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Gender-inclusive language in the corporate communication of German companies:

Authentic corporate activism or pinkwashing?

Carolin Müller-Spitzer¹, Samira Ochs¹, Virginia Sondergeld², Katharina Wrohlich³

Abstract

Commitment to gender equality and diversity has long been a stated priority for large companies, and one visible way to signal this commitment is through gender-inclusive language. Public debates around such language use increasingly surface regarding companies' communication with stakeholders, including employees, customers, and shareholders. In particular, the adoption of newer forms of gender-inclusive language that move beyond the traditional binary framework is often interpreted as a form of political positioning. Critics contend that these practices are unnecessary or serve merely to polish a company's image, lacking genuine engagement with gender equality. If accurate, this critique implies that the practice reflects not authentic corporate activism but rather a form of *CSR-washing* – specifically, *pinkwashing*. We examine whether major publicly listed German DAX companies engage in pinkwashing by employing explicit gender-inclusive markers (e.g., the asterisk in *Kund*innen* 'customers') in their corporate communication without accompanying commitment to other gender-equality measures. To address this question, we employ a mixed-method approach that combines manual linguistic annotations of personal nouns with quantifiable economic data on the representation of women on executive and supervisory boards. Our findings show that companies that perform poorly on increasing women's representation on their executive and supervisory boards do *not* use gender symbols on their company websites in 2023. Furthermore, they do *not* introduce gender symbols in their annual shareholder letters from 2015 to 2022 before achieving improvements in women's representation on their executive boards. These results suggest that German companies do not use gender-inclusive language as a form of pinkwashing, but rather as a symbolic complement to broader gender-equality initiatives. Whether such patterns will persist amid growing political resistance to DEI efforts, particularly in international contexts, remains to be seen.

Keywords: Pinkwashing, CSR-washing, Corporate Activism, Gender-inclusive Language, Gender Equality, Board Gender Diversity

JEL Classifications: M14, M12, M39, Z13

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1 Introduction

Gender-inclusive language is a topic of ongoing controversy in many languages. Proponents view it as a means to promote gender equality and reduce gender bias (United Nations, 2024). Critics, however, see it as unnecessary or as a distraction from more pressing issues related to gender equality. Due to the divisiveness of this debate, the use of gender-inclusive language has become an explicit form of positioning in socio-political and economic contexts, extending to the field of corporate communication (Donnadieu Borquez & Perkins, 2025; Luring & Klitmøller, 2017; Srivastava et al., 2025; Wolfgruber, Einwiller, et al., 2021; Wolfgruber, Stürmer, et al., 2021).

The use of gender-inclusive language in corporate communication can signal progressive views on gender roles (Sczesny et al., 2016) and demonstrate a company's commitment to prosocial values beyond purely profit-oriented goals (Wei, 2020, p. 1013). While some interpret this as a credible form of corporate activism (ifo Institut, 2021), others remain skeptical, questioning the authenticity of such efforts (Payr, 2021; Trutkowski & Weiß, 2022). Critics argue that companies may adopt gender-inclusive language merely as a strategic tool to enhance their public image and appear progressive, without implementing substantive actions. In such cases, the use of gender-inclusive language would not reflect genuine corporate activism but instead constitute a form of *pinkwashing*.

Corporate activism generally refers to deliberate actions taken by companies to publicly support or oppose political and societal issues, intending to contribute to social change. These actions often seek to influence the attitudes and behaviors of relevant stakeholders within the company's institutional environment (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). In some instances, such activism is pursued despite potential reputational or financial risks (Corvellec & Stål, 2019). By contrast, corporate social responsibility (CSR) encompasses strategically planned initiatives that align with societal expectations but are usually associated with lower reputational risks (Bortree, 2014). However, when companies address issues of societal importance in their corporate communication without engaging in meaningful actions, or use such messaging to obscure their lack of genuine involvement, this practice is referred to as *CSR-washing* (Gaspari & Giuliani, 2025).

Numerous related terms with the suffix *-washing* have emerged to describe specific forms of symbolic or misleading engagement, such as *greenwashing* in the environmental context (Bernini et al., 2024; Cotugno et al., 2025) or *rainbow-washing* to suggest solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community (Schopper et al., 2025; Sterbenk et al., 2022, p. 494). All these practices share a common feature: companies seek to benefit from the symbolic value of specific social movements or causes without implementing corresponding actions. *Pinkwashing* represents a specific form of CSR-washing that relates to gender equality, women's rights, and diversity values (Sterbenk et al., 2022, p. 491). It refers to corporate messaging that superficially aligns with feminist or queer values while lacking genuine commitment or action in support of these issues.⁴ Language can contribute to such 'decoupling

⁴ We refer to the definition as in Sterbenk et al. (2022) with a focus on gender, but note that in recent public discourse, *pinkwashing* is used both related to gender identity as well as sexual orientation, often synonymously to rainbow-washing.

tendencies’, as demonstrated in the context of sustainability reporting: corporate misconduct by ‘decouplers’ was often preceded by specific linguistic markers that were absent in the reports of genuine ‘implementors’ (Conrad & Holtbrügge, 2021, p. 543).

For our study, we focus on German companies and their use of gender-inclusive language in German. German is particularly relevant to our research question because, as a language with grammatical gender, it presents specific challenges for gender-inclusive formulations (see section 2). Consequently, the use of gender-inclusive language is a subject of intense public debate in many German-speaking regions (Meuleneers, 2024).

Companies adopting gender-inclusive language in Germany have faced criticism from opponents. Some argue that such language use does not support a genuine shift in power toward marginalized groups but instead functions as a symbolic gesture. According to this view, inclusive language serves as a performative display on corporate websites, intended to signal awareness and progressiveness, while underlying structural inequalities, such as the gender pay gap, remain unaddressed (Trutkowski & Weiß, 2022; Payr, 2021). In contrast, others see potential in the practice. Frank Hensgens, head of Indeed in the German-speaking region, has welcomed the increasing adoption of gender-inclusive language by DAX-30 CEOs. He argues that this linguistic shift strengthens employer branding and may positively contribute to fostering a “culture of diversity.”⁵ In line with this perspective, psycholinguistic research shows that gender-inclusive language in job advertisements can enhance the visibility and perceived inclusiveness of positions for women, thereby supporting their participation in the labor market (Fatfouta & Sczesny, 2023; Hetjens & Hartmann, 2024; Hodel et al., 2017; Horvath & Sczesny, 2016). From this perspective, gender-inclusive language may be viewed as a meaningful tool for promoting gender equality at the organizational level, rather than merely an instance of pinkwashing.

This study investigates whether the use of gender-inclusive language by large publicly listed companies in Germany reflects a genuine commitment to gender equality or constitutes a form of pinkwashing in stakeholder communication. We examine two key indicators. First, we analyze the use of gender-inclusive language in external corporate communication, focusing on the ‘About Us’ websites of the 160 largest publicly listed DAX companies in Germany, as well as 273 shareholder letters from the DAX-40 companies. Second, we assess the representation of women on supervisory and executive boards as a measure of each company’s gender-equality efforts. Combining quantitative data from the economic and the linguistic domain enhances research into CSR-washing, which has so far mostly been based on qualitative text analyses (Gaspari & Giuliani, 2025). In contrast to these prior approaches, our method relies on quantifiable indicators from both corporate communication and actual leadership composition, allowing for a more objective assessment of the alignment between language use and gender-equality measures (cf. Bernini et al., 2024 for a discussion about the measurability of greenwashing).

⁵ <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/unternehmen/soziale-medien-wie-dax-chefs-das-gendern-umgehen-17345892.html>. [last accessed August 7, 2025]

To address our research question, we apply both a cross-sectional and a longitudinal approach. The cross-sectional analysis examines whether companies that prominently used gender-inclusive language on their ‘About Us’ websites in 2023 also demonstrated a measurable commitment to gender equality, as indicated by the proportion of women on their executive and supervisory boards up to that point. The longitudinal analysis, in turn, explores temporal patterns by comparing the timing of gender-inclusive language use in external communications with changes in board-level gender representation over time.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the background of the public and academic debate on gender-inclusive German. Section 3 presents the hypotheses guiding our two-part analysis. Section 4 details the linguistic and corporate leadership data. Section 5 reports the empirical findings of our studies. Section 6 concludes with a discussion of the implications.

2 Gender-Inclusive Language in German

The debate on gender-inclusive language is grounded in the notion that language both reflects and reinforces the cultural and social structures of a society (Garnham et al., 2016). In many languages, the conceptualization of the male as the norm is deeply embedded (Bailey et al., 2019); an aspect increasingly regarded as problematic. Thus, gender-inclusive language can be seen as a tool for promoting gender equality and reducing gender bias (United Nations, 2024).

A key aspect of gender-inclusive language concerns the ways individuals are referred to, for instance in job titles (e.g., *chairperson* instead of *chairman*) and pronouns (e.g., singular *they* in English). The use of gender-inclusive language presents greater challenges in languages with grammatical gender, such as French, German, Italian, or Russian, where every noun is assigned a specific grammatical gender. When referring to individuals, the linguistic category of grammatical gender often corresponds to a person’s gender identity. For example, in German, *die Mutter* (‘mother’) is grammatically feminine, while *der Vater* (‘father’) is masculine. Similarly, occupational nouns such as *die Ärztin* (‘female doctor’) and *der Arzt* (‘male doctor’) reflect gender-specific forms. This close alignment between grammatical and social gender poses particular challenges for the development of gender-inclusive language in such languages, mainly because the masculine form in pairs like *Arzt – Ärztin* has a dual function: It can refer specifically to men, or to people of unspecified or unknown gender. This latter phenomenon, known as the *masculine generic*, is typical for grammatical gender languages and the subject of a long-standing, controversial societal and scientific debate (Zacharski, 2024; Meuleneers, 2024; Müller-Spitzer & Ochs, 2024).

Proponents of gender-inclusive language usually do not accept the masculine generic as a default gender-neutral way of referring to people. This is supported by the fact that many psycho- and neurolinguistic studies find that the masculine generic is not always understood neutrally but rather activates a male bias (Glim et al., 2023; Gyga et al., 2008; Körner et al., 2022; Zacharski & Ferstl, 2023). In addition, gender stereotypes and true gender ratios in the respective groups modulate these effects (Gyga et al., 2016).

Various strategies have been used to replace masculine generics with more inclusive forms in German for over twenty years. An option already well established is to use gender-neutral nouns (like *die Person* ‘person’), derivatives of adjectives and verbs in the plural (like the gender-neutral plural *Studierende* instead of masculine *Studenten* ‘students’) or pair forms (*Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler* ‘female and male scientists’). In recent years, discussions about gender-inclusive language have intensified with the increasing visibility of queer communities. This went hand in hand with an adjustment of the German Personal Status Act in 2018, where a third positive gender option (called *divers*; a fourth option is *no gender*) was introduced. These developments have made the question of how to address people beyond the binary spectrum more relevant (Löhr, 2021, 2022). Consequently, in German-speaking countries, new gender symbols emerged (Link, 2024; Ochs & Rüdiger, 2025; Sökefeld, 2021; Waldendorf, 2023). These are intended to encompass all gender identities and are typically attached to the derivational base of a word as a new suffix (e.g., *Wissenschaftler*innen*, *Wissenschaftler:innen*, ‘scientists of all genders’).⁶ A recent psycholinguistic study suggests that these forms are mentally faster and easier to associate with non-binary people and therefore more inclusive than the masculine generic (Zacharski & Ferstl, 2023).

The new gender symbols (most typically the asterisk or the colon) are highly debated in German-speaking society and academia. Opponents consider them to be distracting from more pressing issues related to gender equality, some consider them to be orthographically wrong, or even ideologically motivated. Proponents see them as a way to make marginalized groups visible in language and to promote tolerance. Therefore, the asterisk and other gender symbols have become indexical signs and prominent markers of linguistic positioning (Bucholtz & Hall, 2010; Silverstein, 2003).

In the wake of this debate, many public bodies, large companies, and other institutions have issued guidelines on gender-inclusive language (Siegenthaler, 2024). However, the growing awareness of gender-inclusive language in Germany has been met with significant counter-movements, which not only intensify the debate but also question the very principles of gender-inclusive language as a whole (Simon, 2022). In particular, (mostly right-wing) populist parties like the AfD in Germany, the SVP in Switzerland, and the FPÖ in Austria see gender-inclusive language as an attractive issue for populist mobilization and have also partly succeeded in bringing this agenda into the mainstream (e.g., Roth & Sauer, 2022). Accordingly, the use of gender-inclusive language has become an important, albeit controversial, question of corporate identity for companies in German-speaking countries (Theile, 2021) – particularly in light of recent international backlash dynamics, such as those seen under former U.S. president Trump, which will be revisited in the conclusion.

3 Hypotheses

To assess whether the use of gender-inclusive language reflects genuine corporate activism or constitutes a form of pinkwashing that obscures a lack of gender-equality efforts, we formulate two hypotheses. These are tested empirically using linguistic and economic data.

⁶ Schunack & Binanzer (2022, p. 4) give an extensive overview of possible forms, and new proposals to integrate the new forms into the German grammatical system are discussed by Völkening (2022, 2025a, 2025b).

Both hypotheses rest on the presumption that companies' use of gender-inclusive language does not constitute pinkwashing. We rather expect that the use of gender-inclusive language accompanies other gender-equality measures, thus putting a symbolic linguistic emphasis on a broader company agenda to increase diversity, gender equality, and inclusion.

The hypothesis of our first analysis states that *if a company uses gender-inclusive language, it has also implemented other gender-equality measures that increase gender diversity at the highest management level*. To evaluate Hypothesis 1, we combine linguistic data from corporate websites with data from the DIW Women Executives Barometer (Sondergeld & Wrohlich, 2024), which reports the share of women in executive and supervisory board positions (see section 4.2). As internal initiatives or specific measures to promote gender equality on other levels are not observable in our data, we use the proportion of women in top leadership roles as a proxy for a company's commitment to gender-equality efforts. Hypothesis 1 will be rejected if companies use prominent ways of gender-inclusive language while performing poorly on this gender-equality indicator. We define poor performance as follows: (i) having zero women on the executive board in 2023; (ii) having less than 30 % women on the supervisory board in the same year;⁷ and (iii) having increased the women's share on supervisory boards at a below-average rate compared to all DAX companies since 2016. Separately, we identify companies that have used prominent ways of gender-inclusive language (i.e., with gender symbols) on their 'About Us' websites in 2023. To evaluate the hypothesis, we compare these two groups of companies and check for overlaps.

As gender-inclusive language is subject to ongoing language change, both a cross-sectional perspective (the use of gender-inclusive language at a specific point in time, 2023 in our case) and a longitudinal perspective are relevant. To complement the first analysis, we conduct a second analysis that takes a longitudinal perspective. It examines when companies began using gender symbols in their corporate communication and whether this aligns with increases in the representation of women on the executive board.

The second hypothesis states that *prominent ways of gender-inclusive language are not used before gender-equality efforts in leadership representation are implemented*. If we see that gender symbols appear in corporate communication before measurable progress in gender equality (i.e., increases in the share of women on the executive board), we interpret this as indicative of a *phase of pinkwashing*. To evaluate this second hypothesis, we analyze shareholder letters from the 40 largest publicly listed companies in Germany (DAX-40) between 2015 and 2022, tracking the timing of gender-inclusive language alongside developments in board-level gender representation. The hypothesis is rejected if the introduction of gender symbols happens in a year where (i) a company has not reached a share of 40-60 % women on the executive board, and (ii) has not appointed a woman to the executive board in the year before the report is published or in the year of publication.

⁷ Most DAX companies must have at least 30 % of members for each gender on supervisory boards since the introduction of the mandatory gender quota in 2016.

4 Data and descriptive statistics

4.1 Linguistic data

The corpus for the linguistic part of the analysis was compiled specifically for this study. Two different text types were analyzed: (1) the ‘About Us’ websites of all 160 companies listed in the largest German stock market index (DAX) from 2023, and (2) the shareholder letters of the DAX-40 companies from 2015 to 2022.

- (1) Analysis 1: The ‘About Us’ sections of the corporate websites were automatically collected in October 2023 using a custom-built web scraping tool. In cases where the scraper retrieved incomplete data, manual correction and data collection were applied. The resulting dataset provides synchronic⁸ linguistic material from 2023 for all 160 publicly listed DAX companies and serves as the basis for our cross-sectional analysis.
- (2) Analysis 2: Shareholder letters were retrieved from the annual reports of the DAX-40 companies for the years 2015 to 2022, resulting in a total sample of 273 texts.⁹ These letters provide diachronic linguistic data, serving as the basis for our longitudinal analysis. As they are published annually under consistent conditions – regarding format, intended audience, and timing – they offer a reliable source for tracking short-term linguistic developments (cf. Müller-Spitzer et al., 2025).

In addition to offering two temporal perspectives, the two text types also differ in their communicative purpose. The ‘About Us’ pages represent a company’s public-facing image aimed at a broad external audience, such as clients or potential employees. In contrast, shareholder letters are a more formalized genre directed at a narrower, high-stakes audience – namely, investors and shareholders (cf. Civera et al., 2025 for a content and thematic analysis of the broader text type ‘letters to stakeholders’). It can be assumed that these letters are subject to review by top management, rather than being authored solely by communications or marketing departments. Reflecting these differing functions, the website texts are considerably shorter (average: 460 words) than the shareholder letters (average: 1,802 words).

After corpus compilation, we manually annotated¹⁰ the texts for nominal person reference (cf. Müller-Spitzer et al., 2024).

⁸ Synchronic linguistic data refers to language data analyzed at a specific point in time, focusing on how language is used in the present or in a particular historical moment, rather than how it has evolved over time. The latter is referred to as diachronic analysis.

⁹ If all 40 companies had contributed 8 letters to the corpus, there would be a total of 320 letters. The missing letters can be explained as follows: (1) Airbus has only one letter in German (2016), the remainder are in English, (2) Qiagen has only English letters, (3) Daimler Truck, Porsche AG, Siemens Energy, and Siemens Healthineers have not been in the DAX-40 for the whole period – therefore, all available letters are integrated in the corpus, (4) Merck 2015 and 2016 were found only in English at the time of data collection; German translations were found later and checked for gender symbols – as we found none, the letters were not re-annotated, (5) Zalando 2015 was found after the main data collection on a separate website; (6) Porsche SE was overlooked during data collection. We collected all letters (2015-2022) after the annotations were finished and checked for gender symbols – as none were present, we decided against re-annotation.

¹⁰ Even though automatic recognition of personal nouns in German has advanced in recent years, it is not yet possible to automatically annotate the various forms of personal nouns and gender-inclusive forms (Sökefeld et al., 2023).

The following linguistic categories were annotated:

- (a) **pair form**, e.g. *Aktionärinnen und Aktionäre* ('female and male shareholders')
- (b) **masculine generic**, e.g. masculine form *Aktionäre* ('shareholders'[m.pl.]) to refer to all genders
- (c) **noun with gender symbol**, e.g. asterisk (*Mitarbeiter*innen*; 'employees') or colon (*Kund:innen*, 'customers')
- (d) **gender-neutral noun**, e.g. *der Mensch* ('human being') or *die Person* ('person'), which can be used to refer to any gender (also called *epicene noun*)
- (e) **masculine/feminine specific**, i.e. referring to a specific, identifiable man or woman

Nouns with gender symbols (c) are the key category for our study, as these carry the most symbolic weight and are the target of pinkwashing accusations (Payr, 2021; Trutkowski & Weiß, 2022). Other strategies, such as the use of pair forms (a) and gender-neutral nouns (d), are typically not perceived as intrusive forms of gender-inclusive writing (WDR, 2023; Zacharski, 2024). Therefore, categories (a) through (d) are relevant for analyzing the broader spectrum of person reference in our DAX corpus, while category (c) is particularly central to assessing the potential presence of pinkwashing. Masculine and feminine specifics (e), i.e., masculine or feminine forms that refer to specific men or women, respectively, are not included in the analysis; however, they are part of the total count of personal nouns used to calculate proportions.

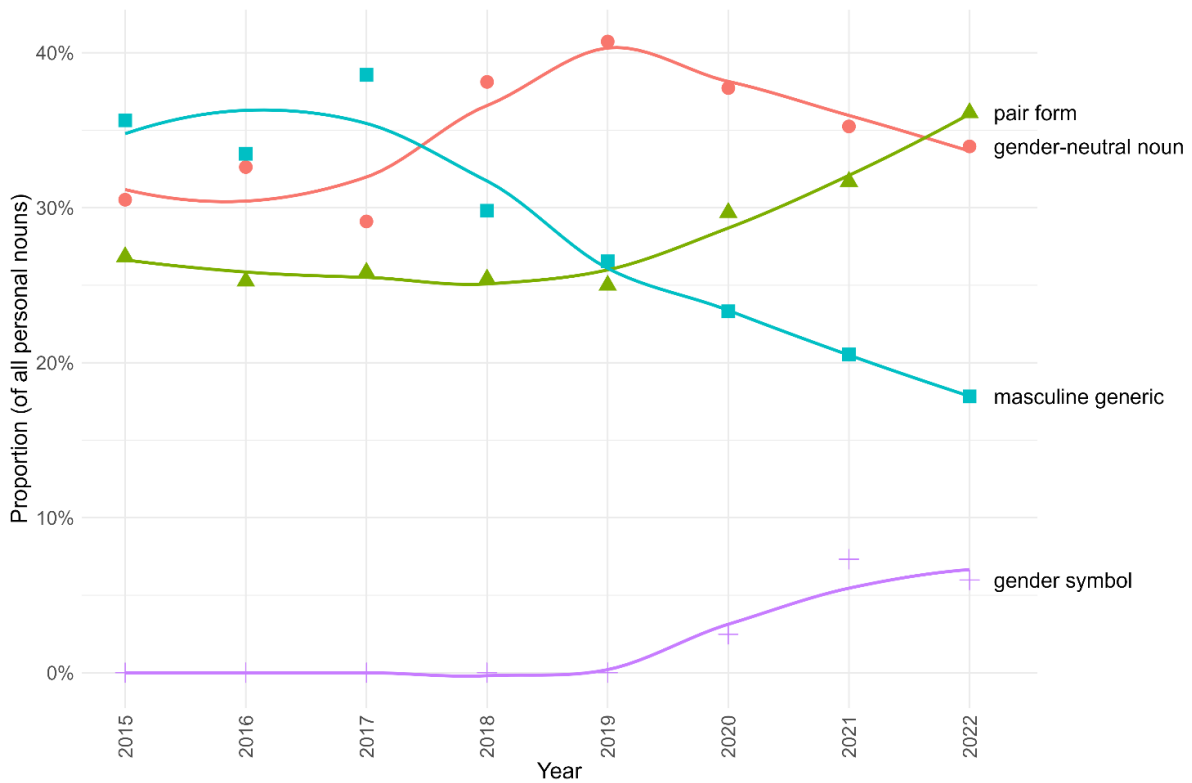
On their 'About Us' websites, only a minority of the 160 DAX companies use gender symbols: 25 of the 160 companies (15.6 %) use the colon ($N = 13$) or the asterisk ($N = 11$). One company uses the mediopoint – a strategy known for gender-inclusive French, but uncommon in German.¹¹ The most common realization of personal nouns on the websites are masculine generics (51.22 % of all personal nouns), followed by gender-neutral nouns (29.45 %), gender symbols (8.18 %), and pair forms (6.84 %).

In the annual shareholder letters from 2015 to 2022, eight of the DAX-40 companies (20 %) use gender symbols, starting in 2020. Six use the asterisk, two use the colon.¹² Considering the document level, only 14 of the 273 sampled letters (5.1 %) contain gender symbols. Figure 1 summarizes the overall trend in shareholder letters over time, and Figure 2 offers a detailed breakdown by company.

¹¹ **colon**: Cancom, Deutsche Wohnen, Grand City Property, Hello Fresh Group, Henkel, Indus, Lufthansa Group, MTU, Normagroup, Prosieben Sat1, Scout24, SMA, Telefonica; **asterisk**: Adidas, Beiersdorf, DHL Group, Fresenius Medicalcare, GFT, Knorr Bremsen, Nemetschek, Puma, Secunet, Siemens Healthineers, Zalando; **mediopoint**: New Work. In contrast to city websites (Müller-Spitzer & Ochs, 2023), there is no variation in the use of gender symbols within one website, indicating careful content curation.

¹² **asterisk**: Adidas (2022), Beiersdorf (2021, 2022), Deutsche Telekom (2021), Infineon (2021, 2022), Siemens Energy (2021, 2022), Zalando (2020, 2021, 2022); **colon**: Henkel (2021, 2022), MTU Aero Engines (2022).

Fig 1: Forms of person reference in the annual shareholder letters (summary)



Tablenotes: Points indicate the mean of all proportions; standard deviation not plotted for better readability.

Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of forms from 2015 to 2022. In 2015, masculine generics were the most prevalent, accounting for 35.7 %, followed by gender-neutral nouns at 30.5 % and pair forms at 26.8 %. At this time, gender symbols were not yet in use. Starting in 2017, the use of masculine generics steadily declined, reaching a low of 17.8 % in 2022. Meanwhile, from 2019 onwards, pair forms began to replace masculine generics as the dominant form, increasing to 36.1 % by 2022. These findings are in line with results from other text types, e.g. the German New Year and Christmas addresses, where masculine generics are gradually being replaced by the widely acceptable pair forms (Müller-Spitzer et al., 2025).

Gender-neutral nouns show only slight fluctuations, with a modest rise of 3.4 percentage points compared to 2015. As gender-neutral forms are a regular part of the German language system (as opposed to the newly introduced gender symbols), their frequency and relative stability over time is unsurprising and found in other studies as well (Müller-Spitzer et al., 2024, 2025). Gender symbols emerged in 2020, peaking at 7.3 % in 2021 before settling at 6.0 % in 2022. From 2019, we observe a convergence between the declining use of masculine generics and the rise of gender symbols, suggesting that gender symbols may serve as a substitute for masculine generics, similar to the role pair forms used to play.

Fig 2: Forms of person reference by company and year in the annual shareholder letters

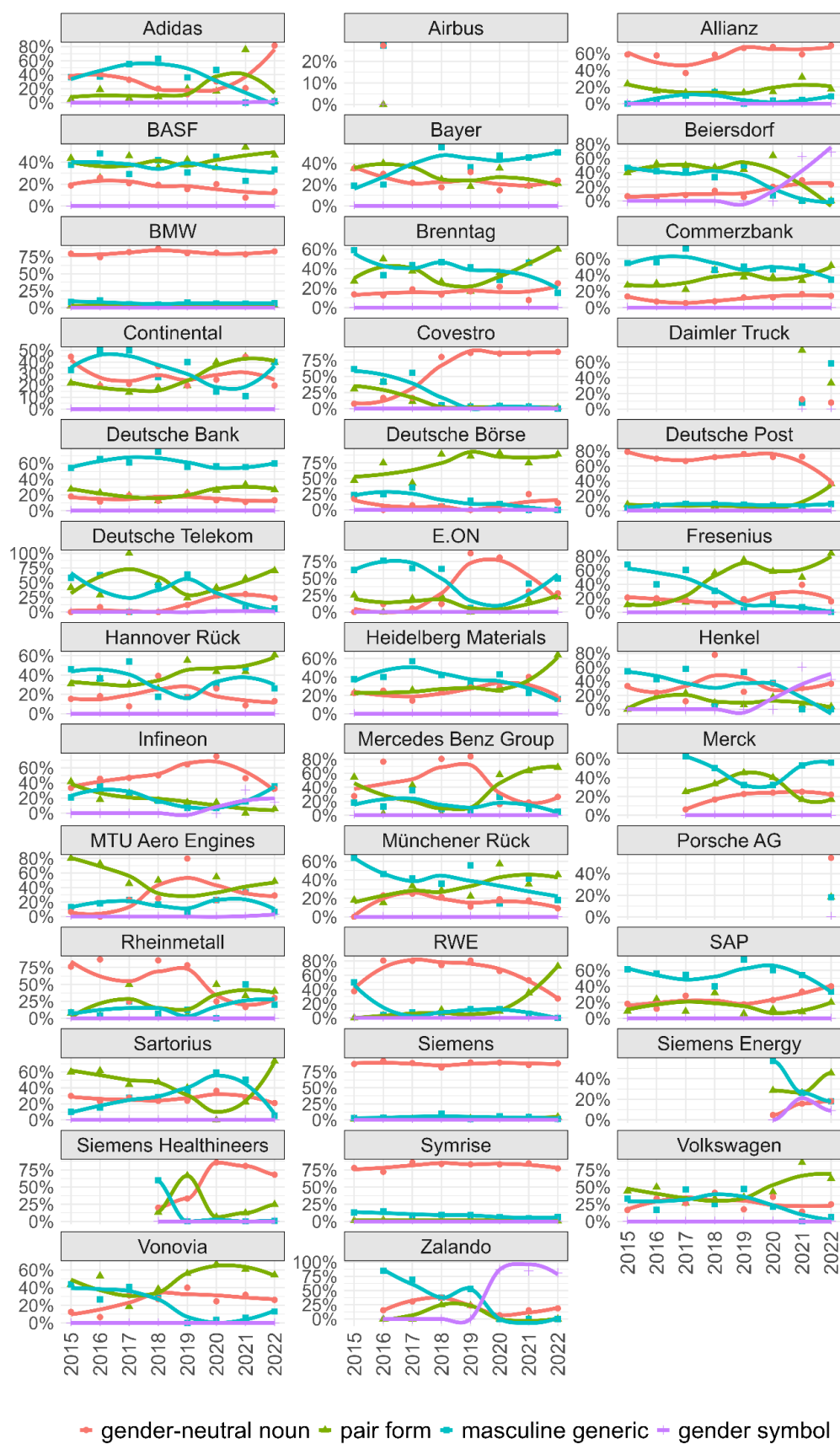


Figure 2 presents the distribution of personal nouns by company and year. The use of masculine generics was initially dominant: in 2015, 18 companies used them as their most frequent form. By 2022, however, only six companies (Bayer, Daimler Truck, Deutsche Bank, E.ON, Infineon, and Merck) continued to rely on masculine generics as their primary strategy. Among them, only Deutsche Bank maintained this usage consistently across all eight years.

In contrast, gender-neutral nouns and pair forms were used broadly across the entire period. Five companies (Allianz, BMW, Deutsche Post, Siemens, and Symrise) relied consistently on gender-neutral nouns as their dominant form. Pair forms gained particular prominence from 2019 onwards, often replacing masculine generics as the preferred inclusive strategy.

The use of gender symbols emerged more recently. Zalando was the first company – starting in 2020 – to adopt them in shareholder letters. Most other companies introducing gender symbols followed in 2021 ($N = 4/8$); two more joined in 2022. Notably, Deutsche Telekom discontinued their use after a single year (2021). In some cases, such as Zalando and Beiersdorf, gender symbols largely replaced other forms, while others, like Henkel, employed a mix of strategies within the same document.

Overall, the data reveal a trend toward more inclusive forms, away from masculine generics. While gender-neutral nouns and pair forms have become widespread and broadly accepted, gender symbols remain a less common alternative that is adopted by only a minority of companies.

4.2 Data on women on executive and supervisory boards

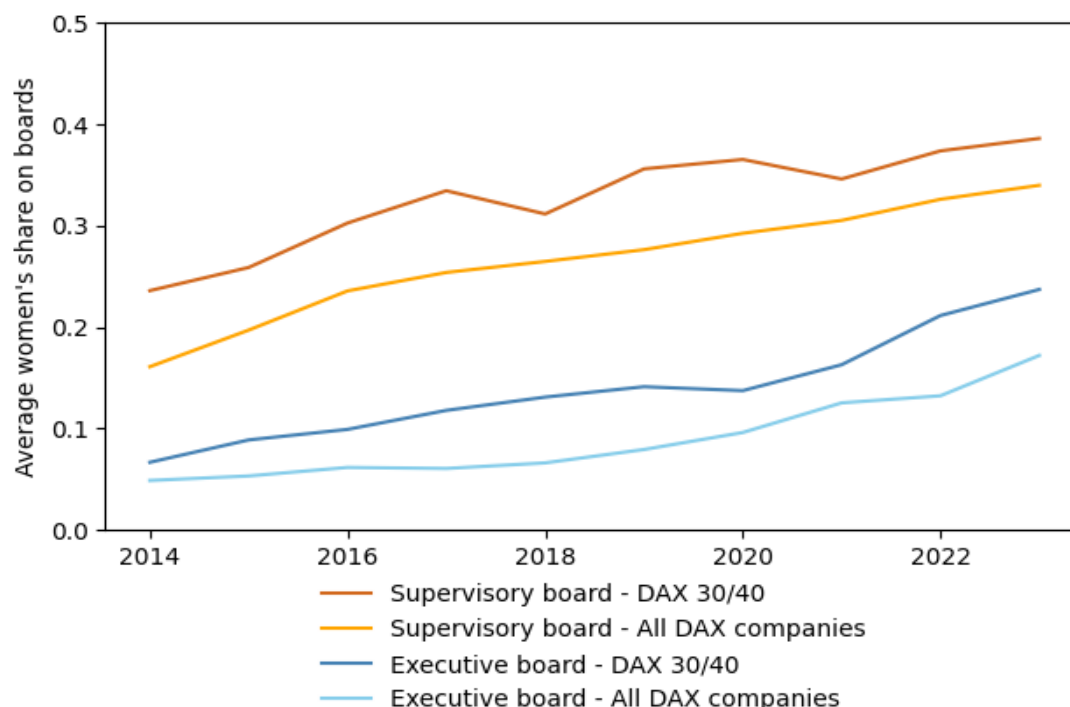
As a measure of a company's efforts to improve gender equality, we use data on the share of women on the executive and supervisory board at the company level.¹³ These indicators are taken from the DIW Women Executives Barometer database (Sondergeld & Wrohlich, 2024). The data includes the average share of women on the supervisory and executive boards of the 160 DAX companies for every year from 2014 to 2023. Over this entire period, the average share of women on supervisory boards increased from 16.1 % in 2014 to 34.0 % in 2023. The average share of women on executive boards was even lower throughout the whole observation period, starting with 4.9 % in 2014 and rising to 17.2 % in 2023. The share of women on the boards of the DAX-40 companies is above the share on the boards of the 160 DAX companies over the entire observation period. In 2014, on average 6.7 % of executive board members and 23.6 % of supervisory board members in the DAX-40 companies were women. By 2023, these numbers had risen to 23.7 % and 38.7 %, respectively (Figure 3).

Note that during our observation period, legal requirements on the gender composition of these boards were issued. In 2015, a gender quota of 30 % was introduced for the supervisory

¹³ Alternative indicators for a company's gender equality efforts, such as the firm-specific gender pay gap or the share of women in other leadership positions in the specific companies, are not available for all 160 DAX companies for the whole observation period.

boards of publicly listed and fully co-determined companies.¹⁴ In 2021, a minimum inclusion requirement of one woman was introduced for executive boards of a sub-group of companies.¹⁵

Fig 3: Average women's share on boards of 160 DAX companies over time



5 Results

In this section, we describe the results of the two analyses examining whether the use of gender-inclusive language in corporate communication represents a form of pinkwashing or is connected to genuine gender-equality efforts.

5.1 Evaluation of Hypothesis 1 based on the ‘About Us’ websites

Following our first hypothesis, we presume that if a company uses gender symbols on its 2023 website, it has also implemented gender-equality measures leading to a higher share of women in leadership positions. We would reject the hypothesis if companies use gender

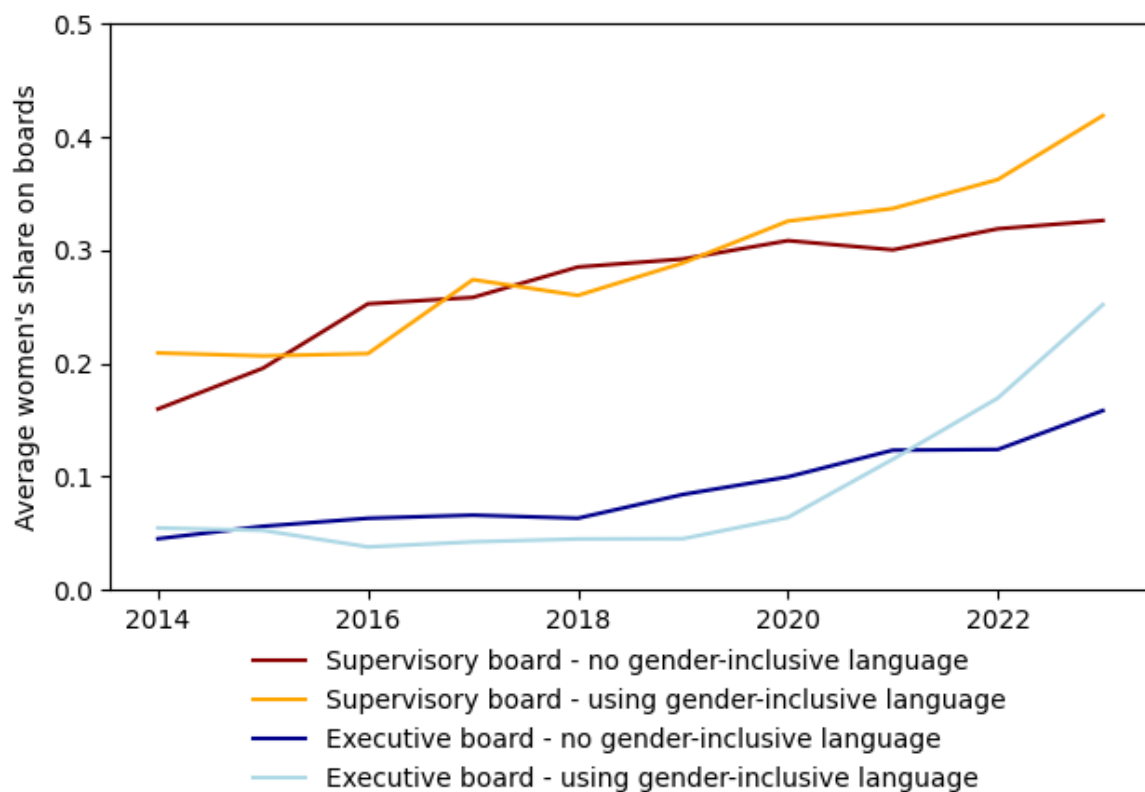
¹⁴ In 2015, the Equal Participation of Women and Men in Leadership Positions in the Private and Public Sectors Act (*Gesetz für die gleichberechtigte Teilhabe von Frauen und Männern an Führungspositionen in der Privatwirtschaft und im öffentlichen Dienst*, FüPoG I) became law in Germany, stipulating a statutory gender quota of 30 % for supervisory boards. This quota applies to publicly listed companies that also have employee representation on their supervisory boards (full co-determination).

¹⁵ In 2021, the Second Equal Participation of Women and Men in Leadership Positions in the Public and Private Sectors Act (*Zweites Gesetz für die gleichberechtigte Teilhabe von Frauen und Männern an Führungspositionen in der Privatwirtschaft und im öffentlichen Dienst*, FüPoG II) was implemented. This law states that publicly listed companies with full co-determination, whose executive board has at least four members, must have at least one executive board position filled by a member of the underrepresented gender at the next opportunity.

symbols while performing poorly with respect to the share of women on their executive and supervisory boards.

To empirically evaluate this hypothesis, we identify DAX companies that perform poorly on gender equality indicators in 2023, i.e. that (i) have zero women on the executive board, (ii) have less than 30 % women on the supervisory board, and (iii) have seen a below-average growth rate in the women's share of members on the supervisory board compared to other DAX companies since 2016. In 2023, 17 companies fulfilled all three conditions.¹⁶ We compare these with the set of 25 companies that use gender symbols on their websites (see section 4.1). This comparison reveals no overlap: no company with poor female representation on executive and supervisory boards uses gender symbols on its website. This finding supports Hypothesis 1: We interpret this as evidence that the use of gender symbols in corporate communication is not merely symbolic; rather it is associated with a broader commitment to gender equality and thus not indicative of pinkwashing.

Fig. 4: Share of women on executive and supervisory boards of 160 DAX companies, by usage of gender symbols on 'About Us' websites



We also compare the development of women's representation on executive and supervisory boards between two groups of companies – those that used gender symbols on their 'About Us' websites in 2023 and those that did not – over the period from 2014 to 2022. As

¹⁶ 61 companies fulfill condition a), 40 companies fulfill condition b), and 61 companies fulfill condition c).

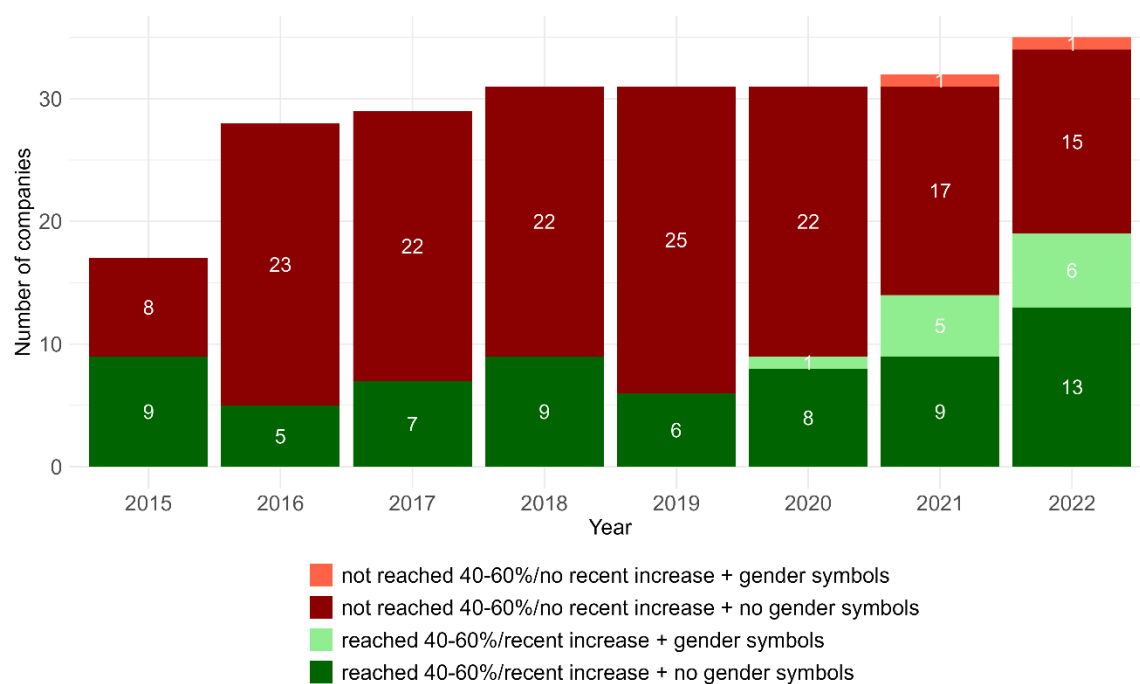
shown in Figure 4, companies using gender symbols had significantly higher shares of women on both executive (25.2 % vs. 15.9 %) and supervisory boards (42.0 % vs. 32.6 %) in 2023. This pattern further suggests that companies using gender symbols are more likely to pursue substantive gender-equality efforts, rather than merely engaging in symbolic communication or pinkwashing.

5.2 Evaluation of Hypothesis 2 based on the Annual Shareholder Letters

The second part of our analysis examines the temporal relationship between linguistic developments and the implementation of gender-equality measures. Hypothesis 2 assumes that gender symbols are not adopted *before* substantive gender-equality measures are in place. If gender symbols appear *before* measurable improvements in female representation, we interpret this as a potential indicator for a phase of pinkwashing and thus would reject Hypothesis 2.

To evaluate Hypothesis 2, we compare the linguistic data from the annual shareholder letters with data on the development of the women's share on the executive boards of the DAX-40 companies from 2015 to 2022. For each year, we create a dummy variable that takes the value 1 if a company (i) has not reached a share of 40-60 % women on the executive board, and (ii) has not appointed a woman to the executive board in the year before the report is published or in the year of publication. Figure 5 shows the share of companies that do (not) fulfill these criteria and do (not) use gender symbols in the respective year.

Fig. 5: Companies by gender-equality efforts and use of gender symbols, 2015-2022



We identify only one case where a company used gender symbols in its annual shareholder letters without fully meeting our criteria for meaningful progress in gender equality at the top management level: Henkel included gender symbols in its 2021 and 2022 letters, although the number of women on its executive board remained unchanged, with exactly one woman represented throughout the observation period. Although this technically constitutes a

deviation from our expectation under Hypothesis 2, it is an isolated case and does not provide sufficient evidence to reject the hypothesis. Moreover, Henkel's broader record on gender equality is not uniformly negative; for instance, in 2009, it became the first DAX company to appoint a woman as chair of the supervisory board. Given the rarity of such deviations and the absence of systematic patterns across companies, we interpret the Henkel instance as an outlier rather than a clear example of strategic pinkwashing, and therefore retain Hypothesis 2.

6 Conclusion and Outlook

In this study, we investigated whether the use of gender-inclusive language in corporate communication by German DAX companies constitutes a form of pinkwashing or can be seen as an expression of genuine commitment to gender equality. Using a mixed-methods approach, we combined linguistic analyses of company websites and shareholder letters with economic data on board gender composition. The results of our first, cross-sectional analysis show that companies using gender symbols – the most visible and contested form of gender-inclusive language in German – do not perform poorly in terms of female representation on executive and supervisory boards. On the contrary, these companies show *above-average shares* of women in leadership roles. Our second longitudinal study further indicates that companies introduce gender symbols in their shareholder letters after or alongside measurable progress in board-level gender equality – not before.

Taken together, our findings provide no evidence that gender-inclusive language is used as a superficial branding tool to cover up a lack of internal progress on gender equality. Instead, the use of gender symbols appears to be closely tied to broader gender-equality efforts, at least at the leadership level. This supports the interpretation of language as a form of social action – one that reflects structural change. It is also conceivable that we find no clear indication of pinkwashing for contextual reasons: in contrast to easily deployed symbolic gestures, such as rainbow logos during Pride Month, implementing gender-inclusive language in German requires navigating both grammatical complexity and intense public controversy. Thus, its use in corporate communication suggests a deliberate, strategic choice – one that requires time, alignment across departments, and institutional buy-in.

Nevertheless, our results do not imply that pinkwashing is no longer a concern. Corporate gender-equality efforts may still be shaped by a complex interplay of genuine commitment and external pressures, including regulatory requirements, investor expectations, and activist demands. Ongoing critical scrutiny of corporate gender policies and communication practices therefore remains essential, especially in light of increasingly volatile political and cultural climates.

In 2025, the idea of gender equality as a broadly shared societal objective has come under renewed pressure. U.S. President Donald Trump has made the dismantling of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives a central element of his political messaging (The White House, 2025). His executive orders and campaign rhetoric target DEI programs across both public institutions and the private sector, framing them as ideologically driven and harmful to merit-based systems. This represents a notable shift in tone and policy from earlier periods, signaling a broader political backlash against gender and diversity efforts.

Given the global operations of many DAX companies – including their exposure to US political and market dynamics – it remains to be seen whether such developments will have a chilling effect, potentially leading companies to scale back not only the use of gender-inclusive language but also tangible measures aimed at promoting gender equality and diversity.

Finally, our approach – while innovative – is limited by its focus on women’s representation in board positions. Future research should expand the analysis to include other dimensions of workplace equality, such as the company-specific gender pay gap, representation in mid-level management, and/or the inclusion of non-binary employees. Given the current lack of data on non-binary individuals in German companies, this represents an important direction for further research. Our findings underline the need for a nuanced and evidence-based understanding of pinkwashing, one that acknowledges the complexities of corporate communication, structural inequality, and linguistic change.

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Data Accessibility

All the data and code needed to replicate our results, as well as supplementary material, are available in the [OSF](#).

Statement on the use of AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, generative AI tools were used to assist with improving the language of the text, such as helping with diction, syntax, grammar, tone, and/or linguistic register. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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