

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: *What The Data Says*

Language,
Please

WHAT THE DATA REALLY SAYS

DEI efforts are more
relevant than ever ...
when done right

Because diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) marketing has the potential to shape both societal perspectives and consumer loyalty, the stakes are high. When done thoughtfully, these efforts can enrich the conversation around DEI while elevating brand loyalty and driving sales. On the other hand, missteps in this area can lead to more than just PR headaches; they can also damage consumer perception and prompt both brands and the industry to reconsider DEI efforts entirely.

This guide offers insights for marketers, advertisers, and other content creators who want to thoughtfully integrate DEI efforts into their work. This resource is based on the findings from recent research conducted by Vox Media, which surveyed 2,000 US adults over the age of 18 representing the US online population.¹ The survey was conducted in collaboration with The Circus, an insight and data storytelling firm. Consumers were surveyed about their attitudes toward DEI initiatives as a whole and in marketing specifically. These findings are meant to provide insights and help you better understand the sentiments that could fuel or hinder your DEI endeavors.

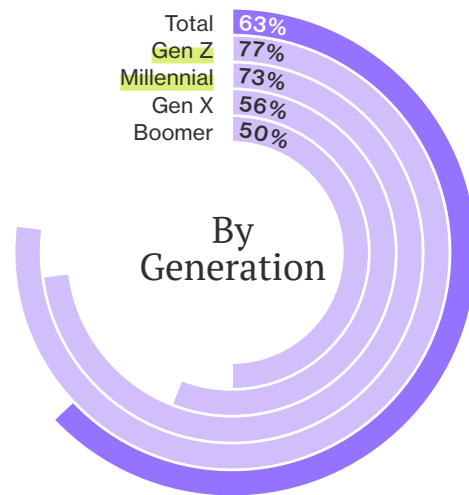
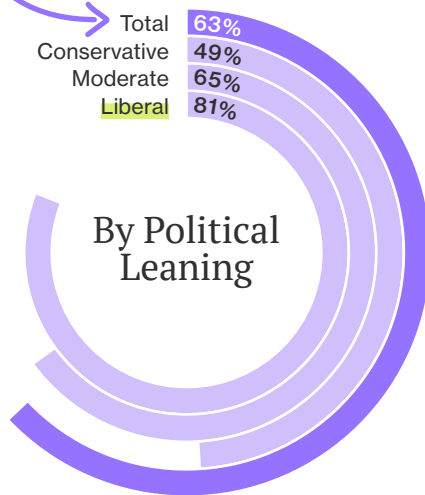
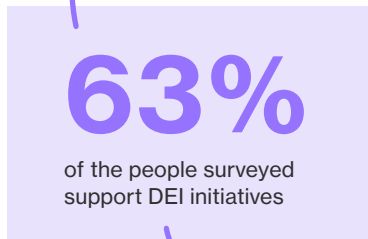
Our focus here is on the consumer. In our digital age, consumer relationships are more important than ever, and understanding the nuances of your customers' lived experiences and identity is essential. **The information shared here is more than surface-level; it aims to explore the why behind the what, aiding thoughtful decision-making in this complex landscape.**

ATTITUDES TOWARD DEI

Age and politics have more influence than other factors

Our survey revealed that approximately two-thirds of Americans across all age groups and political viewpoints support DEI initiatives.

Support was highest among historically underserved groups like LGBTQ+ people and people of color.² That said, it is important to note that attitudes around DEI are shaped more by political alignment and age than by more traditional demographic factors that marketers incorporating DEI into their work may lean on, like race or sexual orientation. For instance, 81% of liberals and 49% of conservatives support DEI efforts. The generational gap is telling, too — 77% of Gen Z consumers vs. 50% of boomers support DEI efforts.

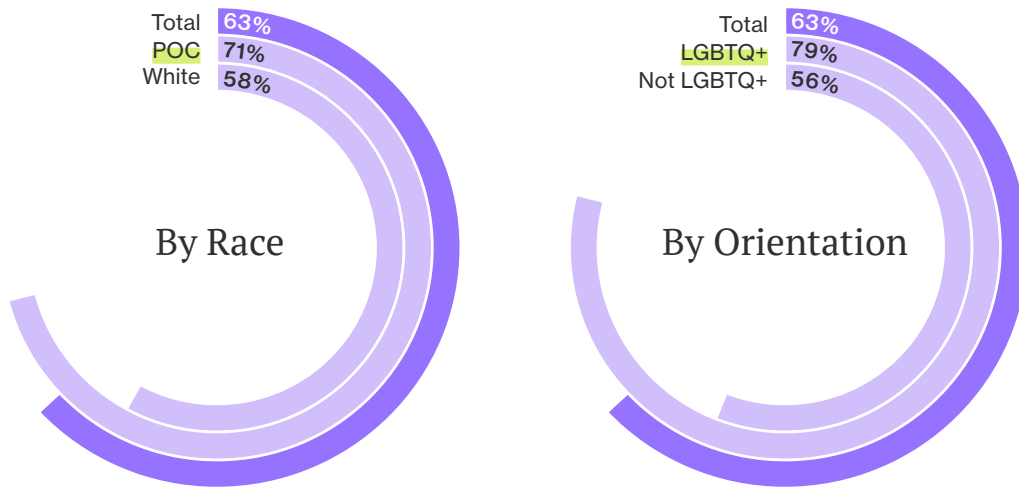


% who support DEI initiatives

¹ Survey respondents self-identified as follows: 68% white; 20% Black or African American; 6% Asian or Asian American; 3% Indigenous, Native American, or Alaska Native; 1% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; 6% other ethnicity; 2% prefer not to answer; 85% non-Hispanic; 14% Hispanic.

² A note on terminology: The language used throughout this paper to describe demographic groups reflects the language used in Vox Media’s survey, and may not match the terms people most resonate with or use to describe themselves. Whenever possible, Language, Please and Vox Media take into account the way someone self-identifies and aim to be as specific as possible in describing individuals and communities.

Although it's tempting to think that support for the DEI mission can be predicted purely by racial group or sexual orientation, that view misses nuance. Case in point: **People of color are supportive at a rate of 71%, and white people at 58%** — a notable difference, but still majorities of both.



WHAT THE DATA SAYS: While age and political leaning influence attitudes the most, consumers across all demographic groups expressed some support for DEI initiatives.

Across the board, **74% of consumers agree that access to opportunity is a real issue in the United States, with 61% of conservatives and 76% of moderates recognizing this societal issue.** Yet the consensus only goes so far. While most consumers believe that factors like living below the poverty line, having a mental or physical disability, being neurodivergent, and dealing with mental health issues are significant hurdles to success, there's a lower level of belief that sexual orientation and race or ethnicity are barriers to opportunity.

These findings make a case for shifting the focus away from strictly demographic-based approaches to ones that also consider ideological and generational nuances. As a hypothetical, a Hispanic/Latine boomer who identifies as politically conservative may be as unlikely to support DEI efforts as their white conservative boomer counterparts.

Indeed, the diversity of ways consumers relate to DEI efforts mirrors the textured way they self-identify, transcending demographics to reflect a broader mosaic of values, beliefs, and personal experiences.

QUESTION

Based on your perceptions, understanding, and beliefs, how much harder or easier do you feel it is for people in the following groups to access opportunity and achieve success in our society?

% Much harder / Moderately harder

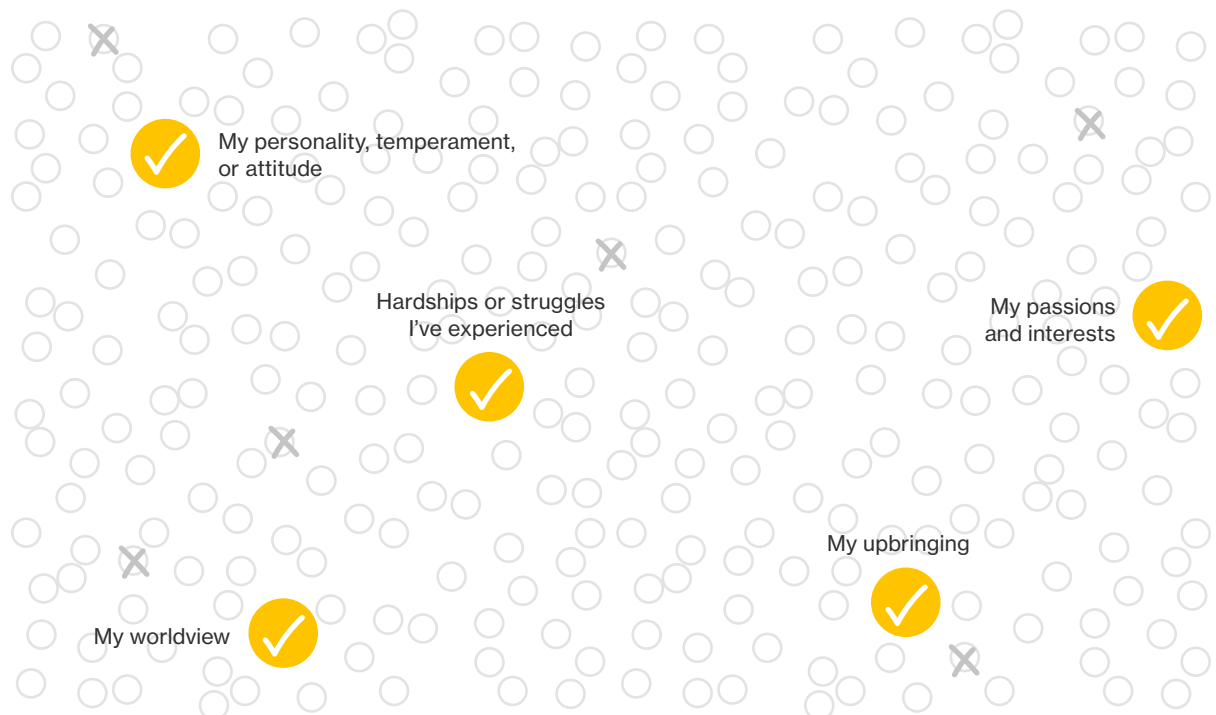
	TOTAL	LGBTQ+	NOT LGBTQ+	POC	WHITE
People living at or below the poverty line	74%	77%	72%	74%	73%
Queer, lesbian, gay, asexual, or bisexual individuals	51%	62%	46%	55%	47%
Transgender or nonbinary individuals	57%	68%	52%	59%	55%
African Americans	54%	64%	49%	64%	46%
Asians and Asian Americans	37%	45%	34%	40%	35%
Native Americans	55%	61%	53%	58%	53%
Hispanic, Latine, or Chicano Americans	46%	54%	43%	52%	42%
White	19%	19%	19%	18%	20%
Physical disabilities	76%	77%	75%	72%	79%
Mental disabilities	77%	78%	77%	74%	80%
Neurodiverse (autism, ADHD, etc.)	70%	71%	70%	67%	73%
Mental health issues (depression, anxiety, etc.)	75%	77%	74%	72%	77%

Self-identity:

More than just a demo

Differences in generation and sociocultural practices inform the key characteristics that consumers believe shape their identity. At first glance, **personality/attitude (58%), upbringing (52%), and interests/passions (49%) seem to be the top characteristics consumers across the board believe define them.**

Upon closer look, these universal traits offer only a baseline to which generational and cultural differences add depth. For instance, while **personality, upbringing, and passions are top-ranking across all generations, millennials and Gen Z stand out for including mental health in their top 5 identity factors; Gen X consumers are the only group that placed worldview among their top 5 list; and boomers are the only group to incorporate religion or spiritual beliefs into their top 5.**

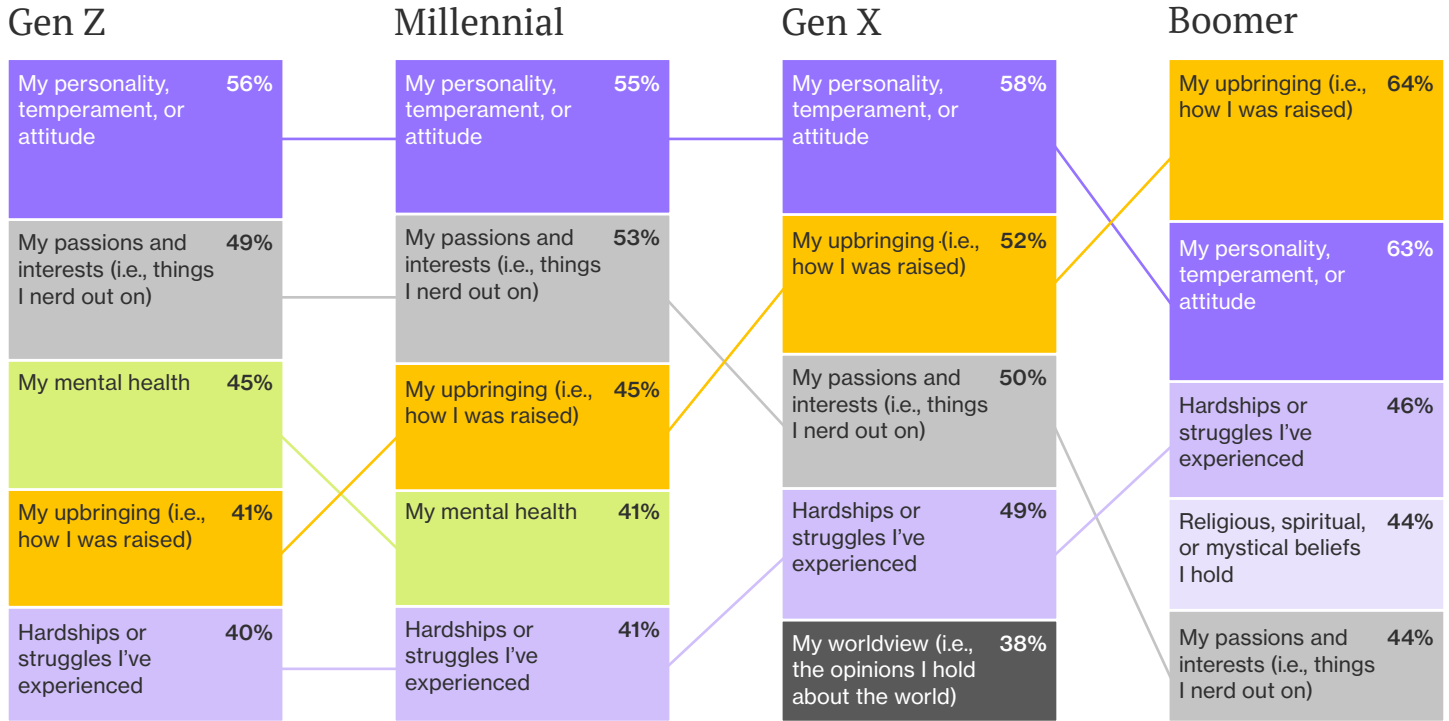


WHAT THE DATA SAYS: The top five factors in shaping identity across all demographic groups, out of a list of 19 options.

QUESTION

Which characteristics play a role in making you you?

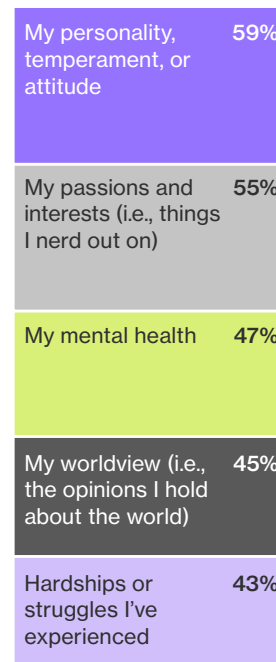
% Chose



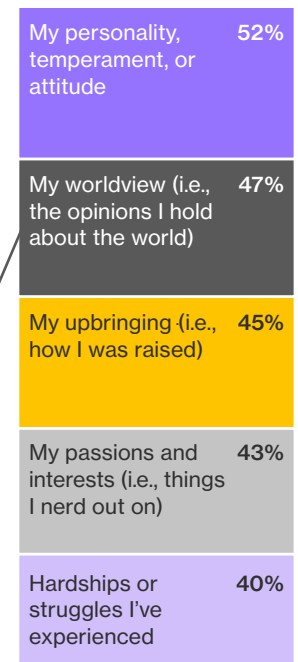
When looking at historically underserved groups that consumers may traditionally associate with DEI initiatives, an even more complex story emerges. For these groups, these characteristics are more likely to be front and center when they talk about themselves. For example, 45% of the LGBTQ+ community reported that sexual orientation is a significant contributing factor to their identity; race and ethnicity rank highly for 47% of people of color.

WHAT THE DATA SAYS: Differences in generation and sociocultural practices inform the key characteristics that consumers believe shape their identity.

LGBTQ+



POC

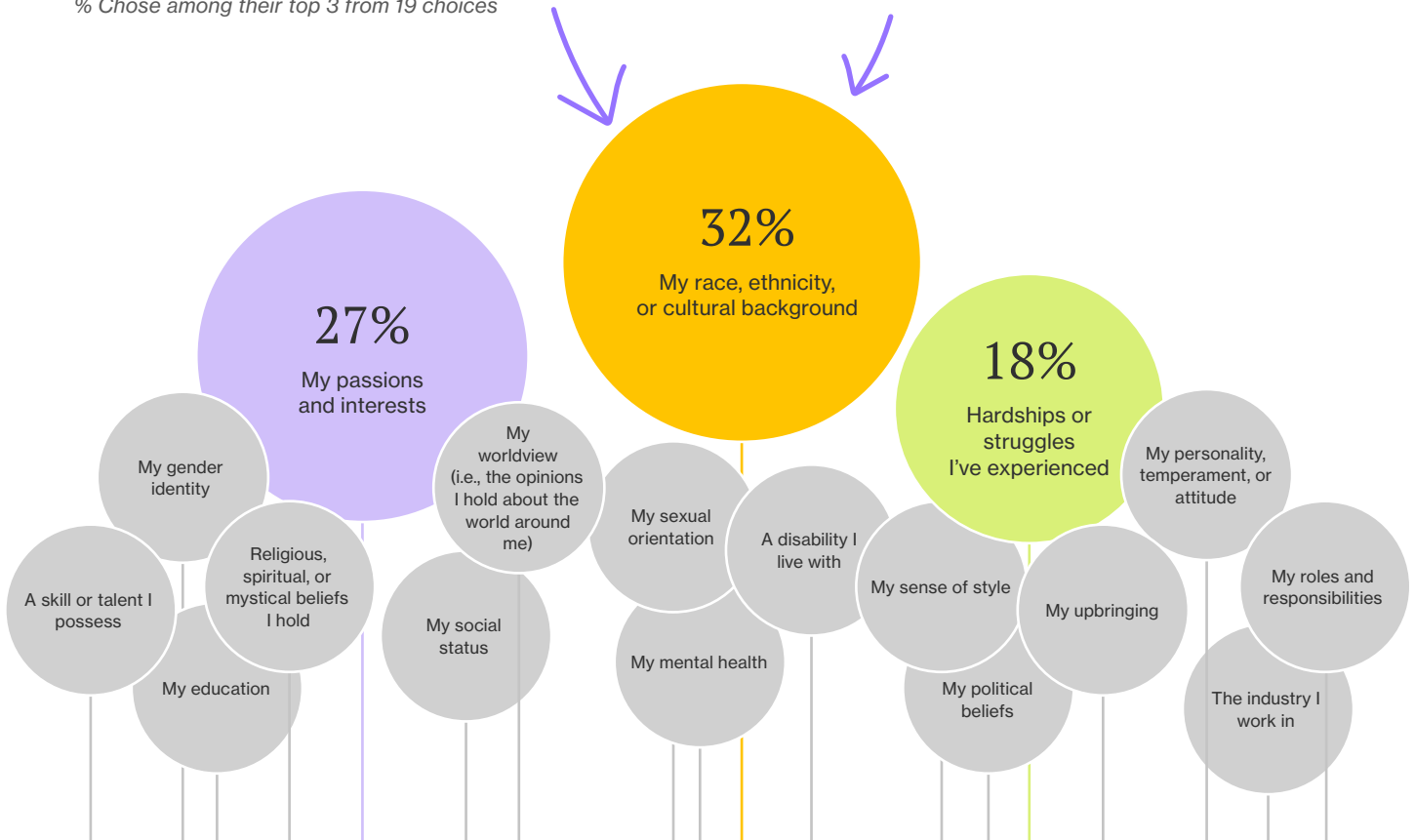


Even though race, ethnicity, or cultural background was not among the top three factors consumers use to self-identify, it is top of mind when it comes to marketing. **In fact, 32% of consumers surveyed said this was the most important dimension when being marketed to.**

QUESTION

When being marketed to, what are the three most important?

% Chose among their top 3 from 19 choices



WHAT THE DATA SAYS: The factors consumers across all demographic groups identified as the most important when being marketed to, out of 19 options.

This seeming contradiction between the traits most consumers use to identify themselves and how they appreciate marketing that acknowledges racial, ethnic, and cultural markers is telling. DEI marketing has the potential to strike an intimate chord and get at a deep truth within consumers’ psyches, one that may not be immediately apparent when consumers are asked about their identities in a vacuum. Thoughtfully accessing this core may be essential for marketers looking to build strong bonds of trust with their consumers.

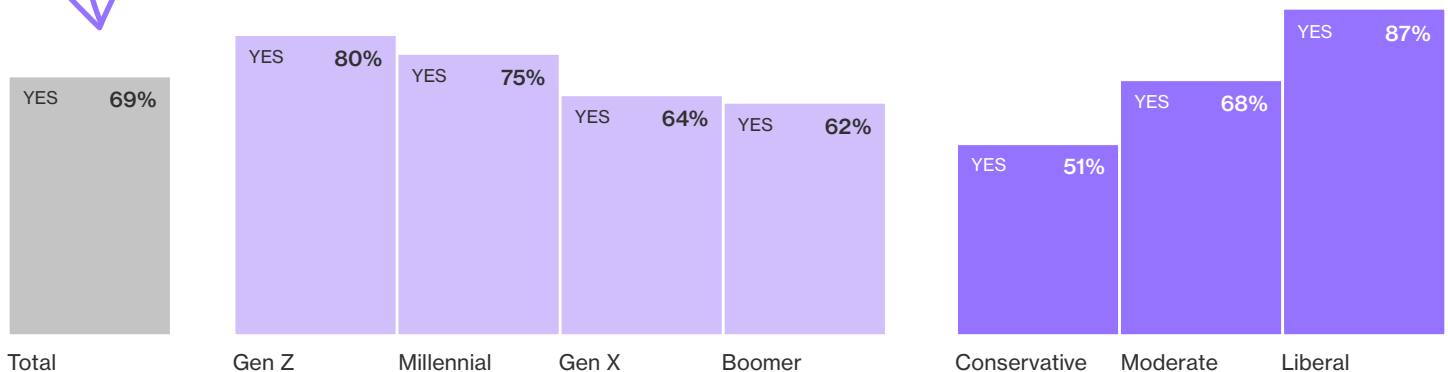
Meaningful DEI belongs in marketing !!

Recent years have seen top executives distancing themselves from DEI initiatives, questioning and diverting resources away from those efforts, even as societal demand for them remains high. Consumer attitudes confirm that thoughtful DEI efforts have a place in marketing.

A majority of consumers support both DEI efforts in general and DEI efforts within marketing specifically. Support transcends political leanings: **69% of consumers across the political spectrum** believe that brands have a responsibility to incorporate DEI efforts into their marketing.

QUESTION

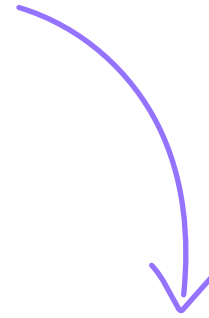
Do you believe that companies and brands have a responsibility to support diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in their marketing?



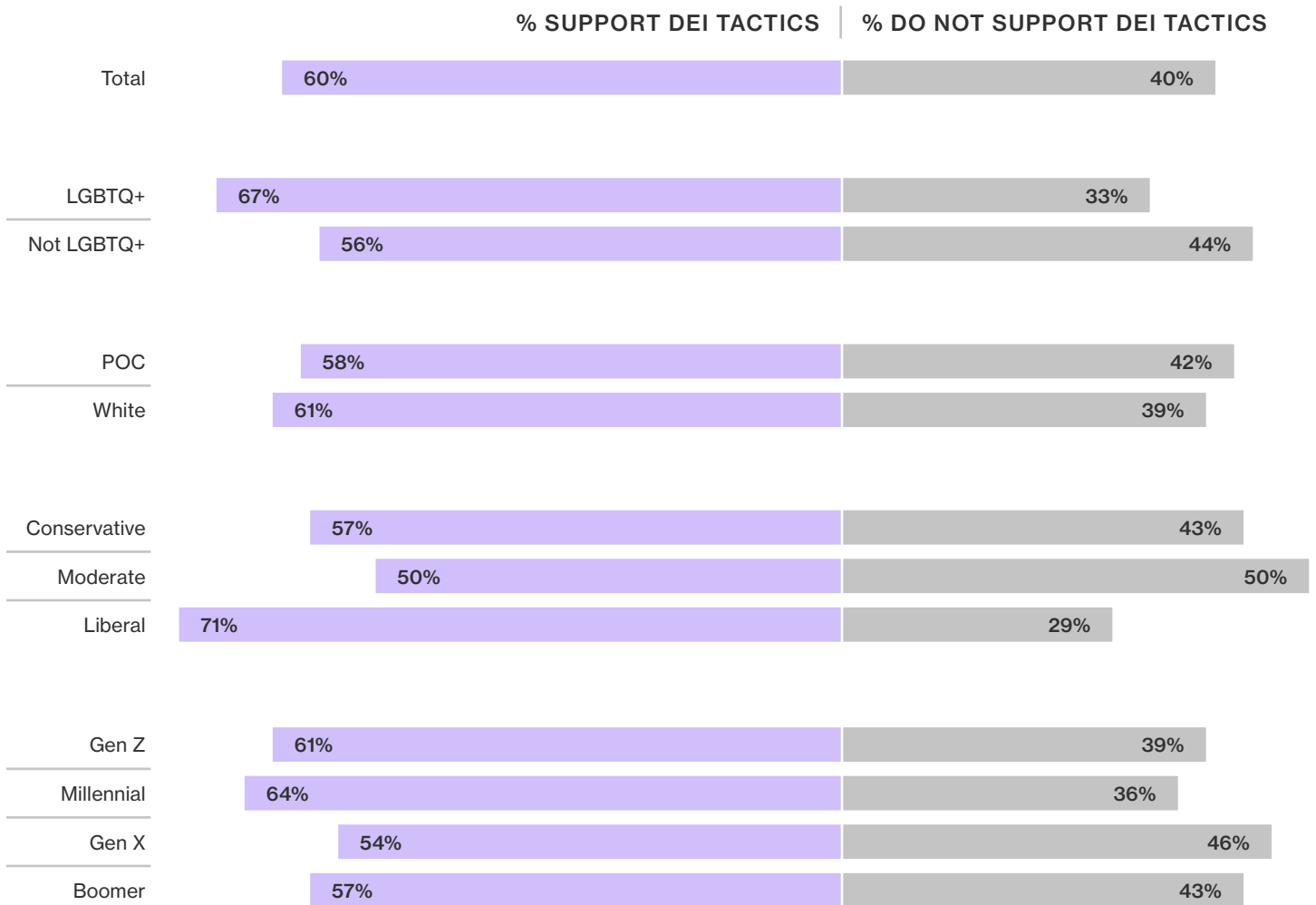
WHAT THE DATA SAYS: Consumers generally support both DEI efforts in general and DEI efforts in marketing specifically, with support for DEI in marketing transcending political leanings.

This is the case even for consumers who self-identify as conservatives (51% of whom support DEI initiatives within marketing) or as moderates (68% support).

While support for DEI efforts and DEI in marketing is widespread, the data suggests there's still room for improvement. **Only 60% of the consumers who support the DEI mission approve of its tactics**; 40% remain critical of them.



Among those who believe in the DEI mission



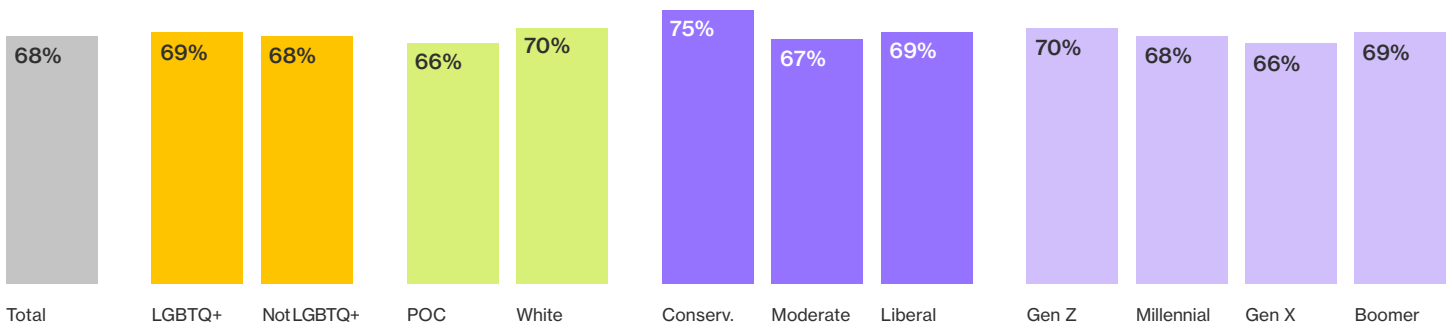
WHAT THE DATA SAYS: Among those consumers who believe in the DEI mission, support for the tactics employed varies.

Digging deeper sheds more light on this skepticism. **68% of consumers feel that when brands take a stand on social issues, it feels like they are jumping on the bandwagon** of support for DEI without pushing the movement forward. And **65% of consumers believe that brands virtue-signal around DEI**, performing allyship without providing real support.

The numbers serve as a call for brands to rethink the ways they integrate DEI into their marketing campaigns.

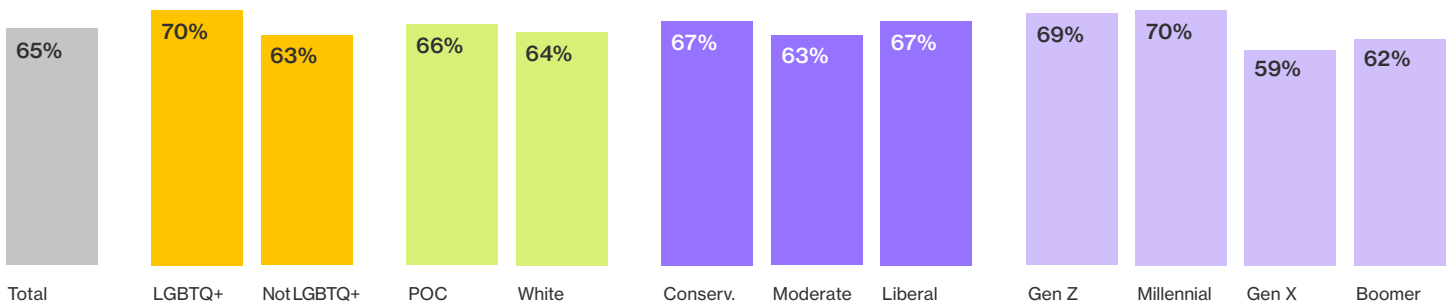
« **When companies and brands take a stand on social issues, it often feels like they’re jumping on the bandwagon, without actually helping push that bandwagon forward.**

% Agree



« **Companies and brands use social issues like diversity and inclusion to ‘virtue signal,’ but typically don’t contribute meaningfully to social causes and movements.**

% Agree



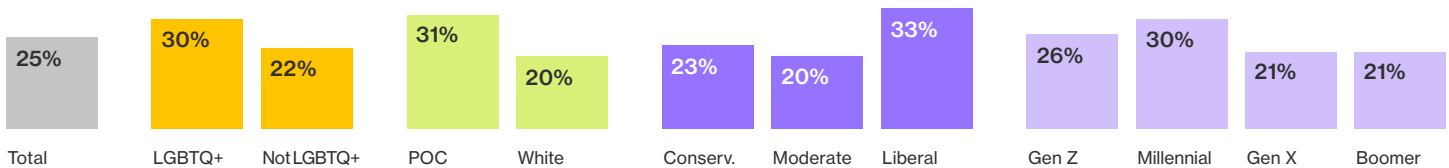
Consumers aren't holding out for a hero, but they do value authentic engagement

Consumers' mandate to brands is clear: Don't try to be heroes, but also don't be afraid to take risks. While just **25% of consumers believe brands should be at the vanguard of social change** supporting DEI, **60% think that it's crucial for brands to support the values of DEI in their marketing**, and **59% appreciate brands**

that take a strong stance around a social issue, even at the risk of turning off their regular audience. Only 19% of consumers believe that companies should focus their marketing on selling and nothing more.

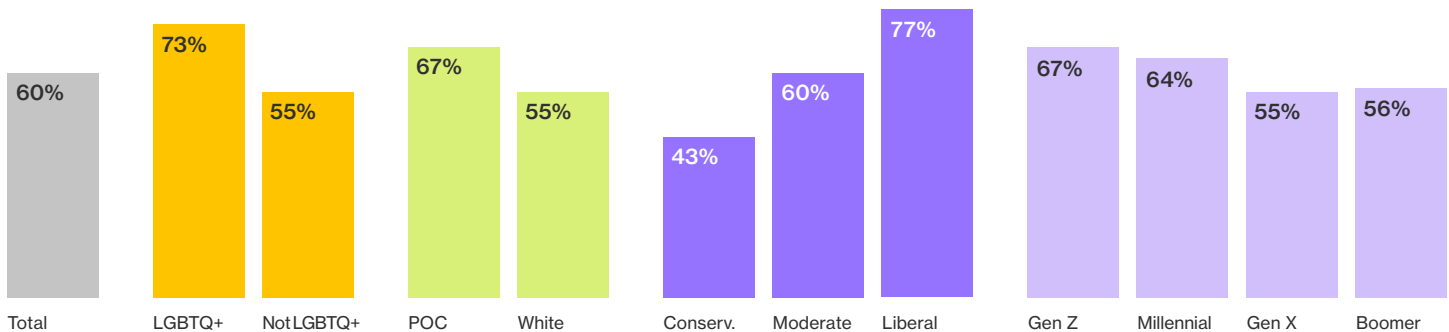
Companies and brands should be at the forefront in helping to promote diversity and inclusion of underrepresented and marginalized populations in their marketing and advertising.

% Agree



It's very important for brands to stand up for the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion in their marketing and advertising.

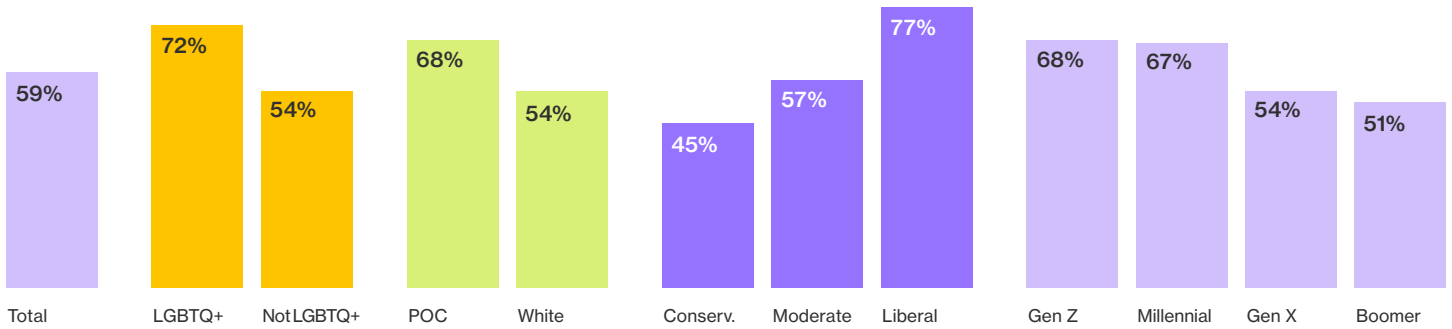
% Agree





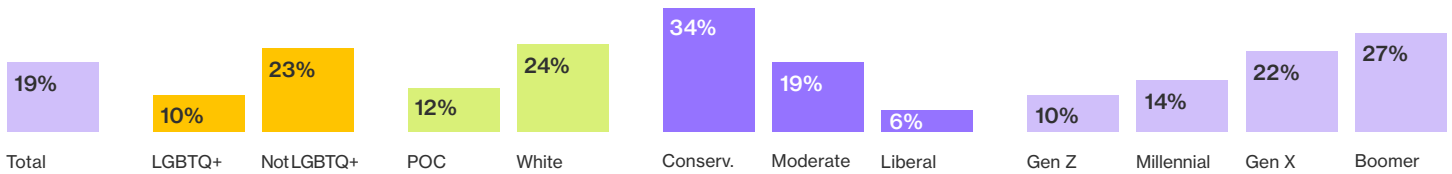
I appreciate when a brand takes a strong stance around a social issue, even at the risk of alienating their core consumer base.

% Agree



Companies and brands should do what they need to do to sell products, and they shouldn't have to do anything more with their marketing and advertising than that.

% Agree



What consumers do expect is for brands to be thoughtful, nuanced, and responsible around DEI issues and avoid reinforcing cliches and perpetuating harmful stereotypes. 46% of consumers feel that companies and brands need to be aware of and sensitive to depictions in their advertising that could reinforce negative societal stereotypes. 65% of consumers believe a poor attempt to support a social issue can damage the cause instead. In fact, 63% of consumers believe that to be the case already — that brands and individuals that have used DEI for self-serving purposes have hurt the DEI mission.

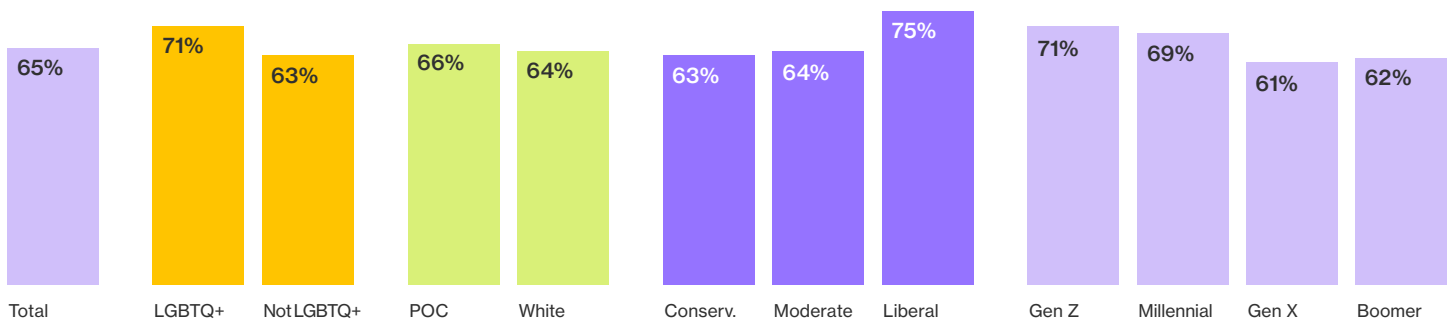
Mistrust is high. Today's consumer has become increasingly savvy and attuned to the difference between DEI efforts in marketing and advertising that look good but are performative and those that are authentic and genuinely speak to the people they are targeting. 68% believe it feels self-serving when brands and advertisers that support DEI don't do more than express support for various "heritage months." A telling 65% feel that the difference between success and failure in marketing containing social commentary is whether a brand genuinely serves a cause or whether it uses a cause to serve itself.

Interestingly, the trepidation seems to decline somewhat around brands that take a stand on social issues beyond merely casting actors from diverse backgrounds or celebrating “heritage months.” **Under those circumstances, a smaller share of consumers (57%) said the efforts feel performative and insincere**, suggesting that genuine commitment and follow-through make a difference in whether a campaign is perceived as authentic or performative.



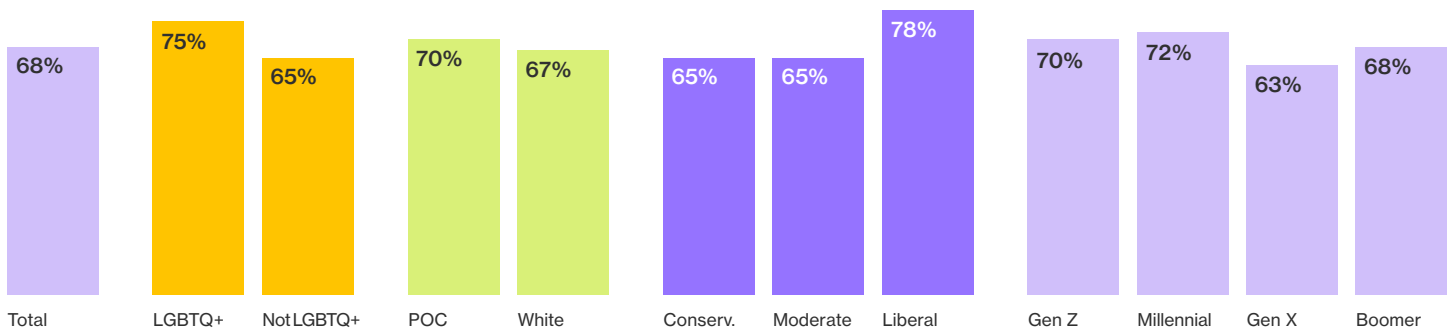
It feels performative when advertisers who support diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts don’t do more than cast actors from diverse backgrounds in their advertising.

% Agree



It feels self-serving when brands and advertisers that support diversity, equity, and inclusion don’t do anything more than make statements of support for various ‘heritage months.’

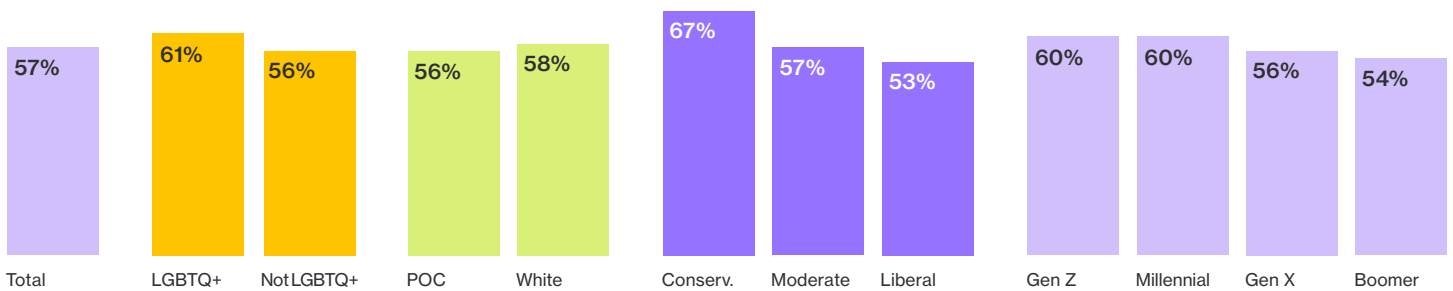
% Agree





It feels performative and insincere when brands ‘take a stand’ on social issues.

% Agree



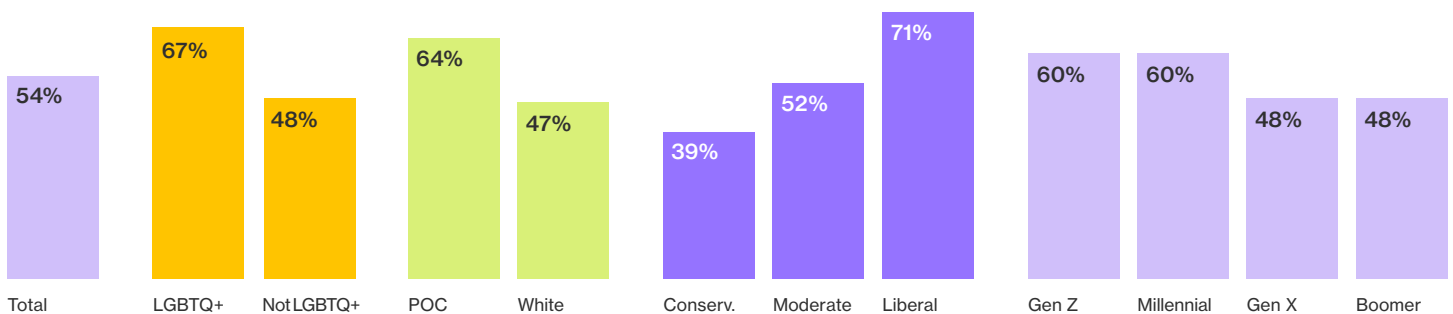
This suggests that brands shouldn't shy away from bold engagement in DEI for fear of making mistakes around these efforts. Roughly **two-thirds of those in historically underserved groups**, and 60% of Gen Zers and millennials, say they are more likely to buy from brands that embrace the DEI mission. **Moreover, 48% of consumers agree**

that brands that don't embrace diversity are out of touch, and 44% of consumers actively steer away from such brands. These percentages vary according to political and generational leanings, but overall they are significant enough to deserve consideration from marketers.



I'm more likely to support or purchase from a brand that incorporates diverse representations of people in their advertising campaigns.

% Agree



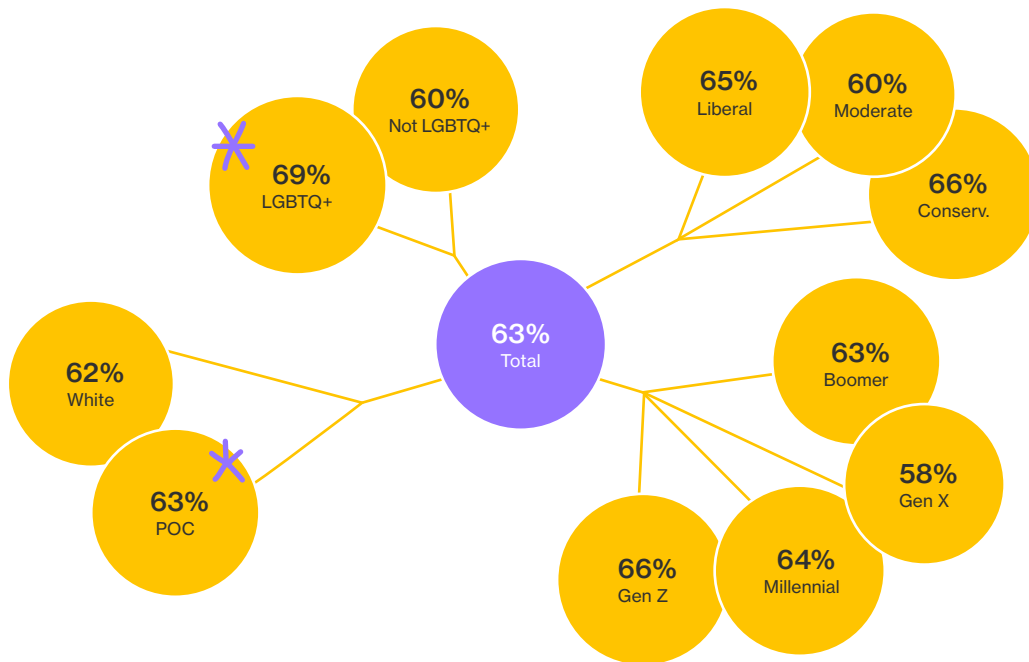
New narratives, backlash, and opportunities *e*

Even though no manual exists for applying a DEI lens to marketing, the data offers clues to begin crafting new narratives and opportunities for a more nuanced and thoughtful approach.

Mixed reception to DEI in marketing is almost a given. The data points to a general skepticism of DEI efforts and DEI in marketing campaigns, even among those groups that are traditionally considered to benefit from said efforts. **63% of consumers surveyed, including 69% of LGBTQ+ consumers and 63% of consumers of color, believe that, ultimately, brands always act in their own self-interest.**

⌋ **We're lying to ourselves if we think that brands and advertisers ever do the right thing for anyone other than themselves.**

% Agree



WHAT THE DATA SAYS: A majority of consumers across all demographic groups believe that, ultimately, brands act in their self-interest rather than in the community's interest.

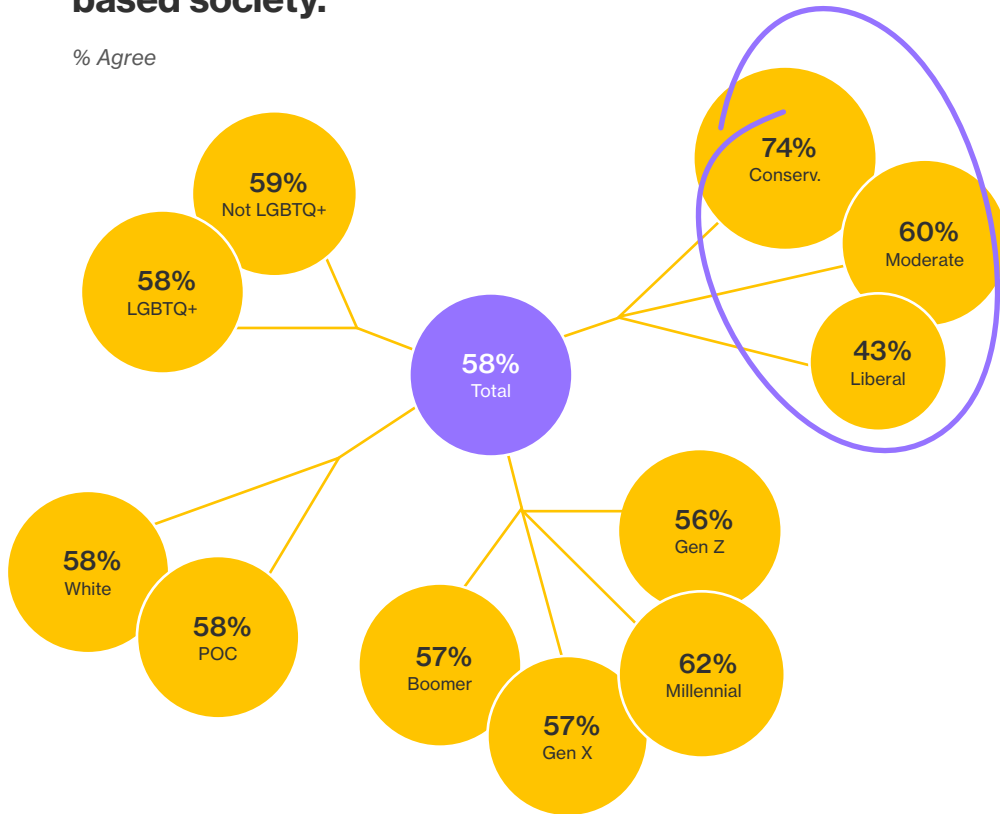
With this context, brands may need to make peace with the fact that backlash is to be expected (though it can also be mitigated, something that their strategies should take into account). They may also have to adopt approaches that simultaneously assume consumer mistrust and actively work to build trust, especially around DEI efforts. *}*

An area to explore what these approaches may look like is the tension consumers feel between DEI and meritocracy. The data shows that **58% of consumers believe DEI efforts have created a less merit-based society. This is the case even among those who may benefit the most from DEI initiatives**, with 58% of LGBTQ+ consumers and 58% of consumers of color agreeing. There is some consensus on this point across different age groups; for instance, 62% of millennials and 57% of boomers agree.

This may mean that marketers looking to incorporate DEI efforts into their marketing need to find a way to solve or address this tension. One unexplored question relates to consumers' sentiments toward meritocracy: Some consumers may be okay with, and even approve of, forgoing merit-based structures if it means ensuring equity and justice for everyone.



The push for more diversity and inclusion, intentionally or not, has resulted in a less merit-based society.

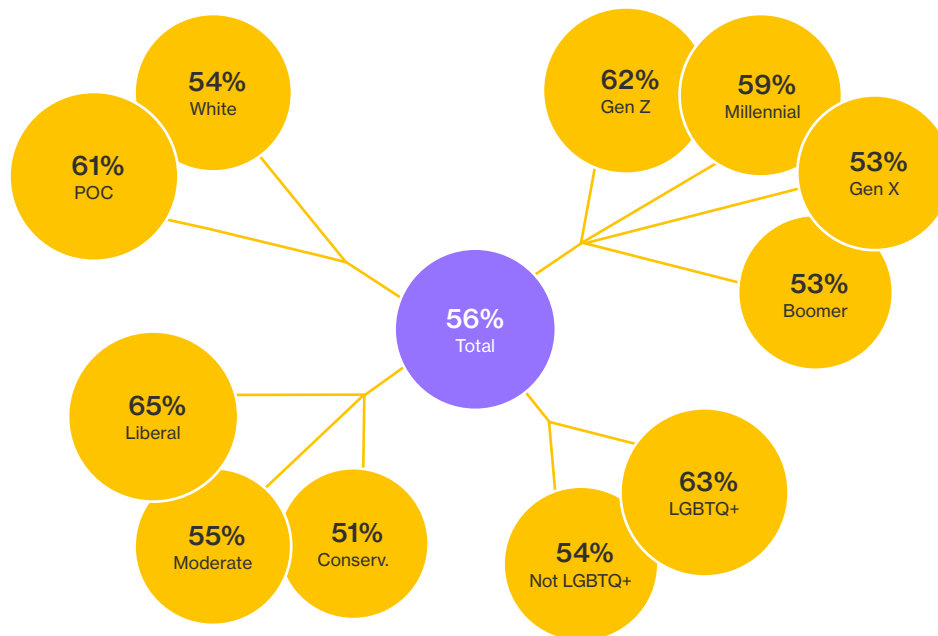


WHAT THE DATA SAYS: Consumer sentiment toward the impact of DEI efforts on meritocracy varied most widely according to political leaning.

The perception of tension between DEI and meritocracy may offer an opportunity to show consumers that brands can navigate this territory with nuance and thoughtfulness. When it comes to brands taking a strong stance on social issues, **56% of respondents said they are willing to forgive a misstep if the intention is right.** While LGBTQ+ people, people of color, liberals, millennials, and Gen Zers ranked highest on that sentiment, it cuts across political and generational lines, with 51% of conservatives and 53% of boomers agreeing.

“ I’m willing to overlook a brand’s botched effort at taking a stand on a social issue I believe in, so long as their intention was in the right place.

% Agree



WHAT THE DATA SAYS: Consumers' willingness to forgive brand missteps if the intentions were good supports the idea that brands can be bold with their DEI efforts.

Overall, the landscape is ripe for brands that are prepared to act boldly and with follow-through. Consumers are cautiously receptive and ready to interact as long as that engagement is genuine.



For additional marketing and advertising resources, and more guidance for thoughtful decision-making around language use and framing, visit languageplease.org

Research methodology

The Vox Media Insights and Research team surveyed more than 2,000 US adults representing the US online population in September 2023 with The Circus, an insight and data storytelling consultancy that specializes in original trend research, thought leadership, and strategic brand positioning rooted in a human-data-centric approach.

Thank you

Edwin Wong
Mila Djordjevic
Sebastian Fernandez
Suset Laboy Pérez

Joanna Douglas
Maria Laboy Pérez
Jacqueline Cinguina
Tanya Pai

Language, Please

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