

Company's inclusive approach to internal and external stakeholders: In search for theories and concepts

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The article aims to explore the current state of knowledge on inclusion and identify manifestations of the company's inclusive approach described in the literature. The objective of the article is to answer the following questions: (1) What theories and inclusion-related concepts may provide insight into an inclusive approach of a company in its relations with internal and external stakeholders? (2) How does the company's inclusiveness manifest itself in relations with those stakeholders? (3) How should we understand the concept of an inclusive approach (inclusiveness), with particular regard to internal (employees) and external (customers) stakeholders?

Research Design & Methods: We conducted a systematic literature review (SLR) following the seven-step procedure. It included both a bibliometric and content analysis of the articles retrieved from the Scopus database. We used VOSviewer to identify the most influential publications and the most popular concepts related to inclusiveness and inclusion.

Findings: We indicated the main theories used in inclusion studies, among which the most important ones were: stakeholder theory, social exchange theory, institutional theory, diversity management, and inclusive leadership theory. We developed a list of inclusive approach manifestations concerning both, employees and customers. Specific manifestations of the employee-inclusive approach regarded areas of organisational culture, management and leadership, as well as human resource management. We identified specific manifestations of a consumer-inclusive approach in the fields of marketing and customer experience. Moreover, the literature review allowed us to identify more general manifestations of a stakeholder-inclusive approach in the area of corporate governance. We operationalised the category of an 'inclusive approach' in a company's activity based on the critical elements of inclusion definitions identified during the review, *i.e.*, stakeholder inclusion, financial inclusion, and social inclusion.

Implications & Recommendations: These SLR results should facilitate developing a theoretical foundation for studying the concept of inclusion and inclusiveness as well as implementing this concept in modern organisations. They also indicate important directions for future studies in this field, *e.g.*, the impact of the organisation's inclusive approach on building its strategic advantage, competitiveness, and resilience.

Contribution & Value Added: The article refers to the relatively understudied concept of the company's inclusive approach towards its main stakeholders, *i.e.*, employees and customers. It contributes to the existing body of knowledge by listing the most significant theoretical frameworks used to study inclusion and identifying a broad range of symptoms representing the inclusive approach.

Article type: literature review

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INTRODUCTION

Current trends in the economic, socio-demographic, and political environment offer an opportunity but also create an urgent need to redefine traditional business goals and re-examine commonly used business practices. We could reduce one of the most significant challenges faced by modern organisations to one simple word, *i.e.*, ‘inclusion.’ However, its simplicity is illusory, because inclusion represents such a complex and multifaceted concept that various sciences have been exploring it for years. However, something that makes the essence of the inclusion idea is even more difficult. We mean its implementation in everyday practices of enterprises, offices, non-profit institutions, schools, and all types of organisations, etc.

Inclusion is not a new concept, since we may track its origins back to the early 1900s and the welfare pioneers. However, its real development started in the 1960s when policies of segregation were questioned (Hodkinson, 2011). Today, promoting and enhancing social, economic, and political inclusion of all people, regardless of their age, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, economic, health or any other status, is one of the main tasks set by the strategic goal ‘Reduce Inequality’ being a part of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Transforming Our World, 2015). More and more companies are applying universal principles relating to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by this Agenda, treating inclusiveness and sustainability as complementary features of responsible economic growth. Similarly, we can observe growing investments in the ‘Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion’ (DEI) programs that have evolved into important business functions in both large and small enterprises (Dong, 2021).

Inclusion is important not only as a concept subject to scientific analysis but also as a certain philosophy, an approach, and a style of acting. Consequently, it has received a lot of attention, but mainly in the areas of education, sociology, and psychology as well as health, digital, and political sciences, etc. (Sunkler, 2024; Halder & Squires, 2023). Meanwhile, the discussion within the economics sciences is dominated by the concept of financial inclusion, its determinants and implications for economic growth, well-being, and poverty reduction (Ouechtati, 2020). The literature does not precisely define or operationalise ‘inclusion’ as such, but particularly ‘an inclusiveness’ or ‘an inclusive approach’ perceived as a distinctive feature of an organisation. There are numerous articles suggesting reference to inclusion but after closer inspection, one sees that they just mention the category once or twice, and provide it among keywords. In fact, there are too many, often vague and overly simplistic explanations of inclusion. The economic literature lacks a cohesive and uniform interpretation of the company’s inclusiveness and several authors call for a more precise definition of this category (Gupta & Vegelin, 2023). The challenge lies in defining and operationalising the notion of an ‘inclusive approach’ in a way that is both theoretically robust and practically applicable. Considering the above, there is a clear need to explore both the essence of inclusiveness and how organisations apply it in relations with their stakeholders.

We sought to address the identified gap by:

- investigating conceptual foundations of an inclusive approach in relation to internal and external stakeholders,
- developing a comprehensive framework that enables empirical analysis of inclusiveness in business practices while facilitating its implementation in diverse organizational settings.

Therefore, we aimed to identify diverse modes of interpretation and manifestations of inclusion with regard to relations between an organisation and its stakeholders.

To ensure a focused discussion, we concentrated on organisational inclusiveness in relations with two key stakeholder groups, *i.e.*, employees and customers. However, this did not exclude other stakeholder relationships. On the contrary, we sought to develop a broader framework applicable to other stakeholders, such as local communities and investors, providing a foundation for future research in these areas.

This review addresses the following research questions:

- What theories and inclusion-related concepts may provide insight into an inclusive approach of a company in its relations with internal and external stakeholders?
- How does the company’s inclusiveness manifest itself in relations with those stakeholders?

- How should we understand the concept of an inclusive approach (inclusiveness) with particular regard to internal (employees) and external (customers) stakeholders?

To respond above questions, we conducted a systematic literature review, including both bibliometric and content analysis, using 'inclusion,' 'inclusive,' and 'inclusiveness' as the main search criteria. By clarifying and refining the concept of organisational inclusiveness, this research aims to contribute to the management and economic sciences, providing a foundation for future studies and developing stakeholder engagement strategies.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. The next section presents the methodological solutions applied in the process of literature review. Then we discuss the results, considering bibliometric analysis first and then content analysis. The latter section is divided into two subsections, which refer consecutively to employees as internal stakeholders and customers as external stakeholders. The last section summarises the research results by relating them to the stated objectives and research questions. Finally, we present study limitations and suggested directions for future research.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Criteria Used in SLR and Retrieval Process

In this article, we applied the method of a systematic literature review as described by Czakon (2011) who suggested a procedure consisting of seven stages. We conducted the first three stages at the end of December 2023.

In the first stage, we defined the purpose of the study which was the analysis of the inclusiveness concept. In the second step, we selected a collection of publications to be explored. We decided to use the Scopus database due to its extensive scientific data coverage and its wide recognition as a trusted source for academic and bibliometric studies (Falagas *et al.*, 2008). The Scopus database has also been used and validated in similar studies (*e.g.* Annahar *et al.*, 2023), and its search engine allows for convenient and precise searches.

The next stage of the procedure regards the selection of a primary set of publications with the use of some chosen criteria. The overall number of documents indexed in the Scopus database somehow referring to inclusion proves that it is a popular research topic. The very first search using only 'inclusion' and words derived from it (*e.g.*, 'inclusive,' 'inclusiveness') returned almost 145 000 publications (Table 1).

Narrowing the search criteria to publications related to two areas, *i.e.*, 'economics, econometrics, and finance' and 'business, management, and accounting' returned still an enormous number of over 6.5 thousand scientific publications referring to 'inclusion' within these disciplines. We decided to further limit the search by setting the timeframe to the last five years (2019-2023) as we wanted to include only the most recent publications. Using time criterion supplemented with two other ones (see step 3 in Table 1) resulted in a database containing around three thousand articles. This high score came as no surprise, hence following the study assumptions, we narrowed search results by using reference to two stakeholder groups, employees and customers. Furthermore, we requested that only English-language, scientific articles published in the 'open access' system be retrieved. This step allowed us to obtain 'reviewable' set of 183 papers.

We conducted the fourth stage of the systematic review procedure, *i.e.*, the development of the final database, in January 2024. We identified and removed repetitive items as well as the ones not fitting the criteria (*e.g.*, one non-English text of full paper). Then we reviewed abstracts to eliminate publications not related to the issue under study. This step led to narrowing the set of publications to 154 articles subject to a full-text analysis.

Exclusion of 28 publications after the review of abstracts resulted from:

- article's non-economic character – 18 publications,
- referring to different (not applicable) meanings of 'inclusion' (*e.g.*, all-inclusive hotels, non-inclusive research) – 5 publications,
- considering 'inclusion' in the context of consumers'/households' attribute when analysing consumer (and not organizational) behaviour – 5 publications.

Table 1. Steps in the retrieval process and their results

Steps	Consecutive selection criteria	Search strings	Output (no. of publications)
1	'inclusion' and all words derived from it (<i>i.e.</i> , inclusive, inclusiveness, inclusivity) in keywords	KEY(inclusi*)	144 707
2	publications in the fields of economics, econometrics and finance and business, management and accounting	KEY(inclusi*) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "BUSI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "ECON"))	6 590
3	timeframe 2019-2023, articles only, final versions, language limited to English	KEY (inclusi*) AND PUBYEAR > 2018 AND PUBYEAR < 2024 AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE, "final")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "BUSI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "ECON")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English"))	3 096
4	all words derived from 'inclusion' co-occurring with keywords characterizing employees (with synonyms) and customers (with synonyms); limited to open-access documents	KEY (inclusi*) AND (KEY(employ* OR work* OR labor* OR stakehold* OR custom* OR client* OR consume* OR purchas* OR buy* OR use*)) AND PUBYEAR > 2018 AND PUBYEAR < 2024 AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE, "final")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "BUSI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "ECON")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (OA, "all"))	183

Source: own study on the Scopus database search results.

We performed the bibliometric analysis, being the fifth stage of the SLR, using VOSviewer (version 1.6.20) to identify the most influential publications and the most popular concepts related to inclusiveness and inclusion used within the economic sciences. We prepared additional calculations (frequencies, time trends, and rankings) with Microsoft Excel. We conducted this part of the analysis on sets of 183 articles, meeting the search criteria in the fourth step of the retrieval process (see Table 1). Analysis of the dataset led to the identification of the strongest associations with a perception of an inclusive approach being focal to this article.

To gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of inclusiveness, in the sixth stage, we conducted a content analysis of all texts included in the final set of 154 documents using the narrative review method (Gondek & Mazur, 2020, p. 141). Parallely, we applied a meta-analysis procedure that considered such elements of the reviewed articles as keywords, stated research problems, regarded theories, key-concepts, inclusion/inclusiveness definitions and their types, as well as contexts of the studied inclusion). Of all the documents that we analysed, 112 refer to the inclusion of employees and 42 – to the inclusion of customers or other stakeholders. We will present the analysis results separately for these two groups.

Bibliometric Analysis

As we mentioned above, 154 articles met the final search criteria. The bibliometric analysis shows that the publication trend is increasing – between 2019 and 2023 the number of articles meeting search criteria increased by over 3 times, from 13 to 45 respectively. Citation analysis indicated that those 154 publications reached a total of 1830 citations. Table 2 presents the ten most cited articles.

Analysis of the occurrence of keywords provided by authors allowed us to identify a significant number of 677 keywords. To conduct keyword mapping, we assumed that only keywords that appear in no less than two articles would be included in the analysis. This allowed us to limit the number of authors' keywords to the 72 most frequent ones. The mapping distinguished 11 subject areas (clusters) (see Figure 1 and Table 3).

Table 2. The most cited publications meeting the selection criteria

Document Title	Authors & Publication Year	Journal Title	Cited by*
Unearthing antecedents to financial inclusion through FinTech innovations	Senyo & Osabutey, 2020	Technovation	133 (125)
Responsible innovation in business: a critical reflection on deliberative engagement as a central governance mechanism	Brand & Block, 2019	Journal of Responsible Innovation	81 (81)
Tourism, inclusive growth and decent work: a political economy critique	Bianchi & de Man, 2021	Journal of Sustainable Tourism	81(79)
Human resource management research and practice in Asia: Past, present and future	Cooke <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Human Resource Management Review	75 (70)
Thriving of employees with disabilities: The roles of job self-efficacy, inclusion, and team-learning climate	Zhu <i>et al.</i> , 2019	Human Resource Management	60 (58)
Elevating the human experience (HX) through service research collaborations: introducing ServCollab	Fisk <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Journal of Service Management	51 (33)
Digital financial inclusion and sustainable employment: Evidence from countries along the belt and road	Geng & He, 2021	Borsa Istanbul Review	45 (44)
From ideal workers to ideal work for all: A 50-year review integrating careers and work-family research with a future research agenda	Kossek <i>et al.</i> , 2021	Journal of Vocational Behavior	44 (41)
Diversity and inclusion branding: a five-country comparison of corporate websites	Jonsen <i>et al.</i> , 2019	International Journal of Human Resource Management	43 (42)
Sharing economy: Studying the social and psychological factors and the outcomes of social exchange	Davlembayeva <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Technological Forecasting and Social Change	43 (41)

Note: * a number in parentheses excludes self-citations.

Source: own study based on the analysis of the Scopus database search results.

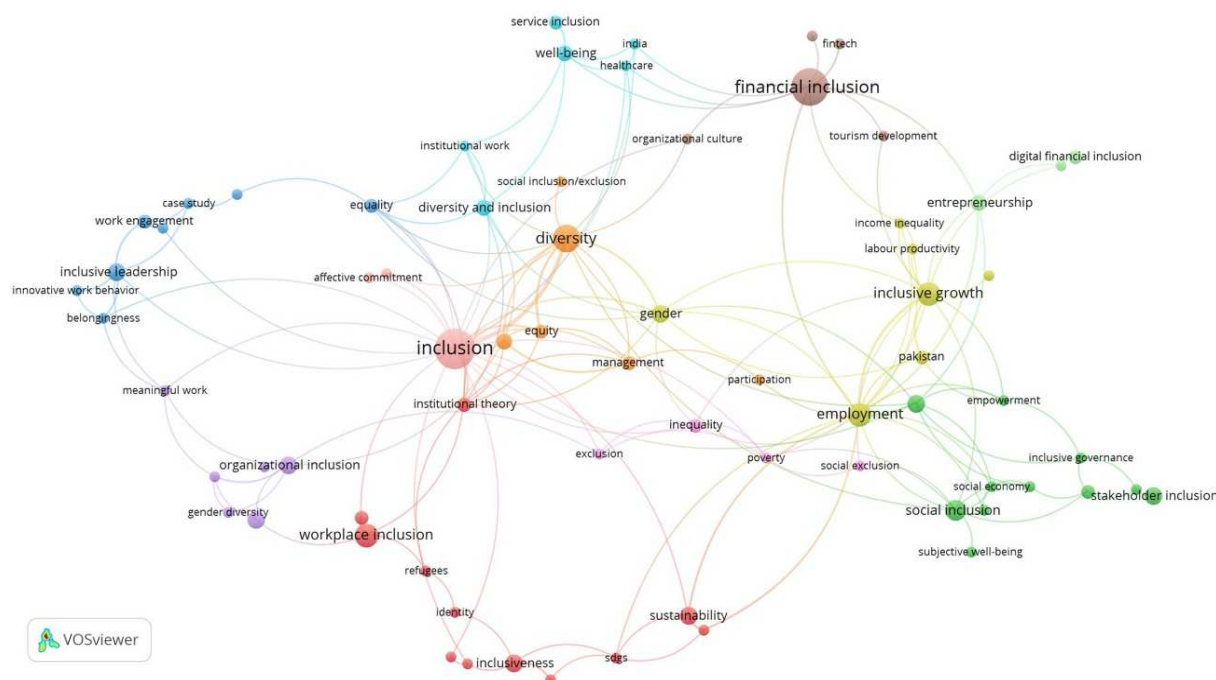


Figure 1. Map of author keywords co-occurrence in selected publications
Source: own elaboration based on data analysis made in VOSviewer

Table 3. Characteristics of identified clusters of papers

Cluster	Colour in Fig. 1	No. of keywords	Most common examples of keywords (occurrences)	Regarded research
1	red	12	workplace inclusion (9); inclusiveness (5); sustainability (5); disability (3); institutional theory (3)	relationship between workplace inclusiveness and sustainability
2	green	11	social inclusion (7); stakeholder inclusion (5); stakeholders (5); stakeholder theory (3)	inclusivity with respect to different stakeholder groups
3	dark blue	8	inclusive leadership (5); equality (3); work engagement (3)	role of leadership in building an inclusive work environment
4	yellow	7	employment (9); inclusive growth (9); gender (5)	relations between inclusion and economic growth
5	purple	6	gender diversity (5); organizational inclusion (5)	inclusive management
6	turquoise	6	diversity and inclusion (4); well-being (4); service inclusion (3)	links between inclusiveness and well-being
7	orange	6	diversity (12); leadership (4) equity (3); management (3)	link between diversity and organizational leadership
8	brown	5	financial inclusion (21)	financial inclusion
9	pink	4	inequality (3); exclusion (2) poverty (2); social exclusion (2)	general studies on exclusion
10	salmon	3	inclusion (25); affective commitment (2); perceived diversity(2)	link between inclusion and diversity
11	light green	3	entrepreneurship (4); digital financial inclusion (3); household consumption (2)	links between entrepreneurship and digital financial inclusion

Source: own study based on data analysis made in VOSviewer.

Mapping results clearly indicate that there is a gap in knowledge regarding how organisations, including business entities, approach the inclusiveness issue, particularly in relation to their external stakeholders, such as customers. Overall, the research on the essence of an organization's inclusive approach in relation to both internal and external stakeholders is scarce, hence there is an increasing urgency to fill the identified gap.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Content Analysis of the Search Results: Inclusion of Employees and Customers

Following the systematic literature review and the bibliometric analysis, we conducted a content analysis of the 154 articles meeting the search criteria. We examined the content of all identified articles to investigate:

- the detailed field/area in which inclusion was analysed,
- the conceptualisation of inclusiveness and its links with other significant terms and categories,
- the theoretical framework and perspective adopted in each study,
- the key aspects and manifestations of the inclusive approach addressed in the article.

Initially, we noted that inclusion and inclusiveness are examined with equal interest in the fields of economics and management. Furthermore, researchers adopt both macro-level (economic, national) and micro-level (organisational) perspectives. We present the detailed findings of the content analysis in the subsequent subsections: the first focuses on studies addressing employee inclusion, while the second explores the inclusive approach towards customers.

Organisation's Inclusive Approach to Employees

There were 112 publications referring to the employees' inclusion selected for the content analysis. Table 4 summarises research areas, theories, and concepts distinguished in the course of the analysis.

Table 4. Inclusion of employees: Summary of identified theories and concepts

Key concept	No. of articles	Theoretical framework
Workplace inclusion; Inclusion; Inclusion practice	34	diversity management; critical grounded theory; person-environment fit theory; organizational justice theory; instrumental stakeholder theory; a stakeholder theory; human-centric design; social exchange theory; work-family; organizational behaviour; institutional theory; organizational and management theory; status characteristics theory
Social inclusion	23	critical management studies; industrial relations; social identity theory; ecological economics
Inclusive growth; Inclusive development	11	demographic transition; feminist economics theory; theory of sustainable tourism
Financial inclusion	11	macroeconomics; Tourism Economics
Inclusive labour market; Labour inclusion	10	theory of planned behaviour; institutional theory; micro-institutional theory
Inclusive leadership	10	social exchange theory; social identity theory; theory of social and organisational learning; inclusive leadership theory; optimal distinctiveness theory; feminist theory
Inclusive (work) environment; Inclusive climate	8	diversity management; exchange theory
Inclusive HRM; Diversity & inclusion	5	human resource management

Source: own study.

The largest number of publications deals with inclusion, inclusion practices, and workplace inclusion analysed from the perspective of an organisation and its diverse employees. Workplace practices that acknowledge the invisible and visible identities of the employees are a positive step toward real workplace inclusion. However, the latter still poses a strategic concern and challenge for the organizations. Bhardwaj (2022) and Salter and Migliaccio (2019) stress that increasing heterogeneity of the workforce leads to greater complexity in collaborative teamwork.

The authors of articles in this group discussed inclusion practices in managing very diverse groups of employees, including workers with disabilities (Zulmi *et al.*, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2023; Jammaers, 2023; Ochrach *et al.*, 2022); blue-collar government workers (Kruyen & Sowa, 2023); sabotaged racialized public servants (Asey, 2022); under-resourced employees of low socioeconomic status (Fujimoto *et al.*, 2023); LGBT/TGD (transgender and gender-diverse) persons (Ladwig, 2023; Sabharwal *et al.*, 2019); potentially marginalized groups (Arman, 2023; Huang *et al.*, 2020; Johnsen *et al.*, 2023). Kallmuenzer *et al.* (2023) explore whether including employees in the planning and implementation of CSR measures contributes to the success of organisational transformation.

Scholars devote special attention to gender-inclusive approaches, particularly women's inclusion in organisations. The following authors explored it: Murray and Southey (2020), Kalogeraki and Georgakakis (2022), Mikhailova *et al.* (2023), Francis and Michielsens (2021), AlEsa and Durugbo (2022), Rahman *et al.* (2023).

Another issue considered within this thread of discussion were factors determining inclusion, such as safe working environment (Amon *et al.*, 2022), inclusive consideration of human rights (Koenigstorfer *et al.*, 2023), bureaucratic organisation structure minimizing status differences (DeHart-Davis *et al.*, 2023), stressful work experiences (Behnke *et al.*, 2023), information and communication technology use (Tarafdar *et al.*, 2023), the use of co-working spaces (Jeske & Ruwe, 2019).

Some research suggested that integration is currently aspirational only (Kossek *et al.*, 2021), although human service organisations are reconfiguring to address diversifying populations (Aby & Gonzalez Benson, 2021). In the context of Industry 4.0, workers' diversity in terms of experience, productivity, and physical capacity represents a significant challenge for companies (Battini *et al.*, 2022).

The virtual work environment may weaken some negative aspects of bias and discrimination while strengthening others (Lauring & Jonasson, 2023). Line managers should offer rewards to enhance employee motivation, adopt an inclusive approach and attend to other challenges inhibiting employee performance (Chikwariro *et al.*, 2021). Offering employees quality jobs and an empathetic environment can lead to early organizational buy-in and change acceptance, thereby improving long-term organization efficiencies and outputs (Hubbart, 2023).

Enehaug *et al.* (2022) introduced the term ‘workplace inclusion competence’, which they operationalised as inclusion opportunity and inclusion capability. The authors explored its association with two distinct work-organizational categories, *i.e.*, participation- and control-oriented management. Finally, Kornau *et al.* (2023) explore how institutional actors push or resist equality, diversity, and inclusion (Germany and Turkey).

Over twenty publications included the key term ‘social inclusion’ concerning very diversified groups, *e.g.*, disabled people (Girlevičienė & Kvietauskienė, 2021; Lindsay *et al.*, 2019); youth groups, NEET (Jonsson & Goicolea, 2020; Ord & Davies, 2022); deaf and hard-of-hearing youth (Bolshakov & Walker, 2023); youth in the disaster resilience model (Rauhaus & Guajardo, 2021); informally employed workmen (Clark *et al.*, 2022); refugees (Koburtay *et al.*, 2020) or migrant workers (Peter *et al.*, 2020).

Another stream of studies refers to social inclusion (or its lack) considered from the employment perspective. Jobs are essential for social inclusion, as they guarantee the financial resilience of (welfare) states (Bohnenberger, 2022). However, work plays a crucial role in rising social inequalities, which result from unequal working opportunities for different social groups (van Dijk *et al.*, 2020). Yet, work requires different organisations so that it is no longer the main mechanism for livelihood provisioning and social inclusion (Gerold *et al.*, 2023) and sustainability transitions in collaborative spaces should be made (Brandellero & Niutta, 2023). Other topics include monetising the social value of inclusive entrepreneurship (Barba-Sánchez *et al.*, 2021), social inclusion as a benefit of the application of blockchain technology (Gong *et al.*, 2022), social innovation and employment in the digital age (Enciso-Santocildes *et al.*, 2021), inclusive unionism (Yu, 2019), and inclusive and exclusive approach to talent management (Ishiyama, 2022). Yu and Pekarek (2023) note that social recognition defines life and professional experience. Mussida *et al.* (2023) argue that only social inclusion funds mean a lower relative risk of material deprivation. The research by Pucci *et al.* (2019) proposes a synthetic ‘index of inequalities in access to job opportunities’ (IAO) to identify disadvantaged urban areas related to socio-economic deprivations, low accessibility to employment as well as low mobility and poor quality of transport supply.

Other articles cover the topic of ‘inclusive growth’ in Africa and Asia (Asongu & Odhiambo, 2020; Biltagy & Nassar, 2020; Henry *et al.*, 2022; Lawrence, 2020; Majid & Siegmann, 2021; Mulugeta Woldegiorgis, 2023; Siegmann & Majid, 2021). Based on the comparative analysis of 83 countries, scholars observed that socio-digital inclusion and green energy impact positively on inclusive growth in all income groups (Ghouse *et al.*, 2022). In both developed and developing economies increased robot adoption is linked with significantly higher income inequality, although there is no evidence of technological unemployment yet (Fu *et al.*, 2021). Sustained and inclusive growth reinforces the primacy of capital and continues to perpetuate a growth-driven tourism development model (Bianchi & de Man, 2021). Privileging foreign firms is a regional trend and a major obstacle to tourism-led inclusive growth policy (Jeyacheya & Hampton, 2020).

Financial inclusion is a frequently explored topic in selected African countries. Articles from this group consider financial support directed at enterprises (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2023; Lakuma *et al.*, 2019), in the form of microcredits boosting employment rates (Atiase *et al.*, 2019); leveraged to improve access to financial services for marginalised communities (Subashini *et al.*, 2023). Data from 42 African countries show that SMEs with access to formal financing create more jobs than firms without such access (Brixiová *et al.*, 2020). Financial inclusion is central to bridging the socio-economic differences (Kanungo & Gupta, 2021). Sabiu and Abduh (2021) explore the impact of Islamic banking inclusion on SME employment growth in Nigeria. Digital financial inclusion drives sustainable employment in lower-middle-income economies but the effect is insignificant in upper-middle-income and high-income economies (Geng & He, 2021). Macroeconomic demand conditions constrain the potential for

women's self-employment to increase livelihoods and support development (Vasudevan & Raghavendra, 2022). The financial inclusion on the happiness index in EU-27 countries is changing with a country's level of income (Akgun *et al.*, 2023), and it has a significant positive correlation with various aspects of tourism development – more so in emerging than advanced economies (Shi *et al.*, 2021).

The topic of inclusive labour market most frequently relates to active inclusive programmes aimed at excluded communities, *i.e.*, the disabled (Pérez-Conesa *et al.*, 2020) or autistic people (Pesonen *et al.*, 2022), and is analysed from the perspective of inclusive employers and social enterprises in Slovakia (Priesol, 2021), disability employment service providers in Australia (Mahasneh *et al.*, 2023), social partners in Spain, France, and Sweden (Scalise, 2021). We can also learn about street-level bureaucrats and the limits to inclusive active labour market programmes in the UK (Johnson *et al.*, 2023), contributions of Swedish Third Sector Organizations to the promotion of professional inclusion among those disfavoured on the ordinary labour market due to their age, disability, or origin (Lindberg *et al.*, 2022). Other articles focus on including labour migrants (de Haan, 2020) and refugees (Ortlieb & Knapert, 2023). Finally, Ključnikov *et al.* (2023) examine how labour productivity will increase in future workplaces employing human resources and machine technologies.

Ten publications discuss inclusive leadership (IL). It constitutes one of the contextual factors contributing to inclusion, alongside inclusive climate, and inclusive practices (Shore *et al.*, 2011). Inclusive leaders are those who demonstrate openness and availability in their interactions with followers (Nembhard & Edmondson 2006, cited in Guo *et al.*, 2023) as well as trust, courage, humility, empathy and gratitude, which leads to business success (Vladić *et al.*, 2021). Mansoor *et al.* (2021) indicate that the inclusion of employees in the key decision-making enhances their ability to perform their tasks. In Chinese industries, scholars analysed the mediating role of job crafting between inclusive leadership and innovative work behaviour (Guo *et al.*, 2023). Inclusive leadership positively relates to employee work engagement through person-job fit (Bao *et al.*, 2022). Data from employees working in the Dutch public sector confirmed personal and organisational antecedents of inclusive leadership. Top management support plays an important role in changing organizational culture and norms (Ashikali, 2023). Inclusive leadership proved to be an important issue in remote work. Employers will need to reinforce a culture of inclusion (Byrd, 2022) by rethinking social distancing and remote working as a platform for rebuilding the fundamentals of humanity (Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2021). Increased diversity in inclusive organisations is a challenge for leaders. In the absence of two elements, a positive perception of work and inspirational leaders, negative work behaviours may result in the emergence of excluded groups and individuals. Consequently, cynicism, discontentment, resentment and conflicts will affect organizational inclusion (Bhatti *et al.*, 2022). Green inclusive leadership (GIL), which is a specific manifestation of inclusive leadership, has been defined as leadership practices characterized by openness, accessibility, and availability, leading toward achieving environmental objectives (Aboramadan *et al.*, 2022; Banu-Lawrence *et al.*, 2020).

An inclusive work environment, perceived as an inclusive organisational culture adopting an inclusive diversity paradigm, was another strand of research. In organizations with an inclusive climate, employees respond with higher levels of affective commitment (Li *et al.*, 2019). Gender diversity, diversity management, and organizational inclusion can effectively predict workplace happiness (Mousa, 2021). In Italy and Poland, scholars found a link between union democracy and the inclusion of precarious workers (Marino *et al.*, 2019). In Chinese factories, inclusion and team-learning climate fosters employees thriving in a diverse workforce (Zhu *et al.*, 2019). In public hospitals in Egypt, workplace fun positively affects organizational inclusion (Mousa *et al.*, 2021). In Poland, scholars found a positive correlation between perceived diversity and an inclusive work environment and job satisfaction (Maj, 2023). Scholars also diagnosed the positive impact of inclusive organizational climate among the growing Muslim community in Australia, New Zealand, USA, and Canada (Khan *et al.*, 2022).

Furthermore, scholars discussed the concept of diversity & inclusion (D&I) in the context of inclusive human resource management (IHRM) with regard to employer branding and employer of choice (Jonsen *et al.*, 2021). Scholars also noted the issue of IHRM in freelancers' employment relationships (van den Groenendaal *et al.*, 2023). The literature also analyses the top 43 European companies from the 2021 Refinitiv Diversity and Inclusion index in terms of how they use diversity and inclusion (D&I)

signals in they employer branding communication (Confetto *et al.*, 2023). Two experiments used fictitious job advertisements to examine the effects of a strong diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) value statement (Heath *et al.*, 2023). Employee voice, D&I, employee well-being and resilience, preparing and responding to crises, and green HRM are currently critical themes (Cooke *et al.*, 2020).

Organisation's Inclusive Approach Towards Customers and Other Stakeholders

The final database of articles being subject to content analysis included only 42 publications that (according to search criteria) related to the customers' inclusion. However, as it occurred during the publications review, they regarded various groups of stakeholders, among which there were those searched ones, *i.e.*, subjects representing the demand side of the market, referred to as customers, consumers, buyers, clients, and households. Such a situation was not a problem though, since the ultimate goal of our studies is to define an inclusive approach towards all stakeholders, not only employees or customers. However, the scope of the current search was narrowed as we planned to focus on the specific features of the company's inclusive approach in its relations with these two main stakeholder groups.

Based on the analysis of keywords provided by the authors as well as on the articles' content review, we could distinguish key concepts related to the inclusion of the above-mentioned stakeholders and the main areas and contexts of the inclusion-related studies. First of all, we identified two types of studies on inclusiveness, adopting respectively macro (13 papers) and micro (29 papers) perspectives. The former ones include mostly cross-country and cross-regional analyses and utilise secondary macro data, collected over longer periods or certain macro indexes (*e.g.*, GDP growth, poverty, income equality or unemployment measures). Meanwhile, the ones taking a micro perspective explore the behaviour of particular market entities and their mutual relations and in majority they are based on primary research results.

Among thirteen publications representing the first group (see Table 5), two are most general and regard inclusive growth and development (Ghouse *et al.*, 2022; Gupta & Vegelin, 2023) while eleven refer to financial inclusion. This is in fact the most common topic of the analysed articles, because there are also seven articles on financial inclusion adopting micro perspective. Majority of these articles consider financial inclusion as a determining factor and analyse its impact on the country consumption, investment, overall economic situation, or tourism development (Compaoré, 2022; Emará & Zhang, 2021; Luo *et al.*, 2022; Zhang *et al.*, 2023), but particularly on sustainability (Khan & Rehan, 2022; Murshed *et al.*, 2023; Tufail *et al.*, 2022; Yang *et al.*, 2022). Articles adopting a micro perspective verify the relationship between financial inclusion and customer loyalty, households' consumption, and digital inclusion (Alwahidin *et al.*, 2023; Aurazo & Vega, 2021; Vo *et al.*, 2020).

Table 5. Inclusion of customers: The summary of concepts in papers adopting a macro perspective

Key concept	No. of articles	Context of exploring inclusiveness
Financial inclusion	11	financial inclusion (FI) as a determinant of sustainability, consumption, investment, tourism development, country economic situation and stability, and entrepreneurial behaviour; FI as an effect of digital inclusion
Inclusive growth	1	inclusive economic growth vs. green energy consumption
Inclusive development	1	exploring actual meaning and indicators of the 'inclusive development' concept

Source: own study.

A different approach presented in the literature regards financial inclusion as the effect of certain processes and actions, and those analyses were also undertaken on macro and micro scale. However, regardless of the scale, the main facilitator of the financial inclusion explored in those studies is digital inclusion (Bayar *et al.*, 2021; Correa *et al.*, 2022; Dimitrova-Grajzl *et al.*, 2023; Hasbi & Dubus, 2020; Mohd Daud *et al.*, 2021; Senyo & Osabutey, 2020; Wamba *et al.*, 2021).

Considering the goals of this study, the publications representing a micro approach to the issue of inclusiveness are by far more important. As we mentioned, there are twenty-nine of them, and seven regard financial inclusion which was already described (see Table 6).

The most common and at the same time the broadest concept considered in the other articles from this group is stakeholder inclusion. However, this is not a homogeneous group and we could identify four threads of considerations, among which inclusive governance and inclusive corporate governance were the most popular issues. In general, articles from these categories analyse certain processes (*i.e.*, governing, managing, planning, decision-making, and developing innovations) and how to ensure their inclusiveness.

Table 6. Customer-inclusive approach: The summary of concepts identified in micro-analyses

Key concept	No. of articles	Context of exploring inclusiveness/Related concepts	Stakeholders considered	Theoretical framework
Stakeholder inclusion	14	urban governance, citizen inclusion, inclusive planning and decision-making, participatory management, inclusive place branding	all, citizens, residents, and local communities	Stakeholder Management Theory, Theory of Power, Organizational Listening
		inclusive corporate governance, deliberative governance, multi-stakeholder initiatives, stakeholder-oriented approach	all	Stakeholder Theory, Social Impact Theory
		responsible innovation, inclusive innovation design	all	Theory of Responsible Innovation
		practising stakeholder inclusion (in platform organizations)	customers	Stakeholder Theory
Financial inclusion	7	FI as a determinant of household consumption, customer loyalty, digital inclusion	customers	CSR Pyramid Model, Signal Theory
		FI as an effect of fintech adoption, digital inclusion, free financial counselling	customers (incl. native Americans)	Technology Acceptance Model, Unified Theory of Acceptance And Use of Technology
Inclusive customer experience	5	inclusive marketplace (preventing retail exclusion)	customers	Social Comparison Theory, Equity Theory
		inclusive services, improving human wellbeing through inclusive services, including disabled customers in the service design process, transformative service research	customers (incl. disabled and their families)	Service Inclusion Theory, Transformative Service Research
Inclusive marketing practices	2	diversity-and-inclusion-engaged marketing (DIEM)	customers	Institutional Theory
		cultural stereotyping in advertising as a non-inclusive marketing practice	customers	Interpretive Advertising Theory
Social inclusion	1	effects of participation in the sharing economy on users' social inclusion	customers	Social Exchange Theory

Source: own study.

In their conceptual paper, Andersen *et al.* (2021) start by exploring the meaning of a 'stakeholder' category and investigate how stakeholders are identified and included in the scenario planning process. Inclusive planning in practice, *i.e.*, applied in developing sustainable urban tourism, is studied by Koens *et al.* (2022). Nguyen *et al.* (2022), Snis *et al.* (2021), and Zinchuk *et al.* (2021) investigated how the inclusion of stakeholders (particularly citizens, residents, and local communities) may shape the urban/rural transformation and development and help solve urban problems, *e.g.*, the ones accompanying major construction projects (Maddaloni & Sabini, 2022). Hakala (2021) presents an interesting concept of inclusive place branding that is created through inclusive urban governance.

With regard to inclusive corporate governance, Andersen *et al.* (2023) propose a model for more sustainable stakeholder inclusion on the example of port governance but they also stress how difficult it is to find a model considered fair by all stakeholders. Sacchetti and Catturani (2021) assess the effects of the diversified governance styles (exclusive vs. inclusive) and describe inclusive governance structures, while Fiandrino *et al.* (2022) describe how multi-stakeholder initiatives and deliberative govern-

ance in an organisation may enhance its inclusiveness thereby foster its social impact. Siebold *et al.* (2023) assess the practice of stakeholder inclusion by analysing AirBnB policies in times of the COVID-19 pandemic and conclude that, despite its declarations, the company's approach was not really inclusive. Finally, Phaswana and Pelsler (2021) conducted a study that verified compliance between banks' strategies and the principles of the 2016 King IV Report on Corporate Governance™ for South Africa (King IV Report, 2016). This was of particular importance to our article since one of the principles mentioned by the Report defines a 'stakeholder-inclusive approach.' It is described as an approach that 'balances the needs, interests, and expectations of material stakeholders in the best interests of the organization over time' (Phaswana & Pelsler, 2021, p. 38).

Stakeholder inclusion is also desirable in the process of innovation design. Popa and Blok (2022) postulate including all the stakeholders in the early stages of research and development process which represents the core of a responsible innovation idea. Moreover, Brand and Blok (2019) introduce the concept of 'deliberative engagement,' which reflects the vision that innovation processes should be organised inclusively and democratically, *i.e.*, by engaging and involving (in contrast to merely consulting) stakeholders and the wider public within and throughout these processes.

The next key concept identified in the article during the content analysis was inclusive customer experience. The creation of such an experience is discussed in terms of building an inclusive marketplace and designing inclusive services, with the latter topic being much better represented in the analysed publications. However, in both cases, the authors refer mostly to the inclusion of vulnerable, potentially excluded groups of customers, *e.g.*, disabled persons. Lu and Sinha (2023) explore possibilities of developing a more inclusive marketplace and assume that this may be achieved by preventing retail exclusion. Therefore, they focus on identifying exclusive marketing practices that are likely to make customers feel ignored or rejected. On this basis, they recommend proactive strategies leading to inclusive customer experience.

In contrast, articles referring to inclusive services use the framework set by the service inclusion paradigm which requires that service providers 'anticipate, diagnose, and rectify problems that might preclude or disadvantage some consumers from realizing value in a service experience' (Fisk *et al.*, 2018, as cited in Kipnis *et al.*, 2022, p. 667). Articles from this category consider, *e.g.* inclusion of disabled customers in the tourist service design process and its consequences (Cerdan Chiscano & Binkhorst, 2019), enhancing value-centred care by technology-integrated (re)design of the service (Kipnis *et al.*, 2022), and overall demonstrate that inclusive services improve consumer well-being (Fisk *et al.*, 2020; Leino *et al.*, 2021).

Only two articles fall into the category that seems critical, considering the goals of the present study, as it refers to inclusive marketing practices. Moreover, one of the articles actually regards non-inclusive practice, since Yoon and Kelly (2023) address the problem of racial stereotypes in advertising and discuss it on the example of three controversial campaigns; they also analyse company responses to the hype created by these campaigns. The second article introduces a very important category, *i.e.*, 'diversity-and-inclusion-engaged marketing' (DIEM). Kipnis *et al.* (2021) define it as 'actions in marketing research, education, and practice that proactively and consistently promote the advancement of diversity and inclusion for all marketplace participants' (p. 144). Authors claim that DIEM is an important well-being-enhancing mechanism that is currently underutilised in the marketplace and, they identify barriers that inhibit effective implementation of diversity and inclusion initiatives.

The last article relates to social inclusion. Davlembayeva *et al.* (2020) explore how the sharing economy (SE) influences users' integration with the community and confirm that more frequent and intensive use of SE platforms increases users' feeling of social inclusion. Unfortunately, the psychological perspective adopted in this article makes it less useful for our study.

Inclusive Approach of a Company: Definition

Since the reviewed publications lack a direct definition of an inclusive approach per se, we attempt to define this category based on the critical elements of inclusion definitions identified during the review, *i.e.*, stakeholder inclusion (Fiandrino *et al.*, 2022; Phaswana & Pelsler, 2021), financial inclusion (Correa *et al.*, 2022; The World Bank Group 2008, in: Wamba *et al.*, 2021), and social inclusion (Davlembayeva

et al., 2020). On this basis, we propose the following general definition: a company is characterised by the inclusive approach (inclusiveness) when it balances its own interests with the needs, expectations, and interests of its stakeholders who are adequately involved in various aspects of this organisation's activity, including decision-making process.

In particular, such a company:

- ensures that employees, including vulnerable groups, get access to workplaces, are treated fairly, and invited to participate in planning and decision-making etc.,
- enables all groups of customers, but particularly those marginalised or under-represented, to access products (services), ensures that they are offered inclusive customer experience and that they may fully connect with a company,
- engages stakeholders in various initiatives and develops multi-stakeholder partnerships.

DISCUSSION

When searching for the theories and concepts regarded in the studies on the company's inclusive approach, we discovered that the researchers most often refer to stakeholder theory, social exchange theory, institutional theory, diversity management, and inclusive leadership theory (see Tables 4-6). We also developed a long list of inclusive approach manifestations in relation to both, employees and customers. Moreover, the literature review allowed us to identify more general manifestations of a stakeholder-inclusive approach. Table 7 summarises and classifies the identified manifestations, indicating the most important references.

The findings of our research indicate that an inclusive approach can manifest in numerous domains, including organisational culture, management, human resources, marketing, and customer experience, as well as corporate governance. The results suggest also that the stakeholder-inclusive approach is not a temporary trend or a rhetorical device. Rather, it can serve as a strategic instrument for organizations seeking to build a competitive advantage by incorporating their stakeholders into the decision-making process or to increase the level of creativity of managers (Tajpour *et al.*, 2025; Tajpour *et al.*, 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

The literature review presented in this paper allowed us to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by:

- identifying theories and inclusion-related concepts that provide insight into a company's inclusive approach,
- characterizing manifestations of the company's inclusive approach towards its various stakeholders,
- conceptually defining the company's inclusive approach to its stakeholders.

The findings of this study have important implications for both academic research and practical applications. The study establishes a theoretical foundation for future research on organisational inclusiveness, offering a structured framework for further exploration. Moreover, by identifying various manifestations of inclusiveness, the study provides valuable insights for companies aiming to enhance their inclusive practices toward various stakeholder groups. The conceptual definition of a company's inclusive approach serves as a practical tool for organisations to assess and refine their stakeholder interactions, fostering more equitable and sustainable relationships.

Beyond these contributions, the study also has broader practical implications. It offers guidance for policymakers in developing regulations and standards related to corporate inclusiveness, ensuring alignment with the best practices. Moreover, it informs business leaders and human resource professionals on strategies for cultivating inclusive organisational cultures that enhance employee engagement and customer trust. Finally, the findings can support investors and socially responsible investment initiatives in evaluating companies based on their commitment to inclusiveness, thereby encouraging more ethical and stakeholder-oriented business practices.

Table 7. Manifestations of stakeholder-inclusive approach in companies' activity: Summary

Stakeholders	Area	Key-concepts (references)	Specific manifestations
Employees	Organisational culture	Culture of inclusion and diversity; inclusion practices in the workplace; inclusive climate; inclusive work environment (Byrd, 2022; Li <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Maj, 2023; Mousa <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Salter & Migliaccio, 2019; Zhu <i>et al.</i> , 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – employees enjoy respect, feel like valued and esteemed members of the team, are treated fairly, in a way that satisfies their needs for belongingness and uniqueness – employees can participate in many activities organized by the employer – there are norms and symbols signalling that all employees are welcome
	Management and leadership	Inclusive leadership (Ashikali, 2023; Guo <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Shore <i>et al.</i> , 2011; Vladić <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – leaders demonstrate accessibility, openness and availability in their interactions with followers (employees) – leaders are committed to top-down inclusion
	Human resource management	Inclusive HRM (Confetto <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Cooke <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Heath <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Jonsen <i>et al.</i> , 2021; van den Groenendaal <i>et al.</i> , 2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – implementing inclusive hiring principles – analysing compensation equality with regard to gender, skin colour, etc. – using I&D metrics to assess company's inclusiveness – organising I&D initiatives for employees
Consumers	Marketing	D&I-engaged marketing (DIEM); inclusive marketing operations (Brodzik <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Hakala, 2021; Kipnis <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Patterson, 2022; Shalvi, 2022; Thompson, 2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – proactively and consistently promoting the advancement of I&D for all marketplace participants – evaluating products/campaigns from a perspective of multicultural marketplace well-being outcomes – listening to customers and ensuring access (to essential products, <i>e.g.</i>, through digital inclusion) – creating inclusive communication strategy, <i>e.g.</i>, campaigns that create feelings of inclusion, empowerment, and social well-being and enable marginalized or under-represented groups to fully connect with brands – incorporating inclusivity of vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers in all marketing operations – developing special roles within organizations (<i>e.g.</i>, Chief Empathy and/or Inclusivity Marketing Officer)
	Customer experience	Service inclusion (SI); inclusive customer experience; responsible innovation (Brand & Blok, 2019; Cerdan Chiscano & Binkhorst, 2019; Fisk <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Kipnis <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Lu & Sinha, 2023; Taylor <i>et al.</i> , 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – designing and ensuring inclusive customer experience and inclusive service concepts – providing customers with fair access to a service, fair treatment during a service, and fair opportunity to exit a service: service providers should anticipate, diagnose, and rectify problems that might preclude or disadvantage some consumers from realizing value in a service experience – including customers in the design of services before the actual experience takes place; involving customers with special needs to (re)design the experience – creating an inclusive and welcoming shopping environment – implementing employee training programs on diversity, unconscious bias, cultural sensitivity, and disability awareness
Stakeholders	Corporate governance	Inclusive governance (Sacchetti & Catturani, 2021); inclusive scenario planning (Andersen <i>et al.</i> , 2021); multi-stakeholder initiatives (Fiandrino <i>et al.</i> , 2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – involving stakeholders in decision-making processes through workshops, interviews, surveys, games – ensuring and encouraging representation of marginalized communities in decision-making bodies – educating and raising awareness about the importance of inclusivity – building bridges between different communities, fostering dialogue and collaboration; creating spaces for open and respectful discussions – developing innovations in a responsible way, <i>i.e.</i>, through the deliberative engagement of all stakeholders at all stages of the innovation process – developing multi-stakeholder partnerships

Source: own study.

The main limitation of the current study is the selection of the database and the strategy used for the SLR. While some might argue that Scopus is not sufficiently comprehensive, this database is one of the largest and most widely recognised databases of peer-reviewed scientific publications, which we believe is a critical aspect of the high-quality literature review. Another limitation of our study regards the search strategy, particularly setting the time and language constraints and restrictions related to the publication model (excluding non-English and non-open access publications). It is possible that due to these limitations, some significant articles might have been excluded. The selection of the keywords utilized for a review also impacted its outcomes.

Summing up, we may state that despite a considerable number of publications on inclusiveness, there are still significant gaps in the existing body of work confirming the need to continue research in this area. The most important gap refers to the inclusion of customers or, more broadly speaking, entities representing the demand side in market relations. Not only there were much less articles somehow relating to customers in comparison to articles referring to employee inclusion (42 vs. 112), but also the ones identified rarely regarded the inclusive approach towards clients. In fact, only eight out of forty-two publications actually related to enterprises' actions leading to the greater inclusion of their customers. This significant disparity in a number of studies regarding a company's inclusiveness is calling for an urgent supplement. Other important directions of future studies in this field include the impact of the organisation's inclusive approach on building its strategic advantage, competitiveness, and organisational resilience.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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