

TOWARDS FAIR SKIES: AN ASSESSMENT OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN THE AIRLINE INDUSTRY

ADİL GÖKYÜZÜNE DOĞRU: HAVAYOLU ENDÜSTRİSİNDEKİ ÇEŞİTLİLİK, HAKKANİYET VE KAPSAYICILIK POLİTİKALARI VE UYGULAMALARININ DEĞERLENDİRİLMESİ

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Abstract

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) refer to the understanding, appreciation, and integration of individuals' unique characteristics, experiences, and perspectives within a group, focusing on creating fairness, justice, and a sense of belonging for all. This involves recognizing and valuing differences and taking proactive steps to ensure everyone has equal access to opportunities and is treated with respect. The aviation industry is a global industry that serves diverse communities worldwide and employing a diverse workforce in terms of background, ethnicity, age, gender, education, and experience. Consequently, DEI is a fundamental issue for the aviation industry to address. This study aims to investigate the DEI strategies of airlines through the official statements of the Top 100 airlines with the highest Available Seat Kilometres (ASKs). More specifically, by exploring their official statements, the aim is to analyse the prioritization of DEI issues and assess the implementation of equity

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and inclusivity practices by airlines. The findings reveal that although many airlines have taken significant steps toward DEI management, there is still room for improvement. The results aim to offer airlines an opportunity to gain insights from their peers and identify areas to improve their DEI initiatives. The outcomes will prove beneficial not only for the aviation industry but for other industries as well.

Keywords: Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI); Aviation industry; Diverse workforce

Öz

Çeşitlilik, eşitlik ve kapsayıcılık (DEI), bir grup içerisindeki bireylerin benzersiz özelliklerinin, deneyimlerinin ve bakış açılarının anlaşılması, takdir edilmesi ve bütünleştirilmesini ifade eder; bu kavramlar, herkes için adalet, hakkaniyet ve aidiyet duygusu yaratmaya odaklanır. Bu durum, farklılıkların tanınmasını ve değer verilmesini, ayrıca herkesin fırsatlara eşit erişim sağlaması ve saygı ile muamele görmesi adına proaktif adımlar atılmasını kapsar. Havacılık sektörü, dünya genelinde çeşitli topluluklara hizmet veren küresel bir sektördür ve köken, etnisite, yaş, cinsiyet, eğitim ve deneyim açısından çeşitli bir iş gücünü istihdam etmektedir. Bu nedenle DEI, havacılık sektörünün ele alması gereken temel bir konudur. Bu çalışma, En Yüksek Mevcut Koltuk Kilometresi (ASK) değerine sahip ilk 100 havayolunun resmi açıklamaları aracılığıyla bu şirketlerin DEI stratejilerini araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Daha özel olarak, havayolu şirketlerinin resmi beyanları incelenerek, DEI konularına verilen öncelik analiz edilmekte ve eşitlik ile kapsayıcılık uygulamalarının hayata geçirilme düzeyi değerlendirilmektedir. Bulgular, birçok havayolu şirketinin DEI yönetimi konusunda önemli adımlar attığını, ancak hâlâ gelişim alanlarının bulunduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Elde edilen sonuçlar, havayolu şirketlerine hem sektör içi örneklerden faydalanma hem de kendi DEI girişimlerini geliştirebilecekleri alanları belirleme fırsatı sunmayı hedeflemektedir. Bu sonuçlar yalnızca havacılık sektörü için değil, diğer sektörler için de fayda sağlayacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çeşitlilik, eşitlik ve kapsayıcılık (DEI); Havacılık sektörü; Çeşitli iş gücü

1. Introduction

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are closely linked values held by organizations to recognize and value differences in people and establish and sustain a fair and equal environment for all (McKinsey, 2022). To grasp the significance of the concept in the organizational context, it is crucial to define all the words that constitute it clearly. Diversity in an organization refers to the intentional representation of various individuals in the workforce, encompassing a range of characteristics including but not limited to gender, religion, race, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, education, and other personal attributes (SHRM, 2023). Equity is the fair distribution of resources, advantages, and rights within a company or community regardless of an individual's background or identity (Jones et al., 2023). This principle acknowledges that people have different starting points in life and aims to provide equal opportunities and resources to everyone, particularly those who have historically faced disadvantages and been underrepresented (ECCP, 2023). Lastly, inclusion is about creating a culture where everyone feels accepted and respected, and their contributions are valued (Rossi et al., 2022). It is also related to fostering a safe work environment where employees feel comfortable voicing their needs (Deloitte, 2023). Diversity, equity, and inclusion are interconnected and mutually dependent and all of these components must be considered and addressed together.

In recent times, the significance of having DEI in the workplace has gained more recognition. Organizations have started implementing different DEI initiatives to promote fairness and create a more inclusive work environment (Ali & Konrad, 2017; Richard et al., 2013; Wavre et al., 2024). Research has demonstrated that DEI management can lead to various beneficial outcomes, such as attracting and retaining diverse talents, enhancing organizational learning and innovation by bringing in a broad range of perspectives, improving organizational adaptability (Kyriakidou et al., 2016), and enhancing employee trust, engagement, and retention (Downey et al., 2015; Rosenkranz et al., 2021). Despite its benefits, implementing DEI initiatives in the workplace can be challenging and require significant work and commitment.

The aviation industry is particularly in need of addressing DEI for several reasons. To begin with, it provides services to a diverse range of communities worldwide due to its global reach. Airlines also typically employ a diverse workforce from different backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, and genders and with varying levels of education and experience (Airlines for America, 2023). Many airlines have started prioritizing DEI mainly based on gender and race diversity. In addition, industry players also have initiatives to support diversity in airline organizations. One of them is the International Air Transport Association (IATA) 25by2025 initiative which seeks to boost the number of women in leadership roles and in areas where they are currently underrepresented by 25%, or at least up to 25%, by the year 2025 (IATA, 2023). Similarly, International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)'s "Air Transport Gender Equality Initiative" which aims to increase women's representation in the industry (ICAO, 2023). In addition, studies are advocating for the industry to gather and disseminate workforce data to pinpoint underrepresented groups and assess the efficacy of initiatives aimed at enhancing their representation (Lutte, 2021).

Communicating DEI practices with stakeholders is vital as it conveys to customers, investors, employees, and others, that the company values diversity and provides fair treatment and inclusiveness to individuals from various social identity groups (Hayles, 2014; Pompper, 2024). When stakeholders see that the company values DEI, they are more likely to provide support in the form of resources such as capital, revenue, and job applicants (Ali & Konrad, 2017). Companies can communicate with their external stakeholders through various channels including annual and financial statements, company website, press releases, and social media. In addition, they communicate with their internal stakeholders through e-mail newsletters, intranet, town hall meetings, and in-person meetings (Cornelissen, 2014).

Although DEI is becoming increasingly crucial for airlines, no previous research has been conducted to explore airlines' DEI strategies. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the DEI strategies of airlines through their official statements. We assume that companies do what they state and state what they do in their external communications. More specifically, by exploring their official statements, our objective is to analyse the prioritization of DEI issues and assess the implementation of equity and inclusivity practices by airlines. We will then create a scorecard to rank the airlines based on their performance in DEI management, highlighting the best and poorest

performers. In this way, we'll reveal the general understanding of this concept in the airline industry and provide recommendations for airlines to improve their DEI practices. The study also aims to help organizations learn from the experience of others and identify areas for improvement in their own DEI practices. The outcomes will prove beneficial not only for the aviation industry but for other industries as well.

2. Literature Review

The DEI concept is founded on the conviction that cultivating a diverse and inclusive culture is crucial for attaining business goals (Garcia-Alonso et al., 2020). The concept's initial emergence is thought to be during the civil rights movement of the 1960s addressing only a narrow area, such as race or gender. Its scope has expanded over the years to encompass a wide range of areas, including age, sexual orientation, political belief, organizational role, education, talent, and beyond (Rosenkranz et al., 2021).

Diversity Wheel is a visual representation created by Loden and Rosener (1991) to help facilitate discussions about various types of diversity and present different categories in a graphical format. Since its inception, the model has been enhanced and expanded upon by Gardenswartz and Rowe (2003), who have incorporated additional levels to make it more comprehensive.

The Diversity Wheel model covers multiple facets of diversity, such as personality, internal characteristics, external factors, and organizational elements. The "Personality" aspect of the model refers to an individual's personal preferences, values, and beliefs. These are formed early in life and continue to shape one's experiences and career choices throughout their lifetime. The "Internal dimensions" category encompasses characteristics that are not easily changed and are the basis for many diversity initiatives, such as race, age, gender, ethnicity, physical ability, and sexual orientation, and these are uncontrolled aspects that create divisions among people. External dimensions of the model include geographic location, income, personal habits, recreational habits, religion and spirituality, educational background, work experience, appearance, parental status, and marital status, all of which can be controlled and may change over time. These aspects usually form the basis for decisions regarding careers and work styles. Lastly, the "Organizational dimensions" aspect of the Diversity Wheel concerns the culture within a work setting, and it consists of functional level/classification, work content/field, division/department/unit, seniority, work location, union affiliation and management status (Akinnusi et al., 2017; Velasco et al., 2016; Novak & Vipiana, 2024).

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are interconnected and mutually dependent concepts. All components must be considered and addressed together to create a truly inclusive environment. As indicated by studies, diversity without inclusion is regarded as tokenism, a practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to include members of minority groups, rather than creating an environment in which they are truly accepted and valued. In the context of DEI, tokenism refers to

hiring or promoting individuals from underrepresented groups to meet diversity quotas or only to prevent criticism and give the appearance that people are being treated fairly (Tokenism, n.d.). When this happens, token employees may feel isolated and disconnected from the rest of the organization. The objective of DEI is to create a sense of belonging for all individuals, which is essential for fulfilling the basic human need for safety, respect, and engagement (Baumeister & Leary, 2015; Samuel et al., 2025).

The significance of having DEI in the workplace has gained more recognition. Organizations have started implementing different DEI initiatives to promote fairness and equal opportunities and create a more inclusive work environment (Ali & Konrad, 2017; Patnaik & Shukal, 2020; Richard et al., 2013; Yang & Konrad, 2011). Some of these initiatives are collecting and analysing data on their workforce through anonymous surveys (Heath et al., 2022), offering DEI training for staff, monitoring various recruitment, promotion and pay policies (Armstrong et al., 2010), launching mentorship programs (Reeves, 2022), and setting DEI policies (Narin & Temel Eginli, 2016; Burnett & Aguinis, 2024).

Research has demonstrated that DEI management can lead to various beneficial outcomes. To begin with, DEI practices foster a more inclusive organizational culture, wherein individuals of all ages, genders, regions, religions, and educational backgrounds are treated equitably, have access to equal opportunities, and participate equally in decision-making (Shore et al., 2017). In addition, Downey et al. (2015) found that the adoption of DEI practices promotes higher levels of employee trust and engagement, resulting in increased retention and productivity. DEI initiatives help companies develop strong relationships with employees, support their professional growth, and enhance overall job performance (Rosenkranz et al., 2021). Also, effective DEI management provides a competitive edge by attracting and retaining diverse talent, fostering a wider range of perspectives, promoting organizational learning and innovation (Bassett-Jones, 2005; Okatta et al., 2024), and organizational enhancing adaptability in fast-changing environments (Kyriakidou et al., 2016; Raghvendra & Vijayendra, 2024). Similarly, researchers have discovered that implementing these practices can positively affect organizational profitability by boosting employees' creativity and innovativeness, improving problem-solving and decision-making abilities, and decreasing turnover and absenteeism costs (Armstrong et al., 2010; Carter et al., 2010; Kandola, 1995; Yang & Konrad, 2011; Chukwudi et al., 2023). Moreover, DEI has been an important tool for companies to showcase their identity and align with the values of their customers (Ferraro et al., 2022).

In addition to the pragmatic motivations, organizations invest in DEI to leverage organizational legitimacy (Dancaster & Baird, 2016; Gyapong et al., 2016; French, 2001; Yang & Konrad, 2011; Roberson, 2025). Legitimacy is "a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). In other words, organizational legitimacy is the degree to which a company's actions are accepted by society. It is attained through the adoption of specific structures, beliefs, and behaviors that are shaped by cultural and social factors in the organization's

external environment (Suchman, 1995). These factors can be categorized into regulative, normative, and mimetic institutional forces, as defined by scholars such as DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Scott (2001). Normative forces are concerned with the ethical and prescriptive aspects of organizational behavior, based on the norms and values established by institutions like professional or industry associations (Suchman, 1995). Regulatory pressure on organizations emphasizes the need for compliance with rules, policies, and laws (Scott, 2001). Mimetic pressure arises in uncertain environments, when an organization mimics the behaviours and strategies of others it perceives as successful and legitimate (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Suchman (1995) identified three strategies to establish legitimacy. The first is to comply with the dictates of legitimate bodies. The second approach involves going beyond compliance, but not making significant changes to the status quo. An example is an organization that supports a diversity network but doesn't take action to address internal diversity inequalities. The third approach involves altering the environment by convincing people to embrace the new reality through communication for DEI, demonstrating indicators of success, advocating for the new values, and institutionalizing the revised structure (Singh & Point, 2009).

Although there are many benefits of the concept, implementing DEI initiatives in the workplace can be challenging and require a significant amount of work and commitment. Effective ways to implement DEI requires collecting and analysing diverse employee data, identifying barriers against the inclusion of individuals with diverse background, offering training on DEI, and promoting employee involvement and feedback (SHRM, 2023). In addition, it is essential to establish specific DEI objectives and key performance indicators (KPIs) and create a roadmap with specific actions to achieve them and measure success (US Chamber, 2023). It is also vital to define how progress will be tracked and sustained (Gallup, 2023).

Most importantly, the DEI efforts become more credible and likely to be supported when the DEI communication approach and methods are carefully planned and executed (Hayles, 2014). Leaders are increasingly expected by a variety of stakeholders to communicate about DEI issues. Major companies such as Apple, Tesla, Google, and Netflix have committed publicly to DEI statements and initiatives. For instance, Google gathers one of the largest datasets about diversity and inclusion in their sector and shares it openly (Diversio, 2023). Communicating DEI practices with stakeholders is vital, as it affirms the company's dedication to creating an inclusive work environment that embraces individuals with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints (Ali & Konrad, 2017). A well-crafted DEI communication strategy demonstrates a commitment to meeting the needs of diverse communities (University of Minnesota, 2023). When stakeholders see that the company values DEI, they are more likely to provide support in the form of resources such as capital, revenue, and job applicants. It helps to educate the stakeholders, receive favorable evaluations, and influence the way the public perceives the organization (Singh & Point, 2009).

Studies have shown that DEI communication is extremely important for employees. For instance, studies found that roughly 80% of employees expect their company to act on racism and social justice (e.g., Axios, 2021). Also, a significant majority of job seekers belonging to the millennial and Gen Z generations – 86% – consider workplace diversity to be a crucial factor when searching for a job (Washingtonpost, 2021). Moreover, almost half of these job seekers – 48% – were inclined to apply for jobs with organizations that have released a public statement of their commitment to DEI (Ziprecruiter, 2020).

In general, companies apply two types of discourse to their corporate DEI communications. They present either expositive or narrative messages in character (Murphy et al., 2013). Expositive (semantic, rational) perspectives are primarily focused on the presentation of logical arguments, numerical data, and statistics (Kaufman, 2003). These messages do not go any deeper into the reality behind those numbers. In contrast, narrative messages utilize storytelling to engage with the audience. This type of messaging creates emotional links between stakeholders and the company (Escalas, 2004; Gill, 2011; Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010). It is based on the assumption that individuals are more inclined to think narratively rather than in an expositive way. Therefore, narrative discourses are expected to result in better audience responses and stronger engagement than expositive discourses (Kaufman, 2003; Lundqvist et al., 2013; Zak, 2014).

Aviation provides services to a diverse range of communities worldwide due to its global reach (Sobieralski & Hubbard, 2019). Airlines also typically employ a diverse workforce from different backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, and genders and with varying levels of education and experience (Airlines for America, 2023). Therefore, the aviation industry is particularly in need of addressing DEI. Consequently, with this study, we aim to investigate the DEI strategies of airlines through their official statements. More specifically, our goal is to evaluate how airlines prioritize and put into action equity and inclusivity practices related to DEI issues, by examining their official statements. Using this information, we'll create a scorecard to compare and rank airlines based on their DEI management performance, highlighting the best and poorest performers. Lastly, we will provide recommendations for airlines to improve their DEI practices and create a more inclusive environment.

3. Methodology

In this study, DEI practices were examined in the airline industry by analysing annual reports, official documents (e.g., Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reports like American Airlines (2021), Delta Air Lines (2021), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports like Aeroflot (2021), Air China. (2022), and website content like Qatar Airways (2019), AirAsia (2021) from a sample of major airlines (For additional sources and details, see Appendix 1). The selection of major airlines was based on their ranking among the top 100 airlines with the highest Available Seat Kilometres (ASK), which is an industry metric. This metric consists of an airline's total available seating capacity and flight distance to reflect operational scale and market presence of airline.

DEI-related data from the websites and reports of a sample of the top 100 airlines with the highest Available Seat Kilometres (ASK) was collected from OAG, a flight database and statistics provider (OAG, 2023). The study applied a combination of manual coding and text mining techniques using computer-assisted software “R” to identify the presence and representation of DEI-related themes, policies, and initiatives.

Computer-assisted software has several benefits for qualitative analysis, such as organizing and storing large volumes of data and enabling fast and efficient retrieval of relevant information (Garcia-Horta & Guerra-Ramos, 2009; De Graaf & van der Vossen, 2013). In addition, they enable a more objective and accurate coding process (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). However, relying only on computer-assisted analysis tools can have some disadvantages. For example, automated methods may struggle to recognize word meanings in different contexts (Matthes & Kohring 2008). On the other hand, human coders can distinguish between different meanings (Conway, 2006). In addition, by relying only on computer software, the researcher becomes distant from their data (Zamawe, 2015), which leads to non-reflexive coding (Garcia-Horta & Guerra-Ramos, 2009). Manual coding involves a cyclical process of reading, coding, grouping, and interpreting data, which is essential for gaining insights and developing theories (Maher et al., 2018). The researcher’s interaction with the data is essential in this regard. A manual approach allows for a slower and more thoughtful interaction with the data, enabling reflection and meaningful interpretation (Maher et al., 2018; Rademaker et al., 2012). Ultimately, manual coding allows researchers to structure their observations and interpretations into coherent and meaningful theories (Saldaña, 2021). Especially in our case, the system cannot identify which action plans, policies, procedures, and processes can be considered under equity and inclusion. Thus, the researcher’s judgment is needed to determine the themes. For all these reasons, the computer-aided tool is supported by manual coding.

4. Findings

Before conducting computer-assisted software analysis, the data pre-processing steps were implemented, including error identification and correction, removal of missing values, and data normalization (James et al., 2013). The first step was to clean it by removing duplicates and irrelevant information and ensuring no typos or inconsistencies. The data was then standardized by converting it to a common scale, such as standardizing numerical values or converting text to lowercase, to ensure consistency in the formatting. Then, stop words like “the,” “a,” and “and” were removed from the data, and all words were reduced to their base form by lemmatization. After the dataset was prepared for analysis, a combination of manual coding and text-mining techniques was used to identify themes and patterns in the content. A variety of tools and packages were used for analysis, including word processors, spreadsheet software, and text mining software.

As a first step of computer-assisted software analysis, word frequencies in the data were computed. The most common words were diversity, employee, inclusion, workplace, women, companies,

people, support, and management. The top ten bigrams were diversity_inclusion, equity_inclusion, diversity_equity, equality_opportunity, people_disability, gender_diversity, team_member, work_environment, diversity_equality, and management_level.

Wordclouds are a popular visual representation of text data that can be used to identify the most frequently occurring words in a dataset. This type of representation can be generated using word frequency information and is particularly useful for identifying the main themes or topics in a text dataset (Feinerer & Hornik, 2015). Frequencies of words were visualized with R package of “word-cloud” (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Wordcloud

After pre-processing the text data and generating a word-cloud, the coherence score was calculated to assess the quality of the resulting topics. Coherence score is an important metric for evaluating the performance of topic models, as it measures the degree to which the words in each topic are semantically related (Mimno et al., 2011). A high coherence score indicates that the words in a topic are conceptually related and form a coherent topic, while a low score suggests that the topic is not well-formed. Additionally, a coherence score can be used to compare different topic models and identify the one that best captures the underlying structure of the text data (Newcombe & McAuliffe, 2017; Röder et al., 2015). Based on the measure, six was the most appropriate number of topics (Figure 2).

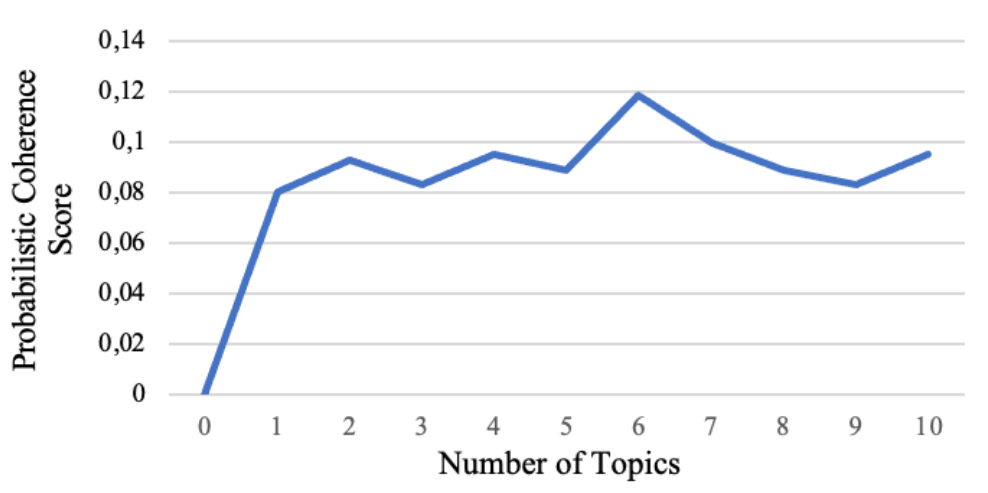


Figure 2. Probabilistic Coherence Score vs. Number of Topics

After deciding on the number of topics according to coherence scores, the next step in topic modelling was to identify the specific content of each topic. One common approach is to examine the most frequent words associated with each topic and use those words to label and interpret the topic (Feinerer & Hornik, 2015). This allows for a more detailed understanding of the themes or concepts represented by each topic and can be used to inform further analysis or interpretation of the text data. The most frequent five words under six topics were identified (Table 1.).

Table 1. Optimal Topics and Related Keywords

Topic_1	women, career, program, support, communication
Topic_2	employee, disability, policy, workplace, employee right
Topic_3	pay gap, gender, cabin crew, award, council
Topic_4	board management, diversity, women director, executive level, position
Topic_5	equality, diversity, equal opportunities, promotion, discrimination
Topic_6	inclusion, diversity, talent, team, strategy

To ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, data was cross-checked manually. In addition, to identify the airlines' equity and inclusion practices addressing individual diversity items and to explore DEI best practices, manual coding was conducted. The emerging codes were into larger categories and then into larger themes (Maher et al., 2018). To increase validity and decrease bias, a second researcher did the same analysis independently and came up with the same result.

It was found that almost half of the airlines in the sample had DEI-related content on their websites or reports (49 out of 100), but the level of detail and the specific themes covered varied significantly. Among them, the most addressed diversity item was gender diversity with 96% of the companies, followed by disability with 47% and gender identity or LGBTIQ+ individuals with 38.7%. The rest of the mentioned diversity items and the % of airlines addressing them can be found in Figure 3.

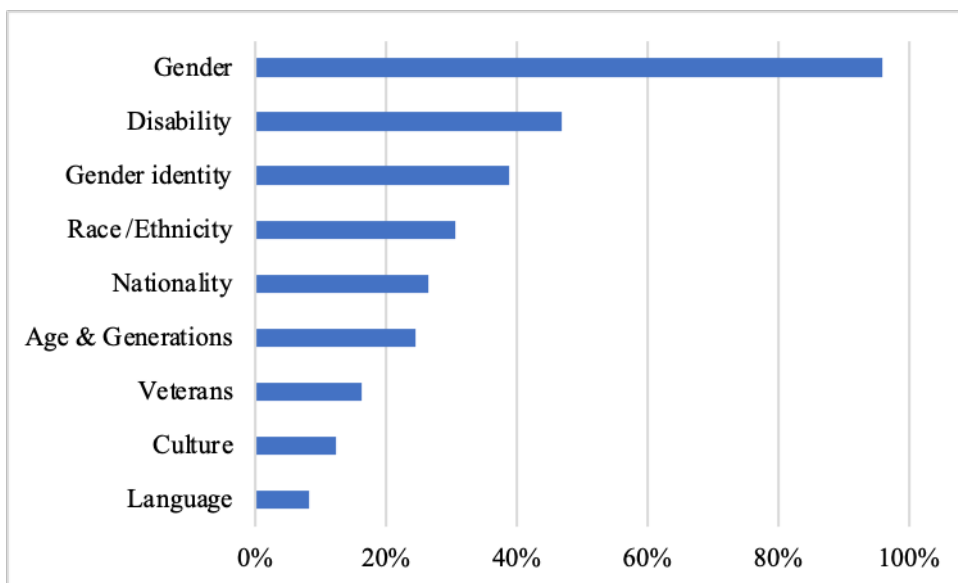
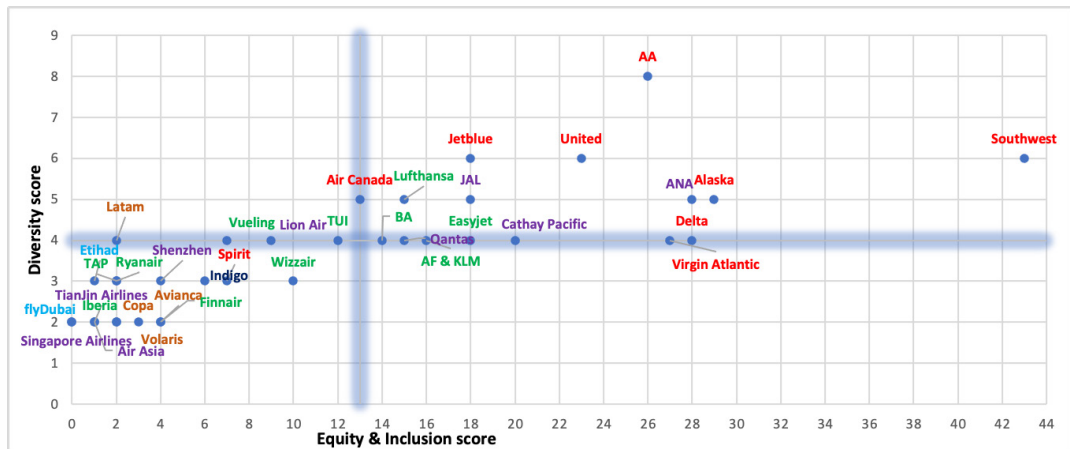


Figure 3. Most Addressed Diversity Items

The findings also revealed that although some airlines mentioned several diversity items, they lack equity and inclusion practices that address them (43 out of 49). Then, the airlines were categorized based on their DEI practices. Each company's equity and inclusion scores were calculated. The diversity score represented the sum of diversity categories that the airline addressed. Equity and inclusion score represented the number of equity and inclusion practices adopted by the airline. Points were awarded for each diversity item addressed, as well as each equity and inclusion practice, with a score of 1 point per item. For instance, if an airline addressed both gender and race diversity, they received a score of 2 points. Similarly, if the airline had established five practices aimed at promoting gender equality, they received a score of 5 points. The final score for each company was the sum of all their individual equity and inclusion scores for each diversity item. The resulting scores were then plotted and visualized in Figure 4. The x-axis represented the diversity score, and the Y-axis represented the equity and inclusion score. To have a more meaningful picture, companies getting 0 and 1 (very low scores) were eliminated.



*Colours of the airline represent the region they are located in (E.g. red coloured ones are located in the North American region)

Figure 4. DEI Scorecard

As can be seen, Southwest stood out as an outlier in terms of both followed by some airlines located in the US and Far East.

5. Discussion and Managerial Implications

Although some airlines demonstrate awareness and implementation of DEI and openly communicate about it, their efforts still fall short. While half of the airlines in our sample assert their commitment to promoting diversity, the majority only focus on gender, indicating a limited understanding of other diversity dimensions and a lack of a holistic approach to DEI. Some merely mention diversity in their official reports to appear concerned and gain legitimacy while lacking genuine effort (Suchman, 1995). Many only states a policy against discrimination based on race, religion, or gender without further detail. Similarly, some airlines' dedication to diversity is primarily motivated by normative pressures, such as IATA's gender equality initiative. As Suchman (1995) defined, their actions are limited to adhering to the expectations of established legitimate bodies such as IATA and ICAO. They profess their commitment to diversity but fail to publicly disclose their employee demographics or methods for achieving and measuring it. It is, however, insufficient to merely mention their compliance with DEI principles without providing evidence of their efforts in this regard.

On the other hand, some companies acknowledge various (if not all) dimensions of diversity and openly share their diverse employee statistics. Still, their approach is narrow in scope as many did not fully address the DEI concept. So, they move beyond conformity without changing much from before (Suchman, 1995). Examples are those airlines that only provide support for diverse

communities (e.g., Women, Black/African American, and individuals with disabilities community partners) without commitment to tackle the unequal diversity relations within the organization. As per the literature, having diversity without equity and inclusion is tokenism, which is merely checking a box. It is crucial to ensure that individuals from underrepresented groups are not just hired or promoted to meet diversity quotas or to avoid criticism. Sadly, only a few airlines genuinely tackle the equity and inclusion aspects of DEI management.

Moreover, it was examined that the emphasis of DEI concepts varied among airlines depending on their region. For instance, race is emphasized more by airlines in the USA which might be due to the country's history of slavery and institutionalized racism that continues to affect people of colour today. However, racial discrimination and inequality exist worldwide, and it is a problem that needs to be addressed globally.

Although the number is limited, several airlines excel in communicating their overall DEI strategies. Some provide informative messages using rational arguments, statistics, and facts (Kaufman, 2003), such as Ryanair, Copa, Iberia, and Lufthansa. Others go beyond and engage other stakeholders, such as employees, community partners, and suppliers, by sharing their stories, photos, and experiences. Examples are Southwest, Air Canada, Alaska, ANA, Delta, and Qantas. These airlines use narrative messages and storytelling to foster emotional connections with their audience (Escalas, 2004; Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010) and are also among the top-performing airlines in terms of DEI scores. They are the ones that make the change, persuade people with their explanations, provide indicators of success, and advocating for the new values (Singh & Point, 2009).

The results also indicate that many airlines primarily concentrate on DEI within their workforce, with less focus on external communities. Some companies have excelled in this area by embracing diversity in the communities they serve through celebrations of special historical events (e.g., International Women's Day, Black History Month, International Day of Persons with Disabilities, LGBTQ Pride Month, etc.), supporting charities, foundations and sports teams representing minority groups, offering scholarships to minority colleges and universities, and collaborating with minority-owned businesses.

6. Recommendations

The results of the examination of 100 airlines revealed that the number of airlines that have current practices on DEI is not sufficient, and there is a need for further progress in this area. Considering the research findings, the following recommendations are derived.

Research has demonstrated that DEI management can lead to various beneficial outcomes such as attracting and retaining diverse talents, enhancing organizational learning and innovation, improving organizational adaptability (Kyriakidou et al., 2016), and enhancing employee trust,

engagement, and retention (Downey et al., 2015; Rosenkranz et al., 2021). Thus, airline companies should improve their efforts in DEI management.

The initial recommendation is that gender is just one aspect of diversity, indicating a necessity for airlines to broaden their diversity discourses, practices, and strategies. In addition, while it is important to consider the specific institutional actors and circumstances affecting each company and incorporate them into DEI strategies, global issues should not be overlooked. For instance, racial discrimination and inequality exist worldwide, a problem that needs to be addressed globally.

Results have also shown that although numerous airlines emphasize diversity, they often fail to embrace equity and inclusion, which are integral components of the overall DEI concept. Creating and implementing equitable policies, offering diversity training, encouraging and providing equal opportunities, promoting inclusive communication for DEI, and regularly evaluating DEI efforts are some strategies to expand the focus beyond diversity to include equity and inclusion.

Effective ways to implement DEI in the workplace requires collecting and analysing diverse employee data, establishing specific DEI objectives and key performance indicators, fostering an inclusive work environment, identifying barriers against the inclusion of individuals with a diverse background, offering training on DEI, promoting employee involvement and feedback (SHRM, 2023). To gain a better understanding of their employees' experiences and identify any biases or issues related to diversity, it is suggested that organizations collect and analyse data on their workforce through anonymous surveys. This can help them to develop the right strategies to achieve equality (Heath et al., 2022). DEI Wheel model can serve as a starting point for airlines to identify various diversity categories. In addition, the equity and inclusion actions taken by airlines for guidance to help them improve their DEI strategies. This table can be used not only by airlines but by other companies as well since these practices can be adapted to any industry.

It is also important that the DEI concept is supported by a corporate policy. DEI policy can help airlines to indicate the company's stance on DEI and its actions for promoting it. A prepared policy should outline all concrete steps to become a more diverse and inclusive workplace and make the company accountable for its DEI-related actions.

Another suggestion is related to the scope of the strategies in practice. The examination of the DEI practices of airline companies has revealed that the initiatives are primarily focused on employees, and this limited approach is insufficient. Thus, to achieve greater impact and substantial and measurable change, the DEI strategy should also encompass all stakeholders, including business partners, customers, members, volunteers, employees, or other individuals who live and work in the area where the organization operates and may be affected by its actions.

Most important, organizations should effectively communicate their DEI commitment and efforts to gain credibility and support (Hayles, 2014). A successful DEI statement would affirm the company's dedication to creating an inclusive work environment that embraces individuals

with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints (Ali & Konrad, 2017). Studies have shown that DEI communication is vital for employees as they expect their employers to address issues such as racism and social justice and consider workplace diversity an important factor when choosing a job (Axios, 2021; Washingtonpost, 2021; Ziprecruiter, 2020).

A successful DEI statement should clearly explain the significance of DEI to the company, its impact on business goals, and the company's role in society, as well as the steps taken to promote DEI through planned activities. It is essential to have a clear roadmap with defined actions and KPIs to track progress and measure success (US Chamber, 2023). It is also vital to define how progress will be tracked and sustained (Gallup, 2023). In addition to providing facts and actions on DEI, companies may also consider storytelling to foster emotional connections with their audience (Escalas, 2004; Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010). The methods used to communicate DEI strategies can vary depending on the company's goals and target audience. However, companies need to be transparent and consistent in their DEI communications to build trust and ensure accountability.

Lastly, although initiatives such as IATA's 25by25 are a good start, they are narrow in scope. Instead, authorities can enforce regulations requiring companies to regularly monitor and report their diversity metrics and DEI actions and provide DEI training. The regulative (or coercive) pressure on organizations that would make it obligatory for companies to monitor and present information about their DEI efforts may guarantee fair opportunities and treatment for all employees.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated the DEI strategies of airlines through their official statements, including annual reports, ESG reports, CSR reports, and website content from the top 100 airlines with the highest ASKs. More specifically, the aim was to analyse the prioritization of DEI issues and to assess the implementation of equity and inclusivity practices by airlines. Then a scorecard was developed to rank the airlines based on their DEI management performance. The results revealed there is a lack of holistic comprehension of DEI and a lack of knowledge of diversity dimensions. Some merely mention diversity to appear concerned and gain legitimacy while lacking genuine effort. Likewise, many only state a policy against discrimination without elaboration. Similarly, some airlines' commitment to diversity is mainly driven by normative forces, such as IATA's gender equality initiative. They profess their commitment to diversity but fail to publicly disclose their employee demographics or methods for achieving and measuring it. It is, however, insufficient to merely mention their compliance with DEI principles without providing evidence of their efforts in this regard.

Although some companies acknowledge various dimensions of diversity and openly share their diverse employee statistics, their approach is narrow in scope as many did not fully address the DEI concept. Only a few airlines genuinely tackle the equity and inclusion aspects of DEI management. It was also examined that the emphasis of DEI concepts varied among airlines depending on their region. Airlines are also diverse in their DEI communication tactics. Some airlines provide

informative messages using rational arguments, statistics, and facts, and others go beyond and use narrative messages and storytelling to foster emotional connections with their audience. In addition, many airlines primarily concentrate on DEI within their workforce, with less focus on external communities.

Several recommendations are provided based on the results. First, airlines' diversity discourses, practices, and strategies should be extended, and the focus should not be only on gender. In addition, while it is essential to consider the specific institutional actors and circumstances affecting each company and incorporate them into DEI strategies, global issues (such as race discrimination) should not be overlooked. Moreover, diversity, equity, and inclusion are interrelated but distinct concepts that need to be considered individually. Creating and implementing equitable policies, collecting, and analysing data on the workforce through anonymous surveys, offering diversity training, encouraging and providing equal opportunities, promoting inclusive communication for DEI, and regularly evaluating DEI efforts are some strategies to expand the focus beyond diversity to include equity and inclusion. Also, effective ways to implement DEI in the workplace requires collecting and analysing diverse employee data, establishing specific DEI objectives and key performance indicators, identifying barriers against the inclusion of individuals with diverse background, offering training on DEI, and promoting employee involvement and feedback (SHRM, 2023). It is also vital that the DEI concept is supported by a corporate policy that can help outline all concrete steps to become a more diverse and inclusive workplace and makes the company accountable for its DEI-related actions. To achieve greater impact and substantial and measurable change, the DEI strategy should also encompass all stakeholders, including business partners, customers, members, volunteers, employees, or others who live and work in the area where the organization operates and may be affected by its actions. Organizations should effectively communicate their DEI commitment and efforts to gain credibility and support (Hayles, 2014). In addition to providing facts and actions on DEI, companies may also consider storytelling to foster emotional connections with their audience (Escalas, 2004; Gill, 2011; Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010). Moreover, authorities are recommended to enforce regulations requiring companies to regularly monitor and report their diversity metrics and DEI actions and provide DEI training. Lastly, the equity and inclusion actions taken by the airlines listed can be utilized for guidance to help them improve their DEI strategies. The study would help organizations learn from the experience of others and identify areas for improvement in their own DEI practices. The outcomes will prove beneficial not only for the aviation industry but for other industries as well.

This study also has some limitations. First, equal weight was assigned to each DEI related variable (actions) during the evaluation of DEI practices of airline companies, which was done by analysing their websites and relevant reports. Future research could involve determining the significance of each DEI variable by assigning weightage to them. This is because the effect of each variable on the organization may be different depending on factors like the industry, and culture. Another limitation of the study is that it only assessed the commitments made by companies regarding DEI.

Further investigation is needed to comprehensively understand the extent to which companies are taking concrete actions on this issue. Therefore, one suggestion for future research is that a direct examination of practitioners through personal interviews (structured or semi-structured) may prove to be insightful, as their perspectives have not been previously expressed academically.

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