

Özge YANIKOĞLU: 

¹Özyeğin University, Faculty of Aviation and
Aeronautical Sciences, Aviation Management
Department, İstanbul, Türkiye

Decoding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in Higher Education: A Linguistic and Theoretical Exploration

ABSTRACT

This study undertakes a comprehensive examination of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) literature in higher education, aiming to identify central themes and assess the theoretical frameworks that shape scholarly discourse. By conducting a thematic analysis of 1,010 DEI-related articles sourced from the Web of Science (WOS) database and utilizing MAXQDA for qualitative data analysis, this research provides a systematic evaluation of existing studies. The findings reveal a predominant focus on gender and racial dynamics, particularly within the U.S. context, alongside a disciplinary concentration in medical and health-related fields. This pattern suggests a limited scope in DEI research, often neglecting broader social identities such as disability, socioeconomic status, religion, nationality, first-generation status, and political perspectives, and overlooking the intersectionality of these identities and their distinct experiences. Additionally, the analysis uncovers a lack of diverse theoretical applications, highlighting the need for alternative conceptual frameworks to advance the depth and applicability of DEI scholarship. The study also points to a significant gap in international perspectives, with most research centered on Western institutions. By synthesizing these insights, this study contributes to the DEI discourse by offering a critical overview of existing research and identifying key areas for further investigation. Ultimately, it advocates for a more inclusive and globally relevant understanding of DEI in higher education.

Keywords: Diversity, equity, inclusion, higher education, systematic review, academia.

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Corresponding author:

Özge YANIKOĞLU
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Introduction

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in higher education has experienced profound transformation over the years. Initially, DEI efforts predominantly focused on racial/ethnic backgrounds and cisgender identities (Worthington et al., 2020). However, contemporary definitions of DEI have expanded to encompass a much broader range of social identity characteristics, which include gender expression, sexual orientation, disability, religious and spiritual beliefs, national and geographic background, linguistic preferences, economic background, age, service in the military, political beliefs and more. The DEI domain has quickly advanced, incorporating nuanced interpretations of intersectionality (e.g., Byrd et al., 2019) and recognizing the variability of multiple identities among students, faculty, and staff (Harris & Patton, 2019; Worthington et al., 2014).

In response to this evolution, higher education institutions have broadened the scope of their DEI initiatives and taken significant steps towards embracing DEI principles. These expanded efforts involve enhancing an equitable, diverse, and inclusive campus environment, enhancing curriculum

and teaching methods, improving recruitment and retention strategies, and enhancing procurement and supplier diversity (Worthington et al., 2014). These efforts show their commitment to confronting systemic issues faced by minoritized groups in higher education (Turner et al., 2008).

While numerous individual studies have explored various aspects of DEI within higher education (Liou et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2021), a comprehensive review synthesizing this body of research and identifying gaps for further investigation has yet to be conducted. Thus, a thorough literature review is essential to provide a comprehensive overview, synthesize key findings, and deepen our understanding of DEI in higher education. This study aims to systematically explore DEI terminology within the higher education literature, with two main objectives: first, to identify and analyze the key concepts, phrases, and language patterns shaping academic discourse on DEI; and second, to examine the dominant theoretical frameworks that underpin DEI studies.

Review of DEI Concept

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are multifaceted concepts that often provoke discussions and debates regarding their meanings and practical implementations. Diversity is the recognition of physical and social attributes that differentiate individuals or groups, with celebrating these distinctions as sources of strength for the entire community (Rodriguez, 2016; Tan, 2019). It explores the impact of societal disparities in power and advantages associated with various social identities such as race, ethnicity, culture, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, income, religion, disability, age, nationality, and language (American Psychological Association (APA), 2021). Diversity serves as the foundation for understanding the concept of privilege, which involves unearned advantages granted to some based on their social identity or status rather than earned merit (Johnson, 2018). On the contrary, oppression arises when one subgroup wields more power and privilege than another, using it to dominate and maintain the current social hierarchy (APA, 2021).

Unconscious bias refers to a negative bias towards a particular social group that exists unconsciously (APA, 2021). These biases are often shaped or reinforced by stereotypes—mental generalizations, such as beliefs and expectations, about the attributes and traits of individuals within a specific group or social category (Britannica, n.d.). When unconscious biases and stereotypes influence behavior, they can lead to discrimination, which involves unjust and differential treatment of individuals based on their social identities. Discrimination operates at both individual and institutional levels, creating systemic advantages for some groups while limiting opportunities for others (APA, 2021). A specific manifestation of discrimination is racism, which targets individuals or groups based on race (APA, 2021). However, racism is just one aspect of a broader process of marginalization. Marginalization extends beyond racial prejudice to include the systematic isolation or disempowerment of certain individuals or groups, rendering them insignificant in society. It results from a range of social, economic, and political inequalities, creating barriers to full participation and equal opportunities in society (APA, 2017). Furthermore, microaggressions—subtle and often unintentional discriminatory acts—frequently stem from unconscious biases and stereotypes, perpetuating marginalization through derogatory attitudes based on characteristics like race or gender (APA, 2017).

Equity, a crucial element of DEI, ensures equal opportunities and access regardless of background. It involves removing barriers that hinder the participation of

some groups and levelling the playing field for all (Rodriguez, 2016). As an essential component of equity, access means removing barriers that lead to unequal opportunities for individuals to be part of a group, organization, or community (APA, 2021). Equity is linked to social justice, defined as the commitment to creating fairness in resources, rights, and treatment for marginalized individuals and groups lacking equal power in society (Duignan, n.d.).

The 'I' in DEI stands for inclusion, which celebrates diverse perspectives and actively engages individuals from all backgrounds, ensuring equal opportunities for all. It fosters belonging by making everyone feel valued as their authentic selves without hiding parts of their lives (Tan, 2019).

DEI initiatives hold great importance for higher education institutions. By fostering diverse representation and creating an inclusive learning environment, universities provide crucial support to students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, inspiring them and bolstering their belief in their own potential and capabilities. Diversity on campus enhances cultural awareness, enriching dialogues and dismantling prejudices (Clayton, 2021). A diverse, equitable, and inclusive university environment encourages students to reflect on their ideas, understand diverse perspectives, and resolve conflicts through compromise and mutual understanding. A more supportive and inclusive educational experience ultimately leads to improved academic performance (Tavares, 2021). Similarly, having a diverse faculty positively impacts the retention and graduation rates of students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, enhances faculty welfare, and leads to better promotion and tenure outcomes (Beer et al., 2023; Gilkes-Borr, 2019).

Researchers have examined various dimensions of DEI in academia. For example, studies have found that gender disparities remain widespread, with women often encountering structural barriers such as unequal pay, limited mentorship opportunities, and underrepresentation in leadership positions (Beech et al., 2021). Race also plays a significant role, as studies demonstrate how institutional biases and systemic racism hinder the academic trajectories of underrepresented minorities (Arnold et al., 2016; Jayakumar et al., 2009). Socioeconomic status further compounds inequities, with scholars from less privileged backgrounds facing challenges such as limited access to funding, professional networks, and academic preparation (Morgan et al., 2022). Similarly, studies have revealed that religion and cultural identity can influence academic experiences, particularly for individuals whose beliefs or practices diverge from institutional norms

(Chen et al., 2019).

While various studies explore different aspects of DEI in academia, they often focus on specific issues, such as gender or race, in isolation. A comprehensive review that synthesizes this body of research and identifies its gaps is notably absent. This study aims to fill that gap by offering an integrated analysis of the DEI landscape in higher education literature.

The study conducts a detailed review of DEI terminology and theoretical frameworks within higher education literature. It aims to 1) identify and examine the DEI lexicon, including essential concepts and language patterns shaping academic DEI discussions, and 2) to evaluate the theoretical frameworks supporting DEI research, with a focus on their application and impact on understanding DEI principles.

Method

Research Design

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR), guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. An SLR is appropriate for this research as it enables a comprehensive synthesis of existing literature, ensuring a rigorous evaluation of DEI in higher education (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008).

To achieve the research objectives, the study employs thematic analysis, combining manual review with qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques, facilitated by MAXQDA software. The literature search was conducted using the Web of Science (WOS) database to identify scholarly articles related to DEI in higher education as of March 2024. WOS was chosen as the primary database due to its high-quality indexing criteria, which ensure the relevance and credibility of the included studies. Additionally, its advanced search capabilities facilitate precise retrieval of DEI-related literature.

The PRISMA guidelines were adopted for this research. PRISMA is widely recognized as a protocol designed to enhance the reporting quality of systematic reviews and meta-analyses. The framework includes a checklist and a flow diagram to ensure that studies are conducted and presented in a transparent, complete, and replicable manner (Liberati et al., 2009) (Figure 1).

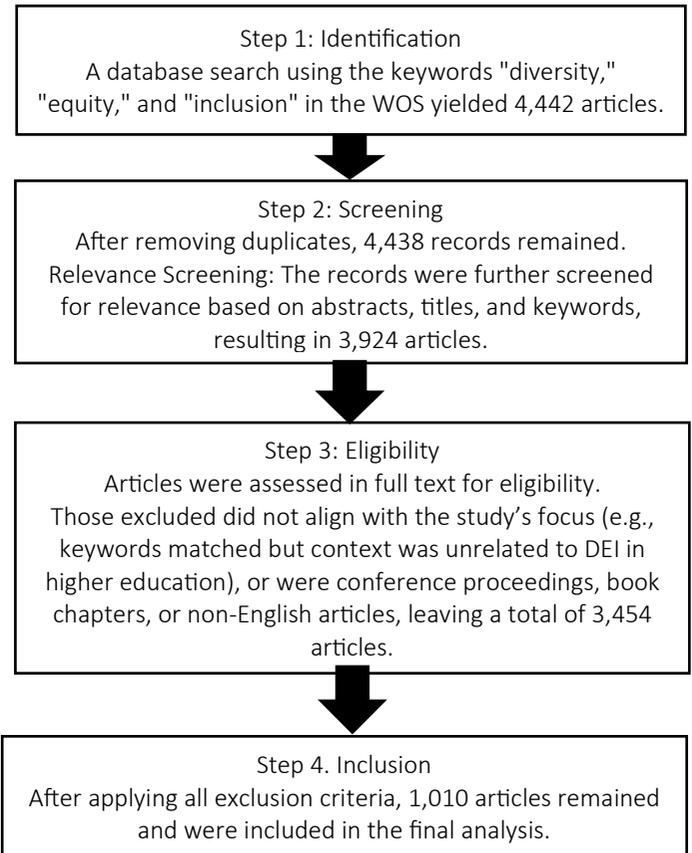


Figure 1.
PRISMA Framework Adopted in the Study

Data Source

The initial research employed the keywords "diversity," "equity," and "inclusion," which yielded 4,442 articles (WOS, 2024). To narrow the focus to higher education, the results were refined by including articles with keywords such as "academy," "academic," "faculty," "university," "higher education," and "curriculum." To ensure inclusivity and accuracy, the author manually reviewed all retrieved articles, examining their abstracts, keywords, and titles to ensure relevance to the study's focus on DEI in higher education. The manual review process involved applying the following exclusion criteria: Conference proceedings and book chapters were disregarded. Non-English articles were removed. Articles containing the specified keywords but deemed irrelevant to the study's objectives were excluded. For example, articles focusing on DEI practices in primary education or corporate settings were excluded, as the study specifically targets higher education. After implementing the exclusion criteria and conducting a thorough manual review, a final sample of 1010 studies was considered relevant for the study.

No ethics committee approval was needed for this study, as it involved only publicly available literature and did not include human participants or sensitive data. The research solely focused on the analysis of publicly available literature

and documents related to DEI in higher education.

Data Analysis

All articles were downloaded and imported into the MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software. Prior to analysis, a series of data preparation steps were implemented to ensure the relevance and accuracy of the analysis results: Hyperlinks, hashtags, numbers, email addresses, and other non-textual elements were systematically excluded from the dataset. A predefined Stop Word List for the English language was activated within the MAXQDA software. This list excluded common words and articles that typically carry less semantic weight, such as "the" "and" "in" and others. Then, the "Lemmatize Words" option was enabled within MAXQDA. This process standardized words to their base or dictionary form, allowing for more accurate analysis and reducing the impact of inflections and variations.

A word combination analysis was performed, and the word cloud was generated using the top 50 word combinations. MAXQDA's "Keyword in Context" and "Lexical Search" tools were employed to identify the theoretical frameworks. Systematic searches utilizing key terms such as 'Theoretical Framework,' 'Theory,' and 'Conceptual Framework' were executed to ensure comprehensive coverage and in-depth investigation. Following the lexical search for theories, each result was carefully reviewed to ensure that references were not mistakenly included in the findings. Abstracts, titles, and keywords of the articles were imported as an Excel file. An additional keyword frequency analysis was performed via MAXQDA to enable the quantification of the prevalence of specific terms and the identification of dominant themes within the body of literature.

Results

An Overall Look

Starting in 2015, there has been a notable and consistent increase in the number of articles published on DEI in higher education, as illustrated in Figure 2. This upward trajectory highlights a growing academic and institutional interest in DEI topics, with a particularly steep rise observed from 2018 onwards. Given the cutoff date was in March, it's expected that there will be more studies by the end of 2024.

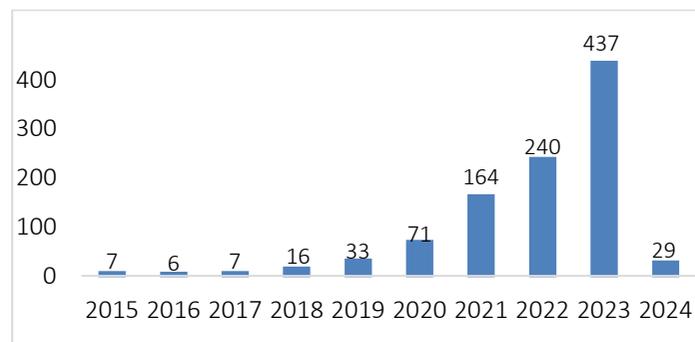


Figure 2.
Yearly Distribution of Studies

Keyword Analysis

The keyword analysis reveals a nuanced understanding of the focus areas within the DEI discourse in higher education, especially concerning academic medicine (Table 1). Having "Medical Education" and "Academic Medicine" as top-ranked keywords indicates a significant interest in advancing the quality, effectiveness, and inclusivity of medical education and academic healthcare practices. "Health Equity" and "Health Care" together illustrate the extensive approach of higher education in training healthcare professionals. "Nurse Education" highlights the importance of training nurses to provide equitable care to diverse populations. The frequent mentions of "Social Justice" and "Social Work" reflect academic institutions' growing focus on addressing societal inequalities and preparing students with the values, knowledge, and skills needed to foster a more equitable society. The emphasis on "Professional Development" indicates a commitment to continuous learning and skill enhancement among faculty and staff, especially in DEI practices. The frequent mention of "Gender Equity" indicates a unified approach within academic settings to address and diminish gender-based disparities. The emphasis on "STEM Education" highlights initiatives to address underrepresentation in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics and encourage broader student engagement in these fields. The term "Cultural Humility" emphasizes academia's shift toward continuous self-assessment and learning, encouraging ongoing reflection on cultural identity, biases, and power structures to enhance respect and inclusivity in educational settings. The focus on "Faculty Development" emphasizes the importance of educators in creating inclusive environments and enhancing teaching, curriculum, and student engagement for greater inclusivity and equity.

Table 1.*Keyword Analysis*

Word combination	Frequency
High Education	84
Medical Education	59
Social Justice	35
Health Equity	25
Professional Development	23
Diversity Equity	21
Nurse Education	20
Gender Equity	19
Underrepresent Minority	13
Health Care	12
Graduate Student	11
Stem Education	10
Social Work	10
Faculty Development	10
Equity Inclusion	10
Cultural Humility	10
Academic Medicine	10

Detailed Word Combination

Beyond the initial keyword analysis, the study delved further into word combinations across all involved articles, uncovering additional trends. The analysis highlighted a dominant focus on the U.S. context, as evidenced by the frequent use of terms like "United States" and "American Medical." It also identified a significant emphasis on racial and ethnic diversity, demonstrated through recurring references to "African American," "Race Ethnicity," "Ethnic Minority," "Systemic Racism," and "Ethnic Diversity." Furthermore, the prevalent mention of "Implicit Bias" underscores its critical role in addressing subconscious prejudices impacting decisions and interactions within higher education.

**Figure 3.***Word Combination Analysis Word Cloud*

The importance of "Learning Environment," "Student Experience," and "Lived Experience" was underscored, reflecting their impact on educational outcomes and the understanding of diverse student backgrounds. Student-related terms such as "College Student" and "Undergraduate Student" indicate a focus on student experiences and support. The inclusion of "Sexual Orientation" and "Gender Identity" highlights an increasing awareness of LGBTQ+ inclusivity. The term "Mental Health" shows an acknowledgment of the importance of the psychological and emotional well-being of individuals in the academic community. Additionally, references to the "COVID-19 Pandemic" point to recent examinations of the pandemic's impact on DEI in higher education. "Role Model" underscores the importance of figures who promote DEI by influencing positive behaviors and fostering an inclusive environment. Lastly, "Financial Support" addresses economic barriers in education and provides resources to ensure equitable access and opportunities for all. The word combination analysis is visually depicted in Figure 2 through a word cloud.

Theoretical Framework Used in the Studies

The theoretical frameworks used in DEI studies within higher education are summarized in Table 2, along with their overarching objectives and their applications in the context of higher education studies, supported by sample references from the analyzed articles. The theoretical frameworks listed in the table are ranked according to their frequency of use in studies, with those at the end being applied in only a single study. In the studies, only theories employed as foundational frameworks were considered; those mentioned in passing or in a single sentence were not included.

The table highlights key theoretical frameworks commonly employed in DEI research within higher education. Among these, Critical Race Theory and the Theory of Racialized Organizations are frequently cited in studies (e.g., Casellas

Connors, 2021; Corneille et al., 2019; Inskip, 2023; Schachle & Coley, 2022; Yi et al., 2022), underscoring the centrality of race in DEI discourse. Critical Race Theory examines systemic racism's impact on academia, while the Theory of Racialized Organizations highlights how institutional practices perpetuate racial inequities.

The Theory of Capital (Bourdieu, 1986) is also prominently used in studies, highlighting the unequal distribution of cultural, social, and economic capital within academia (Deng et al., 2023; Heffernan, 2022). This theory offers a critical perspective on how access to resources—both material and symbolic—impacts the ability of marginalized groups to succeed in higher education.

Intersectionality Theory appears in a significant number of studies (e.g., Casellas Connors, 2021; Corneille et al., 2019; Inskip, 2023; Razzante, 2018; Woodhead et al., 2022), providing a framework for understanding how race, gender, class, and other social categories intersect to shape individuals' experiences in academic environments.

The table further highlights additional key theoretical frameworks, each contributing unique insights into the dynamics of DEI in higher education. For instance, Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1995) emphasizes self-examination and the confrontation of biases (e.g., Brandhorst et al., 2023; Nuss, 2023). The application of Queer Theory (Betsky, 1997) helps to break down biases surrounding sexual orientations and gender identities (e.g., Parra-Martínez et al., 2021; Wilby et al., 2022). Black Feminist Theory (Hill-Collins, 1990) challenges mainstream feminism, which often centers on the experiences of white women, advocating for an approach that recognizes the specific struggles faced by women of color (Leath et al., 2021; Ruel & Tajmel, 2023). Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 1995) emphasizes the pressures faced by underrepresented students and faculty, providing insights into how these stresses impact academic success and well-being (Avery-Desmarais et al., 2021). Gendered Organizations Theory (Acker, 1990) explores how organizational structures and norms often prioritize masculine standards, marginalizing non-masculine perspectives (Bird & Latimer, 2019; Edwards et al., 2019; Laursen & De Welde, 2019). Standpoint Theory (Harding, 1986) highlights how individuals' social positions influence their perspectives on power dynamics and inequality (Razzante, 2018; Schusler et al., 2021). Although less commonly used, other theories in Table 2 contribute significantly to DEI in higher education.

Table 2.

Key Theoretical Frameworks

Theoretical Frameworks and Overarching Objectives & Applications in Higher Education Studies (Sample Article References)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Crenshaw et al., 1995)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) asserts that racism is a deeply entrenched part of society, shaping the educational experiences and outcomes for students of color. In the realm of higher education, CRT aids in unveiling how institutional structures perpetuate racial inequalities and guides efforts to foster more equitable and inclusive learning environments (Corneille et al., 2019; Casellas Connors, 2021; Inskip, 2023).

Theory of Capital (Bourdieu, 1986)

The Theory of Capital highlights the unequal distribution of cultural, social, and economic capital, shaping inequalities within educational settings. This framework clarifies how varying values assigned to applicants' backgrounds influence the selection process, reflecting broader societal inequities. The theory calls for transparency in admissions to address biases and power imbalances to ensure a diverse academic community (Deng et al., 2023; Heffernan, 2022).

Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989)

Intersectionality shows how intersecting identities -race, gender, class, and sexuality - create distinct advantages or barriers. Incorporating intersectionality into DEI strategies allows institutions to acknowledge the full spectrum of individual experiences. By adopting an intersectional approach in DEI work, higher education institutions can adopt a more comprehensive perspective on diversity, recognizing and appreciating the diverse experiences of its community (Razzante, 2018; Woodhead et al., 2022)

Theory of Racialized Organizations (Ray, 2019)

The theory of Racialized Organizations challenges the notion of race neutrality and reveals how racial group membership influences access to resources and leadership roles, typically favoring white individuals. It highlights a systemic lack of diversity among faculty and leadership and promotes a more inclusive academic environment by challenging existing norms and fostering genuine racial equity (Schachle & Coley, 2022; Yi et al., 2022).

Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1995)

Transformative Learning Theory emphasizes self-examination and bias confrontation and helps learners reassess their beliefs through new experiences. This theory enhances DEI education by aiding students in identifying and addressing discriminatory attitudes, thereby nurturing an inclusive learning atmosphere (Brandhorst et al., 2023; Nuss, 2023).

Queer Theory (Betsky, 1997)

Queer Theory critiques traditional gender and sexuality categories as socially constructed, promoting diversity beyond heteronormative and binary norms. Integrating Queer Theory into higher education pedagogy encourages the breakdown of prevailing biases, promoting a deeper appreciation for diversity and inclusivity across sexual orientations and gender

identities (Parra-Martínez et al., 2021; Wilby et al., 2022).

Black Feminist Theory (Hill-Collins, 1990)

Black Feminist Theory challenges mainstream feminism's focus on the experiences of white women, advocating for an inclusive approach that recognizes the unique struggles of women of color. Integrating the theory in higher education DEI efforts allows institutions to combat discrimination more effectively and support marginalized groups (Leath, Whiteside & Jones, 2021; Ruel & Tajmel, 2023).

Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 1995)

Minority Stress Theory explains the psychological distress experienced by marginalized groups, highlighting unique stressors and their impact on the success of diverse students, including those of different races, genders, and sexual orientations. By using the theory, studies emphasize the unique pressures on underrepresented students and faculty, guiding higher education institutions to develop supportive environments to alleviate these stresses (Avery-Desmarais et al., 2021).

Gendered Organizations Theory (Acker, 1990)

Gendered Organizations Theory examines how organizational norms based on masculine standards marginalize non-masculine perspectives, reflecting historical male dominance. Applying this theory, universities can reassess 'gender-neutral' policies to promote inclusivity and diversity, reduce gender disparities, and foster an equitable environment that values contributions from individuals of all gender identities (Bird & Latimer, 2019; Edwards et al., 2019; Laursen & De Welde, 2019).

Standpoint Theory (Harstock, 1983)

Standpoint Theory explores how individuals' perspectives are shaped by their social positions and experiences. It highlights power dynamics and facilitates solutions to inequality more effectively. Applying this theory, higher education fosters inclusivity and amplifies underrepresented voices, creating environments attuned to community diversity (Razzante, 2018; Schusler et al., 2021).

Theory of Practice (Bourdieu, 1972)

Theory of Practice focuses on concepts like habitus (internalized dispositions), capital (resources like money, social connections), and field (social environments), explaining how they influence people's behaviors and opportunities. The theory is used to understand the roles of habitus, capital, and field in shaping the experiences of diverse students, thereby guiding efforts to address inequalities and promote inclusivity (Byrd, 2022; Han et al., 2023).

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1997)

Social Learning Theory posits that regular interactions and shared experiences significantly influence individuals' attitudes and behaviors. This theory explores how continuous engagement and role modeling by academic leaders can enhance faculty members' understanding of inequities and bolster DEI initiatives in higher education (Klemm Verbo et al., 2014; Marchiondo et al., 2023).

Social Justice Theory (Frenken, 1966)

Social Justice Theory focuses on achieving equitable access to resources, opportunities, and rights for all individuals. By applying the theory, higher education can develop policies and

practices to eliminate discrimination, address inequalities, and ensure fair treatment, fostering an inclusive environment aligned with DEI principles (Ávila Reyes et al., 2021).

Social Role Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002)

Social Role Theory examines how societal roles and expectations influence the behavior, attitudes, and opportunities of individuals based on their gender or social identity. It helps investigate how gender and social identity-based role expectations contribute to bias in evaluation, assessment, and promotion processes in higher education (Balkin et al., 2022).

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)

Social Identity Theory examines how individuals derive their self-worth and identity from group memberships. This theory aids in understanding how students develop their scholarly identities and sense of belonging within their academic disciplines, highlighting the significance of acknowledging cultural and social identities (Willis & Schram, 2023; Wolbring & Lillywhite, 2021).

Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994)

Social Cognitive Career Theory examines how individuals' beliefs in their own abilities, expectations of outcomes, and personal goals influence their career development and decision-making processes. This theory is used to understand how marginalized students and faculty perceive their abilities and prospects for success in their chosen career paths (Deng et al., 2023).

Theory of Academic Capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004)

Theory of Academic Capitalism explores how universities increasingly adopt market-oriented practices and strategies due to evolving economic and political conditions. It examines the impact of these market-oriented practices on DEI efforts within universities, highlighting potential challenges such as commercialization and difficulties in tackling social justice issues (David, 2009; Kauppinen & Kaidesoja, 2014).

Co-cultural Theory (Orbe, 1998)

Co-cultural Theory posits that marginalized individuals often adjust their communication to align with the dominant culture's expectations. This theory is applied to investigate how students, faculty, and staff from co-cultural groups modify their communication strategies within the dominant academic culture in higher education (Razzante, 2018; Ruiz-Mesa, 2022).

Theory of Cultural Humility (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998)

Theory of Cultural Humility acknowledges that everyone has both conscious and unconscious biases. It emphasizes the importance of self-awareness, recognizing the limitations of one's understanding of others' experiences, and fostering humility in interactions. The theory encourages higher education institutions to pursue cultural competence with humility and openness to learning, aiming to break down systems of oppression, discrimination, and microaggressions (Buchanan & O'Connor, 2020; Yen et al., 2019).

Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1962)

Human Capital Theory posits that investments in education, skills, training, and experience enhance an individual's economic success and earning potential. It examines how disparities in human capital investments, particularly between

genders, contribute to differences in educational attainment, hiring biases, promotional disparities, and wage gaps within academia (Becker & Beckworth, 2023; Sun & Turner, 2023).

Adult Learning Theory (Knowles, 1978)

Adult Learning Theory emphasizes self-directed learning and real-world application, which is essential for DEI in higher education. It helps create programs and environments that respect adult learners' diversity, improving DEI experiences. Utilizing its principles promotes a deeper DEI understanding and fosters an inclusive academic community (Mullett et al., 2022).

Critical Race Feminism (Wing, 1997)

Critical Race Feminism (CRF) addresses and analyzes the intersecting impacts of race and gender, particularly as they affect women of color in academic settings. It provides a framework for understanding how systemic inequalities and discrimination shape experiences and opportunities (Corneille et al., 2019).

Relative Deprivation Theory (Crosby, 1976)

Relative Deprivation Theory explains how individuals may feel deprived when they perceive a discrepancy between their actual and desired outcomes, especially after comparing themselves with others. This theory explores how students and faculty in higher education perceive disparities and compare their experiences based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, and other social identities (Buttner & Lowe, 2017).

Critical Social Work Theory (CSWT) (Webb, 2019)

Critical Social Work Theory (CSWT) encourages critical self-analysis and active participation in addressing social injustices. By integrating the theory, higher education institutions can create inclusive spaces for open discussion and reflection, enhancing learning and preparing students for effective, justice-focused practice (Owens-King, 2020).

Equity Theory (Adams, 1963)

Equity theory examines the concepts of fairness and justice in social relationships, particularly in the workplace. In the context of higher education, equity theory is utilized to understand and address disparities and perceptions of fairness among students, faculty, and staff (Buttner & Lowe, 2017).

Discussion

The analysis of DEI literature within higher education reveals a landscape predominantly shaped by discussions on gender (e.g., Becker et al., 2023; Didier et al., 2023) and racial dynamics (e.g., Lacy et al., 2024; Wigger, 2024), with a considerable emphasis on the U.S. context (e.g., Carter et al., 2023; Raldow et al., 2023; Rodrigues et al., 2023). The findings highlight an urgent need to broaden DEI research in higher education beyond traditional identity categories to address diverse forms of exclusion. While race and gender remain central to DEI efforts, studies focusing on disabled individuals (e.g., Dollinger et al., 2023; Krishnan, 2024; Rudzki et al., 2023), religious minorities (e.g., Nojan, 2023; Padela et al., 2023), international students (Tavares,

2021; Wang & Sun, 2022), language barriers (Girolamo et al., 2022), and economic disparities (e.g., Rachoin et al., 2023) are sparse. Additionally, there is a notable lack of research on underrepresented first-generation (e.g., Salehi et al., 2020) and politically diverse student groups (e.g., Adida et al., 2023), further highlighting critical gaps in the literature. Expanding the scope of DEI research to encompass these underexplored areas is essential for fostering truly inclusive academic environments.

Notably, a significant portion of the literature originates from medical schools (e.g., Bond et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024; Weller et al., 2024; Wheat et al., 2024), revealing a disciplinary bias that overlooks the distinct DEI challenges and opportunities within other academic fields. To develop a more comprehensive understanding of DEI, it is crucial to expand research to encompass disciplines such as Social Sciences, Humanities, Business, and Legal Studies (e.g., Turco et al., 2023). Greater inclusion of diverse academic domains is essential to achieving a holistic perspective on DEI issues and solutions.

The DEI research landscape in higher education predominantly draws on theories such as Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw et al., 1995), Theory of Capital (Bourdieu, 1986), Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989), and Theory of Racialized Organizations (Ray, 2019). While these frameworks are invaluable for analyzing systemic inequalities, privileges, and exclusions, there is a pressing need for DEI research to evolve by integrating and expanding its theoretical base. This evolution could include exploring more transformative and revolutionary perspectives, such as Black Marxism (Robinson, 2023), Ecological Feminist Theory (Gaard, 2011), and Critical Disability Theory (Hall, 2019). Additionally, theories that have been underutilized, such as Equity Theory (Adams, 1963), Relative Deprivation Theory (Crosby, 1976), and Adult Learning Theory (Knowles, 1978), hold the potential to enrich the DEI discourse. Expanding the use of these frameworks can offer fresh insights and address gaps in understanding DEI research.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study delved into DEI within the context of higher education. First, a comprehensive analysis of DEI literature, examining word combinations and keywords, was conducted to uncover prevalent themes and concepts. Then, by identifying and explaining the theoretical frameworks underpinning DEI research, the study offers a solid foundation for understanding the theoretical aspects driving DEI efforts in academia.

Overall, this study contributes to the wider discussion on DEI in higher education by providing clear explanations of

terminology, theories, and the critical field's underpinnings. A better understanding of DEI language and theoretical frameworks can guide future research and inform policy-making. Ultimately, the findings offer significant insights for the academic community, institutions, and policymakers, delineating a more informed approach to advancing DEI in higher education and paving the way for more inclusive, equitable academic environments.

The study identifies several gaps in the DEI landscape within higher education. While the literature predominantly focuses on gender and racial dynamics, it often overlooks the intersectionality of other identities, such as disability, religion, nationality, first-generation status, and political perspectives, despite their distinct experiences and challenges. Future DEI research should expand to include these diverse and intersecting social identities. Prioritizing underrepresented groups will provide a more comprehensive understanding of inclusivity and help develop DEI strategies that reflect the experiences of all student populations.

In addition, a significant portion of DEI research comes from medical schools, which skews the focus of the research and fails to address the unique DEI challenges in other academic disciplines. Broadening the scope to encompass diverse disciplines is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of DEI across higher education.

Moreover, the research often relies on a few dominant theories, such as Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality Theory, and the Theory of Racialized Organizations. While valuable, these frameworks do not fully capture the complexities of discrimination, exclusion, and privilege. To provide a more nuanced understanding of systemic inequalities, it is essential to integrate a broader range of theoretical approaches that address the diverse experiences of marginalized groups.

Lastly, the recent rise in anti-DEI legislation poses significant challenges to DEI efforts in higher education, yet few studies have addressed this (Carter et al., 2023; Fowler et al., 2024; Harried, 2024; Orr et al., 2023). Further research is strongly recommended to address the notable gap in understanding the implications and effects of anti-DEI legislation within academia, which poses a threat to the core principles of DEI in educational settings.

In summary, the study highlights critical gaps in the current DEI research landscape and offers recommendations to address these gaps. Expanding the focus of DEI research to include a broader range of social identities, academic disciplines, and theoretical frameworks will strengthen efforts to create a more inclusive and equitable higher

education environment.

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