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MSc Thesis Scholarship

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Dear Firestorm Foundation,

We want to extend our sincere gratitude for your support throughout our research project. We are delighted to share that our thesis, *The Art of Framing Diversity: A Qualitative Study Examining How Corporate Art Collections are Leveraged to Support DEI Initiatives*, received a *very good* grade from our professors at the Stockholm School of Economics.

Your encouragement made a tangible difference in allowing us to pursue this work. Following the advice of our thesis advisors, we took the direction of examining female representation in corporate art collections. This perspective naturally led us to explore the broader intersection between corporate art collections (CACs) and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

These cases demonstrate that when intentionally curated, CACs can become tools for inclusion – visually embedding gender equality into an organization's identity and sparking meaningful conversations about representation. However, our research also identified an "activation gap": without structured policies, benchmarks, and collaboration between DEI and curatorial functions, collections risk being symbolic rather than transformative.

For your reference, we have attached Appendix 4 from our thesis on the following page, as it provides a clear summary of female representation across the collections we studied.

With gratitude,
Ella Wiss Mencke & Federico Sangiorgi

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Appendix 4: Overview of Female Representation in CACs

Company	Collection Description	Female/Male Artist Balance	Symbolic Treatment of Females	Tracking Tools Used
Sveriges Riksdag	Publicly funded national art collection focused on democratic representation and civic symbolism.	Improving; legacy male dominance, now targeting parity (50/50).	Actively removes outdated depictions (e.g., nude women); commissions works on suffrage and equality.	Excel and acquisition logs; gender tracked to rationalize buying decisions.
SEB	Corporate collection with curated modern art in offices, includes guided tours and activation events.	Close to parity in some locations; focus on more female artists (e.g., 10 top female Swedish artists).	Female artists are supported to reflect modern identity.	Collection system exists, however, gender-tagging is not evoked.
Svenska Brasserier	Art used in restaurants to diversify clientele and enhance cultural ambiance. Frequent exhibitions.	Actively tracks and targets 50/50 representation; "not hard to find female artists"'	Female perspectives valued and showcased; no tolerance for art seen as devaluing women.	Color-coded system by gender; actively used to guide curation decisions.
SSE	Contemporary art embedded in educational spaces, curated to challenge norms and promote reflection.	Roughly 50/50; slight overrepresentation of female artists depending on classification.	Feminist interventions in masculine spaces (e.g., boardroom); nuanced portrayal of gender themes.	Internal CMS tracks inventory; hesitant to code identity without confirmation.
Lord Art Advisory (clients)	Advisory for corporate clients; art collections shaped by branding, senior management preferences.	Depends on client preferences; female artists included but not systematically tracked.	Often avoids controversial gender topics; client taste often prioritizes neutrality or familiarity.	No formal system; decisions based on visual appeal and client alignment.
CFHILL (clients)	Private gallery working with corporate clients; collections emphasize Nordic contemporary art.	Awareness of imbalance; recommends gender-conscious curating but no hard quotas.	Highlights top Swedish female artists; aware that the equality conversation is still necessary.	No CMS mentioned; curator awareness guides gender balance informally.

THE ART OF FRAMING DIVERSITY

A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXAMINING HOW CORPORATE ART COLLECTIONS ARE LEVERAGED TO SUPPORT DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION (DEI) INITIATIVES.

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Executive Summary

As diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) continue to rise on the corporate agenda, companies are increasingly expected to embody these values not only in policy but across all aspects of organizational life. While much attention has been placed on recruitment, governance, and internal training programs, one highly visible medium remains largely unexplored: the corporate art collection (CAC). This thesis investigates how CACs, traditionally considered aesthetic or philanthropic investments, can serve as tools to support DEI work, both symbolically and strategically.

The study draws on 10 semi-structured interviews with curators, DEI leads, and corporate representatives from six prominent Swedish institutions, spanning both the public and private sectors. By integrating Hatch and Schultz's (2002) identity dynamics model with van Riel's (1995) identity expression framework, this thesis examines how CACs interact with DEI values through the processes of expressing, reflecting, mirroring, and impressing. Together, these mechanisms capture how corporate identity is co-constructed internally (through culture) and externally (through image).

Internally, the findings reveal that when CACs are intentionally curated and actively engaged through lectures, guided tours, or educational materials, they can foster meaningful dialogue around representation, equity, and belonging. Artworks often serve as conversation starters, surfacing implicit organizational assumptions and facilitating deeper, more meaningful interpersonal connections. Several organizations in the study utilize their collections to visibly demonstrate their commitment to gender equity, whether by showcasing works by female and non-binary artists or aligning their acquisitions with broader DEI agendas. Yet, despite these curatorial intentions, most CACs remain underutilized due to insufficient structural support. Few institutions have formal acquisition strategies linked to DEI objectives, consistent activation efforts, measurable diversity benchmarks, or established collaboration between curators and DEI leadership. Without these foundational elements, the potential of CACs to meaningfully advance inclusion remains largely symbolic. This disconnect gives rise to what the study terms an activation gap: the misalignment between the symbolic promise of CACs and their limited integration into organizational strategy and DEI governance.

Externally, CACs contribute to reshaping how organizations are perceived by clients, students, and the general public. Institutions such as Svenska Brasserier and SSE illustrate how art collections can help broaden audience reach, soften traditionally exclusive reputations, and signal inclusive values. Yet this external projection can run ahead of internal engagement. While CACs are potent tools for impressing and mirroring inclusive ideals, their impact depends on alignment with internal culture, curatorial intentionality, and sustained activation.

For practitioners, the findings underscore the importance of aligning CAC strategy with broader DEI goals. Simply acquiring diverse artworks is insufficient; without supportive frameworks, sustained engagement, and curatorial-DEI collaboration, collections risk functioning as empty signals rather than meaningful expressions of inclusion. Organizations are encouraged to integrate CACs into their broader DEI strategies, ensuring that curatorial decisions reflect inclusive values and are supported by acquisition guidelines or measurable diversity targets. Equally vital is the need to prioritize activation: artworks must be accompanied by programming, interpretive content, or engagement efforts to fulfill their communicative and educational potential. Without this, even well-intentioned collections may remain inert. Companies must also ensure alignment between internal culture and external messaging, as inconsistencies between what is displayed and what is experienced can undermine credibility and stakeholder trust. Finally, it is crucial to formalize collaboration between curatorial and DEI functions. When curators, HR, and diversity leaders work together, CACs can evolve from symbolic gestures into strategic tools that foster belonging and cultural change.

As companies increasingly "hang their values on the wall," this study offers a timely call to examine what, how, and who is being represented – and to ensure that these expressions are backed by intentional, credible, and sustained action.

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1. Introduction

Corporate art collections (CACs) may not be the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about diversity work – but perhaps they deserve more attention. Since the 1980s, companies have been investing in art not only for its aesthetic value but as a means of shaping corporate identity, culture, and communicating organizational values (Jacobson, 1993; Wu, 2003). By the mid-1990s, approximately half of Fortune 500 companies were collecting art, a trend that has since expanded across various industries, including healthcare, transportation, real estate, and hospitality (Shane, 1996). As of 2005, more than 1300 companies worldwide were listed in the International Directory of Corporate Art Collections (Leak, 2008). This widespread and often substantial investment suggests that CACs are more than wall décor – they are strategic assets with communicative power.

At the same time, the landscape of corporate values is evolving. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have moved from the margins of HR to the center of corporate identity, culture, branding, and employee engagement (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2023). Especially for younger generations, such as Generation Z, DEI is not a bonus – it is a baseline (Sadeghi, 2023). Companies are increasingly held accountable not only for what they say about diversity, but also for how they embody those values across every facet of their operations. Yet one influential and highly visible medium remains surprisingly underexplored: corporate art.

Art has long held power as a cultural force – amplifying marginalized voices, surfacing uncomfortable truths, and provoking public debate (Hooks, 1995). When curated with intention, CACs can become active contributors to DEI work, rather than just symbolic gestures. However, the art world continues to be shaped by systemic inequalities, where female artists remain underrepresented and undervalued (Elsesser, 2022). In this context, CACs risk reproducing these exclusions – even when companies claim to champion diversity. At the same time, they hold untapped potential to support and express DEI commitments in meaningful ways.

This thesis investigates a largely overlooked intersection: the use of CACs as tools for advancing DEI, with particular focus on gender equality as a key dimension. After all, if

companies are hanging their values on the walls, should one not take a closer look at what is in the frame? Thus, this raises the question:

When corporate art collections are employed, how do they support diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Literature Review

This literature review is divided into three sections: CACs, DEI initiatives, and corporate identity. It concludes by examining how CACs and DEI intersect with corporate identity, thereby highlighting a research gap that informs the study's guiding question.

2.1.1 Corporate Art Collections (CACs)

A corporate art collection (CAC) is a curated assemblage of artworks, ranging from paintings and sculptures to multimedia installations, acquired, owned, and displayed by a company (Foster, 2025; Gerlis & Jacobs, 2024; Kottasz et al., 2007). These collections are typically housed on company premises and made accessible to employees, clients, and sometimes the public (Foster, 2025; Gerlis & Jacobs, 2024; Kottasz et al., 2007). CACs emerged during the post-war economic boom, peaking in the 1980s as companies invested in art to enhance workplace aesthetics and support cultural engagement, before shifting their focus to other philanthropic causes, such as humanitarian aid and education. Today, firms that maintain CACs often do so with clear strategic goals (Foster, 2025; Gerlis & Jacobs, 2024; Kottasz et al., 2007).

Art has long served as a cultural force – amplifying marginalized voices, surfacing uncomfortable truths, and provoking debate (Hooks, 1995). Despite their cultural potential, CACs have historically mirrored broader art world inequality. Studies show women remain underrepresented in exhibitions and receive significantly less financial support (McAndrew, 2024). In Sweden, although women comprise 60% of art school graduates, they secure only 30% of exhibition slots, and their works sell for up to 40% less than those of their male counterparts. Additionally, state-funded acquisitions also favor male artists (Elsesser, 2022). These disparities extend to CACs, shaped by the preferences of male executives and markets biased toward Western male artists (Thorncroft, 2003; Yu, 2001). While some institutions, such as Deutsche Bank, have begun curating more inclusive collections, broader structural inequities persist, with male artists still dominating in price, prestige, and institutional visibility (Gerlis & Jacobs, 2024; McAndrew, 2024; Wu, 2003).

2.1.1.1 Motivations Behind CACs

The motivations behind having CACs have been broadly studied. Appendix 1 presents a comprehensive list of motivations for their existence, compiled initially by Kottasz (2007) and modified for this study to identify three key themes: financial reasons, corporate identity management drivers, and other purposes.

First, one rationale for CACs is their perceived investment value (Abbott, 1999). Art can act as an alternative asset for portfolio diversification, with relatively stable long-term value. However, its risk-return profile remains less attractive than traditional investments (R. Campbell, 2008; Worthington & Higgs, 2004). Firms tend to favor contemporary works over classical ones due to lower costs and stronger market performance (Thorncroft, 2003). Tax incentives also play a role; in countries like the USA, Japan, and France, generous deductions have supported corporate art acquisitions (Kottasz et al., 2008; Wu, 2003). However, these benefits are linked to an opaque and poorly regulated market, described as "the second-largest unregulated market after illicit drugs," rife with fraud and inflated valuations (Rodrigues & Urban, 2018).

Second, CACs are increasingly used to strengthen brand image and corporate identity (Fraser, 2003; Roberts et al., 1993; Thorncroft, 2003; Wu, 2003; Yu, 2001). Beyond decoration, art serves as a communicative tool, reflecting organizational values and contributing to corporate hospitality (Mitchell & King, 1997). One of the core functions of a CAC is to represent a company's corporate identity, often reflecting the values and principles deemed essential to its mission and ethos (Birkgit & Stadler, 1986). CACs help embody values such as sophistication, creativity, and cultural refinement (Hoeken, 2005), transforming the act of collecting into a statement of purpose rather than a decorative exercise. As corporate identity constitutes a central pillar of this research, the concept will be further developed and examined in Chapter 2.1.3.

Finally, other motivations include leadership-driven vision, client engagement, and competitive positioning. Company leaders often shape the collection's direction, especially when it reflects their personal interests (Balmer & Soenen, 1999; Wu, 2003). CACs can also differentiate firms in competitive markets, functioning as tools to impress clients and enhance corporate hospitality (Fraser, 2003; Mitchell & King, 1997; Roberts et al., 1993)

2.1.2 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) refers to policies and practices that aim to promote fair treatment and full participation for all individuals, particularly those who have been historically underrepresented or marginalized (Arsel et al., 2022). In corporate contexts, diversity refers to the presence of differences such as gender, race, and age; equity focuses on fair treatment and advancement; and inclusion involves fostering a culture where diverse individuals feel empowered and respected (Zheng, 2025). This thesis emphasizes gender equality and female representation, as these are core issues in Swedish corporate agendas.

Organizations pursue DEI initiatives for ethical, business, and legal reasons. Ethically, DEI aligns with principles of social justice and fairness, reflecting corporate responsibility (Ely & Thomas, 1996). Legally, regulations, such as the Swedish Corporate Governance Code, recommend a minimum of 40% gender representation on boards; however, women currently hold about 35% (Annual Report, 2022). From a business perspective, diverse teams are believed to enhance innovation, decision-making, and organizational performance (Fondas & Sassalos, 2000; Pletzer et al., 2015; Robinson & Dechant, 1997). However, empirical evidence on the performance benefits remains mixed, suggesting that diversity alone is insufficient without inclusive organizational cultures (Kochan et al., 2003). Importantly, especially for younger generations like Generation Z, DEI is not a bonus – it is a baseline expectation, further raising the stakes for organizations to engage meaningfully with these initiatives (Sadeghi, 2023).

Common DEI strategies include setting diversity targets, implementing inclusive recruitment practices, establishing mentorship programs, and providing training on unconscious bias (Ibarra et al., 2010; Kalev et al., 2006; Thomas, 1990). However, DEI also encompasses the broader objective of fostering an environment where all employees feel valued, respected, and meaningfully included within the organization's culture and operations (Boyles, 2023). In the case of CACs, they can symbolically represent DEI values by showcasing diverse and underrepresented artists (Kottasz et al., 2008). For companies, this serves as a visual commitment to inclusivity, reinforcing corporate values and supporting broader societal goals for equality. Yet, despite a growing toolkit of DEI interventions, a pressing need remains for more research on what works, for whom, and under what conditions, to make these practices more effective and context-sensitive (Park et al., 2025).

Implementing DEI is not without challenges, as empirical evidence has been mixed and context-dependent. Critics argue that simply increasing demographic diversity does not guarantee better performance (Ely & Thomas, 2020). Diversity can create challenges such as tokenism, in-group/out-group dynamics, and conflict, especially with deep-level diversity like values or beliefs (Ferdman, 2017; Sherrer, 2018; Triana et al., 2021). Mechanisms like gender quotas are criticized as undemocratic (Nayar, 2021), and the so-called exclusion-inclusion paradox arises when DEI is housed in departments that simultaneously execute exclusionary practices, such as recruitment (Daubner-Siva et al., 2017). Moreover, DEI efforts are often criticized as performative, risking reputational damage and consumer backlash, such as boycotts or cancellations, if they are perceived to be inauthentic (Saldanha et al., 2023; Sands & Ferraro, 2025). Nonetheless, what matters is not just who is present, but how differences are valued – and whether organizations are willing to challenge dominant norms.
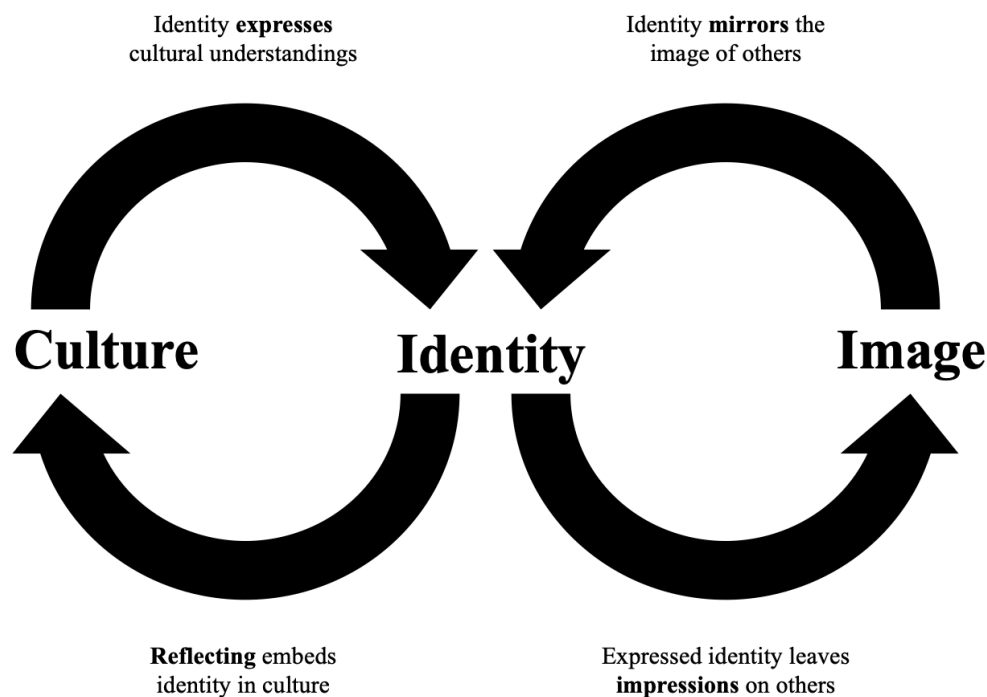
2.1.3 Corporate Identity

Corporate identity refers to how organizations communicate their core values, philosophy, products, and strategies externally (Bick et al., 2003; Jo Hatch & Schultz, 1997), effectively conveying "who you are, what you do, and how you do it" (Lambert, 1989, p.10). These projections require deliberate planning to align with strategic goals and values (Alessandri, 2001). At the core of corporate identity is culture – a set of shared assumptions about organizational functions (Deshpande & Webster, 1989) – which shapes decisions, actions, and behaviors (Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Kiriakidou & Millward, 2000; Melewar & Karaosmanoglu, 2006). Management thus seeks to shape culture to reflect desired values (Cornelissen & Elving, 2003; Markwick & Fill, 1997).

Hatch and Schultz in their Organizational Identity Dynamics Model (2002) portray corporate identity as continuously shaped by interactions between culture, identity, and image (Figure 1). Drawing on Jenkins (1996), they describe organizational identity as an ongoing synthesis of internal self-definitions and external definitions of oneself offered by others (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). This synthesis highlights how corporate identity is co-constructed through four key processes connecting culture, identity, and image:

1. **Mirroring:** External stakeholders' perceptions are mirrored back into the organization, influencing its self-concept.

2. **Reflecting:** Organizational culture embeds identity into shared values and practices, reinforcing the sense of self.

3. **Expressing:** The organization's culture is outwardly expressed through symbolic artifacts and identity claims.

4. **Impressing:** These expressions shape stakeholder impressions, influencing the broader corporate image.

Identity **expresses**
cultural understandings

Identity **mirrors** the
image of others

Culture   **Identity**   **Image**

Reflecting embeds
identity in culture

Expressed identity leaves
impressions on others

Figure 1. Hatch and Schultz Organizational Identity Dynamics Model (2002)

Hatch and Schultz emphasize that a healthy organizational identity emerges from a balanced integration of culture and image, ensuring alignment between internal beliefs and external expectations (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). When managed effectively, corporate identity not only projects corporate values but also enhances and strengthens the organizational reputation over time (Markwick & Fill, 1997).

2.1.3.1 Corporate Identity and CACs

As discussed in Chapter 2.1.1, CACs do more than beautify the workplace; they act as strategic tools for reinforcing corporate identity. These collections support internal and

external communications, expressing organizational values (Kottasz et al., 2008). Kottasz draws on van Riel's (1995) framework for corporate identity management (Van Riel, 1995), which comprises behavior, communication, and symbolism, to examine how CACs contribute to projecting corporate identity. By deliberately transmitting cues across these three dimensions, organizations can strengthen their image and reputation (Markwick Fill, 1997). In this model, CACs are positioned as strategic instruments capable of influencing all three aspects of identity management.

First, CACs influence corporate *behavior*. Art in the workplace enhances the atmosphere, creativity, and morale (Betts, 2006; Mitchell & King, 1997; Richardson, 1998) while also sparking dialogue and reinforcing cultural values (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). Some firms further engage employees by involving them in curatorial decisions (Richardson, 1998; Hoeken, 2005; Shane, 1996). However, research by Wu (2003) suggests that while CACs are often valued by senior management, employees lower in the organizational hierarchy tend to express indifference toward the artworks, indicating potential disparities in interpretation (Wu 2003).

Second, CACs support corporate *communication* by reinforcing brand identity and signaling cultural sophistication (Glynn et al., 1996; Yu, 2001). Corporate values also shape CAC curation, with firms that possess well-defined organizational values often using art collections to symbolize these principles and reinforce brand identity (Balmer & Gray, 2003; Bennett & Kottasz, 2000). Especially in service industries, collections enhance client perception (Swengley, 2004; Wu, 2003). Artworks also serve as marketing tools and symbols of corporate hospitality and social responsibility (Hutak, 2002; Thorncroft, 2003), aligning with cultural values and enhancing a company's reputation. Additionally, some companies establish formal guidelines for art acquisitions, ensuring that the selections align with corporate values and brand messaging (Cornelissen & Elving, 2003; Simoes, 2005).

Third, the *symbolic* dimension of corporate identity is recognized as a significant factor in shaping stakeholder perceptions (Stern et al., 2001). CACs are described as potent symbols of organizational values, reflecting notions of cultural refinement, innovation, and exclusivity (Garnett, 2002; Richardson, 1998; Ross, 2002). Fisher (1997) suggests that CACs often form part of the initial impression clients take with them, symbolizing the firm's values and social standing. Contemporary art, in particular, is associated with notions of modernity and cultural

awareness, which can serve to communicate a firm's market relevance and strategic outlook (Thorncroft, 2003).

2.1.3.2 Corporate Identity and DEI

DEI has emerged as a central components of contemporary corporate identity, increasingly shaping how both internal and external stakeholders perceive organizations. No longer relegated to the margins of human resources or compliance-based requirements, DEI now plays a strategic role in corporate culture, branding, and stakeholder engagement (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2023). For Generation Z, DEI is not a bonus but a baseline expectation – central to how they assess a company's legitimacy (Sadeghi, 2023). As this cohort, along with socially conscious Millennials, becomes the dominant workforce and consumer group, alignment with inclusive values is no longer optional. Brands that fall short, particularly through visible DEI rollbacks, risk not only reputational damage but also financial loss (Sands & Ferraro, 2025). High-profile cases, such as those involving Google and Amazon, illustrate the consequences of such moves. Often linked to political or budgetary motives, they have provoked a strong backlash from employees, consumers, and advocacy groups (Osuh & Partridge, 2025). These incidents highlight that DEI is a moral and strategic imperative, with reputational credibility increasingly shaped by how authentically companies uphold their stated values.

As previously mentioned, corporate identity rests on the dynamic interaction between organizational culture, identity, and image (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Within this framework, DEI functions as both a cultural value embedded *internally* and an identity claim projected *externally*. In other words, DEI initiatives are essential not only for cultivating inclusive work environments but also for shaping a company's public image and strengthening consumer trust (Georgeac & Rattan, 2023). The failure to maintain alignment between DEI commitments and organizational expression can result in reputational dissonance, undermining brand credibility and stakeholder trust (Sands & Ferraro, 2025). This imperative extends to all channels of corporate value expression – positioning CACs, depending on their curatorial approach, to either undermine professed DEI values or actively support them (C. Campbell et al., 2025; Kottasz et al., 2008). When art curation reflects a sincere, structural commitment to inclusion rather than symbolic gestures, organizations are more likely to foster consumer trust and strengthen brand equity (C. Campbell et al., 2025).

2.1.4 Research Gap and Question

CACs have increasingly been recognized as strategic tools for shaping corporate identity, communicating values, and cultivating internal culture. At the same time, DEI has evolved from isolated HR initiatives into core elements of corporate identity, branding, and employee engagement. Both CACs and DEI have thus emerged as meaningful expressions of what a company stands for. Yet, despite this shared potential to influence how corporate identity is constructed and perceived, academic literature has not meaningfully explored their intersection. Therefore, this study seeks to target that intersection and thus explore how CACs may serve as tools for supporting DEI practices.

In doing so, we respond to both the call by Kottasz et al. (2007) for further research on CACs, including cross-industry case studies, different types of collections (e.g., contemporary/classical), and investigations into why symbolic variables may or may not influence organizational identity outcomes, and the call from (Park et al., 2025) for further research on how tomorrow's DEI practices can be executed. Consequently, the relevant research question is formulated as follows:

When corporate art collections are employed, how do they support diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work?

This research question will be framed within the theoretical framework of corporate identity, as it offers a well-established foundation for analyzing CACs. Corporate identity theories have been frequently applied in previous research on CACs, making them suitable for investigating the interaction between these collections and broader DEI values and work.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This paper explores how CACs serve as instruments for supporting DEI initiatives, analyzed through the lens of corporate identity. Given the abstract, interpretive, and sometimes contested nature of terms such as art, identity, and diversity, this framework (Figure 2) does not claim to provide an exhaustive typology of these concepts. Instead, building on Hatch and Schultz's identity dynamics model, it illustrates the mechanisms through which corporate identity is constructed and communicated: expressing, impressing, reflecting, and mirroring. As DEI becomes increasingly embedded in corporate culture and strategic positioning (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2023), these same processes help explore how DEI is manifested.

The double-headed arrows in Figure 2, linking corporate identity with CACs and DEI, do not imply causality but represent exploratory pathways. They indicate the core research focus: to investigate how CACs contribute to or reflect DEI commitments. This framework also incorporates Kottasz's (2007) adaptation of van Riel's (1995) identity model, which identifies symbolism, behavior, and communication as key dimensions through which CACs shape identity. These dimensions are considered potential pathways through which CACs may influence the expression of DEI.

Figure 2. Theoretical framework.
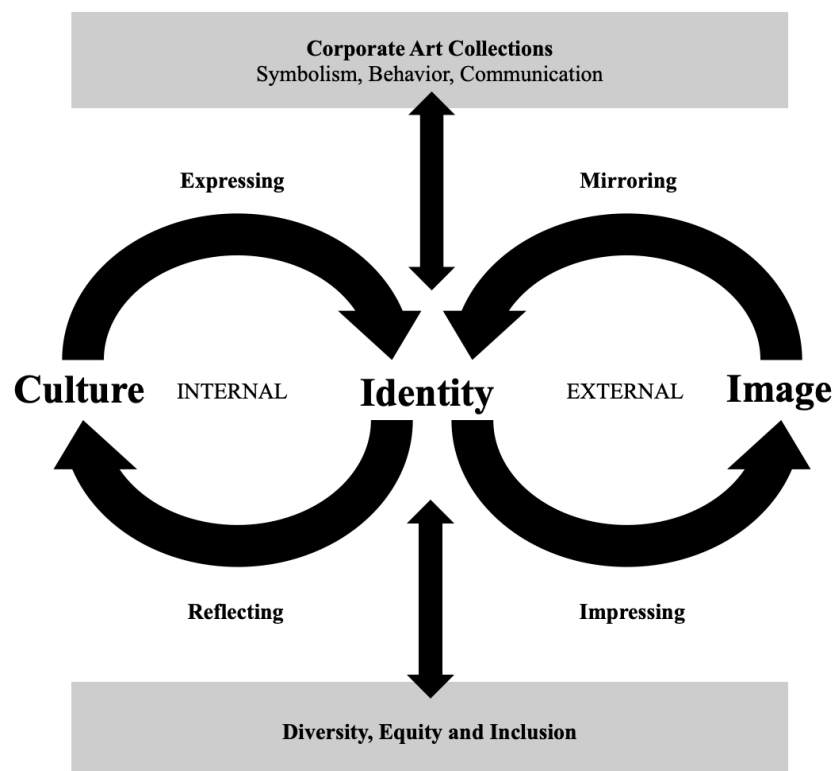
Figure 2 illustrates the a priori framework, not as a rigid analytical tool, but as a conceptual map defining the scope of inquiry. It highlights the central relationships explored in this thesis: the interplay between CACs, DEI, and corporate identity.

The research that follows aims to generate new theoretical insights and deepen understanding of how CACs may support DEI in practice.

3. Methodological Approach

3.1 Research Philosophy and Design

The aim of the study is to understand how CACs can be used to support DEI work and initiatives, particularly concerning gender equality. An interpretivist research philosophy is best suited to this purpose, since this view, ontologically, is supported by the idea that reality is dependent on social constructs, such as language and culture (Saunders et al., 2023). The study embraces pluralism, capturing the subjective truths and perspectives of interviewees shaped by their roles and environments (Saunders et al., 2023). This approach is especially relevant to art, whose interpretation and impact are inherently subjective and personal (Boyd & Barry, 2024). Rather than seeking causal relationships, the research aims at making sense of varied perspectives using methodological pluralism, drawing on multiple stakeholder views and conceptual lenses, including diversity, art, and corporate identity (Saunders et al., 2023). Research on the relationship between CACs and DEI risks adopting an overly optimistic lens – assuming the connection exists and is inherently positive, following a "nice leads to nice" logic. This study acknowledges that risk, avoiding the idealization of CACs, by adopting a nuanced perspective and attending to potential gaps between stated intentions and actual practices.

Methodology wise, our research sits on the intersection between the abductive and inductive approaches, leaning more towards abduction. As we are exploring an under-researched area – how CACs can support companies' diversity work – and the theoretical status of this field is nascent, we are taking part of existing theories and frameworks and expanding on them, adapting them to the interaction between CACs and DEI, see theoretical framework in Figure 2. In line with the abductive approach, our research question enables us to engage in a back-and-forth exchange between theory and results, exploring how CACs can support DEI initiatives. The topic involves socially constructed meanings (e.g., what "diversity" or "representation" means within organizations), which cannot be fully understood through deductive, positivist logic. While a nascent theoretical field does not automatically necessitate abduction, the absence of a strong theoretical base, combined with our explorative aim, makes an abductive approach particularly appropriate (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). This approach aligns with our interpretivist research philosophy (Saunders et al., 2023),

which supports an abductive reasoning process that iteratively moves between empirical observations and a theoretical framework to develop new insights.

Given the exploratory nature of our study and the lack of established theory in this area, a qualitative research method is most appropriate. This choice allows us to avoid pairing nascent theory with a quantitative method, which would result in an unfocused "fishing expedition" (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Instead, we aim for our theoretical contribution to serve as an invitation for further research, potentially paving the way for a quantitative combination in the future. This approach will enable us to gain rich, in-depth insights into how actors involved in CACs interpret and enact female representation concerning company diversity values. Furthermore, the objective is not to achieve analytical generalization, but to gain in-depth theoretical insights, or 'particularization', on the phenomenon (Stake, 2010). By conducting semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, we aim to uncover subjective experiences and meaning-making processes that would not be accessible through quantitative techniques.

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Primary data

3.2.1.1 Sample Selection

The collection of primary data consists of semi-structured interviews with senior personnel with roles as art curators and managers, HR/DEI heads, and independent external advisors. To account for the explorative nature of the study, a purposive sampling approach was taken: the entities whose personnel were interviewed were selected for the fame of their collections or for the role they had in designing emblematic collections in case of advisories, and the interviewees had crucial roles in the collection management, DEI departments and advisories (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Moreover, to capture more nuance, the entities chosen ranged from banks to private companies and from universities to independent advisors, providing a more holistic view and perspective on the subject matter while mitigating potential selection biases.

3.2.1.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

A total of ten interviews were conducted: five with "Konstansvariga" (art managers), two with "Konstintendenter" (art curators; see Appendix 3.1), one with the "Head of Inclusion and Diversity" (Appendix 3.2), two with heads of independent advisories (Appendix 3.3), and one with the President of SSE, also following the guide in Appendix 3.1. The semi-structured format enabled interviewees to share their perceptions freely – their view of reality, following the interpretivist philosophy – while allowing comparability (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). Follow-up questions were used to deepen responses and enhance quality, and the guide was adapted as needed. To minimize bias, leading keywords were excluded in the interview guides (Saunders et al., 2023).

All interviews were conducted in English, though participants could use Swedish terms to avoid language barriers and ensure interview quality. Six interviews took place in person at organizational premises, while four were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams.

3.2.2 Secondary data

The study also relies on secondary data as complementary to the interviews. Triangulation of data is essential for enhancing credibility, reliability, and validity, thereby strengthening the case for using multiple sources of data (Saunders et al., 2023). Desktop research was conducted before the interviews, gathering information from publicly available sources, including company websites, digital art tours, and podcasts and books by curators. This approach enables the interview process to be more focused on achieving a profound and nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis follows the process proposed by (Saunders et al., 2023), where subsequent steps ensure quality and align with the interpretivist nature of the study.

During the dialogues, the researchers divided their tasks, with one taking the role of interviewer and the other that of note-taker. The interviews were recorded, after receiving consent, and then transcribed by the researchers using tools such as Microsoft Teams. The next step was to actively listen to the recordings to ensure the quality of the transcriptions and

gain a better understanding of the answers. This process enabled a more thorough familiarization with the data from the interviews.

The data were then analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, which is the most suitable methodological fit for this nascent field and the interpretivist research philosophy, as it allows for the distinction between individual interpretations of the research topic (Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Saunders et al., 2023). The themes were chosen to follow the same structure as the questions asked during the interviews and, loosely, the one proposed by the theoretical framework.

3.4 Method Criticism and Research Quality

First, given the interpretivist stance of this study, the transferability of findings is inherently limited. While the analysis is based on a small sample of ten interviews with stakeholders across curatorial, HR/DEI, and advisory roles, the goal is not to generalize but to gain context-rich insights. The use of thick description allows readers to assess the relevance of our findings in other organizational settings (Saunders et al., 2023).

Second, while this study adopts an interpretivist research philosophy, it is essential to acknowledge that CACs are inherently entangled with broader issues of power, marginalization, and inequality, particularly in light of the persistent gender disparities in the art market. As such, one could argue that a critical research philosophy, which explicitly seeks to expose and challenge dominant ideologies, may have been more appropriate (Louis et al., 1983). A critical approach would have framed corporate art curation as a site of power and exclusion, with an explicit aim to highlight silenced voices and systemic gender biases. However, our choice of interpretivism reflects our intention to understand how organizational actors themselves make sense of gender representation, rather than to critique their practices against normative ideals. Still, we remain aware that broader discourses and power structures shape the practices we analyze – a perspective we have sought to integrate through reflexivity and critical sensitivity in our analysis (Saunders et al., 2023).

Finally, given the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews, there is an inherent risk of bias on the part of both the interviewer and the participant. As our participants were selected based on their relevance to art curation, corporate identity, or DEI work, they likely held

pre-existing interest or investment in the topic, which may have narrowed the range of perspectives. Furthermore, the lack of standardized questioning (see customized interview guides in Appendices 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3) across roles may compromise the reliability of the findings. However, this was a necessary trade-off to allow for context-sensitive insights. To address this, we remained reflexive about our positionality and carefully documented the interview process to enhance transparency (Saunders et al., 2023).

4. Empirical Findings and Analysis

This chapter is divided into two parts: Chapter 4.1 outlines the CACs themselves, while Chapter 4.2 analyzes how CACs can support DEI work and initiatives.

4.1 The Collections

An essential step in understanding how CACs can support DEI work is examining their contents. Since this thesis emphasizes gender equality as a key dimension of DEI, particular attention is paid to the representation and symbolic inclusion of female artists. Findings in Appendix 4 reveal significant variation in how collections address the topic of gender. Some organizations, such as Svenska Brasserier and SEB, actively prioritize gender balance – using tracking tools and prominently featuring top Swedish female artists – while others, like Lord Art Advisory and CFHILL, rely on curator awareness rather than formal processes. Sveriges Riksdag is moving toward parity, shifting from a legacy of male dominance. SSE, while exhibiting a near-equal gender distribution, expresses an ethical reluctance to codify gender identity in its Collection Management System (CMS).

Overall, most collections are not explicitly curated with DEI strategies in mind, yet their gender compositions and symbolic narratives often reflect broader organizational values. SEB's inclusion of the top 10 Swedish female artists exemplifies intentional alignment with diversity principles, while Svenska Brasserier's gender-tracking suggests a strong internal commitment. These examples show that even without formal DEI-driven curation, CACs can support and reflect inclusion values within organizational culture.

Approaches to tracking gender also vary. Sveriges Riksdag utilizes Excel and gender-tagged acquisition logs, while Svenska Brasserier employs a color-coded system to guide its decisions. SSE uses a CMS for inventory but hesitates to track gender, citing concerns about identity confirmation. Lord Art Advisory and CFHILL do not use formal tracking mechanisms, relying instead on curator judgment and client preferences.

4.2 The Role of the CAC

This section addresses the central research question: How can CACs support DEI efforts? Through thematic analysis of the interviews, five core themes were identified. These are

organized under the two key dimensions of organizational identity, as defined in our theoretical framework: culture and image, reflecting the internal self-understandings and external perceptions that shape identity (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Jenkins, 1996).

4.2.1 Culture

This section examines how CACs function internally as tools within organizational culture, contributing to the understanding and practice of DEI.

4.2.1.1 Sparking Conversations

Interviews reveal that artworks, especially those that challenge norms or amplify marginalized perspectives, can spark conversations that would otherwise remain unspoken. Both Martin Joanson (SEB) and Lars Strannegård (SSE) described how certain art pieces serve as ice-breakers, prompting discussions among colleagues who would not typically engage, thereby promoting inclusion:

> *"Pieces from the collection can serve as ice-breakers among colleagues who do not usually speak with each other, bringing them to talk about much deeper topics than usual 'small talk'."*
> – Martin Joanson, SEB

> *"It's, you know, conversation starters[…]And if it can spark your imagination or sort of makes you tick somehow, you can get new types of conversations. You interact with people in a new way. So I think it's a perfect grease in human interaction."*
> – Lars Strannegård, SSE

This suggests that art can transcend hierarchies and support DEI by not just increasing the frequency of interpersonal exchanges, but also enriching their depth. Ninhursag Tadaros from SSE similarly noted that artworks can catalyze engagement with complex social issues: *"[Art] is a creative way of engaging with questions that might be harder to approach."* Thus, CACs are not merely decorative elements but active catalysts for DEI dialogue through visual prompts. However, their impact is uneven – not all employees engage with or even notice the art. At SSE, some students show little interest, while remote work at SEB limits the collection's influence entirely.

In addition to connection, CACs function as diagnostic tools, surfacing tensions related to DEI. When certain pieces provoke discomfort or pushback, they highlight underlying

sensitivities. These reactions can guide attention to areas that require dialogue or support, although they also risk creating conflict and alienating employees. As Michael Storåkers (CFHILL) cautioned:

"That's the balance that you need to respect, that it's a workplace, and not an art institution. If you are pushing in the wrong way for some stuff at the workplace, that could be more complicated."
– Michael Storåkers, CFHILL

Findings across multiple institutions reveal a recurring pattern: artworks perceived as controversial or misaligned with institutional values and professional context, especially those involving nudity, masculinity, or socio-political themes, often provoke discomfort and are subsequently removed or replaced. At Sveriges Riksdag, for example, Sara Bernesjö reported that several nude portraits of women were removed following concerns about male gaze and objectification: *"Maybe that is a topic easier spoken about in an art museum… since Riksdag is not a museum… maybe you shouldn't have nude, even if it's a historical painting"*. While such pieces may be intended to challenge norms and spark dialogue, their exclusion highlights the tension between curatorial ambition and the need to maintain a culturally sensitive and inclusive workplace. This underscores a broader curatorial paradox: the artworks most capable of provoking meaningful DEI engagement are often the ones most likely to be excluded due to institutional risk aversion and cultural sensitivity.

4.2.1.2 Activating the Collection

While CACs have the potential to support DEI work, our findings show that their impact depends significantly on how actively they are interpreted and communicated – a process interviewees referred to as "activation." Activation involves deliberate efforts, such as art tours, lectures, or seminars, to make artworks accessible and contextually meaningful, transforming them from passive décor into communicative tools.

Calle Carboni of Svenska Brasserier stressed that without someone to explain the collection internally and externally, *"it would go flat."* His observation underlines that simply displaying artworks is not enough – engagement is necessary to unlock the stories and intentions behind each piece. Elisabeth Johansson at SEB echoed this: *"When you know what type of art was chosen and why… You can translate those stories into your daily operations."*

In both cases, activation connects abstract values with lived organizational practice. Without it, the art risks fading into the background, and its DEI potential remains untapped.

Tinni Ernsjöö Rappe of SSE described activation as intentional and multi-layered, including a website, podcasts, and guided tours. These initiatives provide context and narrative that bridge the gap between observer and artwork, encouraging deeper reflection on themes such as equity, gender, and representation. Ernsjöö Rappe recounted a specific incident where an artwork that provoked resistance was met with a strategic activation effort:

> *"So we actually took that one down, which is kind of a no-no in the art world. And then we made a seminar about it where we watched it together and the students could talk about it, and this group spoke about it, which was really interesting."*
> – Tinni Ernsjöö Rappe, SSE

This example illustrates how activation can transform discomfort into a collective dialogue. Without deliberate framing, challenging artworks risk rejection, not because of their content, but because of the missing context that enables thoughtful engagement. When activated intentionally, such pieces can move from sources of tension to catalysts for reflection, allowing institutions to integrate complex themes without alienating their audiences.

Kerstin Lord from Lord Art Advisory emphasized activation as a path to self- and social understanding: *"The more you know about art, the more interesting it becomes."* Yet she also noted a common shortfall: *"They like the idea… but it seldom materializes."* This reflects a broader challenge: while many organizations acknowledge the value of activation through tours or seminars, such efforts are often sporadic, due to time, budget, or staffing constraints. Consequently, the capacity of CACs to support DEI remains largely untapped. This activation gap reveals a deeper paradox: while curators often stress the symbolic and cultural power of collections, few implement a clear strategy to realize that potential. The absence of structured activation weakens institutional claims and raises doubts about genuine commitment to using CACs for inclusion and reflection. For example, at SEB, no formal collaboration exists between the Head of Inclusion and Diversity and the art collection manager, despite clear opportunities for alignment. Without sustained, cross-functional coordination, the rhetorical emphasis on CACs risks remaining symbolic rather than substantive.

4.2.1.3 Supporting DEI Strategy

When CACs are intentionally curated to reflect values such as gender equality or social progress, our findings indicate they can serve as symbolic drivers that reinforce broader DEI objectives. At SEB, the theme of *"young, female, Scandinavian artists"* in the Arenastaden collection was framed as part of a larger gender equality initiative, catalyzed by the then-current female CEO and CMO. According to Martin Joanson, the collection helped legitimize and support similar pushes for 50/50 gender representation across the organization:

> *"We are trying to have this mix in all areas. And then I think it's analog to do that when it also comes to art and to give them more space just for a better society in all ways, a better outcome if everything is mixed."*
> – Martin Joanson, SEB

SEB's case demonstrates how CACs can foster cultural change when aligned with leadership and evolving institutional values. The collection's gender emphasis coincided with female leadership, reinforcing broader gender equity objectives internally. Joanson highlighted this link, noting that representational progress "goes hand in hand" with internal leadership. Similarly, at SSE, the collection aligns explicitly with the school's educational mission, FREE – Fact-based, Reflective, Empathetic, Entrepreneurial – which aims to cultivate human capabilities, empathy, and inclusion, fostering DEI. President Lars Strannegård underscored this alignment, describing art as "*much more fundamental…rooted in the idea of what education is about.*" Thus, the collection actively serves as a pedagogical tool, embedding institutional values.

Our findings suggest that although CACs are frequently portrayed as aligned with DEI or educational objectives, they often lack structured governance and evaluation, revealing a gap between rhetoric and implementation. Acquisition decisions commonly rely on curators' personal ethics or informal practices rather than institutional guidelines. Interviewees from Lord Art Advisory and CFHILL intuitively avoid all-male rosters, but such practices remain uncodified. At SSE, despite the CAC's close alignment with the educational mission, curatorial decisions remain informal and dependent on leadership vision, with formalization still pending. Similarly, institutions such as SEB and Riksdagen mention representational fairness but lack clear key performance indicators (KPIs) or systematic diversity assessments. Without formal strategies and accountability, CACs risk functioning only symbolically rather than driving sustained cultural transformation.

4.2.2 Image

This section examines how CACs are leveraged to enhance corporate image and communicate DEI commitments and values to external stakeholders.

4.2.2.1 Diversifying Audience

Through our findings, CACs were identified as a means to diversify the customer base by changing the company's reputation, drawing to the entity those who would traditionally be distant.

At Svenska Brasserier, Carboni has been actively engaged in changing the reputation of their restaurants through their art collections, to target a more diverse customer base. Initially, he noticed that the overwhelming majority of customers at their restaurant, Sturehof, were business people, making others feel unwelcome. Carboni installed art pieces and hosted exhibitions that targeted a diverse clientele, resulting in a more eclectic and varied customer base that ranged from artists and creative individuals to the original base of business professionals. Carboni explained that the initial thought behind the shift was, "*You don't want it to be a restaurant homogenic for just the business people… so that's how we thought [art] would attract the opposite.*" Signalling inclusivity was a key part of driving the change: "*We're trying to be as diverse as possible. Lilla Baren is for the younger, Riche is more for the settled ones, and at Teatergrillen you can also bring your granny.*" This approach demonstrates how art collections can effectively enhance your reputation and demonstrate a commitment to diversity, thereby increasing DEI.

At SSE, the creation of the Art initiative has helped shift the school's image from one of being overly masculine and intimidating to a more inclusive and diverse one, both Ernsjöö Rappe and Tadaros explained. The latter stated that: "*The school has changed a lot since the Art Initiative was here to become more dynamic and welcoming … An inclusive place in many ways*".

> "*Students said, 'I would never have started here if it wasn't for Art Initiative.'*"
> - Ninhursag Tadaros, SSE

The art in the school fosters a sense of belonging among previously alienated students and groups. However, external reputational gains are not always mirrored internally. The presence of art at SSE was well-received from outside, with praise for the new initiative. Still, staff and students initially struggled with the presence of art, being very skeptical of its purpose and reasons. In one instance, a student even went so far as to unplug visual installations, underscoring cultural frictions. This highlights a tension between the outward-facing symbolic value of CACs and the slower process of internal acceptance and cultural adaptation. Nevertheless, these cases show that art collections can meaningfully reshape how institutions are perceived, opening them up to broader publics and more diverse constituencies.

4.2.2.2 Communicating DEI Values

"It's soft values they want to share with the clients.[...] Contemporary art is loaded with a lot of values… and those are transferred to the companies. [...]It signals that it's a good company that cares about its employees."
– Kerstin Lord, Lord Art Advisory

Findings suggest that entities may want CACs to convey specific meanings and values related to DEI. CACs function as a strategic visual communication tool, becoming an extension of who the entities are. This strategy is particularly important in political institutions such as the Riksdag, where Bernesjö explained that the aim is that of transmitting national values – *"It's also quite important that [the art] is going to work to represent Sweden."* – political milestones – *"We made [art] works to celebrate 100 years of women's voting rights."* – and evolving social norms – *"[Art] can be about difficult topics.* Furthermore, the parliament makes decisions to commission gender-specific pieces and avoid depictions that clash with today's values as part of a calibrated signaling strategy.

Art is a cultural signal to both internal and external stakeholders, Lord explains, communicating progressiveness –*"They're not just a company that wants to do business."* openness –*"Show they're in the forefront… that they know what's going on."* – criticality and social engagement –*"Contemporary art carries material and cultural value, transferred to the company."* Furthermore, art can be used to present new values, as Ernsjöö Rappe explained that the aim at SSE is to promote the ideas that *"Art is knowledge"* and *"move the brand from a place where you learn how to make money to one where you engage with the*

world." Similarly, Johansson explained that SEB uses art to challenge outdated institutional norms, aiming to convey that it is *"not the same stuffy old image of a man in a suit"*.

As previously mentioned, however, there is a lack of formalized acquisition and curation strategies emerging from interviews. This discrepancy is also evident when investigating objectives such as signaling values and the practicalities of curation. Lord herself explains that DEI considerations are intuitively driven towards a common-sense balance rather than being institutionally mandated, leading to possible issues in how the intended message is delivered.

5. Discussion

Our findings identified five core themes linking CACs to DEI, grouped under the categories of culture and image. In this discussion section, we will build upon these findings by interpreting them through the four key processes: *Expressing* and *Reflecting*, the internal mechanisms that shape and articulate organizational culture and identity; and *Mirroring* and *Impressing*, which are the external mechanisms that project identity to external stakeholders, influencing their perceptions. This section situates the analysis within the broader literature on corporate identity, art, and DEI, demonstrating how CACs can strategically reinforce inclusivity and engagement.

5.1 Aiding in Internal Expression and Reflection of DEI

This study finds that CACs can support internal DEI efforts by expressing organizational values and fostering reflection, provided they are intentionally curated, activated, and aligned with institutional goals. Initiatives such as SEB's acquisition of works by leading female artists and SSE's inclusion of socially engaged pieces illustrate how CACs operate as symbolic extensions of corporate values, visually embedding DEI principles into the workplace. This reflects Hatch and Schultz's (2002) concept of expression, where organizational culture is projected through tangible practices and artifacts, and reinforces Kottasz's (2007) and van Riel's (1995) argument that symbolism communicates strategic values, such as inclusion.

Beyond symbolism, CACs also enact DEI by sparking interpersonal engagement. At SEB and SSE, art was described as "grease for human interaction," prompting spontaneous cross-silo dialogue. These conversations often deepened into discussions on gender, identity, and norms, echoing Kottasz's (2007) and van Riel's (1995) views of CACs as *behavioral* tools and reinforcing research by Mitchell and King (1997) and Betts (2006) that links art to morale and cohesion. Our findings extend the existing literature by demonstrating that CACs facilitate meaningful discussions related to DEI. This finding is relevant for DEI work, as it supports Campbell's (2025) claim that DEI must be enacted, not just stated. By prompting affective and intellectual responses, CACs make inclusion visible and experientially felt.

However, engagement is not universal. Echoing Wu (2003), we found it was uneven, especially among SSE students or remote SEB employees. Furthermore, the findings contribute a novel insight: CACs do not simply spark inclusion – they can also reveal the boundaries of acceptable expression. Artworks that provoke discomfort are often removed to avoid controversy. While these actions reflect institutional sensitivity, they also reveal how transformative pieces may be excluded, limiting DEI discourse. As Hooks (1995) argued, art's power lies in its ability to challenge norms, yet in corporate contexts, this power is frequently curtailed by concerns over professionalism and reputational risk. CACs not only express DEI values but also expose underlying cultural tensions, highlighting where inclusion is embraced and where it is quietly resisted. This supports Ferdman (2017) and Triana et al.'s (2021) findings that deep-level diversity often provokes organizational conflict and resistance.

Our findings also include that visual expression alone is insufficient without activation. Guided tours, seminars, and contextualization help transform passive observation into cultural meaning-making, allowing employees to engage with art as prompts for dialogue and introspection. This aligns with Hatch and Schultz's (2002) notion of reflection, where artifacts of identity are processed and embedded in culture. SSE's seminar series, for example, reframed a controversial artwork into an opportunity for collective engagement, exemplifying Ely and Thomas's (2020) argument that DEI must go beyond compliance to generate real interaction. Without such activation, CACs risk being perceived as mere décor; SEB and Svenska Brasserier both noted that without explanation, collections "go flat." This supports prior research on employee engagement with art (Hoeken, 2005) and reinforces findings by Richardson (1998) and Shane (1996) that CACs influence identity only when integrated into organizational routines. Our findings extend this by identifying activation as the key mechanism enabling reflection and deeper cultural engagement.

Despite recognition of CACs' symbolic value, activation often lacks strategic support. Many institutions endorse activation in theory, but fail to sustain it in practice, constrained by time, staffing, or siloed structures. At SEB, for example, no collaboration exists between the art manager and the Head of Inclusion and Diversity – a missed integration opportunity. This reflects Kottasz's (2007) critique that symbolic assets are underleveraged when not embedded in formal identity management. Without sustained activation, CACs risk becoming symbolic

gestures rather than strategic instruments, severed from the cultural and organizational goals they are meant to support.

The relationship between *expression* and *reflection* is cyclical and mutually reinforcing. As organizations express DEI through curated art, they simultaneously provoke reflection, surfacing assumptions and informing future curatorial choices. This iterative process aligns with Hatch and Schultz's (2002) identity dynamics model, which views artifacts as absorbing meaning over time. When activated, CACs become both mirrors and makers of DEI identity. SEB's gender-conscious acquisitions and SSE's alignment with the FREE framework show how CACs can legitimize and normalize DEI by embedding it into everyday visual and spatial culture. Yet most institutions lack formal structures to sustain this alignment, relying on leadership ethics rather than policies or frameworks. This affirms findings by Cornelissen and Elving (2003) and Simoes (2005) on the need for curatorial guidelines, and supports Balmer and Soenen (1999) and Wu (2003), who observed that collections often reflect executive taste more than organizational values. Without cross-functional coordination, this alignment remains fragile. Even at SSE, strategic consistency depends on current leadership, rather than institutionalized frameworks. This underscores Sands and Ferraro's (2025) argument that DEI credibility is not built through symbolic gestures but through embedded, consistent practices. Without formalized acquisition strategies, KPIs, or integration with DEI and HR functions, CACs risk becoming symbolic gestures – well-intentioned but strategically disconnected.

5.2 Shaping External Perceptions Through Mirroring and Impressing

The findings of this study suggest that CACs can be strategically mobilized within Hatch and Schultz's (2002) processes of *mirroring* and *impressing* to shape stakeholder perceptions and, as highlighted by Dixon-Fyle (2023), to project an organization's commitments to DEI in a visible manner.

First, the *mirroring* process, where external expectations are reflected into organizational identity, emerges clearly through the strategic deployment of CACs to address societal pressures and stakeholder feedback. This reflects broader literature emphasizing the necessity of aligning with external legitimacy demands (Sadeghi, 2023; Sands & Ferraro, 2025). Our findings demonstrate that CACs are leveraged to reshape and diversify customer bases, aligning with DEI research that highlights inclusive commitments as crucial for brand image

and consumer trust (Georgeac & Rattan, 2023). For example, Svenska Brasserier utilizes its art collection to attract a broader demographic beyond its traditional business clientele, thereby enhancing inclusivity and appeal to various demographic groups. This strategic use of art aligns with van Riel's (1995) *symbolic* dimension of identity management, where visual elements, such as curated artworks, serve to communicate and reinforce organizational values. In this context, art becomes a tangible signal of commitment to diversity, strengthening perceptions of authenticity among external stakeholders.

However, our findings also reveal that stakeholders at times perceive a disconnect between the organization's internal use of art and its externally projected DEI commitments, leading to skepticism about the authenticity of such efforts and exposing a potential symbolic misalignment. This skepticism aligns with Sands and Ferraro's (2025) concerns regarding reputational risks stemming from inconsistencies between stated values and organizational expressions. Artworks that triggered internal backlash were often removed, relocated, or recontextualized, reflecting curatorial responses to stakeholder feedback. Such dynamics support the findings of Kottasz (2008) and Campbell (2025) that CACs can either reinforce or undermine DEI work and values, depending on curatorial decisions and stakeholder reception. Curators frequently modified displays to address employee concerns, even at the expense of original curatorial intent. These tensions further illustrate Hatch and Schultz's (2002) mirroring process, in which external feedback influences internal identity reflections, thereby shaping organizational decisions about self-definition and expression.

Second, the *impressing* mechanism emerges clearly as organizations strategically deploy CACs to project DEI commitments to external stakeholders. As highlighted by Lord, contemporary art embedded in corporate environments communicates soft values, signaling organizational care for employees – a perspective consistent with Balmer and Gray (2003) and Kottasz (2000), who argue that organizations with clearly articulated values often use CACs to reinforce and communicate their identity. This mechanism aligns closely with van Riel's (1995) *communication* concept, which emphasizes curated artworks as communicative tools that shape stakeholder perceptions and enhance inclusivity. For instance, SEB strategically selects young, female, and regional artists to visibly communicate cultural engagement with international audiences, illustrating how CACs align with Dixon-Fyle's (2023) findings on the role of visual identity in inclusive branding across global markets. These insights substantiate Hatch and Schultz's (2002) model by confirming CACs as active

instruments of identity construction rather than mere decoration. Through deliberate curation, organizations impress their values outwardly, shaping how they are perceived. SSE provides a practical example by intentionally using art to shift the institution's external perceptions from traditional economic success to global responsibility and inclusive engagement.

Nevertheless, our findings also reveal potential vulnerabilities in the external projecting of DEI through CACs. At CFHILL and Lord Art Advisory, symbolic communication may remain superficial when driven primarily by client preferences or a reluctance to engage controversial themes. The effectiveness of *impressing* as a mechanism where organizations seek to shape external perceptions relies heavily on intentional and sustained activation strategies, consistent with Campbell's (2025) insights. Interviewees from Svenska Brasserier and SSE stressed the importance of contextualization, interpretation, and engagement to ensure collections have a meaningful impact.

If these activation efforts are absent, the potential of CACs risks being diluted or entirely unrealized. This concern echoes Hatch and Schultz's (2002) warning that unmanaged expressions can fail to generate meaningful impressions, leading to dissonance between the projected identity and stakeholder interpretation. Similarly, Kottasz (2008) emphasizes the crucial role of curatorial management in ensuring that CACs effectively promote organizational values, particularly in support of DEI initiatives. Without strategic alignment and activation, the communicative function of CACs may be underleveraged, reducing them to an aesthetic feature rather than an instrument of inclusive identity.

5.3 Closing the Loop: Synthesizing Internal and External Mechanisms

Bringing together the internal and external dimensions of the findings, CACs emerge as instruments that support DEI by bridging organizational culture and image through the processes of expression, reflection, mirroring, and impressing. This perspective aligns with core theories of corporate identity, which emphasize its dynamic nature as shaped by both internal values and external perceptions. Hatch and Schultz's (2002) Organizational Identity Dynamics Model provides a helpful lens for understanding how CACs facilitate this interplay, both internally, by expressing and reflecting cultural values, and externally, by mirroring societal expectations and impressing stakeholders. In this dual role, CACs help

shape organizational culture while also projecting inclusive commitments to the outside world.

Our findings reinforce Kottasz's (2007) adaptation of van Riel's corporate identity management framework. We also extend it by showing that *behavioral* factors, such as fostering conversation, are closely tied to internal processes; *communication* mechanisms support external projection; and *symbolism* operates across both domains. This structure illustrates how DEI functions both as an embedded cultural value and as a strategic message (Georgeac & Rattan, 2023), as CACs were used not only to foster inclusive internal environments but also to attract diverse talent and build external trust. Consistent with Kottasz (2008), we found that organizations use CACs to express their identity and values, rather than as financial investments. However, echoing Balmer and Soenen (1999) and Wu (2003), we also found that curatorial direction is often guided by leadership preferences rather than formalized policy. While this can result in visionary collections, it simultaneously exposes the fragility of DEI commitments when they lack structural support. Without acquisition strategies, KPI tracking systems, or alignment with DEI leadership, CACs risk becoming performative rather than strategic.

Yet, as Sands and Ferraro (2025) caution, this alignment must be genuine: without internal activation, DEI symbolism risks being misread as performative, potentially eroding credibility. Although Hatch and Schultz (2002) present identity formation as a reinforcing loop between culture and image, our findings highlight a structural tension in this model: *reflection* emerges as the most fragile link. When reflective practices, i.e., activation, are weak or absent, the external projection (*impressing* and *mirroring*) becomes decoupled from internal culture, rendering CACs susceptible to becoming visual performances for external audiences rather than meaningful tools for internal DEI engagement. This disconnect can lead to reputational dissonance, undermining brand credibility and stakeholder trust (Sands & Ferraro, 2025). However, this fragility may diminish over time if CACs are consistently activated and embedded into organizational routines, suggesting that their impact grows cumulatively when managed with sustained intention. This aligns with Markwick and Fill's (1997) emphasis on consistency as a key factor in building a credible and enduring corporate identity.

In conclusion, to function as effective DEI instruments, CACs depend on the integration of several contingencies:

- Activation efforts to ensure internal expression is meaningful and resonant

- Alignment with internal culture to make reflection authentic and grounded

- Responsiveness to stakeholder feedback to enable mirroring and recalibration

- Strategic communication to support external impressing with credibility

- Tracking systems and acquisition policies to connect curatorial practices to measurable DEI goals

- Formalized collaboration between curators and DEI leadership to bridge symbolic intent with structural implementation.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary and Answer to the Research Question

Amid growing demands for corporations to demonstrate genuine commitments to DEI, this thesis examines a novel and underexplored intersection: the role of CACs in supporting DEI initiatives. Drawing on 10 in-depth interviews with curators and corporate representatives across six Swedish institutions, and guided by a theoretical framework rooted in Hatch and Schultz's (2002) corporate identity dynamics model and Kottasz (2007) adaptation of van Riel's (1995) theory, this study set out to answer the research question: *When CACs are employed, how do they support DEI work?*

Our findings reveal that CACs can serve as both mirrors and makers of DEI identity, but only when strategically curated, actively engaged, and institutionally aligned. While few collections are governed by formal DEI strategies, many nonetheless reflect values related to gender representation, often shaped by curatorial ethics or executive influence. CACs contribute to DEI by enabling the four processes in Hatch and Schultz's model: expressing, reflecting, mirroring, and impressing. Internally, CACs support DEI culture by *expressing* inclusive ideals, sparking values-based conversations, and activating art (e.g., tours and seminars) to foster *reflection* and critical dialogue. Externally, collections *mirror* shifting societal norms and *impress* stakeholders by signalling inclusive values, helping reposition the corporate image and broaden audience appeal. However, without structural support ensuring internal-external alignment through DEI-curatorial integration and activation, CACs risk functioning as decoration or performative symbols, undermining their strategic potential.

6.2 Contributions

This thesis contributes to the discourse on CACs, DEI, and corporate identity by conceptualizing CACs as active instruments of identity management rather than static symbols. While prior research has examined corporate art as a tool for branding or morale, this study frames CACs through a DEI lens, addressing a gap in both identity and inclusion literature. It extends Hatch and Schultz's (2002) identity dynamics model into the realm of visual culture, illustrating how CACs engage in expression, reflection, mirroring, and impressing within DEI contexts – while also identifying a tension within the model itself. Specifically, our findings suggest that reflection is often the most fragile link: when activation

is lacking, the loop between culture and image risks breaking down, weakening the credibility of DEI efforts. Our study also advances van Riel's (1995) framework by showing how symbolic assets, such as art, intersect with internal culture and external image work.

We offer three theoretical contributions. First, we show that CACs can express and reflect on DEI values internally, enabling organizations to materialize inclusive commitments through curatorial choices and engagement practices. Second, we reveal how CACs are used to mirror and impress, communicating DEI narratives externally, reinforcing reputation and stakeholder trust. Third, we identify an activation gap: while curators articulate symbolic aspirations, these are seldom supported by structured DEI integration or cross-functional collaboration, thereby limiting the strategic potential of CACs.

By bridging identity theory with organizational DEI practice, this thesis opens a new line of inquiry into how aesthetic infrastructures shape and support inclusive corporate identity.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations. First, the institutional sample is limited to Swedish contexts, where national culture and public attitudes toward art and diversity likely influence how CACs function. While the findings remain relevant for international business, future comparative studies could shed light on how these dynamics vary across different cultural settings and further enrich the understanding of CACs as tools for DEI.

Second, the study focused primarily on gender representation. While allowing for depth, it left other forms of inclusion, such as race, sexuality, or disability, underexplored. Future research could adopt an intersectional approach to representation in CACs.

Third, the data focused on curators and leaders, leaving the reception of employees and audiences largely to be inferred. Incorporating employee perspectives, visitor feedback, or broader external stakeholder views could provide a more holistic understanding of how CACs are experienced and whether they effectively communicate DEI values.

Finally, the formalization of CAC governance deserves further study. As many collections remain curatorially driven and structurally disconnected from HR or DEI strategy, future

work should examine how acquisition policies, KPIs, and activation frameworks can be institutionalized. We encourage further research into how CACs can be purposefully leveraged for DEI, particularly as shifting political and cultural climates, such as recent DEI rollbacks (Sands & Ferraro, 2025), may constrain or reshape their impact.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Literature Review on Motivations for Collecting Corporate Art

The reasons firms collect art for *financial purposes* are highlighted in red. Those related to *corporate identity* are marked in green, while all *other reasons* are color-coded in yellow.

Stated Reasons for Firms Collecting Art

Sources	Motivations
Arab, 2003; Brancaccio and Black, 2002; Charles, 2002; Myer, 2004; Silvester, 2003; Thorncroft, 1999, 2003	1. Investment or other financial incentives (e.g., tax-related)
Charles, 2002; Wu, 2003	2. Company head passionate about art
Fisher, 1997; Garnett, 2002; Macritchie, 1996; Minder, 2003; Potterton, 1990; Rawsthorn, 1994; Richardson, 1998; Ross, 2002; Scardino, 1987; Thomas, 1990; Woolnough, 2002; Wu, 2003; Yu, 2002	3. Corporate image, identity
Bogni, 2002; Hutak, 2002; Myer, 2004; Thorncroft, 1999; Yu, 2002	4. Philanthropy, altruism (e.g., donation of corporate art to arts institutions or purchase of works by unknown artists); in some countries, businesses can make tax-deductible donations of art to certain organizations (Wu, 2003)
Brancaccio and Black, 2002; Mitchell and King, 1997; Richardson, 1998; Shane, 1996; Swengley, 2004; Wu, 2003; Yu, 2002	5. Enhancement of work environment for the benefit of staff and clients
Fraser, 2003; Roberts, March and Slater, 1993; Scardino, 1987	6. Impressing clients and hence increasing sales and gaining a competitive advantage
Macritchie, 1996; Woolnough, 2002	7. Statement about owner
Mitchell and King, 1997	8. Corporate hospitality
Thorncroft, 2003	9. Signalling a type of corporate culture (e.g., dynamic)
Thorncroft, 1999	10. Commercial advantages: the company can advise wealthy clients on the buying and selling of art, thus attracting new clients

Appendix 2: Overview of Interviews

#	Name	Company	Role	Location	Date	Time	Duration
1	Martin Joanson	SEB	Konstansvarig	SEB Arenastaden	26th of February 2025	09:00 – 11:30	2h ,30 min
2	Martin Joanson	SEB	Konstansvarig	Online	14th of March 2025	14:00 – 15:00	59 min
3	Elisabeth Johansson	SEB	Head of Inclusion and Diversity, HR Group Staff	Online	4th of March 2025	10:00 – 11:00	1 h, 1 min
4	Michael Storåkers	CFHILL	Art Advisor / Founder and Executive Chairman	Online	14th of March 2025	15:00 – 16:00	57 min
5	Kerstin Lord	Lord Art Advisory	Founder	Galleri Flach	17th of March 2025	14:00 – 15:15	1 h, 15 min
6	Tinni Ernsjöö Rappe	SSE	Executive Director SSE Art Initiative	SSE	4th of March 2025	08:00 – 09:30	1 h, 30min
7	Ninhursag Tadaros	SSE	Curator SSE Art Initiative	SSE	18th of March 2025	10:00 – 11:00	1 h
8	Lars Strannegård	SSE	President	SSE	15th of May 2025	15:30 – 16:00	30 min
9	Sara Bernesjö	Sveriges Riksdag	Konstintendent	Online	21st of March 2025	14:00 – 15:00	56 min
10	Calle Carboni	Svenska brasserier	Konstansvarig	Svenska brasserier Office	2nd of April 2025	09:00 – 10:00	1 h

Minimum	**30 min**
Maximum	**2 h, 30 min**
Average	**1 h, 10 min**
Median	**1h**

Appendix 3: Interview Guides

Appendix 3.1 Corporate Art Curators

Before introduction
- Introduce the purpose of and background to the study.
- Ensure confidentiality.
- Ask if recording is permitted.

Introduction
- Can you tell us about yourself and your role at [X]?
- How do you work with art at [X]? What does a normal day look like for you?
- Who has the main responsibility for the art collection at [X]? In other words, what does the team look like?

The Corporate Art Collection
- Purpose
  - Tell us about the art collection, when and how did [X] start collecting art?
  - Tell us about the purpose of the art collection.
  - Who is the target group of the art collection?
- Curation
  - How many artworks are included in the collection? Which artworks and artists are part of the collection?
  - Tell us about the curation process. What does it look like and who is involved? (e.g. how do you go about selecting the artworks from your collection to display in the office?)
  - Are there specific themes or values the collection aims to reflect?
- Activation
  - How do you engage with the art within the organization? For example, through guided tours, informational brochures, intranet, seminars, lectures, etc.
  - Do you activate your art collection from an external perspective? E.g. Presence at galleries and museums, public tours of the office, etc.

Diversity and Gender Representation
- Does the company have guidelines or policies to ensure gender diversity in art acquisitions?
- How do you handle the balance between artistic merit, financial value, and diversity considerations?
- What percentage of your collection would you estimate features female artists? Any other statistics?
- Are there financial or market-based barriers to acquiring works by female artists?
- Have you encountered any challenges when trying to incorporate diversity into the collection?

Corporate Identity
- Tell us about the values and corporate identity of [X]?
- Do you see any connections between the collection and the company's core values or corporate identity?
- Do you believe the collection functions as a tool for representing or communicating your company's identity?

Conclusion
- Is there anything else you would like to add that could be helpful for our research?
- Do you have any suggestions for someone else we could interview for our research?

Appendix 3.2 People & Culture / Diversity Manager

Before introduction
- Introduce the purpose of and background to the study.
- Ensure confidentiality.
- Ask if recording is permitted.

Introduction
- Can you tell us about yourself and your role at [X]?
- How do you work with HR/culture/DEI at [X]? What does a normal day look like for you?

Diversity and Gender Representation
- Tell us about gender diversity/female representation at [X].
  - How "diverse" is your management landscape? That is, are there women in influential positions at [X]?
- Tell us about your DEI work. What does it look like and who is involved in creating it?
- Could you share the motivations behind your DEI policies? How have these initiatives evolved or been adapted over time?
- How does DEI influence broader corporate strategies and policies? Alternatively, how would you describe the priority given to DEI initiatives at [X]?
- Are there measurable goals for gender diversity (in areas beyond leadership, such as in corporate spaces or cultural expressions?)
- Have you encountered any challenges when trying to incorporate diversity?

The Corporate Art Collection
- Tell us about your view on the art collection.
- Do you have any involvement in the art collection? Tell us about any engagement.
- How do you perceive the purpose of the art collection to be?
- Do you believe there are any specific themes or values the collection aims to reflect?
  - Do you perceive that the corporate art collections reflect the company's DEI values?
- Are there specific DEI guidelines related to art acquisitions or display policies?
- Have you received feedback from employees regarding diversity in the corporate art collection?

Corporate Identity
- Tell us about the values and corporate identity of [X]?
- Do you see any connections between the collection and the company's core values or corporate identity?
- Do you believe the collection functions as a tool for representing or communicating your company's identity?

Conclusion
- Is there anything else you would like to add that could be helpful for our research?
- Do you have any suggestions for someone else we could interview for our research?

Appendix 3.3 External Curators

Before introduction
- Introduce the purpose of and background to the study.
- Ensure confidentiality.
- Ask if recording is permitted.

Introduction
- Can you tell us about yourself and your role at [X]?
- How do you work with art at [X]? What does a normal day look like for you?
- What does the team look like?

The Corporate Art Collection
- Purpose
  - Could you describe your experience curating corporate art collections?
  - Tell us about the usual purposes of art collections.
  - Who are the common target groups of the art collection?
- Curation
  - Tell us about the curation process. What does it look like and who is involved? (e.g. how do you go about selecting the artworks from your collection to display in the office?)
  - Are there usually specific themes or values the collections aim to reflect?
- Activation
  - Are you involved in the activation process of the collections?
    - How do you engage the art within the organization? For example, through guided tours, informational brochures, intranet, seminars, lectures, etc.
    - Do you activate art collection from an external perspective? E.g. Presence at galleries and museums, public tours of the office, etc.

Diversity and Gender Representation
- How do you typically approach diversity and representation when advising clients?
- Do companies usually have guidelines and policies to ensure diversity in their art collections? Has this changed over time?
- How do you handle the balance between artistic merit, financial value, and diversity considerations?
  - What strategies do you use to ensure underrepresented voices are included in corporate collections?
- Have there been any instances where companies aspire to a specific percentage of female artists in your collections? Any other metrics?
- Are there financial or market-based barriers to acquiring works by female artists?
- Have you encountered any challenges when trying to incorporate diversity into the collection?

- Are there examples of best practices from corporations that have successfully integrated diversity into their art collections?

Corporate Identity

- Do you see any connections between the collection and the company's core values or corporate identity?
- Do you believe the collection functions as a tool for representing or communicating your company's identity?

Conclusion
- Is there anything else you would like to add that could be helpful for our research?
- Do you have any suggestions for someone else we could interview for our research?

Appendix 4: Summary of Findings Gender Representation and DEI in CACs

Overview of Gender Representation and DEI Alignment in CACs

Company	Collection Description	Female/Male Artist Balance	Symbolic Treatment of Females	Tracking Tools Used
Sveriges Riksdag	Publicly funded national art collection focused on democratic representation and civic symbolism.	Improving; legacy male dominance, now targeting parity (50/50).	Actively removes outdated depictions (e.g., nude women); commissions works on suffrage and equality.	Excel and acquisition logs; gender tracked to rationalize buying decisions.
SEB	Corporate collection with curated modern art in offices, includes guided tours and activation events.	Close to parity in some locations; focus on more female artists (e.g., 10 top female Swedish artists).	Female artists are supported to reflect modern identity.	Collection system exists, however, gender-tagging is not evoked.
Svenska Brasserier	Art used in restaurants to diversify clientele and enhance cultural ambiance. Frequent exhibitions.	Actively tracks and targets 50/50 representation; "not hard to find female artists'"	Female perspectives valued and showcased; no tolerance for art seen as devaluing women.	Color-coded system by gender; actively used to guide curation decisions.
SSE	Contemporary art embedded in educational spaces, curated to challenge norms and promote reflection.	Roughly 50/50; slight overrepresentation of female artists depending on classification.	Feminist interventions in masculine spaces (e.g., boardroom); nuanced portrayal of gender themes.	Internal CMS tracks inventory; hesitant to code identity without confirmation.
Lord Art Advisory (clients)	Advisory for corporate clients; art collections shaped by branding, senior management preferences.	Depends on client preferences; female artists included but not systematically tracked.	Often avoids controversial gender topics; client taste often prioritizes neutrality or familiarity.	No formal system; decisions based on visual appeal and client alignment.
CFHILL (clients)	Private gallery working with corporate clients; collections emphasize Nordic contemporary art.	Awareness of imbalance; recommends gender-conscious curating but no hard quotas.	Highlights top Swedish female artists; aware that the equality conversation is still necessary.	No CMS mentioned; curator awareness guides gender balance informally.

Appendix 5: Relevance for International Business

This study contributes to international business research by examining how CACs can be strategically employed to support DEI efforts, an increasingly global imperative for multinational and internationally engaged organizations. As companies operate across borders, they are required to communicate inclusive values in culturally resonant and contextually sensitive ways. In this regard, CACs can function as a visual and symbolic medium for conveying organizational identity across diverse stakeholder environments, bridging internal cultural values and external image across geographies.

In line with Hatch and Schultz's (2002) identity dynamics framework, the international relevance of CACs lies in their potential to reinforce or disrupt organizational identity dynamics, particularly in multinational settings where symbolic artifacts must speak to both local and global audiences. This aligns with longstanding concerns in international business research regarding how firms balance global consistency with local adaptation. The use of CACs to signal DEI values is a form of strategic communication that, if managed well, can strengthen institutional legitimacy across markets with varied social expectations around inclusion and representation.

Furthermore, to be relevant, international business research needs to investigate factors that determine companies' successes and failures (Peng, 2004). In line with this need, our research investigates and proposes some contingencies that make a company succeed in using their CACs purposefully, which can be extended to international contexts.

Finally, this study responds to the need for more interpretive and context-sensitive approaches to understanding how symbolic practices travel across organizational and cultural contexts. In particular, it shows how CACs are not universally interpreted or experienced in the same way: the same artwork may be read differently by internal and external audiences depending on cultural and professional contexts. These insights underscore the need for international firms to critically reflect on the symbolic dimensions of their corporate expressions and adapt visual strategies accordingly.

Appendix 6: AI Use Disclosure

Generative AI tools, particularly ChatGPT, were used throughout the development of this thesis. The most significant role it played was that of a brainstorming partner and idea generator, offering inputs and outlines for specific sections of the thesis. For example, prompts such as "Provide me with some options on why it would be interesting to explore art in corporate spaces for business" were used to generate a variety of perspectives and angles, which supported our ideation process. Additionally, ChatGPT was utilized as a support tool for navigating the academic literature. It assisted in explaining and distinguishing between theoretical frameworks and in determining their relevance to our research topic. Typical prompts included: "Give me a list of the most recognized theories on corporate identity" or "Explain in detail how Hatch and Schultz's model works to someone with no prior knowledge in the field." This functionality proved especially useful for breaking down complex concepts and facilitating the literature review by offering an accessible entry point into the existing body of research. Furthemore, AI tools were used during desktop research to transcribe existing materials such as podcasts. This proved extremely useful to extract quotes when needed. Sample prompts were: "transcribe this podcast recording, give names to the two speakers, and polish the transcript". Lastly, ChatGPT was used to refine, clarify, and improve the fluency and coherence of written content. Prompts such as "Improve fluency and coherence in this paragraph" or "Rewrite this in a more academic style" helped enhance the overall readability and tone of the thesis.

We are aware of the risks associated with the improper use of generative AI and implemented several measures to mitigate these risks. First, in the context of idea generation, no AI-generated content was adopted as it was. Instead, outputs were treated as supplementary inputs and further developed through our own reasoning and interpretation. Second, when ChatGPT was used to explore literature or explain theoretical concepts, its outputs were critically reviewed and validated. The tool was used as a foundation to guide further research, not as a definitive source. Third, any AI-generated transcript was thoroughly checked while listening to the recording to ensure that no discrepancies existed between the recordings and the text. Lastly, any AI-assisted rephrasing or refinement of text was carefully reviewed to ensure that the original meaning, nuance, and intent were fully preserved and, when necessary, adjusted accordingly.

In conclusion, we learned that the use of generative AI tools is valuable throughout the research process, particularly in stimulating outside-the-box thinking and offering alternative viewpoints. However, we remained fully aware of our responsibility for the integrity of the work and were diligent in managing the limitations of these tools, especially in relation to theoretical analysis and textual precision.