

All Aboard: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Sea Transport Sector

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Abstract

Although greater public awareness has forced firms to take a more proactive approach to transparent communication and disclosure, it is often difficult to verify the quality of the information provided. This paper explores the characteristics of language which can act as indicators of transparency and focuses on the information about the promotion and practice of Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) which has become a business imperative in the wake of recent social movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo.

A corpus of texts dealing with the question of DEI have been extracted from various sections of the websites and the latest CSR reports of ferry and cruise operators. The texts will be examined adopting a corpus-assisted, quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis approach to gain insights into the linguistic and discursive strategies adopted to present the information. The results of the analysis show a great disparity in the attention paid to the topic of DEI, in the amount of space dedicated to it, the clarity and accuracy of the information being given.

Keywords: DEI, Transparency, Corporate communication

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades the promotion and practice of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion have become imperative in the corporate world (Murphy, 2018). There are basically two arguments

that can spur companies to promote DEI: firstly, the business case to gain and maintain a competitive advantage and secondly, the justice case based on moral and ethical considerations, also known as the utilitarian and deontological arguments respectively (Wolfgruber et al., 2021). However, in the wake of recent social movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, firms are under mounting pressure from stakeholders to take a leading role in achieving greater social equality.

Although there is broad recognition of DEI as a fundamental value in society, it is a complex concept, with each of its three components having a specific, but at times contrasting focus. Diversity refers to individuals' physical and sociocultural differences, classified in terms of surface level characteristics (gender, race, physical disabilities, which are clearly visible) and deep level characteristics (beliefs, religion, some kinds of disabilities which will not be visible) (Ponton, 2015, p. 5). It is to be hoped that the workforce of an organization or company reflect the demography of society. Inclusion involves fostering a culture where individuals feel supported and valued. It "is about celebrating difference as an asset, since everyone is unique, and recognising that everyone can make a contribution." (Evans, 2006, p. 26, cited in Oswick and Noon, 2014, p. 26). It may be questionable whether these two aspects are compatible (Jonsen et al., 2016, p. 6) since diversity encourages differences in thinking, whereas inclusion may push in the opposite direction as employee branding promotes a homogenous workforce and way of operating (Breeze, 2013, p. 78). Equity is concerned with treating everyone justly according to their circumstances, providing the resources and opportunities needed to reach the same outcome as people from more advantaged groups. It is "an ideal and measurable outcome of diversity and inclusion in action" (Ferraro et al., 2023, p. 464).

Another topic of interest in corporate communication that has come to the fore in recent years is the question of transparency. Originally studied in the context of political and financial disclosure, it has also drawn the attention of business and management scholars as it is regarded as an essential factor in building trust (Rawlins, 2008). A broad definition of transparency was proposed by Heise (1985, p. 209, cited in Rawlins, 2008, p. 6) when he identified its basic principles as making "available publicly all legally releasable information – whether positive or negative in nature – in a manner which is accurate, timely, balanced, and unequivocal". However, as Wehmeier (2018, p. 1659) points out, the emphasis should not be just on the availability and openness of information in "a linear sender-oriented perspective", but also on the quality of the communication.

Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2016) draw on previous studies of transparency and identify three essential dimensions of transparency, namely disclosure, clarity and accuracy, "together they provide a parsimonious foundation upon which to study transparency" (p. 1791). Disclosure refers to the availability and accessibility of information, though they are not necessarily a guarantee of true transparency. Too much information may lead to "obfuscation" (Fisher & Hopp, 2020, p. 205) with an overload of information. Relevance therefore becomes a significant feature. Clarity, the understandability and coherence of the information being disclosed, with particular attention being given to the use of complex, highly specialised technical details that will be unintelligible and confusing to the non-expert. Here the focus falls on the linguistic resources and devices used to accomplish "the seamless

transfer of meaning from sender to receiver” (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016, p. 1793) and thus guarantee the complete comprehension of the communication. Lastly, accuracy is concerned with the correctness and reliability of the information, perhaps the most difficult dimension to verify. The receiver of the communication may not be in a position or have the necessary knowledge to evaluate the information and, given the highly promotional nature of corporate communication, what Coombs and Holladay call “self-interested discourse” (2013, p. 218), companies may be tempted to ‘manage’ information that could undermine, or even damage, their reputation. “Purposefully biased or unfoundedly contrived” information is not transparent (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016, p. 1793).

This paper aims to draw the two threads of DEI and transparency together to assess whether corporate communication about DEI is not just paying lip service to the expectations of the public at large, but rather demonstrates a sincere, effective and transparent commitment to DEI policies through precise and explicit information. DEI has been studied extensively in management and business studies from an organisational perspective (Mor Barak, 2005; Oswick & Noon, 2014), as indeed transparency (Coombs & Holladay, 2013; Fisher & Hopp, 2020; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). However, in both cases few linguistic studies have been made on how the topic of DEI is discursively constructed or the linguistic characteristics of discourse which may act as indicators of the degree of transparency in corporate communication.

The present study tries to fill this gap by focusing on the language used in the websites and CSR reports of ferry and cruise operators, both of which are fundamental channels of communication for companies to project a favourable corporate image. CSR reports are official documents produced by companies to record their activities and performance in the field of sustainability, whilst websites not only act as showcases, but also have the function of selling a product or service. Consequently, the addressees of these two informative and promotional texts may overlap, but these texts also target more specifically different stakeholders, such as investors or customers.

Unlike some sectors of the economy where the topic of DEI is dealt with extensively (Malavasi, 2023; Nocella, 2023; Turnbull, 2023), the transport sector, and in particular the maritime industry, is lagging far behind in adopting the values of DEI. Indeed, a recently published survey showed the maritime sector is still regarded as a male dominated industry (Nastali & Bartlett, 2022). It will therefore be particularly interesting to examine the characteristics of the language used by ferry and cruise operators in their websites and CSR reports that may indicate the degree, or lack, of transparency. As Fisher and Hopp (2020, p. 204) comment, transparency can be considered as a form of strategic communication.

2. Materials and Methodology

The maritime sector includes a very wide range of activities and companies, but, for the purpose of this research, it was decided to focus on ferry and cruise operators, since their clear connection with the tourism sector, especially in the case of cruise lines, means they provide a large variety of jobs both on board and on land, which may ‘encourage’ greater diversity and inclusion. Originally it was intended to select companies working in different

geographical, social and cultural contexts to compare possible different approaches to the topic and consequently different content. Whilst the selection of cruise lines, which usually operate on a global scale, was made from the leading companies in the field, only European ferry operators were included in the corpus. The reason for this is that ferry companies operate on a more local basis and are often small operators which do not publish sustainability reports or have only a small website to sell tickets without giving much, if any, information about the company. In Europe, however, there are quite a few larger companies in different geographical areas of the continent providing both website information and Corporate Social Reports.

The corpus consists of website pages dealing with the question of DEI (downloaded in January 2025) and the relevant sections of the most recently available corporate Reports (note 1) (Sustainability, ESG or Annual) of a selection of ferry and cruise operators (see Table 1). Texts about DEI may appear in various sections of websites, so the Homepage was first viewed for direct links to sections dealing with the topic such as About Us, Sustainability, People and Careers. The sites' search engines were then used to find other webpages dealing with the topic. Similarly certain parts of the CSR reports were extracted that could be expected to discuss or mention the question of DEI, namely the CEO's letter which serves as an introduction to the report and presents the main issues being tackled by the company, the Materiality Analysis, whose results "can help improve business practices, accountability and disclosure, and increase the effectiveness of the sustainability strategy" (<https://en.cubemos.com/sustainabilityglossary/materiality-analysis>), and lastly the section called Social or People.

Table 1. Corpus

Websites	Tokens	Reports	Tokens
Ferry operators			
DFDS Seaways (Denmark)	7727	ESG Review 2023	8268
ForSea ferries (Sweden)	-----	Sustainability Report 2022	3644
Grimaldi Lines (Italy)	1049	Sustainability Report 2023	1401
Irish ferries (Ireland)	6180	Annual Report 2023	9355
Moby Lines (Italy)	1453	–	-----
NorthLink ferries (UK)	318	–	-----
P&O ferries (UK)	3762	ESG Report 2023	6946
Stena Line (Sweden)	16,653	Sustainability Report 2022-23	878
Tallink (Estonia)	1173	Sustainability Report 2023	4997
Viking Line (Finland)	2201	Sustainability Report 2023	997

Cruise operators

Carnival Cruise Lines (USA)	1229	Sustainability Report 2023	5369
Costa (Italy/USA)	475	Sustainability Summary 2024	1956
Fred Olsen (UK)	728	Sustainability Report 2022	1170
Disney (USA)	1030	CSR Report 2022	-----
MSC (Switzerland/ Italy)	1077	Sustainability Report 2023	1823
NCLH Norwegian (USA)	1757	ESG Report 2023	6346
Royal Caribbean (USA)	568	ESG Report 2023	4897
Total	47,380		58,047

As can be seen from the number of tokens of each text in Table 1, there is a great disparity in the amount of space dedicated to the topic of DEI in both the websites and the Reports. Whilst some companies deal with the topic extensively, others barely touch upon it or not at all. This means that some lexical choices may be restricted to just a few, or even just one company. Furthermore, their attention to the topic may be concentrated more in one type of text and much less in the other, as for example Stena Line. However, two points need to be taken into consideration. Firstly, the companies in the study may or may not follow the GRI Guidelines which advise companies on how to draft their CSR Reports. As a consequence, the Reports vary enormously in length and consequently also the space that is dedicated to the topic of DEI. Secondly, the corpus contains extracts about DEI taken from a much larger corpus compiled for the study of transparency in corporate communication. The lack of homogeneity between the various subcorpora and the texts within each one depends on the attention given to the issue by the individual companies.

The texts have been examined adopting a corpus-assisted, quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis approach to gain insights into the linguistic and discursive strategies adopted to present the information. They have then been assessed from the perspective of transparency, following the three dimensions of Disclosure, Clarity and Accuracy as proposed by Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2016), as described in the Introduction.

3. Results

3.1 DEI in Websites: A Quantitative and Qualitative Overview

The discourse surrounding DEI has become a significant component of corporate communication. This section describes the linguistic strategies employed across cruise and ferry websites under investigation to understand how they present their commitment to DEI. The comparison is based on lexical choices to identify patterns, similarities, and differences in their approaches.

Starting with the cruise companies under investigation, a shared pattern among their websites is the frequent use of *diversity* (59 occ., 12th position), *inclusion* (27 occ., 28th position), and *inclusive* (19 occ., 44th position) scoring at the very top of the word list within the 100 positions. These terms often appear as part of formalized phrases such as *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)*. More specifically, cruise operators such as Carnival, Costa, Disney, MSC, NCHL, and Royal Caribbean consistently employ *diversity* and *inclusion*, emphasizing the importance of these values in the workplace and beyond. Fred Olsen is an exception, as it does not explicitly use these terms as frequently. Instead, it adopts an implicit approach by using alternative words such as *people, team, respect, and culture* to signal inclusivity without directly naming it.

Similarly, the terms *diversity* (161 occ.) and *inclusion* (73 occ.) appear in the ferry websites to align with workplace culture and corporate responsibility. They rank 31st and 68th respectively in the word list of the top 100 words in the corpus. For example, as the following extract shows, Tallink integrates diversity into a broader commitment to well-being. This positioning indicates an effort to normalize diversity as an inherent aspect of workplace culture rather than as an isolated initiative.

- (1) We nurture an environment and culture of health and general well-being, where diversity, joy, inclusion, and equality are at the forefront. (Tallink)

Interestingly, Viking Line explicitly defines *diversity*, extending beyond gender and ethnicity to include “age, sexual orientation, physical abilities, religion, beliefs, and behavior”. Conversely, there is a lack of explicit diversity language in ferry operators such as Grimaldi and Moby Lines, suggesting that while they may have general policies for employee well-being, they do not actively market diversity initiatives in their communication.

Another notable lexical trend is the differential emphasis on *women* versus *gender*. As regards the cruise websites, most of the occurrences of *women* appear in the Carnival website: 26 occurrences out of 28, especially in the context of career advancement and leadership initiatives. This suggests an emphasis on gender diversity with a specific focus on increasing female representation. As for *gender*, it occurs twelve times, mostly in MSC (5 occ.), followed by NCHL (3 occ.), Carnival (2 occ.). On the contrary, Costa, Disney, and Royal Caribbean tend to frame DEI in terms of multiculturalism and broad inclusivity rather than gender-specific initiatives. Fred Olsen demonstrates some awareness of gender diversity but uses alternative phrasings such as *team members* or *leaders* rather than explicitly mentioning gendered terms.

Interestingly, gender-specific language is absent in ferry websites such as Grimaldi and Moby Lines. The omission of gender discussions contrasts with best CSR practices, where gender inclusivity is a key pillar. On the contrary, the ferry operator Viking Line acknowledges gender balance as a hiring goal: “We shall achieve a more even distribution of women and men in different positions”, and P&O Ferries explicitly discusses *women* and *gender*, advocating for pay equity and leadership development. Statements such as “champions our women through initiatives that empower, mentor, and open doors of opportunity” reinforce a proactive stance on gender diversity.

Cruise and ferry companies also differ in their lexical choices when referring to the workforce. Disney, Costa, and Royal Caribbean frequently use *people* (12 occ.), and *communities* (9 occ.) to reinforce an inclusive and human-centric perspective. Fred Olsen and NCHL use *team members* (13 occ.) rather than *employees* (1 occ. in NCHL), emphasizing a sense of equality and reducing hierarchical connotations. Carnival and MSC prefer *employees* (7 occ.), maintaining a more traditional corporate tone.

The term *people* (189 occ.) is also frequently used in ferry companies as an umbrella term that encompasses employees, customers, and stakeholders. As the following example shows, *people* functions as an inclusive and unifying term, emphasizing interconnectivity between different groups. However, the lack of explicit reference to specific identity categories (e.g., gender) suggests a broad, rather than targeted, approach to DEI.

(2) We don't have a business without people, so our most important focus area must be the people who work at Tallink, the people who travel with us every day, the people who are our partners. (Tallink)

Similarly, P&O Ferries fosters a collective tone with phrases like “our people and our communities”. Viking Line’s Equal Opportunity Policy states, “We shall treat all people with respect, humanity, and dignity”, framing inclusion as an ethical imperative. Moby Lines primarily uses *people* in relation to accessibility for disabled passengers, emphasizing a service-oriented rather than workforce-focused DEI perspective.

Additionally, *people* is contrasted with *customers*, as exemplified in (3), that highlights the company’s dual responsibility: fostering internal inclusivity while ensuring external representation.

(3) Diversity means representing our people and our customers. (Stena Line)

Unlike *people*, the term *employees* is used in a more formalized sense in ferries, particularly in discussions about workforce management. It is associated with human capital (e.g., *Our success depends on the skills and quality of our employees*, Grimaldi), or it is used in the context of working conditions and well-being. The focus varies from emphasizing skills and quality to ensuring inclusive policies and maintaining a balance between corporate formality and human-centered language.

Interestingly, abstract nouns such as *diversity*, *inclusion*, *equity*, *belonging* frame DEI as fundamental principles rather than individual experiences. Cruise operators such as Disney and Royal Caribbean, for example, emphasize *people* and *communities*, shifting from abstract concepts to a collective identity-based approach.

Adjectives also play a key role in shaping corporate narratives around DEI. *Diverse* (cruises 26 occ., ferries 57 occ.), *inclusive* (cruises 19 occ., ferries 43 occ.), and *global* (cruises 13 occ., ferries 17 occ.) are commonly used across the cruise and ferry operators to describe workplaces, cultures, and corporate values.

Verb choices also reflect how companies position their DEI commitments. Cruise operators such as Carnival, Costa, and NCHL use action-oriented verbs such as *support* (20 occ.), *ensure*

(8 occ.), *strive* (5 occ.), *encourage* (4 occ.), which suggest an ongoing and proactive approach to diversity and inclusion, as the following example shows:

(4) Growing talent from within: We want to support the career development of our employees within our business. (MSC)

Similarly, ferry companies tend to use verbs such as *ensure*, *achieve*, *provide* that convey responsibility, goals, and engagement, as exemplified in (5) and (6). They emphasize structured policies and active intervention to foster DEI.

(5) [...] ensure a healthy and safe working environment. (Grimaldi)

(6) We shall achieve a more even distribution of women and men in different types of jobs. (Viking Line)

These choices suggest that they are not merely stating values but are taking concrete steps to implement them in workplace policies and culture. This proactive verb use reinforces the organization's dedication to creating a fair and inclusive environment for all employees.

While all cruise and ferry companies highlight diversity and inclusion, their linguistic strategies differ based on branding, corporate values, and target audiences. Companies that use action-oriented verbs and direct language position DEI as an ongoing commitment. Others employ a more neutral and corporate tone. These linguistic choices not only shape public perception of corporate commitment to DEI but also influence how employees and stakeholders interpret these values within their respective organizations.

3.2 DEI in Reports

This section of the analysis first provides an overview of the linguistic characteristics of DEI discourse in the CSR reports using a quantitative approach. Starting from the word list of the top 100 words in the corpus the first content word relevant to DEI to appear is *employees*, in 24th position (201 occurrences) which clearly reflects the focus of the reports on the question from an internal perspective. This is confirmed by the presence of *people* in 55th place (102 occ.), a term frequently used in corporate discourse to portray a personalized image of the company, followed by *crew* in 58th position (97 occ.) and *employee* in 60th (94 occ.). In contrast, *customers* (77 occ.) appears much further down in 80th position. The position of *women* and *gender* in 37th and 77th place with 154 and 79 occurrences respectively, show the prime concern of the reports is to deal with the question of serious underrepresentation of women in the sector, as highlighted in the Introduction. Other types of diversity, *disabilities*, *LGBTQ** and *age*, have few mentions, thus substantiating that the focus of the reports rests on the question of women.

It is interesting to note the position of the three words that are represented in the acronym DEI. *Diversity* ranks 45th with 127 occurrences, whilst the third element of DEI, *inclusion*, just manages to enter this word list in 98th position (65 occ.). But what is perhaps most striking is the absence of the other key words present in alternative interpretations of the *E* in the acronym, *equality* and *equity*, though they are the most frequent collocates of *diversity*. They rank only in 137th (54 occ.) and 264th position (33 occ.). The most frequent collocate of

equality is *gender* with 38 hits, while the most frequent for *equity* (after *diversity* and *inclusion* which always appear as a threesome to refer to DEI) is *pay* with 9 hits.

Although these words do not have as high frequencies as might be expected, a qualitative approach will illustrate more closely how DEI is discursively construed in the reports. Firstly, it is interesting to note where the topic is discussed, or rather at times simply ‘mentioned’ or referred to. As indicated in Section 2 the corpus is made up of extracts from various parts of the reports. The social aspects of sustainability are raised in the CEO’s letter of the cruise operators’ reports, at least hinting at the question of DEI if not directly referring to it:

(7) The other main ingredients of our strategy are an increasingly careful and mindful use of resources, an increasingly open and inclusive corporate culture, and the promotion of sustainable practices, including through high-value partnerships. (Costa, p. 2)

(8) In 2023, following listening sessions with team members, NCLH PRIDE was established as a new resource group for our LGBTQ+ community and its allies, as well as a new parent mentor program to offer support to working parents returning to the workforce following maternity and paternity leave. (NCLH, p. 4)

In contrast, the ferry operators do not even mention social issues in the CEOs’ letters, prioritizing economic and environmental questions. This difference may in part be explained by the type of Report that is published by the individual companies, but also because environmental questions are a major concern in shipping. The topic of DEI always appears in the graphs, tables and lists of priorities in materiality analyses wherever one is presented. In this way a company concedes the relevance of the topic without necessarily dealing with it in detail in the rest of the report. Nevertheless, some of the Reports are so short that they do not include this type of analysis.

The main discussion of DEI takes place in the People or Social section, to various extents and with a focus on different aspects of the question. Although the key words of DEI discourse have relatively low frequencies, their concepts are often conveyed through the use of their adjectival form:

(9) In collaboration with Wellbees, we designed a platform to cater to the diverse and individualised needs of our global team, offering an inclusive and personalised approach to wellbeing services across eight key pillars: Physical, Mental, Emotional, Spiritual, Social, Environmental, Financial and Occupational. (P&O, p. 38)

In this way the question of DEI is often subsumed into a more general discussion of the wellbeing of workers, suggesting that diversity and inclusion have already been realized as corporate objectives and values, and therefore are a ‘given’ in the company.

Similarly, the basic elements of DEI are suggested, intimated in an indirect way. For example, the concept of inclusion, which entails a sense of belonging and the possibility of making a real contribution to the company, is implied by words such as *team member*, (22 occ., though mostly concentrated in the NCLH report) and *colleagues* (22 occ.) which was more evenly

distributed across the reports of both the ferry and cruise operators. These words suggest the acceptance, integration and assimilation of all workers.

(10) With approximately 41,000 team members representing over 110 nationalities, we embrace the backgrounds, skills, passions and perspectives that our team members bring to our Company each day. (NCLH, p. 4)

(11) We build teamwork with colleagues; we help and encourage each other. (Tallink, p. 23)

When discussing DEI the language in the reports often reveals the typical rhetoric of corporate communication, with emotional, highly evaluative language:

(12) We champion a strong, inclusive, employee-focused culture. (Royal Caribbean, p. 58)

(13) With approximately 41,000 team members representing over 110 nationalities, we embrace the backgrounds, skills, passions and perspectives that our team members bring to our Company each day. (NCLH, p. 4)

(14) At ICG, we are unwavering in our commitment to fostering a positive working environment where every employee is respected, valued, and empowered to reach their full potential. We firmly believe that a diverse workforce enriches our organisation with a wide range of skills and experiences, enhancing our creativity and competitiveness. (Irish ferries, p. 47)

To corroborate their involvement in DEI policies and practices many companies give an explanation or justification for their promotion of diversity and inclusion. Business reasons seem to be the most frequent, though one company, P&O, also gives the moral reason, *the right thing to do*:

(15) We embrace diversity because we firmly believe that it fuels creativity by acknowledging the different mindsets that are so important for our continued growth. (ForSea, p. 23)

(16) At DP World we celebrate the infinitely richer and stronger culture that comes from diversity. To reflect within our Company the diversity of society we see externally is not only the right thing to do; it brings remarkable strength and opportunities to our business. We firmly believe that diverse teams are the bedrock of innovation, creativity and resilience – and are precisely what’s needed to tackle the multifaceted challenges in the business landscape. (P&O p. 60)

Costa conveys their reasons in the heading of a paragraph about DEI in a rather enigmatic way:

(17) Diversity is our wealth

We are a world that travels around the world. And we believe in a corporate model based on diversity and inclusion, in perfect harmony with all the cultures and the places we travel through and that we assimilate. (Costa, p. 12)

The use of the metaphor *wealth* refers to the richness in the variety of cultures and perspectives in the company, but it may also suggest the economic benefits that it may reap as a result.

3.3 DEI in Websites: A Discursive Perspective

The cruise and ferry websites under investigation employ a variety of discursive strategies to position DEI. However, a question arises: Do these companies genuinely integrate DEI into their mission, or is DEI merely a rhetorical tool for market appeal? By examining how the cruise and ferry lines frame DEI, we argue that while some companies embed DEI into their corporate ethos, others use it as a superficial branding exercise without substantive systemic change.

The manner in which cruise and ferry companies frame DEI reveals their underlying priorities. While some cruise companies view DEI as both a moral and business imperative (e.g., *We are a better and more successful company when the diversity of race, ethnicity, age, gender identity, culture, beliefs, and other backgrounds are celebrated*, Carnival), others integrate it into their identity, seeing diversity as an inherent part of their corporate culture rather than a separate initiative, as the following example shows. This divergence in approach highlights key debates about the effectiveness of DEI strategies and their role in fostering inclusion.

(18) While maintaining a clearly Italian identity, Costa has always had a multicultural soul, embodied by its ships' crews and guests, who create a "world that moves within the world". Diversity in terms of professionalism, multiculturalism and skills within the company are the hallmark of Costa's human capital. (Costa)

Another perspective within the cruise industry focuses on the concept of "belonging" rather than traditional DEI terminology. By emphasizing belonging, companies attempt to create a more unified and inclusive culture, ensuring that diversity always leads to practical inclusivity, as shown in the following example:

(19) Disney is proud to support voluntary, employee-led groups formed around shared identity, interests, and pursuits. These groups are a key component of nurturing a sense of employee belonging, visibility, and cultural understanding. (Disney)

Some cruise companies also treat diversity as a business asset, linking it directly to success, innovation, and growth, as the following examples show:

(20) The diversity of our teams is a key element in MSC Cruises' success. (MSC)

By embedding diversity in discussions about profitability and corporate strength, this framing attempts to make DEI indispensable to the company's long-term success. However, there is a risk that treating diversity purely as a business asset might lead to a focus on outcomes rather than meaningful inclusivity. If diversity is only valued for its economic benefits, companies may overlook the ethical responsibility of ensuring fair treatment and equal opportunities for all employees.

DEI strategies also vary across cruise companies, reflecting different priorities and approaches. Some take a proactive stance, using phrases like *deeply committed*, *actively fostering*, and *ensuring equity* or enhance credibility and transparency by providing quantitative data on workforce diversity and training efforts (e.g., *54.9% shoreside female employees*, *19.5% onboard female crew*, *300,000+ training hours*). Other companies diverge from formal corporate language, adopting a more personal and conversational approach to workplace culture. Core values such as caring, positivity, authenticity, and teamwork are highlighted, implicitly aligning with inclusive workplace principles. The phrase taken from Fred Olsen, *We respect and embrace all our different personalities and cultures* signals a commitment to diversity without explicitly using the term *diversity*. Instead of explicitly referencing diversity, the emphasis is placed on respecting and embracing different personalities and cultures, signaling a commitment to inclusivity without using conventional DEI terminology.

In the ferry industry, companies adopt different approaches to DEI. Some position DEI as a marker of industry leadership, linking it to corporate identity and competitive advantage through external endorsements and best practices. Others take an implicit approach, integrating DEI within broader corporate responsibility efforts but without clear articulation, reducing visibility and accountability. Some embed DEI within Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) commitments, highlighting its role in sustainable business but also risking diminished focus. Others emphasize DEI through corporate policies on equal opportunities and fair labor practices, though stronger benchmarks and public reporting could enhance accountability and progress.

In conclusion, the discourse surrounding DEI in the cruise and ferry industry reflects varying levels of commitment and authenticity. For diversity to be meaningful, companies must move beyond rhetoric and embed inclusion into decision-making processes. By comparing these different approaches, it is evident that explicit DEI framing and measurable commitments are essential for maximizing inclusivity and corporate accountability in the cruise and ferry industry.

3.4 Transparency in DEI Discourse

No matter what is said or claimed by companies, there remains the fact that women are heavily underrepresented in the maritime sector. It therefore leaves companies with a somewhat arduous task of communicating on this aspect. In this section the websites and the reports will be assessed from the perspective of transparency, following the three dimensions of Disclosure, Clarity and Accuracy as proposed by Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2016).

3.4.1 Transparency in DEI Discourse: The Case of Websites

Transparency in DEI communication is crucial for fostering inclusivity. Some ferry companies ensure that their DEI information is readily available, transparent, and easy to understand, as the following extract shows:

(21) Right now, we are about 25% women – considerably more on land than at sea. We are working to achieve our target of 30% females in DFDS by 2023, and the EMT is living up to this commitment already. (DFDS, CEO Torben Carlsen's statement)

This level of detail in leadership representation shows a strong effort toward accessibility and awareness of DEI efforts at DFDS.

This also the case for cruise companies that provide extensive information on its DEI initiatives. For example, Carnival details initiatives such as the Women Officer Network (W.O.N.), that states: *The Women Officer Network was established to bring women maritime officers onboard our ships together to create a community.* The company also uses named individuals, such as *Louise Sara*, adding a personal narrative and making the information engaging, as shown in the following example. This approach not only informs stakeholders but also personalizes DEI, making it relatable and impactful. By incorporating storytelling, the company enhances the effectiveness of its DEI messaging.

(22) Louise created the Women Officer Network at Carnival to inspire young women and connect current officers, through role modeling and mentoring. (Carnival)

Transparency is essential for credibility in DEI initiatives. Some companies fail to demonstrate a meaningful DEI commitment, either by providing minimal information or by lacking clear policies. This lack of transparency may lead to scepticism about the company's commitment to diversity and inclusion. One common shortcoming among ferry companies is the reliance on broad statements without accompanying data or concrete actions. For instance, Viking Line defines diversity in inclusive terms, stating that it encompasses:

(23) [...] age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and physical abilities as well as such differences as religion, beliefs and ways of thinking and behaving. (Viking Line)

However, such statements remain abstract if not supported by workforce statistics, employee experiences, or tangible initiatives. A commitment to diversity means little without proof of its implementation. Similarly, some operators promote external diversity accreditations, yet fail to disclose specific programs or measurable progress, creating an illusion of inclusivity without accountability.

Even when aspects of DEI are addressed, they are sometimes communicated poorly, leading to ambiguity. For example, accessibility - a key component of inclusivity - is mentioned by some companies, yet the information provided is often vague or difficult to comprehend. A particularly convoluted statement requires passengers with disabilities to notify the carrier at the time of ticket purchase about "their specific needs for accommodation for e.g. seat, the required service or the necessity of medical care to carry along as long as the need or requirement was known at this state of time" (Moby Lines). Such unclear phrasing raises concerns about whether accessibility policies are truly designed with the needs of passengers in mind or if they exist merely to meet minimum legal requirements.

Some ferry companies perform even worse by entirely omitting explicit DEI policies. Instead, they emphasize human capital and professional ethics without addressing diversity in a meaningful way. A statement taken from the ferry company Grimaldi that claims, "success depends on the skills and quality of employees, whether they operate at sea or ashore" highlights a company's reliance on its workforce, but fails to acknowledge the importance of

fostering an inclusive environment. Without specific references to equity, diversity, or inclusion, such statements appear generic and do little to promote real change.

In contrast, cruise operators generally provide more structured and transparent DEI strategies. Some companies lead in clarity by sharing demographic workforce data, employee testimonials, and career development programs, offering a concrete demonstration of their commitment to inclusivity. Others establish well-organized policies and leadership representation goals, ensuring accountability. Additionally, some brands set themselves apart by incorporating explicit DEI initiatives with measurable objectives, showing a serious commitment to diversity. However, not all cruise operators excel in this regard: some merely offer verbal support for DEI without structured policies, while others lag behind with minimal public acknowledgment of inclusivity.

The disparity between ferry and cruise industries underscores the need for more rigorous DEI frameworks. A commitment to diversity must go beyond symbolic statements and instead be supported by transparency, measurable goals, and ongoing progress reports. Companies that fail to do so risk undermining their credibility and missing out on the benefits that a genuinely inclusive workplace can bring.

3.4.2 Transparency in DEI Discourse: The Case of Reports

Three different scenarios of how companies communicate on the topic emerge from the analyses, each indicating different levels of transparency. Firstly, the question is often not tackled directly; the issue is sidestepped and an evasive approach is adopted by referring to notions evoking the concept of DEI, such as respect, belonging, collaboration:

(24) WE RESPECT EACH OTHER

We are committed to a supportive working environment, where employees have the opportunity to reach their full potential. We are all expected to do our utmost to create a respectful workplace culture which is free of harassment, intimidation, bias and unlawful discrimination of any kind. (Tallink, p. 20)

(25) OUR GLOBAL WORKFORCE

Our number one priority is the wellbeing and safety of our guests and workforce. We also want our diverse crew members to feel welcome and to have the support and training needed to develop long term careers within the company. (MSC, p. 17)

These declarations seem ‘correct’, far-reaching, but remain somewhat obscure as they express good intentions, *we are committed*, *we also want*, that is, what should be, might be, but no evidence is given about how these objectives may be achieved. This approach seems to fail the test of transparency on all three counts, little is disclosed, no clear indications are given of what is being done and there is little accuracy or precision.

Another approach is to give some examples and details about what a company is actually doing to implement DEI policies, thus moving in the direction of disclosure and clarity:

(26) We also launched additional Employee Resource Groups such as a Women Officer Network, a group devoted to helping propel women toward even more leadership roles in the organization through networking, skills development, and career advancement. (Carnival, p. 4)

(27) We also promoted and expanded Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion across our ranks and departments, implementing vital new initiatives in support of this commitment. Female representation has grown in a number of shipboard departments and globally we have seen a growth in female representation within cadets where 1 in 5 Carnival Corporation cadets are female. (Carnival, p. 4)

However, in both these examples we can see how transparency can be undermined when the same company uses vague expressions, *additional, even more, in a number of shipboard departments* and in particular *a growth in female representation*, where the number of female cadets is shown, but we do not know exactly how much growth there has been.

The last approach is much more decisive, refreshing in a certain sense, as it gives concrete details about the approach adopted in promoting and actually practising DEI. For example, Olsen indicates a more carefully conceived interpretation of DEI rather than a predictable statement about DEI practices. It even goes so far as to refuse the idea of ‘positive discrimination’, that is favouring underrepresented groups or disadvantaged groups, advocating instead a merit-based system.

(28) 2. Focussed Recruitment- aiming to find a balance in shortlists of men and women where possible. Whilst we don’t advocate “positive” discrimination, we always look for the best candidates for our roles

3. The interview process- ensuring that there are women on the interview panels for all management level positions to promote balanced assessment and opinions (Fred Olsen, p. 33)

The reports often provide numerical data about the workforce which give an immediate visual overview of the ratio of male to female workers, their ethnic origins, their age. We could expect this to be give clear and transparent information, but often the reader may need to think carefully about the true significance of these figures. For example, cruise operators boast about the number of nationalities among their employees, quoting figures such as:

(29) 130+ countries representing over 60% of the world’ nationalities (Royal Caribbean, p. 58)

(30) Across our workforce we employed 144 nationalities; we take pride in this diversity and remain committed to providing a safe and inclusive environment for all our employees. (MSC, p. 3)

However, these are companies operating at a global level and probably also employ people from the local population, which can explain the high number of nationals. Another example is when companies communicate promising percentages of women employed by the company, actually highlighting the figure in a pull-quote:

(31) 59% of shoreside team members are women (NCHL, p. 3)

It must be remembered that in ferry and cruise companies shoreside team members are a small percentage of the total workforce and this information could be misleading if read quickly without due consideration.

An important indicator of transparency is the way in which companies acknowledge unfavourable situations to give an honest and balanced assessment of a company's operations.

(32) We firmly believe that a diverse workforce is a key driver of our competitive edge in the industry. Our commitment to diversity, equality, and inclusion runs throughout our organisation. While our gender ratio may not yet be perfectly balanced, we acknowledge that the maritime industry has historically been male dominated. We are dedicated to improving the representation of women at ICG through policy enhancements and recruitment processes. (Irish ferries, p. 44)

This example is particularly interesting because it not only states the reasons for promoting DEI, but also acknowledges the failure to manage a good gender balance in the company. Admitting shortcomings may contribute to transparency and enhance the appearance of honesty and trustworthiness of the company.

(33) DFDS works to promote and change the gender distribution in the industry, which has historically been dominated by men, through a dedicated and structured approach to diversity and inclusion. [...] Our target is to have 30% minority representation amongst all staff and across all teams and divisions in 2028, as studies show that this is the level where you no longer feel like a minority. We acknowledge that this will be difficult to achieve in all teams considering the norm in our industry and the impact of acquired companies. (DFDS, p. 28, 56)

4. Conclusion

DEI is a very sensitive topic, especially following the resurgence of movements demanding social equality and the consequent debate in society. Businesses have been obliged to take up the banner of DEI and integrate it into their corporate vision, their work culture and not least of all their communication. This study has analyzed the websites and sustainability reports of ferry and cruise operators to understand how they communicate their DEI policies and practices.

The results of the analysis show that DEI discourse in the sea transport sector presents a very motley picture, reflecting varying levels of commitment and authenticity across the companies included in the study. While some companies integrate diversity into their core values, others use it as a strategic tool without substantive change. For diversity to be meaningful, companies must move beyond rhetoric and embed inclusion into decision-making processes. Employees must be more than passive beneficiaries - they should have a voice in shaping corporate policies. Framing diversity as both a moral and business imperative is crucial, but without structural changes, it risks being an empty gesture.

The findings also reveal that transparency in DEI discourse varies significantly across websites and reports, with some demonstrating clear commitments to diversity and inclusion while others fall short. While cruise websites generally exhibit a higher level of transparency through structured policies, demographic data, and employee testimonials, ferry websites often rely on vague statements that lack measurable actions. The presence of concrete initiatives, such as the Women Officer Network at Carnival, showcases how companies can enhance credibility by providing specific programs and role models. However, the lack of clarity and precision in certain reports, where promising figures may be misleading or incomplete, highlights the importance of ensuring that DEI communication is not only present but also meaningful. Furthermore, the willingness of some companies, like DFDS and Irish ferries, to acknowledge the challenges in achieving gender balance indicates a more honest and transparent approach to diversity. Ultimately, transparency in DEI discourse should go beyond symbolic statements and aim for disclosure, clarity, and accuracy, ensuring that commitments are backed by concrete data and ongoing progress. By embracing genuine transparency, companies can build trust, foster inclusivity, and drive meaningful change within the maritime industry.

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Note

Note 1. Companies produce different kinds of reports, each with its own focus. An Annual Report is a factual account of a company's activities in the financial year and its business results, whilst Sustainability and Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) reports focus on environmental and social issues, targeting a broad audience of stakeholders, from customers to employees or anyone interested in knowing about the company's sustainability strategy. However, apart from Annual Reports, companies in some geographical areas, are not obliged to produce Sustainability/ESG reports, so for the purpose of this study we have had to use the latest reports made available, irrespective of type.

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