs.

There is empirical evidence that inclusive marketing is not only ethically relevant, but that it also delivers direct benefits for companies. A research by an industry-led initiative convened by UN Women shows that an inclusive orientation boosts short- and long-term sales and increases customer loyalty (The Unstereotype Alliance, 2024). This 'loyalty-through-inclusion effect' has also been observed in some preliminary studies on brand love (Salsabila & Apriliyanty, 2022; Srivastava, Malik, Sethi, & Tripathi, 2025). Furthermore, building on success stories such as Fenty Beauty, Rihanna's inclusive approach to cosmetics, we can claim that inclusive marketing is not only socially valuable, but can also be financially beneficial for companies. The growing trend surrounding inclusive marketing has therefore emerged not only from societal ethical pressures and consumer expectations, but also from its business value.

However, inclusive marketing is a concept that suffers from conceptual confusion. In other words, inclusive marketing is interpreted differently by different people and it misses a general understanding (Grieco, 2024; Licsandru & Cui, 2018). The conceptual frameworks, scope, and response types of inclusive marketing have not yet been fully crystallized (Tuli, Srivastava, & Kumar, 2025). Even experts on the matter use different explanations to the same concept, such as "respecting and valuing identity", "reversing inequity" or "avoiding assumptions" (Wunderman Thompson, 2022, pp. 6-7). Furthermore, Kipnis et al (2020) diagnose that research is fragmented, as they address only one specific dimension within the broad spectrum of inclusion (e.g., gender, race, disability, etc.). Research on inclusive marketing is fragmented, both in relation to target audiences and in the diversity of marketing elements examined. We recognize three primary manifestations of inclusive marketing: 1) inclusivity as a guiding purpose, 2) inclusivity in product design, and 3) inclusivity in promotion and communication. It is undeniable that inclusive marketing encompasses a wide range of aspects—arguably too many.

3. Problems in implementing inclusive marketing

Inclusive marketing is difficult to put into practice. Actually, inclusive marketing appears to transfer from a promise into a problem. Besides the conceptual confusion around the topic, we have identified three practical dimensions of problems relating to the positioning of a brand. The first challenge concerns the operationalisation of the concept. In the context of inclusive marketing and design, the concept is often operationalised as meaning 'for all.' The problem, however, is that this often implies a 'one size fits all' approach. As some scholars are in favour of this strategy for a broad range of consumers (e.g. Sharp & Romaniuk (2016)), in practice this positioning is neither feasible nor desirable for every brand. For example, luxury brands deliberately rely on exclusivity as a defining element of their positioning, with the explicit purpose of *not* fitting all. Even when organisations attempt to accommodate multiple groups within a single marketing design, the complexity of intersectionality also quickly becomes apparent. Intersectionality is often insufficiently addressed in marketing practice

(Tuli, Srivastava, & Kumar, 2025). A consumer who, for instance, belongs to an ethnic minority and at the same time identifies with a lower socio-economic status may experience marketing efforts differently than a consumer from the same ethnic minority with a higher socio-economic position. Therefore, this 'one size fits all' seems to fit nobody particularly well.

The second problem dimension concerns the organisation's existing customer base. For current customers, a perceived lack of representation may cause an inclusive strategy to backfire, particularly when the brand shifts attention to a previously silenced consumer segment that some customers prefer not to be associated with, as this may risk signalling an unintended identity (White & Dahl, 2007). Consumers are naturally driven to utilize their belongings as a means of self-expression, thereby constructing a sense of both personal identity ('me-ness') and differentiation from others ('not me-ness') (Kleine, Kleine III, & Allen, 1995). Consequently, they tend to select brands that reinforce their self-concept while avoiding those that are inconsistent with, or threatening to, their self-view (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; White & Dahl, 2007). A well-known example occurred in 2023, when Budweiser attempted to appeal to a socially conscious audience by collaborating with a transgender influencer, which provoked significant backlash among parts of its existing customer base (Liaukonyte, Tuchman, & Zhu, 2024). An inclusive marketing strategy, even if well-intentioned, may draw in previously silenced or underrepresented customers, while simultaneously risking disengagement from current customers who no longer see their identities reflected in the brand's messaging or positioning (Hassan, McGowan, & Shiu, 2025).

The third problem dimension concerns the prospective customers whom inclusive marketing aims to attract. Although underrepresented consumers are expected to benefit most from such initiatives, they might respond less favourably than already represented consumers (D'Angelo, Dunn, & Valsesia, 2025; Mishra & Bakry, 2021; Uduehi, Saint Clair, Hamilton, & Reed, 2025). This pattern is largely explained by scepticism, a specific form of doubt concerning whether the product will adequately meet their individual needs (D'Angelo, Dunn, & Valsesia, 2025; Patrick & Hollenbeck, 2021). Such scepticism is not an abstract concern but rather stems from consumers' prior negative marketplace experiences, in which their characteristics were historically ignored or poorly accommodated. These accumulated experiences shape future expectations, responses and consumption experiences (Lee & Shrum, 2012; Van Beest & Williams, 2006). In this sense, brands are at a disadvantage, as their inclusivity efforts arrive after a history of exclusion, which makes it easier for consumers to question the authenticity of the commitment. Thus, while inclusivity initiatives are positively received overall, the very consumers these strategies seek to empower may remain the most cautious. In other words, inclusive marketing can easily backfire (D'Angelo, Dunn, & Valsesia, 2025; Hassan, McGowan, & Shiu, 2025; Johnson & Grier, 2011; Lee, Alwi, & Gambetti, 2024; Tuli, Srivastava, & Kumar, 2025; Uduehi, Saint Clair, Hamilton, & Reed, 2025). Even with good intentions, customers may disengage. When inclusive marketing results in exclusion in practice, it requires rethinking. We therefore propose shifting the focus from inclusive marketing to inclusive targeting.

4. Inclusive targeting: what and how

As a solution to the aforementioned issues, it is suggested that brands establish sub-brands, designed to target different market segments (Hassan, McGowan, & Shiu, 2025). Building on this perspective, we position inclusive targeting as a manifestation of inclusive marketing in

practice. We define inclusive targeting as the delineation of a target group followed by the systematic identification of all its members, while consciously considering diversity in background, capacities, and perspectives, with the purpose to enable market and design decisions that hold relevance and value for every individual within the designated segment. In short, inclusive targeting entails being of meaning for *everyone* in the predefined segment(s).

The definition of inclusive targeting highlights three key elements that should be emphasised. The first element encompasses the first part of the definition: "the delineation of a target group". This is precisely the element that distinguishes inclusive marketing from inclusive targeting, and the reason why inclusive targeting is easier to implement in practice than inclusive marketing, as long as the delineation is precise. When targeting is delineated with precision and rooted within the organization, diversity initiatives are less likely to be perceived as an afterthought: an impression that can otherwise undermine organizational credibility and effectiveness (Lamberton, Wein, Morningstar, & Ghai, 2024).

The second element involves the systematic identification of all its members, while consciously considering diversity in background, capacities, and perspectives. The greater the precision in delineating the segment in the preceding phase, the more straightforward the subsequent phase becomes. Simultaneously, this constitutes the most difficult element, as it requires suspending one's own perspective on the target audience to allow for alternative frames that bring the 'silent voices' into view. Moreover, an intersectional approach is crucial at this stage, as it acknowledges that identities are not singular but intersect in ways that shape consumer experiences. Such an approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how overlapping identities influence both market behaviour and the effectiveness of marketing strategies, which makes this phase even more demanding, yet also more insightful.

The third element encompasses the last part of the definition: the purpose to enable market and design decisions that hold relevance and value for every individual within the designated target group. To design for value means "giving meaning to matter" (Stange, Schiele, & Henseler, 2022, p. 1), or translating what matters into meaningful value. This value-driven perspective on marketing encompasses contemporary marketing thought, especially when marketing is considered from the perspective of social responsibility.

Collectively, these three key elements provide a 'how-to' framework. This framework consists of the following steps. At first, the target audience is delineated with precision. This entails the question to which target group you want to be of value with your product or service. At this initial stage, it is essential that the target group is not defined in overly general terms. Next, you identify all non-silent and silent voices within the target group. This means mapping precisely who belongs to the target audience, from the groups that are typically within your field of view to those who are usually overlooked. A useful tool for identifying silent voices—those frequently overlooked—is the 'power wheel,' which facilitates the analysis of sources of inequality (Canadian Council for Refugees, n.a.; Riitaoja, et al., 2022).

After delineating and identification comes the final step: designing. This step actually constitutes of two sub-steps: 1) exploring the needs of the people in the target group by inclusive consumer research, and 2) designing a solution to those needs, which entails not only product and service design, but also the design of the overarching marketing strategy. By delineating a target group clearly and precisely and examining that defined target group through a lens of inclusivity, the marketing strategy for that specific target group can also be designed in a more inclusive manner.

In the first sub-step, exploring the needs of the people in the target group, inclusive consumer research involves actively exploring the needs and perspectives of *everyone* within a target

group, ensuring that respondents feel valued and able to contribute (Shaw & Wickenden, 2024). This requires careful attention to inclusive sampling, as the exclusion of specific segments or intersections between them means their voices remain unheard. However, even with an inclusive sample, the research design itself must also be inclusive by design. Central to this inclusive research design are empathetic, transparent, ethical, and non-judgemental interactions with respondent (Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Ellsberg, Heise, Pena, Agurto, & Winkvist, 2001). Research among historically silenced groups indicates that traditional positivist approaches are often inadequate (Fenge, 2010). Employing active listening, appropriate and respectful language, participatory research designs, and creating a safe and welcoming environment fosters trust and a sense of belonging, encouraging participants to share their experiences openly (Beltrán-Grimm, 2025; Lewis, Mehmet, Quinton, & Reynolds, 2023; Nind, 2014). Such approaches generate more in-depth insights and result in richer, more reliable data when studying silenced groups (Davison, 2004; Nikidehaghani, Hui-Truscott, & Cortese, 2023; Walmsley, Strnadová, & Johnson, 2018).

These in-depth insights lay the groundwork for the second sub-step: solution design, encompassing products, services, and the broader marketing strategy. Such solutions are manifold, with an inclusive design approach encompassing both functional attributes and emotional dimensions that promote recognition and belonging (Patrick & Hollenbeck, 2021). Positioning therefore draws on both functional and emotional dimensions to resonate with the inclusive target group. At the same time, targeting requires a deliberate effort to reach all members of the designated segment, including those with intersectional identities. A marketing approach must embody inclusive principles to secure accessibility, fairness, and representation. Achieving this requires focus, and when inclusivity is authentically embedded in the organizational core and enacted consistently, it can mitigate risks such as tokenism. Taken together, these steps illustrate how inclusivity can serve not as an add-on, but as a guiding principle of marketing strategy.

| 3a. Inclusive consumer research | 3b. Inclusive design of product, service and marketing strategy |
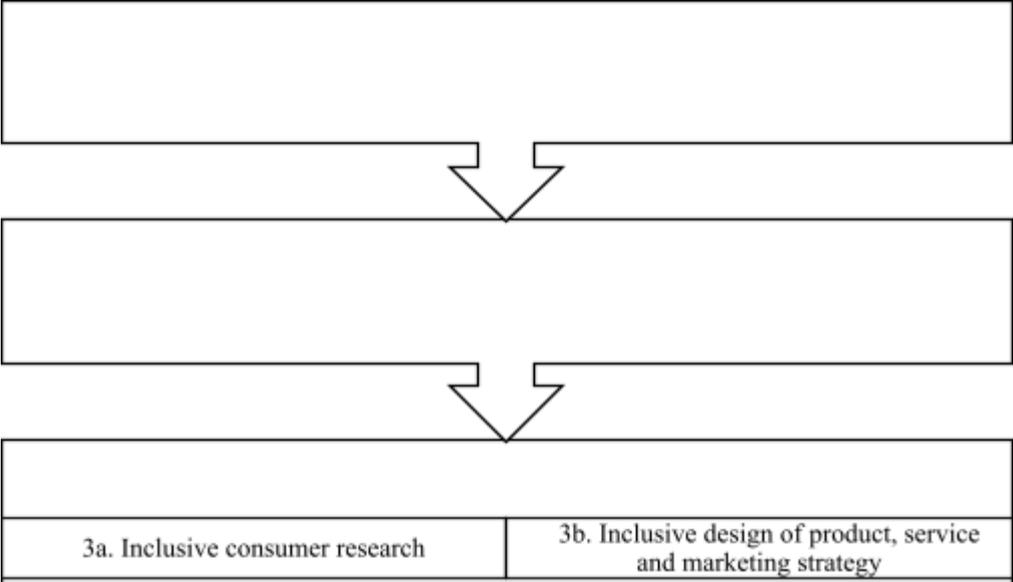
5. Concluding remarks

Inclusive marketing does not encompass a single thing. It involves that marketers *see* the market differently, that they *serve* the market differently and that they *are* in the market differently (Rodríguez-Vilá, Nickerson, & Bharadwaj, 2024). Inclusive marketing is not only

a complex issue, it is also inherently complex. To bring more focus and concreteness to the broad concept of inclusive marketing, we have emphasised that it should rather be framed as inclusive targeting. Inclusive targeting anchors inclusivity in practical marketing practice, rather than leaving it as an abstract ideal. It removes the pressure on marketers to sever the whole market and include every individual, a task that could leave brands positioned ambiguously and without a clear strategic direction. With this focus, marketing decisions can be both ethically responsible and commercially effective, guiding strategy with precision and purpose.

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