Diversity in Tech: Analyzing the Mismatch Between Corporate Framing and Impact

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DIVERSITY IN TECH: ANALYZING THE MISMATCH BETWEEN CORPORATE FRAMING AND IMPACT

by

Rana Abulbasal

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In

Sociology

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2023
ABSTRACT

Diversity in Tech: Analyzing the Mismatch Between Corporate Framing and Impact

by

Rana Abulbasal, Doctor of Philosophy

Utah State University, 2023

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Tech companies are spending millions of dollars on diversity programs, creating teams and roles specifically to address the lack of diversity in their workforces, and publishing Annual Diversity Reports to highlight the results of their diversity efforts. Yet, the number of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) employees in most tech companies remains in the single digits despite rapid growth of the industry. Even more alarming are the discrimination and harassment lawsuits against some of the biggest tech companies, which speak to the enduring hostility for women and people of color within the industry. When taken together, these trends suggest a mismatch between how corporations frame and implement diversity and the actual impact of those diversity efforts. By applying a critical interdisciplinary approach, and utilizing multiple methods, the objective of this research is to investigate why efforts by corporations to promote diversity have failed to realize their stated objectives. To accomplish this goal, the research commences with a comprehensive review of sociological perspectives on diversity management, followed by two empirical studies of the practice of diversity management from two perspectives: tech corporations themselves and women of color within the industry. The first chapter examines the framing strategies used by tech
companies to present their diversity initiatives on their websites, while the second analyzes how women of color in tech view diversity and the impact of DEI policies and programs on their careers.

(169 pages)
Diversity in Tech: Analyzing the Mismatch Between Corporate Framing and Impact

by

Rana Abulbasal

This doctoral dissertation investigates the discrepancy between tech companies' substantial investments in diversity programs and the persistently low representation of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) employees. Despite extensive efforts, discrimination and harassment against women and people of color persist in the industry. The study employs a critical interdisciplinary approach, comprising sociological perspectives on diversity management and two empirical studies. The first scrutinizes tech companies' framing strategies of diversity initiatives on their websites, while the second explores the impact of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies on women of color in the industry. By identifying shortcomings and proposing recommendations, this research aims to enhance the effectiveness of corporate diversity efforts in the tech sector.
DEDICATION

To the trailblazing spirits and indomitable strength of the overlooked and under-valued women of color in the tech industry. Your resilience, brilliance, and unwavering commitment to breaking barriers inspire this dissertation. May this work serve as a testament to your invaluable contributions, as we strive to create a more equitable and inclusive future for all. Your voices matter, and your presence enriches us all.

And… To Omar and Zain, I hope that one day, you’ll read this dissertation and feel very proud of your mama.

Rana Abulbasal
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Rana Abulbasal
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Chapter 1: What Would You Do If You Were Not Afraid?

Introduction
What Would You Do If You Were Not Afraid?

As I walked up the east stairwell of Building 16 at Facebook headquarters in Menlo Park for the first time, my attention was immediately drawn to the bold question on the wall—what would you do if you were not afraid? Printed in large red print, this question haunted me for nearly five years, causing me to stop in my tracks every time, both literally and figuratively. The answer seemed simple enough: pack up and leave. Though my heart knew that leaving the company was the right decision, my brain couldn't bring itself to admit it, not even to myself. It was hard to fathom leaving Facebook. I had worked really hard to get there.

Back then, Facebook was a good place to be, or so I thought. But I was miserable, and my dissatisfaction made no sense. Facebook was where I earned my first six-figure salary and where I took my first antidepressant. It was a place that brought countless people into my life yet left me feeling incredibly lonely. It was where I felt the most support and filed my first discrimination complaint. Facebook was a place that loved me publicly while telling me privately that I wasn't enough. Facebook told me to speak up but to do so quietly. Facebook wanted to celebrate me but only if I threw the party. But Facebook wasn’t the problem, I told myself over and over again. Facebook cared so much about diversity, and I was diversity! I was the only other Hijabi woman and one of very few Arabs there, and Facebook was on a mission to change that. In fact, during my tenure the company had significantly expanded its commitments to increasing the diversity company-wide. Was I the problem? Maybe I was too sensitive? Too immigrant? Too conservative? Or maybe a little too different? My experience wasn’t unique to me,
though. I heard many similar stories from employees from different backgrounds across many different tech companies. Puwar (2004) calls us “space invaders”, outsiders within a context where we don’t belong. And this is how we felt most of the time. Out of place. Occupying a space that wasn’t made for us.

Why did our experiences contradict the messages the company was sending us? Why was there a mismatch between what many major tech companies were communicating publicly about their commitment to diversity, and our lived experience?

I brought this inner conflict with me into the graduate program, where I was determined to unpack it and understand it. That’s where did this dissertation comes from, and those are the questions I attempt to answer with my research.

This… is what I would do if I wasn’t afraid.
Introduction

Tech companies are spending millions of dollars on diversity programs and initiatives, creating teams and roles specifically to address the lack of diversity in their workforces, and publishing Annual Diversity Reports to highlight the results of their diversity efforts (Nader 2018). Yet, the number of BIPOC employees in most tech companies remains in the single digits despite rapid growth of the industry (Alegria and Branch 2015). Even more alarming are the discrimination and harassment lawsuits against some of the biggest tech companies, which speak to the enduring hostility against women and people of color within the industry (Sonnemaker 2020). When taken together, these trends suggest a mismatch between how corporations frame and implement diversity programs and policies and the actual impact of those diversity efforts on the careers of women and people of color. Despite this paradox, there exists little research on why, where, and how this mismatch occurs. This study will attempt to fill this gap by investigating why corporate approaches to advancing diversity have failed to achieve their aims.

The Tech Industry

The tech industry represents an excellent case study for research on gender and racial inequalities for a variety of reasons. In theory, tech companies should be the unicorns of diversity. Acker (2006) argues that both internal and external forces combined are needed for successful change projects that can dismantle inequality regimes in work organizations. Internally, tech companies do not represent the bureaucratic organization model that Acker identifies as a primary mechanism contributing to inequality regimes (Acker 2006). Instead, organizations in this industry follow the co-called Silicon Valley
Model, characterized as semi-structured, non-hierarchical, and flat (Steiber A., Alänge 2016). Additionally, tech companies invest millions of dollars annually on diversity programs that aim to create a diverse workforce (Reboot Representation and McKinsey & Co. 2018). Externally, social movements like Black Lives Matter, the Women’s March, and #MeToo, which have demanded greater social equity and justice in the US, have found fertile homes in the tech industry. Between 2018 and 2020, thousands of employees from major tech companies like Google, Facebook, and Amazon organized employee walkouts to protest companies’ mishandling of events involving harassment and unfair treatment (Contreras 2021).

Despite these trends, the tech industry continues to fall far short of its stated diversity goals despite reported and ongoing commitments to representation and inclusion. As of 2020, there was 7.7 million jobs in the tech industry, and the median tech wage was 89% higher than the median national wage. However, women and BIPOC employees accounted for only 24% and 7% of the total tech workforce respectively (Cyberstates 2021). According to Acker (2006), this is a form of a systemic inequality that excludes women and minorities from accessing good high paying jobs. Furthermore, technology products and services have become essential parts of people’s lives (Kushlev and Leitao 2020; Melumad and Pham 2021), and when COVID-19 hit the world in early 2020, dependency on technology products and services dramatically increased (Montag and Elhai 2020; Tibbetts et al. 2021). Indeed, the global shift to “work from home” created unprecedent pressure on technology infrastructure and increased the demand for robust technology products and services (Cyberstates 2021). However, the tech industry
continues to be characterized by biased algorithms, designs, and products (Benjamin 2019; Noble 2018).

The contradictions between tech companies’ public pledges to advance diversity and the reality of the lack of diversity industry-wide raises many questions regarding the effectiveness of corporate diversity management within tech companies. These contradictions demand an analysis of the diversity landscape in the tech industry from multiple perspectives, which when combined, can help us understand this dilemma, and more importantly, solve it.

The Significance of the Study

A great deal of scholarship has explored the drivers and impacts of diversity in work organizations. Some research focuses on the overall impact of diversity on corporate performance (Duchek, Raetze, and Scheuch 2019; Hartono, Dzulfikar, and Damayanti 2020; Schippers et al. 2003), while other research focuses on the impact of diversity on specific organizational processes like hiring, performance evaluations and promotions, and leadership (Cook and Glass 2015; Dobbin, Kim, and Kalev 2012; Flory et al. 2021; Jayne and Dipboye 2004; Mckay and Avery 2016). Another body of research considers the impact of diversity on employees’ perceptions, behaviors, and job satisfaction (Leslie et al. 2019; Sharon 2019; Thomas 2009).

Despite the significant body of research on diversity, a majority of studies tends to concentrate on a singular aspect of corporate structure or organization, resulting in an incomplete understanding of the link between diversity initiatives and their outcomes. This research seeks to address this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of
diversity across an industry from various perspectives. Specifically, the study aims to investigate how diversity is conceptualized by corporate management and experienced by women of color in leading tech companies in the United States.

The objective of this research is to critically examine the practice of diversity that transcends the bounds of "mainstream diversity studies" as articulated by Thomas Calvard (2020). In his critical analysis of research on diversity in organizations, Calvard (2020) contends that the bulk of managerial and psychological studies of diversity in organizations lacks a critical approach to studying diversity systematically. Sociology, on the other hand, is uniquely positioned to furnish critical perspectives on diversity in organizations (Calvard 2020, p. 26), because it recognizes underrepresentation as a form of systemic inequality that is woven into the structure of organizations. This approach undermines perceptions of race- and gender-neutrality in organizational practice as well as assumptions that workplace inequalities simply reflect individual-level biases or shortcomings (Acker 1990, 2006; Kanter 1977; Ray 2019). Thus, while the field of sociology of work and occupations has a rich history of inequality studies in organizational settings (Glass and Cook 2017; Reskin 2000; Williams 1992; Wingfield 2021; Wingfield and Myles 2014; Wingfield and Wingfield 2014), very few studies have explicitly centered “diversity” as a concept in their analyses (Dobbin and Kalev 2016; Dobbin et al. 2012; Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006).

This study unpacks diversity as a concept and critically analyzes the conceptualization, operationalization, and impact of diversity management in the tech industry. By applying a critical interdisciplinary approach, and utilizing multiple methods, the objective of this research is to investigate why efforts by corporations to promote diversity have failed to
realize their stated objectives. To accomplish this goal, the research commences with a comprehensive review of sociological perspectives on diversity management, followed by two empirical studies

(1) View from the Top: How Tech Corporations Conceptualize Diversity

(2) View from the Margins: How Women of Color Encounter Diversity in Tech

This study is original because it consolidates different perspectives on diversity within a single industry to develop a comprehensive analysis of the mismatch between corporate diversity efforts and their impact. Understanding why and where this mismatch occurs will offer significant insight into the organizational policies and processes that can help move the needle in companies’ diversity and inclusion efforts. The research is also original because it is rooted in sociological theories of inequality using an intersectional approach, which emphasizes the need for theoretical approaches to representation that incorporate an intersectional perspective. Lastly, this research combines several methodologies to investigate diversity from different standpoints in tech and will contribute to the existing empirical research on diversity that centers a single perspective.

Literature Review

In her seminal work on inequality regimes, Acker (1990; 2006) argues that race, gender, and class inequalities are structural, embedded in organizational processes, and produced and reproduced systemically. Acker also argues that those inequalities, although different in their degree and visibility, control the distribution of power and resources within organizations. Organizational hierarchies are one dimension of inequality regimes that control the distribution of organizational power and authority, and Acker argues that
those hierarchies are gendered and racialized, with top positions mainly occupied by white men. She also argues that the abstract ideal worker represents a white man who is fully dedicated to his career and has few responsibilities outside of his job. Building on Acker’s theory, Ray (2019) developed the theory of racialized organizations, which posits that assume whiteness as the default category, producing a system of rewards and recognition in which whiteness acts as a credential (Ray 2019).

The leadership landscape in the tech industry is consistent with the patterns identified by Acker and Ray. Research shows that leadership roles in tech are dominated by white men (Alegria 2020). Alphabet Inc. (i.e., Google) provides a very good example of this pattern. Per the company’s 2022 filing, total full-time employees in the company surpassed a hundred thousand. The diversity report of the same year reported that about 70% of the leadership positions in the company were occupied by men compared to 30% women. Additionally, white men occupied 44% of the leadership positions as compared to 2.7% and 2.6% for Black and Latino men respectively, while Asian men made up around 21% (Google Diversity Report, 2022). Although Acker argues that such organizational hierarchies are more prominent in traditional bureaucratic organizations compared to flat organizations, Mickey (2019) found that tech companies in the startup phase were still described as a “boys club” and that the organizational logics still idealized the masculine standard worker (Mickey 2019). She also found that when tech companies go public, they usually undergo organizational restructuring that defaults back to bureaucratic structures with hierarchies and career ladders that result significant disadvantages for women (Mickey 2019)
The wage gap is another metric of inequality in organizations. Acker argues that wage setting is often tied to hierarchies within organizations (2006). Higher level jobs are valued higher and therefore receive higher wages. When higher roles are disproportionately occupied by white men, their wages will continue to be higher than women and BIPOC employees who are cramped together at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy in lower valued jobs (Acker 2006). Taking the argument a step further, Ray (2019) adds that when whiteness is the default, it becomes a credential that holds the highest value in the organizational structure, therefore placing everyone who is not white in a lower location in the organizational hierarchy.

In a study on wage differences in the tech industry, Alegria (2016) calculated the exact wage premiums and penalties for tech workers across gender, racial, and immigration status. Her model controlled for age, education, potential experience, field of study, and marital status, and used US-born white men as a reference group. She found that all women experienced wage penalties that could not be explained by their human capital, demographic, and work-related characteristics. For example, the study found that US-born BIPOC women experience a 10% unexplained wage penalty compared to US-born white men. As for US-born BIPOC men, the study found that they earn 18% less than US-born white men with 6% unexplained penalty. Only Asian men earned more than US-born white men and enjoyed 3% unexplained premiums. Although Alegria (2016) referred to part of the wage gap as unexplained, I argue that the gendered and racialized organization theories (Acker 1990; Ray 2019) are well suited to explain the unexplained. And while Asian men enjoy a wage premium that suggest better access to financial resources, the racialized organization still places them in a lower location in the
organization hierarchy in terms of power, authority, status, and prestige. In fact, research shows that although Asian American tech employees are over-represented in technical roles, they are underrepresented in managerial positions due to the perception that they lack managerial skills required for leadership roles (Alegria 2020), a phenomenon that is referred to as the “bamboo ceiling” (Huyen 2005).

Job and occupation segregation is another mechanism that contributes to racialized and gendered inequality regimes in work organizations (Acker 2006; Ray 2019). Relying on gender stereotypes and assumptions about skills and abilities, certain jobs and occupations are socially constructed as feminine (e.g., teaching and HR), while other jobs are constructed as masculine (e.g., engineering)(Acker 1990). Similarly, relying on whiteness as a credential, BIPOC professionals are often considered as lacking the required competence or credentials to achieve upward mobility into leadership positions (Ray 2019). Research shows that the tech field is highly gendered (Cooper 2000; Crump, Logan, and McIlroy 2007; Guerrier et al. 2009). Additionally, the racial composition of the workforce in tech suggests that the industry is also highly racialized with BIPOC employees representing only 7% of the total workforce (Cyberstates 2021). For example, Microsoft’s 2020 diversity report shows that women accounted for only 28% of the global workforce, while Black employees represented 4.9% and Hispanic and Latinx represented 6.6% (Microsoft Diversity Report 2020).

Understanding the implementation of diversity policies and their impact requires an intersectional framework. Intersectional frameworks have expanded our understanding of how organizations and professions reproduce hierarchy and exploitation at the intersection of race and gender (Crenshaw 1989). Research on BIPOC women in tech
reveals that their experiences in the workplace are very different than their white counterparts. A study by Twine (2018) found that Black women working in tech have less access to information and mentorship opportunities as compared to white and Asian women. Furthermore, because Black women are significantly underrepresented in tech, social support systems are nonexistent, which make Black women’s career experiences much more precarious (Twine 2018). In another study, Alferey and Twine (2017) investigated the intersections of gender, race, and sexual identity for women in tech. They found that when white and Asian women identified as gender fluid, they experienced fewer microaggressions, were perceived as more competent, and had a better sense of belonging when compared to their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts. Importantly, these benefits did not extend to Black and Latina women who identified as gender fluid. For these women, their race had a larger impact on their workplace experience than their sexuality (Alfrey and Twine 2017). Lastly, a study by Alegria (2019) shows that white women—but significantly not women of color—experience something akin the glass escalator that white men ride to get to managerial positions when being tokens in female dominated fields (Williams 1992). Building on the glass escalator framework, Alegria (2019) found that white women in tech get promoted to low- and mid-level management roles, moving from technical positions into management. While this might be seen as an advantage for white women, Alegria argues that tech companies do that to avoid fully integrating women in their technical teams. She referred to this phenomenon as a “step stool” (Alegria 2019).

The above-mentioned research and examples show that the state of diversity in tech is indeed an indicator of inequality in the industry. They also make the case that using
theories of inequality is an appropriate and needed approach to studying diversity in tech. Combined, the theories of organizational inequalities and intersectionality will offer a deeper understanding of the complexity of diversity as a concept within organizations. This approach will broaden the way in which diversity is viewed and practiced in organizational settings, moving it away from the classic business case of diversity – that argues that diversity brings financial gains to the companies- , and challenging the notion that workplace biases are individual level problems that can be fixed through individual level interventions, such as diversity trainings or mentoring programs (Kalev and Dobbin 2016).

Diversity in Organizations

A quick Google Scholar search of “diversity in the workplace” returns more than two million studies in a tenth of a second! The topic is as popular as it is complex. Although there is not a consensus on one specific definition for diversity in the workplace, the main theme that emerged from the search is the focus on the demographic “differences” between employees and the “representation” of those differences within the workforce (Cox and Blake 1991; Fine, Johnson, and Ryan 1990; Pfeffer 1985; Roosevelt Thomas 1990; Seliverstova 2021; Sharma 2019). Differences are personal attributes that can be ascriptive like gender and race, or non-ascriptive like religion, political views, and education (Sharon 2019). Research on diversity best practices is an area that continues to analyze how companies frame diversity and the strategies they use to achieve their diversity goals. Much of the existing research focuses on the benefits of diversity for companies or “the business case” (Hubbard 2012; Jayne and Dipboye 2004; Manoharan, Madera, and Singal 2021; Rutgers et al. 2008), and highlights that most companies seem
to follow the same set of practices which include: diversity recruiting (Dobbin et al. 2012; Flory et al. 2021; Mckay and Avery 2016), diversity trainings (King, Gulick, and Avery 2009; Roberson, Kulik, and Pepper 2003; Thomas, Tran, and Dawson 2010), and mentoring and networking programs (Kalev et al. 2006; Kim 2006; Landfeld 2009; Madera 2013).

Despite the popularity of this comment set of diversity practices, research shows that they have little impact on improving workplace diversity over time. Based on federal data on the workforce compositions of 708 private establishments in the US collected between 1971 and 2002, Kalev, Dobbin and Kelly (2006) found that diversity training had the least impact on improving diversity in the workplace, and in some cases, those trainings activated bias instead of reducing it. Mentorship and networking programs had modest impacts on improving diversity. Additionally, they found that the most effective approach to improving workplace diversity was to establish organizational responsibility or accountability for achieving diversity goals. Results from another study conducted by the authors ten years later (Kalev and Dobbin 2016) were consistent with their initial findings. Diversity trainings continued to have the least impact on improving diversity in the workplace, while mentoring and networking had better though still moderate impacts.

As for diversity recruiting, findings suggest that diversity recruiting that focuses on targeting women and minority talent, especially in colleges, had a positive impact on workplace diversity, and that it “turned the managers into diversity champions” (Dobbin and Kalev 2016). Similarly, Flory et al. (2021) found that when companies indicate an explicit focus on diversity in their recruitment materials, they see a significant increase in interest among applicants from underrepresented groups (Flory et al. 2021). McKay and
Avery (2006) also found that targeted diversity recruiting strategies succeeded in attracting minority employees; however, they warn that those efforts can backfire and be seen as misleading if the companies do not have strong diversity policies that can help retain those diverse hires (Mckay and Avery 2016).

Diversity in organizations continues to be a very popular topic for researchers in fields like management, organizational demography, and psychology, but as shown above, not much progress have been made to fix the problem. The “business case” for promoting diversity in organizations is not working, and neither is dealing with workplace biases as individual level problems. While this body of research is concerned with the practice of diversity in organizations, it tends to overlook the central mechanisms that shape organizational hierarchies including power, privilege, and oppression (DiTomaso, Post, and Parks-Yancy 2007). Ely and Thomas (2020) have recently stressed the need for organizations to understand the dynamics of systems of privilege and oppression at the societal level in order to drive systemic changes at the organizational level (Ely and Thomas 2020). According to DiTomaso et.al (2007), “Far too little attention has been paid to the relationship between diversity and inequality… [and]… the workforce diversity literature has given little attention to the issues of power and status differences among groups in society” (DiTomaso et al. 2007). This study aims to address these critiques by bringing issues of power and status to the center of the analysis.

Research Overview

(1) Sociological Perspectives on Diversity Management

The implementation of workplace diversity policies and practices, such as mandatory training and formal mentoring programs, has witnessed widespread adoption across both
the private and public sectors, encompassing entities ranging from large corporations to institutions of higher education. As per recent estimates, U.S. employers allocate a substantial annual budget of more than $8 billion to support diversity promotion, a trend that is paralleled by a continuous increase in the recruitment of corporate diversity professionals within American firms (Newkirk, 2019). Despite these noteworthy investments and the pervasive use of standardized diversity management practices, the existing evidence offers limited support for substantial advancements in terms of achieving enhanced workplace diversity, equity, or inclusivity. Despite the evident prosperity of the diversity enterprise, tangible improvements in actual workplace diversity persist at a level that is relatively moderate or stationary.

This chapter aims to trace the origins of corporate diversity management and explore the reasons behind its continued relevance and evolution. Additionally, it seeks to examine the criticisms of this approach voiced by sociologists and other social scientists. The primary objective is to identify the factors that restrict the effectiveness of corporate diversity initiatives and to propose empirically grounded pathways for progress. I contend that an examination of the history of corporate diversity management can offer insights into the shortcomings of current diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in achieving enduring change in terms of representation and inclusion. Furthermore, I argue that the ongoing critiques of the corporate diversity model can provide valuable guidance for advancing towards greater equity within American workplaces.

This chapter is organized into three sections. First, I trace the history of corporate diversity management to provide context for the emergence and evolution of corporate diversity approaches from their origin in the 1960s to the present. Second, I review the
range of sociological critiques of this approach to workplace equity, noting both conceptual and empirical critiques of this model and its effects on workplace representation and attitudes. Finally, I conclude by reviewing several approaches to workplace equity advanced by sociologists with the aim of addressing the shortcomings and limitations of current approaches and moving workplace policy and practice toward more equitable approaches.

(2) View From the Top: How Tech Corporations Conceptualize Diversity
In 2014, major tech companies publicly disclosed their workforce's racial and gender compositions, leading to widespread recognition of the industry's lack of diversity, particularly the underrepresentation of women and people of color. Despite receiving criticism, these reports were commended for acknowledging the existing diversity problem. Since then, tech companies have invested significant financial resources in diversity programs and initiatives, emphasizing their commitment to diversity through regular updates on dedicated websites. However, despite these efforts, actual representation in the tech industry has shown minimal improvement over the past decade, with women and people of color remaining significantly underrepresented. (Cyberstates 2022).

In spite of the underwhelming state of diversity in the tech industry, a majority of tech companies maintain diversity websites that showcase their ongoing commitment to diversity. These websites often include prominent statements highlighting the importance of diversity and inclusion, employing positive language and optimistic messaging to convey the company's dedication to these issues. However, it raises the question of the purpose these diversity websites serve if they do not accurately reflect the actual level of
diversity within the organization. This chapter aims to explore how tech companies present the purpose and outcomes of their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in light of limited progress towards achieving their stated objectives. The objective is to investigate how major tech companies, widely acknowledged as diversity leaders, frame diversity on their corporate websites.

Relying on a thematic content analysis method, and drawing on Entman’s (1993, 2003) framing theory, this chapter analyzes diversity websites for eight major tech companies in the US: Apple, Amazon, Google, Meta (formerly Facebook), Microsoft, LinkedIn, Salesforce, and Oracle.

(3) View from the Margins: How Women of Color Experience Diversity
As previously illuminated, despite the concerted efforts of technology companies to enhance workforce diversity, women of color employed in the technology industry remain noticeably underrepresented (Alegria 2020; Alegria and Branch 2015). Limited in scope, extant intersectional research investigates the gendered and racialized dimensions of labor within the tech industry, revealing it to be a "brotopia" predominantly dominated by white men (Chang 2019). This prevailing perception is supported by an escalating number of public testimonies from women of color, particularly Black women, detailing instances of retaliation after voicing complaints regarding bias, discrimination, and harassment encountered in the field.

The persistence of marginalization experienced by women of color within an industry that allegedly prioritizes diversity and inclusion raises pertinent inquiries. Significantly, scholarship has not yet comprehensively grappled with the implications of diversity programs and initiatives on the career trajectories of Black and other women of color.
The inadequacy of such policies in facilitating their entry into the industry or advancement into leadership positions warrants investigation. This paper seeks to address these queries by centering the perspectives and lived experiences of women of color currently working (or have worked) in the technology sector. Drawing upon 24 in-depth interviews with current women employees from diverse racial backgrounds, this study explores the impact, both supportive and detrimental, of companies' diversity programs on their careers.
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Chapter 2: Sociological Perspectives on Diversity Management

* This chapter was co-authored with Dr. Christy Glass
From mandatory training to formal mentoring programs, workplace diversity policies and practices have diffused across the private and public sector, from large companies to institutions of higher education. Recent estimates suggest that U.S. employers invest over $8 billion dollars annually in diversity promotion and the number of corporate diversity professionals employed in American firms continues to rise (Newkirk 2019). Despite these investments and the ubiquity of standardized diversity management practices, scant evidence suggests that workplaces are becoming more diverse, equitable, or inclusive. While the business of diversity business is booming, actual workplace diversity remains modest or stagnant.

Where did corporate diversity management policies come from and what explains their continued relevance and evolution? This chapter seeks to trace the history of corporate diversity management as well as the critiques of this approach among sociologists and other social scientists. Our purpose is to identify factors that limit the efficacy of corporate diversity as well as empirically driven paths forward. We hope the history of corporate diversity management can provide clues about the failure of corporate DEI to achieve sustained change in representation or inclusion and, secondly, that the ongoing critiques of this model provide guidance for moving toward more equity in American workplaces.

We organize the chapter into three sections. First, we trace the history of corporate diversity management to provide context for the emergence and evolution of corporate diversity approaches from their origin in the 1960s to the present. Second, we review the
range of sociological critiques of this approach to workplace equity, noting both conceptual and empirical critiques of this model and its effects on workplace representation and attitudes. Finally, we conclude by reviewing several approaches to workplace equity advanced by sociologists with the aim of addressing the shortcomings and limitations of current approaches and moving workplace policy and practice toward more equitable approaches.

I. Emergence & Evolution of Corporate Diversity Management

In this section, we provide a brief review of the institutional history and evolution of diversity management. Centering the seminal work by Kelly and Dobbin (1998) and Dobbin (2011), we argue that corporate diversity management emerged not as a response to political or legal requirements or activism but out of efforts to avoid legal liability and expand compliance. The evolution of equal employment frameworks into diversity management programs led to an explosion of resources devoted to strategically managing difference in the workplace. From the 1980s onward, human resource managers have been at the forefront of the diffusion of diversity management perspectives and related programs, including formalized hiring practices, mandatory training, mentorship programs and affinity groups (Ely and Thomas 2001)

_The “Invention” of Equal Opportunity_

Since the 1960s, efforts by corporate personnel to minimize legal liability has transformed how American firms recruit, hire, and promote. The emergence of equal opportunity policies represented a revolution from within American companies waged primarily by personnel managers, rather than judges, activists, or policy makers. The history of these programs reveals outsized influence of corporate actors on the ways
diversity broadly defined has been conceptualized and operationalized in policy and practice. In his seminal history of the emergence of equal opportunity frameworks in American companies, Dobbin (2011) argues that while equal opportunity and “diversity management” have expanded our sense of workplace fairness, these corporate frameworks have led to the institutionalization and legitimation of diversity policies centered not on equity or justice but legal compliance.

Dobbin identifies three primary factors that motivated a shift to equal opportunity practices in American firms. First, significant civil rights advances – including Kennedy’s 1961 affirmative action decree and the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act in 1964—outlawed employment discrimination without specifying compliance guidelines (Kelly and Dobbin 1998). The vagueness of new legal prohibitions combined with weak and fragmented federal and state government enforcement led personnel managers to devise compliance measures to avoid legal liability. Legal ambiguity combined with perceived risk led firm actors to create and expand policies and practices to get ahead of enforcement. Finally, Dobbin argues that this context also provided an opportunity for personnel managers to reinforce the value of their professional expertise; the promise of liability avoidance allowed managers to amass control over the design and implementation of measures aimed at ensuring equal opportunity for women and people of color.

Somewhat ironically, these early measures – which borrowed from the industrial labor relations toolkit – were reinforced by courts, which translated the corporate compliance model into law. Dobbin (2011) notes that “what personnel made popular gradually became lawful” (p. 5), as courts as well as federal regulatory agencies endorsed
compliance practices of leading firms, leading to the diffusion of policies across sectors and industries.

*From Equal Opportunity to Diversity Management*

Uncertainty regarding equal employment compliance spiked in the 1970s, following the Supreme Court’s disparate impact decision in *Griggs v. Duke Power Company* in 1971 and the passage of the Equal Opportunity Act in 1972. These legal and regulatory advances heightened firms’ uncertainty about legal compliance and, as a result, led to the expansion of personnel managers authority. As purported experts of compliance, personnel managers expanded their roles to include data tracking the introduction of grievance procedures and the expansion of internal reporting mechanisms.

The era of deregulation, ushered in by Reagan’s election in 1980, led to a sustained backlash against affirmative action and to the strategic rebranding of “equal opportunity” to “human resource management”. This shift signaled a decline in political support for remedying racial and gender inequalities through law and policy (Clayton and Crosby 1992) and the waning of political will to pursue race-conscious approaches to employment opportunity (Nkomo 1992). To sustain legitimacy for their expertise, personnel managers recast their efforts as a competitive imperative. By downplaying the legal and regulatory rationale for their efforts and centering the business case for diversity, personnel managers were able to rebrand themselves as human resource experts. Effective management was now legitimized by claims of efficiency and productivity, a frame that emphasized the strategic benefits of diverse experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds (Knight et al. 1999). This shift decentered race and gender in favor of an expanded focus on a wide range of demographic differences. In the new
diversity management regime, equality may result from the strategic management of diversity but was not the goal; instead, properly managed diversity was now a strategy for profit maximization (see Köllen 2021 for a review).

The recasting of equal opportunity as diversity management centered diversity as a strategic imperative that required professional expertise. Starting in the 1990s, human resource managers expanded their authority by defining their expertise as central to firm functioning and success they were able to expand the range of tools necessary for effective management of diversity, ushering in a toolkit consisting of mandatory trainings, mentoring, and networking programs, performance evaluations, and formalized hiring, wage setting and promotion practices (Thomas 1991). In this way, diversity management expanded the bureaucratization of personnel practices and cemented a market-based framework of “diversity” in the corporate management cannon.

**Contemporary Approaches to Diversity Management**

Human resource managers have solidified their authority over diversity management and successfully diffused standard DEI practices across the corporate landscape and beyond, including in non-profit organizations and globally (Klarsfeld et al. 2014). Today human resource managers (often termed “diversity specialists”) derive their authority from expert knowledge and skills to manage diversity in appropriate ways. Indeed, the continued diffuse legal environment related to discrimination has allowed corporations continue to exert significant influence over the definition of diversity as well as the scope and reach of “diversity management” paradigm.
The dominant diversity paradigm is characterized by three components. First, the dominant paradigm defines diversity in an additive manner; increasing the representation of individuals from non-overlapping and fixed identity categories including age, race, ethnicity, (binary) gender, disability, religion, and sexual orientation (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006). In this model, everyone is diverse in that all individuals contribute to a diversity of talents and perspectives. According to Nkomo and Hoobler (2014), “current conceptualizations of diversity include everyone, even White males, and include an appeal to utilize the talents of all individuals to achieve organizational objectives” (p. 251). This additive conceptualization of diversity, rooted firmly in the American corporate context, has become the dominant ideology of diversity in that it reflects beliefs and attitudes about how non-dominant groups should – or should not be – incorporated into work organizations (Nkomo and Hoobler 2014). Diversity is a means to an end – an apolitical, rational call to achieve a demographic distribution to increase profitability (Nkomo and Hoobler 2014).

Second, this paradigm is increasingly legitimized in relation to the economic value and competitive advantage of achieving numerical diversity, often referred to as the “business case” for diversity (Kollen 2019). Diversity managers are positioned professionally and structurally within firms to effectively harness the power of difference to achieve a range of benefits, including innovative, creativity, profitability, and competitiveness (Shen et al. 2009). Their location within firms allows them to claim legitimate knowledge to deploy bureaucratic and technological mechanisms to secure the so-called benefits of diversity (Prügl 2011).
Finally, this paradigm is diffused mimetically as a “one size fits all” set of practices derived from corporate contexts (Ely and Thomas 2001). In practice, diversity efforts follow two primary pathways: (1) recruitment and hiring strategies including targeted recruitment and diversity-relevant branding; and (2) retention practices including family policies, resource or affinity groups, mentoring programs and diversity training (Kollen 2019). These practices adopt a deliberate color-blind and gender-blind focus, which denies the existence of racism, sexism and other types of systemic discrimination and exclusion (Linnehan and Konrad 1999; Nkomo and Hoobler 2014). Thus, diversity policies aim not to address structural barriers but to achieve a numerical balance sufficient for achieving corporate objectives.

II. Sociological Critiques of Diversity Management

Sociologists have sustained multiple critiques of the corporate diversity management paradigm, and this section of the chapter reviews a range of critiques. Most theoretical critiques focus on the hyper-individualistic nature of the dominant DEI paradigm, which renders systemic and structural inequalities invisible. Indeed, scholars have noted the way in which psychological individualism is embedded in the conceptualization and operationalization of corporate DEI, which treats “diversity” as a characteristic of individuals that can be marshalled in service of corporate profitability (Schatzki 2005). According to the dominant DEI paradigm, diversity as well as its impediments can be found in the heads of individuals (Janssens and Steyaert 2017; Reckwitz 2002). Thus, many programs and policies derived from this perspective focus on “fixing” bias in members of the dominant group while simultaneously adding more members of non-dominant groups. Such a “add diversity and stir” model neglects questions of power,
structural barriers, social hierarchies, status, and cultural discourse (Janssens and Steyaert 2017).

Still others have critiqued this paradigm on empirical grounds, for its ability to co-opt the language of equity and inclusion while simultaneously reproducing existing social hierarchies. Thus, a great deal of empirical critique of this paradigm has centered on its lack of efficacy for advancing inclusion or equity, broadly defined. Indeed, evidence suggests that this paradigm has largely failed to achieve progress, even on its own terms, and has instead contributed to backlash and resistance across a range of organizational contexts. Some of the most important critiques in this vein have come from feminist and race scholars’ critiques of the business case for diversity, business feminism and racial capitalism within the workplace diversity paradigm (e.g., Fraser 2022; Leong 2021). Sociologists have also critiqued diversity management empirically, demonstrating the lack of efficacy of the corporate model to advance equity and representation in organizations. Finally, sociologists have analyzed the unintended consequences of corporate diversity management, including backlash and resistance to inclusion efforts.

We review each of these strands of research below.

Critiques of the “Business Case” for Diversity

In the 1990s, conversations about diversity in the workplace started focusing on the idea of the "business case" of diversity. The main argument is that organizations can economically benefit from having a more diverse workforce, and that diversity will add value to the bottom line of any company. The concept became very popular in both academia and businesses, and diversity advocates in both sides started looking for ways to prove it (Calvard 2020). However, sociologists have critiqued the business case for its
failure to acknowledge the social inequalities that led to the lack of diversity in the first place, and the subtle suggestion that hiring and retaining employees from historically excluded groups must be economically justified first (Ely and Thomas 2020).

Although sociologists have generally critiqued the business case for diversity, there is ample sociological research on the potential benefits that diversity can bring to businesses. Amongst the early work was a study published in 1996, in which scholars David Thomas and Robin Ely argued that companies can “tap diversity’s true benefit” only if they adopt a radical paradigm for managing diversity through what they called the learning-and-effectiveness paradigm. This new paradigm requires companies to consider the cultural differences among their employees from underrepresented groups as a critical source for business growth, which can only happen if employees are recognized, valued, and integrated in all business processes and levels, and are included in decision making (Thomas and Ely 1996). In a follow-up study conducted in 2001, they found that when companies utilized this paradigm and integrated diversity in their processes, their employees felt more respected and valued, companies gained access to previously inaccessible markets, and obtained new perspectives about work and how to best achieve it (Ely and Thomas 2001).

Despite the continuous appeal of the business case, sociologists have critiqued it for the lack of empirical evidence that support the claims of it. Furthermore, results from decades of research have been mixed at best and contradicting at worse (Kochan et al. 2003). For instance, studies in favor of the business case argue that diversity can improve teams’ performance and increase innovations (Kochan et al. 2003; Robinson and Dechant 1997), while other studies suggest that diversity can increase conflict among team
members (Jackson, Joshi, and Erhardt 2003; Van Knippenberg, van Ginkel, and Homan 2013).

Second, sociologist critique the business case for ignoring the structures of power and privilege within the organizations and instead, adopting a simplistic additive approach that focuses on increasing the numerical representation of women and people of color. Ely and Thomas argue that the “add and stir” approach that many companies are using cannot improve diversity in their workforce, when no changes are made to reform the structures of power that shape how women and people of color are treated within their organizations (Ely and Thomas 2020). Research shows that although companies are hiring more women and people of color in general, they are largely failing at retaining them (Dobbin and Kalev 2022). Sociological research on workplace inequalities have long established that the dynamics of power and privilege determine how employees from historically excluded groups experience the workplace, and that those dynamics are embedded in the fabric of organizations (Acker 1990, 2006; Reskin 2000; Williams 1992), and that organizations are not gender and race neutral, but rather structures that continue to reproduce social inequalities that control the distribution of power and resources within organizations (Acker 2006; Ray 2019; Wingfield and Chavez 2020). So when companies focus on hiring more women and people of color under the business case of diversity without paying attention to the structures of power and privilege, workplace inequalities place them at the bottom of the organizational hierarchies, limit their opportunities for advancement, and pay them less than their white male counterparts with similar, and sometimes lower, credentials (Acker 2006; Alegria 2016; Ray 2019; Wingfield and Chavez 2020; Wingfield and Wingfield 2014). DiTomaso et.al (2007)
argue that “To understand the dynamics of workforce diversity, one must understand the relationships of power among groups at both macro and micro levels” (p476).

Lastly, sociologists argue that the business case of diversity is not only failing at improving diversity within the workforce, but in many cases, backfiring. A recent study by Georgeac and Rattan (2022) found that when companies used the business case rhetoric to justify their diversity efforts, potential employees from underrepresented groups questioned their ability to feel a sense of belonging in that company, and were less interested in joining it (Georgeac and Rattan 2022). Other studies also found that white employees had unfavorable views about diversity and inclusion, and made more biased decision toward potential Black employees (Trawalter, Driskell, and Davidson 2016; Williams 2017)

*Inequality Regimes & Racialized Organizations*

Sociologists view the issues of underrepresentation in organizations as forms of systemic inequalities that are embedded in the fabric of the organizations, rejecting notions that organizations are race and gender neutral structures and that workplace biases are individual level problems (Acker 1990, 2006; Kanter 1977; Ray 2019). Those views are largely missed in the corporate diversity model that focus on achieving moderate increases to the numerical representation of employees from historically excluded groups – the so-called “add one and stir” model of diversity management.

In her seminal work on inequality regimes, Acker (2012) argues that race, gender, and class are structural inequalities that are systemically reproduced through organizational processes. Organizational hierarchies are one dimension of inequality regimes that control the distribution of organizational power and authority, and Acker argues that
those hierarchies are gendered and racialized, with top positions mainly occupied by white men. She also argues that the abstract ideal worker represents a white man who is fully dedicated to his career and has little responsibilities outside of his job (Acker 2006, 2012). Building on Acker’s theory, Ray (2019) developed the theory of racialized organizations. This theory identifies racialized organizations as those that assume whiteness as the default category, which then becomes a credential that holds the highest value in the organizational structure, thereby placing everyone who is not white in a lower location in the organizational hierarchy (Ray 2019).

Empirical research has found that workplace gender and racial hierarchies are responsible for many workplace dynamics that exclude employees from historically excluded groups from access to leadership roles, resulting in wage disparities and job segregation (e.g., Roth 2004; Turco 2010; Wingfield and Chavez 2020), even in industries that are known for an aggressive focus on diversity (Alegria 2018; Nader 2018). For example, as of 2020, there was 7.7 million jobs in the tech industry, however, women and BIPOC employees accounted for only 24% and 7% of the total tech workforce respectively (Cyberstates 2021). Additionally, a study by Sharla Alegria found that leadership roles in tech are highly dominated by white men, and that although Asian American tech employees are over-represented in technical roles, they are severely underrepresented in managerial positions due to stereotypes about lacking managerial skills that are required for leadership roles (Alegria 2020), a phenomenon that is referred to as the “bamboo ceiling” (Huyen 2005).

Research shows that although diversity programs continue to spread across industries, sectors, and organizational types, these programs often sidestep the mechanisms that
shape organizational hierarchies such as power, privilege, and oppression (DiTomaso, Post, and Parks-Yancy 2007). Ely and Thomas (2020) have stressed the need for organizations to understand the dynamics of systems of privilege and oppression at the society level, in order to drive systemic changes at the organizational level (Ely and Thomas 2020). According to DiTomaso et.al (2007), “Far too little attention has been paid to the relationship between diversity and inequality… [and]… the workforce diversity literature has given little attention to the issues of power and status differences among groups in society” (DiTomaso et al. 2007)

Critiques of “Business Feminism”

Several feminist scholars of workplace inequality have critiqued the diversity management paradigm by interrogating the individualistic, superficial, and apolitical concept of “women’s empowerment” that derives from this paradigm. Business feminism (or corporate feminism) refers to the articulation of women’s empowerment within the corporate diversity management framework. Best illustrated by Sheryl Sandberg’s 2013 bestselling manifesto Lean In, this approach encourages women to liberate themselves from internalized constraints to realize their true professional potential (Kay and Shipman 2014; Slaughter 2015). This approach, termed the “fix the women” approach to DEI management, locates the problem of women’s lack of representation in corporate leadership in women’s inability to overcome a range of self-limiting behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. In this model, women’s work lives require hyper self-management to facilitate inclusion in corporate work cultures (Adamson 2017; Banet-Weiser 2015). Women’s emancipation is understood as synonymous with their mobility within corporate careers (Rottenberg 2014).
Equity within this paradigm can be achieved not through structural change but through women’s adoption of the right mindset, the right choices about family and work conflict, and embodiment professional performances aimed at conforming both to gendered role expectations and corporate cultural norms. Absent any critique of corporate work cultures more broadly, this approach to gender equity posits that women’s limitations can be overcome through confidence, control, and courage. In this way, women are encouraged to “conform to the norm of the market while assuming responsibility for [their] own well-being” (Rottenberg 2014, p. 426).

This approach to gender inequity increasingly informs ways in which DEI practices are conceptualized and operationalized in the U.S. and around the globe (Roberts 2012). The colonization of the language and practice of diversity, equity and inclusion has enabled corporations to become sites where “particular business-oriented and market-based knowledges about women and gender relations are produced” (Roberts 2015, p. 201). And, as several scholars have noted, corporate diversity management has become a central channel through which business feminism is disseminated and diffused (Fodor, Glass, and Nagy 2019; Gill, K. Kelan, and M. Scharff 2017)

Sociological critiques of this approach to gender equity center on the essentialist and elitist definition of “women”, the centering of private corporations as the purveyors of gender equality, and the absence of a structural critique of patriarchy and capitalism. First, business feminism centers the experiences, needs and perspectives of white women in high status careers, professions, and roles. Women are conceived as an undifferentiated group with distinct needs, interests, and dispositions than men (Roberts 2015). Thus, business feminism fails to grapple with the myriad ways gender intersects with other
identities including race, ability, sexuality, and social class (Collins 2000) (Collins 2000). The result is an ideology and set of practices derived therefrom that reflect the simplistic, superficial, and additive model of corporate DEI. This approach fails to critique the economic and sociocultural power of elites as well as the structural and intersectional inequalities that manifest in and result from market organizations (Fisher et al. 2015).

Second, feminist scholars critique business feminist approaches for centering private corporations as sites pioneering feminist social change (Fraser 2013). By defining emancipation at the individual level – and situating women themselves as actors responsible for cultivating emancipatory behaviors and dispositions – business feminism reflects the priorities of modern corporations and further entrenches neoliberalism in everyday life (Fraser 2013). Indeed, scholars argue that the co-optation of the language of women’s empowerment in service to profitability reflects a neoliberal recasting of feminism itself, centered on individual agency and choice within privatized and deregulated markets (Roberts 2012; 2015).

Finally, feminist scholars have critiqued business feminism for its tendency to render structural inequalities invisible. For Fraser (2009; 2013), this reflects the tendency to colonize feminist discourse in service to advancing the political economy of capitalism. Emancipation is premised not on collective mobilization and solidarity but on individual self-realization (Adamson 2017). In this way, difference is commodified and depoliticized and placed in service of corporate profit (Brown 2005).

**Empirical Critiques of Diversity Management**

Sociologists have critiqued the corporate diversity model on empirical grounds, testing its claims and efficacy comparatively and over time to reveal the ways in which this
approach has failed to achieve progress even on its own terms – in terms of numerical representation.

One of the primary tools in the corporate DEI toolkit includes a range of diversity trainings, including anti-harassment, implicit bias and cultural diversity awareness trainings. Mandatory diversity trainings date back to the earliest days of diversity management. Consistent with the focus of DEI efforts on individual attitudes, behavior and choice, mandatory trainings seek to mold employees and managers into agents incapable of bias or discrimination. According to Prugl (2011), trainings aim to “build new selves that have internalized a sensitivity to different to such an extent that controls, oversight, and incentives no longer are necessary” (p. 82). In this way, mandatory diversity trainings aim to equip all workers with new competencies to deal with difference at work; by building a workforce accommodating of difference, workplace disruptions can be avoided, and the full promise of diversity achieved (Prügl 2011).

Diversity trainings have become standard features in many corporate contexts, yet evidence suggests that mandatory trainings have little or no impact on attitudes or behavior and may in fact reinforce stereotypes, resentment, and distancing behaviors. Scholars have evaluated the impact of trainings on attitudes and behavior, concluding that any positive attitudinal effects of trainings are minimal and temporary (Lai et al. 2016) and that effects on behavior are non-existent (Noon 2018). A recent experimental study found that trainings have no impact on the behavior of men toward women or white workers toward colleagues of color (Chang et al. 2019). Instead, research finds that such trainings may strengthen stereotypical attitudes and beliefs, reduce the representation of women of color and inspire resistance, resentment, and backlash (Anand and Winters...
While the negative impacts of trainings may be reduced in some contexts (e.g., when trainings are voluntary, non-punitive and goal oriented), the overwhelming conclusion of scholars is that the dominant model of DEI practice has failed to achieve even its stated – albeit limited – goals of increasing representation and reducing bias in the workplace.

**Backlash and Resistance to Diversity Management Practices**

In addition to critiques of the corporate diversity model for failing to achieve its stated goals, scholars have also explored a range of unintended consequences of this model. Research finds that diversity efforts often lead to resistance from employees in the dominant group (Thomas and Plaut 2008), increase concerns about identity and belonging for employees from historically excluded groups (Georgeac and Rattan 2022), and activate the same biases they aim to reduce (Dobbin and Kalev 2016).

Thomas and Plaut (2008) argue that diversity is, in many ways, a form of organizational change, and change is often met with resistance. Research finds that members of the dominant group often react to diversity management efforts with resistance or backlash, which include the explicit rejection of diversity and diversity practices in the workplace (Thomas and Plaut 2008). Beyond backlash, research finds that diversity management contributes to diversity fatigue, described as “a diminished response to or desensitization toward diversity efforts” (Smith et al. 2021). In a study by Smith et. al. (2021), the authors argue that although diversity resistance and fatigue might look the same, they are quite different in their causes and outcomes (Smith et al. 2021).

Diversity resistance (or backlash) is usually driven by employees in the dominant group feeling threatened by the changes that more diversity can cause (Gephart et al. 1996).
range of backlash-oriented behaviors, ranging from denial of the problem to inaction or repression, have been documented by scholars (see Flood, Dragiewicz, and Pease 2021 for a review of a range of documented forms of resistance). A recent study by Iyer (2022) identified three types of threats that influence employees’ attitude towards DEI policies: (1) resource threat that is driven by a zero-sum belief that members of the dominant group will lose access to resources and privileges if the representation of employees from historically excluded groups increases; (2) a symbolic threat that an increase in diversity will change the organization culture and values by, among other things, undermining meritocracy; and (3) ingroup morality threat that threatens the positive image of dominant group by revealing its role in perpetuating injustice (Iyer 2022). Diversity resistance and backlash manifest as hostility, heightened workplace bias, and discrimination, implicit and explicit racism and sexism, and other forms of prejudice (Thomas and Plaut 2008).

Diversity fatigue on the other hand is usually driven by a general belief of system-justifying ideas like the leaky pipelines, and the high costs associated with implementing diversity programs (Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004; Smith et al. 2021). Smith et al. (2021) argue that the main difference between diversity resistance and fatigue is that even employees who believe in the reality of inequality and the need to address it can experience diversity fatigue (Smith et al. 2021). Diversity fatigue is mainly manifested in an “inaction” towards diversity due to perceived costs like the additional efforts and time required to address diversity (Smith et al. 2021).

A study by Dover and colleagues (2020) identified other negative “unintended effects” for diversity initiatives including a decrease in sensitivity to unfair practices and discrimination. In this study, the authors argue that companies with diversity initiatives
are seen as “fair” to employees from historically excluded groups. This perception makes white workers and men less likely to recognize unfair practices, and less likely to believe claims of discrimination made by employees from historically excluded groups (Dover, Major, and Kaiser 2020).

Another body of research on the effects of diversity focused on the “signals” that companies send when communicating and framing their diversity efforts and their impact on prospective employees. For example, a study by Georgeac and Rattan found that when companies used the business case to frame their diversity efforts, prospective employees from historically excluded groups reported an increase in identity threat and questioned whether they would feel a sense of belonging in those companies (Georgeac and Rattan 2022). Similarly, prospective white men employees expressed concerns about anti-whiteness and reverse discrimination when presented with companies with pro-diversity communications (Dover, Major, and Kaiser 2016).

III: Toward Models of Workplace Justice

In this section of the chapter, we review a range of empirically informed practices that prioritize specific aims, including workplace equity and access and the redistribution of workplace power. Sociologists who study corporate diversity and workplace inequalities have used their work to identify new ways to organize equity efforts, including new workplace policies as well as new models for organizing work that better reflects the needs, ability, and interests of a diverse labor force. We review promising models below.

*Dobbin & Kalev’s Adaptive Management Systems*
Building on their work illustrating the failure of corporate diversity management to advance equity and access, Dobbin and Kalev (2022) identify several pathways to enhance access and promotion for those systematically excluded by existing career systems.

For Dobbin and Kalev (2022), the primary goal of workplace equity practices is to advance demographic diversity, including among managerial ranks. To increase the representation of white women and people of color in positions of authority, they call for abandoning most of the conventional diversity management practices in favor of approaches that seek to democratize career systems. Democratic systems are those that enhance rather than limit access to historically underrepresented groups, including in the areas of recruitment, mentorship, training, and work-life support. For example, to increase recruitment of white women and men and women of color, Dobbin and Kalev (2022) recommend democratizing skill and management training by, among other things, integrating work groups. Drawing on research that suggests greater contact and collaboration reduce stereotypes and enhances supportive work cultures (e.g., Pettigrew and Tropp 2006), Dobbin and Kalev (2022) advocate for mentorship programs, team collaborations, and managerial assignments all adopt a principle of cross-group integration.

In addition to democratizing employment systems, Dobbin and Kalev (2022) also call for more adaptive management systems in which assessment, revision, and reform are “baked in” (p. 188). This means holding management accountable—through the establishment of task forces and appointment of diversity managers—for making progress on stated goals. They also recommend enhancing transparency of workforce
data as another mechanism for managerial accountability. Positioning managers as change agents can channel their efforts, creativity, and authority toward greater inclusion and diversity.

**Perlow and Kelly’s Flexible Work Redesign**

Drawing from a large body of research on the impact of work inflexibility on the inclusion of women and mothers, Perlow and Kelly (2014) present a model of work redesign that prioritizes cultural change rather than accommodation to maximize workers’ ability to manage work and family demands. According to Perlow and Kelly (2014), the dominant method for supporting work and family conflicts is accommodation to individual needs rather than a shift in the cultural expectations of workers. Thus, work structures and expectations remain unchanged, and individuals are left seeking individual solutions to collective challenges (Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Parker and Wang 2013). The accommodation model also reinforces motherhood biases, by reinforcing status differences among those who need (or are perceived to need) greater accommodation and those who are not (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). In this way, accommodation generates a flexibility stigma against those who rely on (or are perceived to rely on) flexibility workplace policies (Cech and Blair-Loy 2014; Williams et al. 2013). Instead, Perlow and Kelly (2014) advocate for a work model that critically assesses the organization of work itself.

The authors explore the potential impacts of work redesigns by evaluating two initiatives that restructured work expectations in two large companies. Their findings suggest that genuine work redesign requires three elements: a sustained commitment to improving the quality of work, mechanisms to legitimate the goals of supporting healthy lives for
employees at work and beyond, and methods for institutionalizing experimentation and critique.

By problematizing convention methods for organizing work, effective redesign models center on the notion that restructuring work will benefit workers as well as enhance productivity and retention. Unlike conventional accommodation approaches, these redesign models place accountability for ensuring compliance with managers and senior leaders. Indeed, they find that leader support and facilitation are central to the success of work redesign models and, like Dobbin and Kalev (2022), argue that responsibility for ensuring access and support cannot be outsourced to human resources or diversity committees. Also, like Dobbin and Kalev (2022), Perlow and Kelly (2014) find that building in opportunities for experimentation, critique, and revision are central for successful institutionalization of more inclusive work models.

*Wingfield’s Representation & Restructuring Model*

Adia Harvey Wingfield’s work (2012; 2019; 2020) has explored the challenges Black workers experience navigating employment. Her work is particularly valuable in its exploration of workplace exclusion of Black professionals at the intersection of gender and class. This intersectional lens offers significant insight into ways workplaces and employment practices might be redesigned to better include those existing at the intersection of multiple marginal identities.

Her most recent book (2019) analyzes the ways in which Black doctors, nurses and technicians navigate the increasing precarity of the health care profession. She finds that companies that tout diversity as a value often fail to address the needs of Black employees and, instead, rely on those underserved and underrepresented individuals to
perform equity work in ways that are often invisible, unrewarded, and uncompensated – a tendency Wingfield terms “racial outsourcing” (2019). Extensions of this work also explore the ways in which one’s position in the organizational hierarchy shape perceptions and experiences of inclusion, including barriers to attaining positions, navigating organizational power and the impact of status and power in workplace interactions (Wingfield and Chavez 2020).

To address these challenges, Wingfield (2019) argues that workplaces must avoid relying on Black workers themselves to address issues of workplace equity and must prioritize representation beyond tokenism or “two-kenism” (Cho 2021). Instead, organizational and policy changes are required to enhance access, equity, and inclusion within professional settings. Specifically, Harvey advocates for a radical restructuring of hiring processes by eliminating reliance on social networks and personal connections of organizational incumbents to fill positions. She critiques conventional approaches to DEI that fail to address specific needs of Black workers on issues related to racial discrimination and harassment. Instead, she advocates for institutional supports that address race and racism at work without placing the burden to prove workplace hostility on the shoulders of Black workers themselves. Finally, she calls for targeted, specific mechanisms for addressing gender and racial bias at work, including stronger managerial accountability. Like Dobbin and Kalev (2020), she argues that accountability increases managers motivation to support diversity at all stages of the employment process.

Centering Intersectional Research & Praxis

Across the range of critiques of corporate diversity management, a central theme is the continued reliance on a one-size-fits-all model for diversity practices. The lack of
intersectionality in these approaches results in a failure to recognize how multiple social categories interact to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. This lack of understanding of the specific challenges faced by individuals belonging to multiply marginalized groups leads to inadequate diversity programs that fail to address these challenges. For example, a diversity program that primarily focuses on increasing the representation of women in the workplace may not consider or address the additional barriers faced by women of color, LGBTQ+ women, or women with disabilities.

Many disciplines, including sociology, have emphasized the critical importance of using an intersectional approach to illuminate and address bias and discrimination in the workplace. A significant body of research has established that the ways in which individuals experience the workplace are influenced by the multiple social categories to which they belong. For instance, Kanter's classic token theory posits that the prevalence of workplace biases is dependent on the numerical representation of a group (Kanter 1977). However, further research on token theory has found that the impact of tokenism varies depending on the social categories and status of employees. In the case of gender, Kanter found that when women work in male-dominated fields, they experience negative consequences of tokenism, such as increased performance pressure and scrutiny (Kanter 1977). On the other hand, white men in female-dominated jobs benefit from being tokens, a phenomenon known as the "glass escalator" (Williams 1992). However, the benefits of token status for men does not fully extended to Black men, who continue to experience heightened visibility and scrutiny—what Wingfield terms “partial” tokenism (Wingfield and Wingfield 2014).
A review by Rosette et al. (2019) reviewed research from multiple disciplines that employed an intersectional approach to understand the workplace experiences of women at the intersection of race and ethnicity. The study found that two main themes have an impact on women's experiences: 1) racialized gender stereotypes shape how women are perceived and treated in organizations; and 2) these stereotypes create hierarchies of exclusion and limit women's ability to succeed.

Gender stereotypes commonly associate women with communal and warm qualities, while men are attributed competence and dominance (Fiske et al. 2002). Failure to conform to these stereotypes can lead to negative reactions and career penalties. In organizational settings, these stereotypes can undermine women's competence and affect the distribution of power and resources within the organization (Acker 1990; Kanter 1977). When women exhibit behaviors that defy these stereotypes, such as assertiveness and dominance, they often face backlash (Phelan, Moss-Racusin, and Rudman 2008). However, research on intersectionality has revealed that gender stereotypes are also racialized, resulting in varying experiences for women of different racial backgrounds (Rosette et al. 2016, 2019). When women of color defy their racialized gender stereotypes, they can face different consequences compared to white women (Rosette and Livingston 2012). For example, Black women are often stereotyped as angry, assertive, and dominant (Collins 2005), in sharp contrast to stereotypes of white women as warm and communal or stereotypes of Asian women as passive and delicate (Prasso 2005). These racialized stereotypes have significant impacts on women's careers. Rosette et al (2019) found that Black women may be at an advantage -relative to non-Black women-during the hiring process due to their perceived masculinity, however, their perceived
incompetence hinders their advancement to leadership positions. Similarly, Asian women may be considered more hirable, than any other women, due to their perceived competence; however, they are less likely to be selected for leadership roles due to their perceived passivity and meekness (Rosette et al. 2019)

Racialized gender stereotypes also play a role in determining the types of jobs available to women. According to Kanter's token theory, organizations use gender stereotypes to assign roles to women, often confining them to support roles due to the perceived warmth and communal qualities associated with white women (Kanter, 1977). Black women, however, are often overrepresented in lower-paying jobs due to the stereotype of incompetence, or in jobs requiring manual or intensive labor due to the stereotype of Black women as strong and masculine. Asian women, by contrast, are often expected to perform menial tasks willingly and without complaint (Rosette, 2019). Research also indicates that women of color are more prone to experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace compared to white women and have a lower chance of success in their discrimination cases if they choose to take legal action (Rosette et al. 2019).

Workplace policies that do not account for workers’ experience at the intersection of gender and race are unlikely to be efficacious at addressing systemic and structural inequalities within work organizations. Other social factors, such as class, sexuality, and religion, also play a role in shaping experiences of individuals at work.

Toward Problem-Solving Sociology Workplace Justice

Sociology as a field, is deeply concerned with issues of inequality, which is why its well-suited to study topics like workplace equity that are deeply rooted in structural and systemic inequalities (Calvard 2020). Sociologists have also been critical of corporate
diversity models that ignore underlying issues of inequality that contribute to a lack of diversity in the workplace. Despite the impressive amount of sociological research on workplace inequality, research often falls short in terms of offering solutions. While studying a social problem is an important first step in finding a solution, much of the knowledge produced by sociologists stops at this point, rather than offering practical solutions. In her efforts to move sociology toward a more problem-centric discipline, Prasad (2018) argues that social inequality research tends to be characterized by three common pitfalls: (1) a failure to offer solutions despite a clear definition of the problem; (2) an excessive focus on the consequences of issues rather than causes; and (3) critiques of existing solutions in lieu of offering a more efficacious alternative.

According to Prasad (2018), to move the field forward, one solution is to adopt a problem-solving approach that utilizes sociological knowledge to identify the root causes of real-world problems and develop practical solutions that can be implemented to address them. Prasad also suggests using a comparative approach, where successful and unsuccessful examples of addressing social problems are studied and compared, to provide practical solutions. Moreover, Prasad suggests shifting the focus from those affected by the problem (“victims”) to those responsible for causing it (“villains”) to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the problem's causes. The experiences of the victims are important but not enough to fully grasp the underlying causes and processes of the problem. Lastly, Prasad recommends "Finding the theoretical question inside the practical question" by grounding the practical question within a theoretical framework and using that theory to look for more sociologically informed alternatives (Prasad 2018).
Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to illuminate the seeming contradiction between diversity investment and diversity outcomes. While resource investments and the diffusion of corporate diversity management continue to expand, representation and equity within the workplace remain underwhelming. Our review of the history of this model provides insight about the relative ineffectiveness of standard diversity management priorities, frames, and policies: these models don’t work because they were never intended to. Rather than advancing gender and racial justice in the workplace, these policies were designed internally, by corporate personnel themselves, as a means of inoculating themselves against legal liability. Their evolution reflects path dependency, both for the policies themselves as well as for human resource professionals who relied on diversity management to solidify their professional status within their organizations.

Sociologists and other social scientists have been at the forefront of interrogating corporate diversity management, conceptually and empirically. This focus has led to a range of sustained critiques of this approach, ranging from the reliance on individualistic tropes such as “Lean In” to the unintended consequences of mandatory diversity training. These critiques reflect the many shortcomings of the corporate diversity management model and provide guidance on ways work organizations can better address systemic barriers to entry and success for women and people of color. Critically, sociologists of work and inequality have also begun to map out new directions and possibilities for organizing work and restructuring or refocusing equity policies in ways that reduce the gendered and racialized nature of workplace hierarchies. While these proposals have great merit, there remains significant work to be done to incorporate the insights of
critical race and intersectional scholars to forge new and innovative problem-solving pathways for achieving workplace justice.
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Chapter 3 - View From the Top: How Tech Corporations Conceptualize Diversity
Introduction

In 2014, major tech companies publicly released data on the racial and gender compositions of their workforces for the first time, which prompted the Wall Street Journal to declare it as "The Year Silicon Valley Spilled Its Diversity Data" (Molla 2014). The resulting reports revealed a significant lack of diversity within the tech industry, highlighting the severe underrepresentation of women and people of color. Despite drawing negative attention to the tech industry, the reports were applauded for acknowledging the existing problem. In particular, scholar Joan Williams (2014) noted “It’s remarkable that the sector is finally stepping up to the plate on diversity—and refreshing that its focus is on metrics rather than rhetoric” (Williams 2014, p2).

The reports were accompanied by public pledges to address the lack of diversity in tech and promises to increase the representation of women and people of color in the tech workforce. Since 2014, tech companies have invested millions of dollars on diversity programs and initiatives aimed at improving diversity and have placed increasing emphasis on their annual diversity reports, turning them into websites that are regularly updated with information about diversity and inclusion initiatives, efforts, and news. Despite the industry’s increasingly public-facing posturing with regard to DEI, actual representation in the tech industry has barely shifted over the past decade. Women and people of color continue to be severely underrepresented. Out of 5.9 million positions available in 2022, women and BIPOC employees made up only 24% and 7%, respectively (Cyberstates 2022).

Despite the unimpressive state of diversity in the tech industry, most of tech companies continue to maintain diversity websites advertising their continued commitment to
diversity. A quick Google search of any major tech company's name followed by the term "diversity" typically leads to the company's diversity website, often featuring a prominent statement about the significance of diversity and inclusion, as well as positive language and optimistic messaging signaling the company's commitment to these issues.

What purpose do those diversity websites serve if they do not accurately reflect the actual state of organizational diversity? This study explores how tech companies frame the purpose and outcomes of their DEI efforts in the face of minimal progress toward achieving their stated goals. My objective is to investigate how major tech companies – widely recognized as diversity leaders – frame diversity on their corporate websites.

Guided by scholarship on the relationship between diversity and impression management (Ahmed 2012; Berrey 2015; Tata and Prasad 2015; Thomas 2020), and the failures of the corporate diversity model (Dobbin and Kalev 2022; Kalev and Dobbin 2016), I argue that tech companies efforts are centered on impression management rather than organizational change. What was initially a means of releasing employment data has become a "must-have" prerequisite for almost every tech company, and what began as a focus on metrics has given way to what Pasztor (2019) refers to as diversity rhetoric defined as “the art and science of developing a consistent language and ideology intended to convey the presence of organizational inclusion and lack of bias in employment practices" (Pasztor 2019). Research on the rhetoric of diversity management argues that diversity initiatives serve as a form of impression management that allows organizations to project an image of valuing and endorsing diversity, despite their failure to redress the structural inequalities that persist within the organization (Ahmed 2012; Thomas 2020).
Relying on a thematic content analysis method, and drawing on Entman’s (1993, 2003) framing theory, this chapter analyzes diversity websites for eight major tech companies in the US: Apple, Amazon, Google, Meta (formerly Facebook), Microsoft, LinkedIn, Salesforce, and Oracle. The results indicate the presence of three key themes that were uniformly observed among the eight companies under examination: (1) continued reliance on the business rationale for diversity in which companies portray diversity initiatives as necessary for achieving business success; (2) strategic ambiguity concerning the root causes of inequality, with firms attributing the issue to broader societal trends; and (3) cultivation of an impression that the company is engaging in efforts to address the problem while outsourcing responsibility.

Corporate Diversity Management

Despite the widespread use and popularity of “diversity” in the workplace, there is no consensus about the definition of diversity. Pasztor (2019: P455) argues that the reason for that is because diversity as a term is “less theoretically grounded and more organizationally enforced through proscribed institutional policies and practices”. The emergence of the corporate diversity model, along with the ambiguity around its definition, can be traced back to the 1960s, when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted in the United States to address discrimination against minorities and women in various domains, including employment, education, and housing. The lack of clarity in the legal definition of discrimination and the decentralized nature of legal enforcement encouraged human resource (HR) professionals to adopt practices aimed at inoculating their companies from legal repercussions (Dobbin 2009).
The 1970s witnessed the spread of HR-supported diversity programs and policies, including equal opportunity policies, management training, and antidiscrimination departments and officers, across America’s corporate landscape (Dobbin & Kalev 2013). However, in the 1980s, during the mass deregulation phase following the election of President Ronald Reagan, these initiatives faced considerable opposition, leading to the rebranding of equal opportunity policies as "human resources management." This change in terminology shifted the focus away from issues of gender and race and towards an expanded emphasis on a broad spectrum of demographic differences (Dobbin and Kalev 2013).

Diversity policies, primarily designed and sustained by personnel managers, transformed hiring and promotion processes in corporate America and laid the foundation for the emergence of the corporate diversity model as a new management paradigm. The strategic management of diversity was considered the key to profit maximization under this model, with equality being a possible outcome rather than the primary goal (Calvard 2020; Köllen 2019). In the 1990s, diversity management surfaced as a business strategy intended to exploit the potential of diversity for achieving organizational success. The business case for diversity gained recognition across various sectors and served as the primary strategy for persuading corporate executives to consider diversity programs as a crucial "investment" for generating economic benefits (Calvard 2020; Ely and Thomas 2020).

Despite the continual expansion of the corporate diversity model, scholars have criticized its effectiveness, disregard for power and privilege dynamics, and dependence on a shallow, individualistic, and additive approach to recruiting women and individuals of
color (Ely and Thomas 2020; Kochan et al. 2003). Empirical research indicates that corporate diversity programs have limited influence on enhancing workplace diversity (Dobbin and Kalev 2022). Rather, they operate as a mechanism of impression management, enabling organizations to project the image of valuing and supporting diversity while failing to address underlying inequities within the organization (Ahmed 2012; Thomas 2020).

Scholars have further identified a range of unintended consequences associated with the corporate diversity model. Empirical research finds that diversity programs can motivate in resistance among members of the dominant groups (Thomas and Plaut 2008), exacerbate concerns regarding identity and belonging for historically marginalized groups (Georgeac and Rattan 2022), and actually activate or reinforce biases (Kalev and Dobbin 2016). Dover and colleagues' study (2020) also identifies several other negative unintended effects associated with diversity initiatives, including a decrease in sensitivity to unfair practices and discrimination. According to the authors, the mere presence of DEI statements and programs can limit the legitimacy of discrimination claims. The authors argue that companies that implement diversity initiatives may be perceived as "fair" to historically excluded groups, leading whites and men to be less likely to recognize unfair practices and less likely to believe claims of discrimination made by individuals from historically marginalized groups (Dover, Kaiser, and Major 2020).

Scholars have also explored the impact of corporate signals on prospective employees, focusing on the ways companies communicate and frame their diversity initiatives and how this framing affects perceptions of potential hires. A recent study by Georgeac and Rattan (2022) found that when companies utilized the business case rationale to frame
their diversity efforts, individuals from historically excluded groups reported feeling greater identity threat and questioned whether they could find a sense of belonging within these organizations. By contrast, when presented with pro-diversity communications, white male candidates expressed concerns about anti-whiteness and reverse discrimination (Dover, Major, and Kaiser 2016).

Public Framing of Diversity

The contemporary emphasis on workforce diversity has evolved into a strategic process of organizational communication, in which organizations seek to bolster their corporate image, enhance recruitment efforts and drive profitability (Pasztor 2019). Communication scholars have studied how organizations use external communication platforms, such as corporate websites and social media, to construct a "virtual corporate identity" (Fiol 2002). This enables them to create a figurative stance as "leaders of diversity" through diversity and inclusion messaging (Pasztor 2019).

Research finds that companies employ diversity and inclusion rhetoric as part of their branding strategy to create brand identities perceived as inclusive and diverse (Edwards and Kelan 2011). For instance, Jonsen et al. (2021) conducted a content analysis of corporate websites in five different countries and found that diversity and inclusion branding has become a mainstream strategy to attract talent and present themselves as an "employer of choice" (Jonsen et al. 2021). Likewise, Windscheid et al. (2016) conducted a similar study on corporate websites in Germany and found that companies use their online presence to cultivate positive perceptions of their gender diversity efforts (Windscheid et al. 2016).
Despite the positive public attention gained from external diversity communications, numerous scholars have criticized these efforts as a form of organizational impression management, aimed at cultivating a positive reputation without addressing underlying issues of bias and inequality within the organization (Ahmed 2012; Berrey 2015; Tata and Prasad 2015; Thomas 2020; Warikoo 2020). Thomas (2020) posits that the portrayal of diversity in organizational communications is frequently abstract and devoid of significance. According to him, what holds greater importance for organizations is demonstrating a professed commitment to diversity. Thomas further contends that organizations' emphasis on diversity is characterized by "diversity regimes," which involve a set of practices that communicate a benevolent dedication to diversity, while avoiding fundamental alterations to address issues of power and oppression (Thomas 2018, 2020).

Similarly, Ahmed (2006) refers to the use of diversity in organizational communication as "non-performative" and adds that “they are speech acts that read as if they are performative” but that result in inaction. Communication efforts of this kind, which often include images of smiling happy individuals from various racial and gender backgrounds, can create the impression that the organization values and celebrates differences (Ahmed 2006). Ahmed (2006) further contends that organizations prefer the term diversity because it is a comfortable one that people find easy to "engage with," unlike other terms like equality, which are often associated with the law and can be seen as threatening. Diversity rhetoric, by contrast, is an example of the use of strategic ambiguity by organizations, allowing the organization to reap reputational benefits without committing to specific actions. Strategic ambiguity in corporate communication reflects the use of
ambiguous terms or goals by companies to achieve goals, including enabling diverse interpretations of strategic goals, preserving existing power relations, and shielding those in authority from scrutiny and critique (Eisenberg and Goodall 1997). Strategic ambiguity in this instance enables corporations to maintain existing power relations while appearing to support change.

According to Entman (1993), corporate framing efforts aim to strategically communicate corporate priorities in line with a positive corporate identity. Entman (1993) writes, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation of the item described” (p. 52). Previous research suggests that over time, diversity management has moved to the center of companies’ branding efforts, particularly in tech, where recruiting efforts and reputation building center on an image of an enlightened and progressive corporate culture. Thus, diversity messaging aims to achieve a range of corporate goals centered on a strategically ambiguous commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion. I now turn to a description of the methodology for conducting a framing analysis of DEI messaging on corporate websites. The aim is to identify key frames used by tech companies to achieve a desired corporate identity.

Methods

Corporate websites are widely acknowledged as critical channels for conveying information to the public and deploying effective strategies to establish and foster a favorable corporate image (Connolly-Ahern and Broadway 2007). The present study aims to investigate the strategies employed by technology companies to frame their
diversity efforts on public-facing websites. Adopting Entmean’s (1993) framing approach defined above, and relying a thematic content analysis approach, this study seeks to analyze the framing strategies employed by technology companies to better understand the ways companies communicate a positive corporate image centered on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

This study focused on the diversity websites of eight prominent tech companies in the U.S., namely Apple, Amazon, Google, Meta (previously Facebook), Microsoft, LinkedIn, Salesforce, and Oracle. Mashiah (2021) relied on a similar list of tech companies to investigate the framing and messaging strategies used by tech companies for employee recruitment (Mashiah 2021). Initially, the sample included AirBnb and Pinterest. However, after examining the companies' websites, it was discovered that neither company had dedicated diversity websites. Moreover, the diversity-related content on their websites was in the form of news releases that mainly focused on customers/users rather than their workforce or products. Consequently, I decided to exclude them from the analysis. Table 1 delineates the websites utilized for each company.

The websites for all companies were visited between December 2022 and March 2023. Using a predefined library of "trigger" words, a Python script was employed to scrape diversity content from these websites, with a detailed data collection process described in the following section. This script was initially part of DivPAR, an automated content analysis tool developed by Joep Hofhuis et al. (2021). However, after the initial trial run, it became evident that the tool was intended to detect the presence of diversity terms in the annual reports of European companies and thus was not ideally suited to the current analysis.
Table 1: List of companies and URLs used

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Data Collection

The initial version of the DivPAR tool was designed to analyze PDF files of annual reports using a pre-existing library of trigger words. However, the tool lacked the ability to analyze websites. Hence, with the approval of the DivPAR tool's developer, the Python script was modified to integrate a web crawler that could automatically scan predetermined websites. Furthermore, the triggers library was expanded to include 78 triggers of terms that were deemed to be most pertinent and had a historical connection with the diversity construct, featuring over 170 variations and/or combinations. Table 2 provides an exemplar of the trigger's library.

Table 2: Triggers Library – sample

| diverse, diversity, diversifying |
| Inclusion, inclusive, inclusivity |
| equity, equities, equitable, inequity, inequities |
| equality, equalities, inequality, inequalities |
| representation, representative, underrepresented, under-represented, underrepresentation |
| gender, gendered, gender equity, gender equality, gender inequity, gender inequality |
| bias, biases, conscious bias, unconscious bias |
| systemic bias, systemic discrimination, systemic change |
| pay, pay gap |
| fair, fairness, fairly |
| justice, social justice, racial justice |

The data collection process was initiated by accessing the website of each of the companies to ascertain the precise URL of their diversity websites. In most cases, the
companies had one dedicated diversity website that consisted of several webpages. After confirming the required URLs, the web crawler was deployed to scan the websites for the presence of the trigger words. Whenever a trigger word was detected, the crawler would extract the paragraph where the word appeared and record it as a single row on an Excel sheet. The process was repeated for each company, and the results were recorded in separate Excel files. The results spanned from 50 rows of content for a company with a more modest website like LinkedIn, to over 500 rows for more sophisticated and detailed websites like those for Google and Microsoft. With assistance from a research assistant, the results recorded for each company were then thoroughly compared to the actual websites to insure the reliability and validity of the script. A few cases of false positives were detected and removed from the files. Table 3 provides instances of the extracted content.

**Table 3: Extracted content - examples**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>company</th>
<th>trigger_regex</th>
<th>phrase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apple</td>
<td>(inclusive</td>
<td>inclusivity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apple</td>
<td>(representation</td>
<td>representative), (underrepresented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apple</td>
<td>(representation</td>
<td>representative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apple</td>
<td>(inclusive</td>
<td>inclusivity), (woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apple</td>
<td>(underrepresented</td>
<td>underrepresentation)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis

The initial phase of the analysis included development of structural codes to serve as the foundation for subsequent thematic analysis. As Namey and colleagues (2007: p. 140) have noted, structural coding is a "useful approach for managing large qualitative datasets in preparation for content or thematic analysis." To this end, I established three primary structural codes to function as "labels and indexers" (Namey et al., 2007: p. 141). The data were subsequently coded based on these codes. In the second stage of the analysis, the structurally coded data were reviewed to identify overarching themes that emerged from the data in order to create thematic codes (Namey et al. 2007). The files were then divided between the author and the research assistant, who both independently coded the data. To ensure intercoder reliability, a recoding exercise was conducted whereby each coder undertook a recoding process on a randomly selected 10% sub-sample of the other coder's files. Intercoder reliability was calculated at 0.97 using Holsti’s formula. By combining structural and thematic coding, we were able to conduct a more refined and effective analysis of hundreds of data rows. We met frequently during the process to compare codes and notes.

Findings

The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to identify the specific approaches taken by leading technology corporations in defining and contextualizing diversity through their
official websites. Second, this analysis aims to evaluate the degree to which diversity initiatives may be used as a mechanism for impression management, allowing companies to position themselves as champions of diversity while not directly addressing the underlying factors contributing to a lack of diversity in their workforce.

The results indicate the presence of three key themes that were uniformly observed among the eight companies under examination: (1) continued reliance on the business rationale for diversity in which companies portray diversity initiatives as necessary for achieving business success; (2) strategic ambiguity concerning the root causes of inequality, with firms attributing the issue to broader societal trends; and (3) cultivation of an impression that the company is engaging in efforts to address the problem while outsourcing responsibility.

**DEI for Dollars: Doubling Down on the Business Case**

The present study began by analyzing the array of diversity definitions featured on tech companies’ websites. Without exception, all eight companies linked the value of diversity to business success using two primary strategies: firstly, they emphasized that diversity fosters innovative thinking by promoting divergent perspectives; and secondly, they highlighted the need for companies to attract individuals from diverse backgrounds to serve broader customer segments and develop products that appeal to everyone.

These companies perceive employees from diverse backgrounds as valuable organizational assets capable of generating more innovative products, which can, in turn, confer competitive advantages—a particularly important consideration for the fast-paced tech industry. For example, Apple’s website states, "We're continuing to build a culture
where everybody belongs. That's what sparks our innovation.” Similarly, Oracle declares, "We truly believe innovation starts with inclusion, which is why we're committed to creating a workplace where all kinds of people can do their best work and succeed without barriers.”

Moreover, all tech companies in this study underscored the significance of having a diverse workforce to develop products that can effectively cater to a broader spectrum of clients and customers. In many instances, companies framed this objective as a way of serving the larger community, as exemplified by the following statement from Apple's website: "To create products for everyone in the world, we need a workforce with diverse backgrounds and experiences”. Meta also had a very similar message, reading in part: “building products that serve diverse communities starts with building a diverse workforce”. However, the reality is that they are for-profit companies, and offering products that can appeal to a wide range of individuals from diverse backgrounds can attract more customers, increase revenue, and promote business growth. For Salesforce, the diversity-as-good-business message reads as follows:

_Our work centers on two key questions: How can we build better products that include everyone, and how can we anticipate risks and promote positive impacts of our products in the world? When we answer these questions by creating for — and with — diverse stakeholders, we unleash innovation and create products people can trust._

In addition, the hiring of employees from diverse backgrounds is framed as an effective strategy for gaining access to untapped customer segments due to their insider knowledge and specialized expertise. This is particularly evident in the context of product accessibility, whereby the incorporation of unique perspectives can enhance product design and usability. Microsoft, for instance, highlights the role of employee diversity in
driving innovation and growth, stating that "The different experiences and abilities of our employees drive our innovation and growth." In this way, the recruitment of diverse employees serves a critical business purpose. Diversity in this sense becomes broad and diffuse, encompassing any individual who may have a unique perspective due to their identity, life experience, or background. In this way, a commitment to equality, equity, or fair representation by race, gender or sexuality are exchanged for a transactional approach to diversity.

After presenting statements in support of the business case for diversity, the technology companies included in this study showcased their strides towards augmenting workforce representation on their websites. These efforts were reflected in the provision of hiring data snippets, which appeared to serve as a means of rationalizing and legitimizing their focus on diversity, particularly in relation to recruitment and retention initiatives. Figure 1 presents an example from Microsoft diversity website (accessed on April 6, 2023).

**Figure 1: Representation and Inclusion data, Microsoft**

*Shifting the Blame: Strategic Ambiguity about the Causes of Inequities*
Despite emphasizing the significance of diversity for their respective business priorities, the companies in this study were strategically ambiguous regarding the root causes of the lack of diversity in their workforces. Rather than acknowledging their own potential role in this issue, half of these companies framed the problem as a byproduct of broader societal issues such as social inequalities and systemic barriers, while the other half did not even mention the root causes of the “problems” their DEI efforts were seeking to “solve”. This approach allows tech companies to deflect blame away from themselves and their own systems, while at the same time positioning themselves as champions of diversity and equality.

By framing the issue as a problem that is beyond their control, those companies are able to avoid taking responsibility for their own shortcomings in the area of diversity and inclusion. A predominant approach adopted by several corporations involves the notion that remediying systemic barriers is a collective obligation. Salesforce, for instance, emphasizes this approach in the following manner: “Creating ethical and inclusive products is everyone’s responsibility. We can’t do this alone”. Similarly, Microsoft states:

*The issues behind social and economic inequality are bigger than any one organization can tackle alone. We have an opportunity—and an obligation—to foster collective movement towards greater diversity and inclusion through our actions and partnerships.*

This approach also allows companies to present themselves as corporate saviors that are making concerted efforts to address societal challenges, thus enhancing their public image and brand reputation. For instance, Google states: “We’re making commitments at scale to address some of society’s biggest barriers to belonging”. In this statement,
“society” becomes a strategically ambiguous site where inequalities are produced and reproduced, while the company positions itself as a righteous force working against these societal challenges. “Society” is where injustice happens; the company is one of the good guys seeking to address these injustices through vague action words such as “speak openly”, “foster movement”, and “make commitments”. Indeed, many companies position themselves as advocates working on behalf of society, as seen in Apple’s statement: “We’ll continue to speak openly about our efforts to eradicate systemic racism and injustice”. And some take it a step further by taking political stances like Salesforce

*We’re advocating for meaningful police reform, civic engagement, and protection of voting rights, and for economic empowerment policies that address the equity gap [...] We’re working to advance laws and regulations that protect against racism and discrimination.*

While strongly worded, this statement remains strategically ambiguous in that it offers no specific examples of what a “meaningful police reform” would be, or how it is “advocating for” or “working to advance” policies, laws or other actions that would rectify social issues related to racial justice. Merely the impression that the company is working on behalf of—or alongside of—ongoing social movements is sufficient to demonstrate the company’s commitment to equity, equality, and social justice.

Finally, reliance on a strategically ambiguous approach allows companies to appear as if they’re holding themselves accountable for promoting diversity without ever admitting to their shortcomings. Remarkably, among the studied companies, none took responsibility for the significant underrepresentation of women and employees of color in their previous hiring practices. Rather, they presented this lack of representation as a learning process, while in some rare instances, acknowledging the need for further work to be done.
Google’s website offers a typical example of this type of ambiguity regarding the company’s role in reproducing racial and gender hierarchies: “While we continue our efforts to improve our internal representation, we recognize that Google has a long way to go to fully reflect all the users we serve”. Similarly, Microsoft states:

*We do not have all of the answers, there is much we don’t know, but we do have the privilege of access to some of the leading minds in this space. These are the people from around the globe who are driving innovation and insight in D&I across concepts, communities, and identities.*

By obscuring the company’s complicity in reproducing racial and gender hierarchies through recruitment, retention, and promotion practices, companies in the sample are able to position themselves as equity champions despite abysmal records of internal representation. Through the performance of benevolent ignorance (e.g., “we do not have all of the answers”), companies are able to deflect culpability in erecting barriers to entry and success for women and BIPOC individuals within their ranks. In this way, companies can hold themselves up as eager learners and aggressive advocates of equity without having to demonstrate progress empirically.

**DEI as Side Hustle: Coercive Diversity Management through ERGs and Community Investments**

The final theme that emerged from this study was the tendency for companies to shift responsibility for the work of DEI to others. Company websites highlighted the ways their DEI programs allocate financial resources to marginalized groups and communities. In this way, companies’ diversity efforts prioritize outsourcing the labor of DEI to internal and external stakeholders who are also the targets of DEI programs. By outsourcing the work of DEI to already marginalized others, companies are able to claim
to be DEI champions without incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion into their core strategic plan. Instead, DEI becomes a side hustle, centered in corporate framing but marginalized within corporate functioning.

All companies surveyed emphasized the crucial contribution of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) in driving diversity initiatives. In some instances, such as in LinkedIn, ERGs function primarily as a means of establishing a support system for underrepresented groups by fostering a sense of community and promoting inclusivity. Similarly, Meta (formerly Facebook) explains their resources groups in the following way:

*Meta resource groups (mrgs) are inclusive groups that provide community support crucial to achieving our mission and create a space where employees feel seen, heard and [develop] a sense of belonging*

Crucially, for the majority of the companies examined, ERGs are not only spaces for underrepresented employees are able to commune. Rather, for these companies, ERGs are tasked with most of the heavy lifting work related to diversity, including the work of recruiting, mentoring, retention, and career development. For instance, Amazon's Black Employees Network (BEN) has been entrusted with the responsibility of fulfilling the mission to:

*Recruit, retain, and empower Black employees. BEN connects members with mentors and provides career and personal development workshops. BEN also engages with the local and regional chapters of the National Society of Black Engineers, leads recruiting initiatives with Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and partners with other organizations.*

The delegation of key processes such as hiring and career development to ERGs places an undue burden on marginalized employees who are already underrepresented in their companies. Moreover, most diversity initiatives that fall under the purview of ERGs are
volunteer-based and the work of carrying out these functions is often uncompensated and secondary to employees’ primary role in the company. The tendency to outsource the labor of DEI in ways that are uncompensated, often devalued, and outside the company’s strategic functioning is not uncommon. Neither is the tendency to place the responsibility of achieving equity, diversity, and inclusion on the shoulders of already marginalized and underrepresented employees. This tendency is particularly illuminating in tech, however, as companies in this sample are widely lauded as leaders of corporate DEI in the U.S.

In addition to outsourcing internal diversity initiatives, companies included in this study also have external community outreach programs, typically in the form of financial investments in underrepresented communities. These programs represent a means of enhancing the public image of tech companies without necessitating significant or substantive changes in the underlying practices of these organizations. Such investments may thus be perceived as a form of "window dressing," allowing companies to present themselves as socially responsible without implementing any meaningful changes to address the root causes of disparities in their workforces or wider society.

The tech industry often cites the pipeline metaphor as a justification for the underrepresentation of women and BIPOC employees in their workforce. According to the pipeline argument, women and people of color are underrepresented in tech because they are underrepresented in STEM education either due to a lack of desire or affinity or discouragement. Thus, the underrepresentation of women and people of color in large tech companies is unrelated to company processes and, instead, reflects a lack of qualified, well-trained individuals with the requisite educational credentials. Despite the continued salience of the pipeline argument to explain underrepresentation, existing
research has challenged the core assumptions underlying this explanation for the lack of diversity in STEM fields broadly and the tech industry specifically. For example, research finds that the pipeline of women pursuing STEM careers is robust, and points to employment discrimination in recruitment, selection, evaluation, promotion, and compensation as primary causes of underrepresentation STEM professions (see Kang and Kaplan 2019 for a review).

Despite the evidence, all technology companies analyzed in this study invest in educational initiatives aimed at underrepresented groups, portraying such initiatives as an ideal solution to address the issue of underrepresentation. Microsoft’s website even explicitly states the pipeline problem as justification for their community investments:

_Diversifying the STEM pipeline into colleges and universities starts with generating excitement for tech as early as possible. Through a range of initiatives and partnerships, we’re helping young people discover a passion for tech and envision a future filled with possibility._

Similarly, Amazon’s website frames their community investments as efforts to cultivate “future generations” of qualified employees:

_To develop future generations of talent, we are committed to holistic strategies that support K-12, higher education, and students who are underrepresented in the tech industry._

Evidence undermining the pipeline myth suggests that investment in educational programs targeting underrepresented communities is unlikely to address the central challenges to equitable representation: reducing barriers in the ways women and BIPOC professionals that are internal to work organizations. Research finds that, rather than early educational interventions, addressing inequities in tech firms requires organizations to systematically address more immediate barriers facing women and people of color.
including experiencing less respect, a greater exposure to hostility and harassment, scrutiny and performance pressures, higher expectations for uncompensated labor, a lack of workplace support and mentorship, and the denial of promotion opportunities (Kang and Kaplan 2019, p. 11).

However well-intentioned, investments in K-12 education and other community programs do not represent a comprehensive solution to the lack of representation within companies’ ranks. Instead, these investments likely serve as a symbolic gesture aimed at projecting a positive public image. Ultimately, however, these investments fail to address the systemic biases inherent in employment processes and workplace climates that contribute to the lack of diversity in the tech industry.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how leading tech companies frame their diversity management efforts. The companies included in this analysis are often lauded as DEI champions, yet overall representation of women and people of color within these firms specifically and the sector generally remains stagnant. Our review of the history of DEI management concludes that the blueprint for diversity management in U.S. companies was never intended to achieve equity or inclusion; rather, the history reveals that diversity management is rooted in companies’ efforts to inoculate themselves against legal liability in the face of the expansion of anti-discrimination law. Previous research on the public framing of diversity managements finds public-facing diversity claims, such as those on company websites, are often aimed at impression management while sustaining the status quo in terms of internal access and advancement.
To analyze corporate framing, I systematically analyzed the diversity websites of eight leading tech companies selected based on their selection among Glassdoor’s 2021 best places to work. Content analysis of company websites reveals three patterns of impression management: (1) an emphasis on the business case for diversity; (2) strategic ambiguity regarding the causes of inequities; and (3) outsourcing the labor of diversity management to already marginalized groups and individuals.

The first theme revealed suggests that tech companies strive to present themselves as genuinely committed to diversity by aligning their initiatives with a desire to reflect the society they operate in and to create products that cater to all. However, the underpinning of this frame is the business case for diversity, which characterizes diversity efforts as a business necessity rather than a moral responsibility. Furthermore, the professed aspiration to offer products for everyone, though ostensibly noble, entails utilizing employees from diverse backgrounds to augment the development of products and services that cater to the needs of a wide-ranging customer base. In this way, women and BIPOC individuals become a commodity that can be exchanged for greater profits.

The second frame centers on a strategically ambiguous definition of the problem and the cases of inequities, allowing companies to avoid any culpability in the processes that generate and reproduce inequality within their ranks and beyond. This strategy involves shifting responsibility to broader societal problems such as social inequalities and systemic barriers, rather than acknowledging the ways their practices and cultural climates create barriers to entry and mobility. In doing so, tech companies position themselves as agents of change—social justice warriors engaged in solving larger societal problems—while avoiding accountability for their own lack of diversity. This approach
serves to divert attention away from specific practices and workplace culture that perpetuate the problem. By shifting the blame to broader societal concerns, tech companies can maintain the status quo, avoid making significant changes to their policies and practices, and maintain a self-congratulatory image without addressing their own limitations. All companies in this study highlighted their awareness of the long road ahead to attain diversity goals; however, they refrained from acknowledging their past (and ongoing) failures in hiring and retaining employees from underrepresented groups.

The final theme reveals the ways that tech companies position diversity work as a side hustle and employ a coercive approach to diversity that outsources the labor of diversity work onto already marginalized groups and individuals. This approach involves allocating financial resources to marginalized groups and communities, such as employee resource groups (ERGs) and community programs, as a means of delegating responsibility for DEI initiatives to these groups. By outsourcing DEI work to ERGs and community organizations, companies are effectively shifting the burden of promoting and managing diversity onto those who are already marginalized and underrepresented. This coercive approach also serves to depoliticize DEI efforts by framing them as voluntary acts of goodwill rather than systemic changes that are necessary to address historical inequalities. Importantly, the work of managing diversity is often uncompensated, invisible, and devalued (as I will cover in the next chapter). By siloing these efforts, companies reinforce racial and gender hierarchies and fail to integrate diversity priorities into core strategic areas of corporate functioning.

Overall, these findings suggest that diversity management in the technology industry functions symbolically by allowing companies to project an image of equity and
inclusivity (Ahmed, 2012). However, symbolic function is executed in a strategically ambiguous way that prioritizes communicating the existence of diversity programs rather than their efficacy. Consequently, diversity management serves as a means of impression management rather than interventions aimed at reducing barriers to entry and advancement. This conclusion is reinforced by data from recent layoffs in the tech industry. During the period under study, five of the eight companies in the sample introduced significant layoffs, leading to 77,000 employees losing their jobs in under six months. Women and BIPOC employees were particularly affected by these layoffs because they held newer positions and were in roles that companies deemed less essential (Nix 2023). None of these companies acknowledged these layoffs—much less the gendered and racial patterns of job loss—on their websites.

These findings have substantial implications for the practice of DEI. First, to limit diversity backlash and burnout, companies must do more than perform diversity management. Research on the impact of diversity programs finds that many of the standard corporate-based DEI policies and programs fail to achieve any increase in representation and many are negatively associated with the representation of women and men and women of color in leadership (see Dobbin and Kalev 2022 for a review). In their recent review of this work, Dobbin and Kalev (2022) conclude that performative DEI strategies do not reduce bias, discrimination or harassment and have no impact on the representation of women and people of color in management over time. In short, the standard corporate approach to diversity management has been a “spectacular failure” (p. 11).
The lack of accountability for making progress on diversity has led to complacency and reliance on symbolic gestures rather than efficacious policies and practices. One potential mechanism for enhancing the transparency and accountability of DEI management would be placing the monitoring of DEI outcomes with boards of directors. Among other functions, boards are responsible for evaluating the strategic priorities of a company as well as their progress toward achieving goals. Shifting DEI into the core strategic functions of a company – produce development, return on investments, market expansion – would increase the accountability for senior executives for making progress on key benchmarks. Such a shift would also lessen the burden of diversity work for already-marginalized employees and community stakeholders.

The current study is limited to the websites of eight leading companies at one time point. Future research can build upon these findings in at least three ways. First, a longitudinal analysis of annual diversity reports would illuminate the ways in which companies’ messaging around diversity has emerged and evolved over time. Such an analysis may reveal important patterns, including the types of external or internal pressures that lead companies to shift their diversity foci or messaging. Findings from such a study would further reveal potential strategies for inducing companies to take a more transparent and efficacious approach to diversity management. Second, qualitative research with corporate leaders would reveal the ways in which DEI framing is reflective of leaders’ priorities, viewpoints, value commitments, and leadership strategy. Exploring how corporate leaders understand diversity – and how they engage in sensemaking about the disconnect between DEI branding and progress toward diversity – may further reveal the factors that contribute to corporate leaders’ understanding of the problem and their
responsibility for addressing it. Finally, future research could compare diversity framing in tech to other industries or sectors. While tech companies are often considered leaders in corporate diversity management, this analysis suggests that this may be due more to their effective impression management strategies than to actual commitments to representation, equity, and inclusion. However, comparing tech companies to companies in other sectors may reveal important distinctions or nuances in terms of diversity framing.

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Chapter 4 - View from the Margins: How Women of Color Experience Diversity
Abstract

Tech companies spend millions of dollars annually on diversity programs and initiatives to address the lack of diversity in the industry (Nader 2018). Despite these efforts—and despite the rapid growth of the industry—the number of women of color in most tech companies remains in the single digits (Alegria 2020; Alegria and Branch 2015). Intersectional research that explores the gendered and racialized nature of work in the tech industry is limited; however, extant research describes the industry as a “brotopia” (Chang 2019) where white men dominate. This view of the industry is reinforced by the mounting public stories of women of color, especially Black women, who were retaliated against for speaking up against bias, discrimination, and harassment in the industry. What explains the continued marginalization of women of color in an industry that identifies diversity and inclusion as a top priority? Scholarship has yet to fully grapple with the ways diversity programs and initiatives impact the careers of Black and other women of color. Why have policies that aim to support the careers of women of color failed to facilitate entrance into the industry or pathways into leadership? This paper aims to answer these questions by centering the perspectives and lived experiences of women of color in tech. Relying on 24 in-depth interviews with women of color currently employed in the industry, I explore how their careers are shaped (harmed or supported) by companies’ diversity programs.

Introduction

In 2014, major tech companies launched a campaign to address diversity in the industry (Williams 2014). Companies like Google, Yahoo, Linkedin, and Facebook (now known as Meta) positioned themselves as champions of diversity and inclusion by
acknowledging the significant underrepresentation of women and people of color in their workforces. They recognized the issue as a major problem in the industry and pledged to address it by spending billions of dollars on various programs and initiatives aimed at improving diversity and increasing the representation of women and employees of color.

Nearly ten years later, the tech industry still falls far short of its stated diversity objectives, despite an ongoing public commitment to diversifying its labor force. In 2014 at Google, for example, women comprised 30.6% of the total workforce; in 2022, that figure increased to 33.7%, with Black women and Latinx women accounting for 4.3% and 3.2%, respectively. Meta’s (formerly Facebook) numbers are similarly unimpressive: in 2014, women accounted for 31% of the global workforce; in 2022, that number increased to 37.1%, with Black and Latinx women accounting for 3.2% and 3.4%, respectively. Regarding the overall industry, there were 5.9 million positions available in 2022. However, women and BIPOC employees made up only 24% and 7%, respectively, of the entire technology workforce (Cyberstates 2022).

Large tech companies often rationalize the lack of gender and racial diversity within their workforce by citing the pipeline myth, which suggests that there aren’t enough qualified women available to hire. Research finds that while the pipeline of women is robust, bias and discrimination push them out of the pipeline at each stage of professional life, from recruitment to promotion (see Kang and Kaplan 2019 for a review). Importantly, these barriers are even greater for women of color who face greater barriers to accessing and succeeding in STEM careers than white women (Williams, Phillips, and Hall 2016). Indeed, research on organizational inequalities has identified various forms of structural and systemic barriers that result in the exclusion of women of color, like unfair hiring
processes (Alfrey and Twine 2017), gendered organizational networks (Mickey 2022), racial and gender biases (Alegria 2020), and racialized gender stereotypes (Alfrey and Twine 2017; Shih 2006). Research on corporate diversity practices also reveals that many of the popular “best practices” fall short of their intended objectives (Dobbin and Kalev 2016) and primarily benefit white women (Kalev and Dobbin 2016). For instance, in their study of DEI in tech, Gee and Peck (2016) found that initiatives aimed at promoting diversity have had a noticeable impact on increasing the presence of white women in management and executive positions but showed no progress in advancing the representation of women of color.

What explains the continued marginalization of women of color in an industry that identifies diversity and inclusion as a top priority? And why have policies that aim to support the careers of women of color failed to facilitate entrance into the industry or a pathway into leadership? Connecting theories of organizational inequalities (Acker 2012; Ray 2019) to the growing body of research on the failures of the corporate diversity model (Dobbin and Kalev 2022; Kalev and Dobbin 2016), I argue that corporate DEI policies fail because they were never designed to support the careers of women of color. Instead, the history of corporate DEI shows that dominant DEI approaches were designed to protect companies from liability and litigation. As a result, the tech industry’s continued promotion of these policies reflects a deep contradiction: companies can claim to be DEI champions while maintaining the status quo in terms of recruitment, hiring, and promotion.

Using data from interviews with twenty-four women of color who worked or are currently working in the tech industry, this chapter examines and explores how their
careers are shaped (harmed or supported) by companies’ diversity programs. Interviews reveal that women of color do not conceptualize diversity, equity, and inclusion in ways that align with their companies’ diversity rhetoric or implementation. As a result, they recognize the lack of efficacy in many of their companies’ DEI policies by design as well as in practice. Their experience in tech has informed their views of a range of policies and practices that would better support their careers.

Organizational Inequalities

In her seminal work on inequality regimes, Acker (2012) argues that race, gender, and class inequalities are structural, embedded in organizational processes, and produced and reproduced systemically. These inequalities, although different in their degree and visibility, control the distribution of power and resources within organizations. One aspect of systemic inequality is organizational hierarchies, which control the distribution of power and authority within organizations. Acker argues that these hierarchies are both gendered and racialized, with white men dominating top positions. In many organizations, the abstract ideal worker is a white man who is fully devoted to his job and has few external responsibilities (Acker 2012). Expanding on Acker's theory, Ray (2019) suggests that organizations are racialized and assume whiteness as the default category (Ray 2019).

Leadership positions within the technology industry reflect the mechanisms identified by Acker and Ray. Research indicates that white men dominate leadership roles in the tech sector (Alegria 2020). For instance, Alphabet Inc. (i.e., Google) employs approximately one hundred thousand full-time workers. The company's 2022 diversity report revealed that 69.4% of leadership positions were held by men, while 30.6% were held by women.
Furthermore, of the women in leadership positions, 18% were white, Asian women 9.8%, whereas only 2% were Black and 1.5% were Latinx (Google diversity report, 2022). Acker contends that such hierarchical structures are more prevalent in traditional bureaucratic organizations compared to flat organizations. However, Mickey (2019) discovered that tech startups are still seen as a "boys club," and the organizational logic continues to prioritize the idealized masculine worker. She also found that when tech firms go public, they usually revert to bureaucratic structures with traditional hierarchies and career ladders, which further disadvantages women (Mickey 2019).

The existence of a wage gap serves as another marker of organizational inequality regimes. Acker posits that the determination of wages is frequently linked to organizational hierarchies. Higher-level positions are valued more and therefore receive higher salaries. Consequently, when top-tier jobs are predominantly held by white men, their salaries remain higher than those of women and BIPOC employees who are relegated to lower-level jobs at the bottom of the hierarchy (Acker 2006). Ray (2019) builds on this argument, stating that when whiteness is seen as the default, it becomes a credential that carries the greatest value in the organizational structure, placing all non-white employees at a lower rung in the hierarchy (Ray 2019).

In a study of wage differences in the tech industry, Alegria (2016) calculated the exact wage premiums and penalties for workers based on gender, race, and immigration status, while controlling for various factors such as age, education, experience, the field of study, and marital status. Using US-born white men as a reference group, she found that all women experienced wage penalties that could not be explained by their demographic or work-related characteristics. For example, US-born BIPOC women experienced a 10%
unexplained wage penalty compared to US-born white men. While acknowledging that unmeasured factors may contribute to the unexplained gap, Alegria suggested that these gaps likely represent discrimination (2016).

These studies suggest that a lack of diversity in tech organizations is a manifestation of broader inequalities across the industry. The use of organizational inequality theories and intersectionality offers a more comprehensive understanding of diversity in the workplace.

**History and Critiques of the Corporate Diversity Model**

The corporate diversity model emerged in the 1960s as a response to the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was introduced in the United States to address discrimination against minorities and women in employment, education, and housing. However, since the law did not provide a clear definition of what constituted discrimination and because legal authority was highly decentralized, human resource (HR) professionals assumed a prominent role in determining the practices that were deemed compliant with antidiscrimination legislation (Dobbin 2009). As a result, the 1970s witnessed the proliferation of HR-supported programs and policies, including equal opportunity policies, management training, and antidiscrimination departments and officers (Dobbin and Kalev 2013). Backlash against these efforts in the 1980s—the era of mass deregulation launched by the election of President Ronald Reagan—led to the rebranding of equal opportunity policies as “human resources management”. This shift decentered issues of gender and race in favor of an expanded focus on a wide range of demographic differences (Dobbin and Kalev 2013).
Designed and sustained primarily by personnel managers rather than judges, activists, or policymakers, these policies and practices transformed hiring and promotion processes in corporate America and created the foundation for the emergence of the corporate diversity model as a new management paradigm. Under this new model, equality may result from the strategic management of diversity, but it was not the goal; instead, properly managed diversity was posited as the key to profit maximization (Calvard 2020; Köllen 2019).

During the 1990s, diversity management emerged as a business strategy that aimed to capitalize on diversity for organizational success. The business case for diversity gained widespread acceptance across sectors and became the go-to selling point to convince corporate executives to view diversity programs as a necessary “investment” in economic gains (Calvard 2020; Ely and Thomas 2020). The business approach has also coopted the language of feminism to brand corporate DEI as a critical tool for women’s empowerment. The emergence of “business feminism”, popularized by Sheryl Sandberg’s 2013 bestselling manifesto *Lean In*, aligned with the corporate DEI model by placing responsibility for succeeding in corporate settings on women themselves. This approach identifies women's inability to overcome self-limiting behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs as the cause of their underrepresentation in corporate leadership, thereby inoculating companies from responsibility for closing the gender gap.

Despite the sustained proliferation of the corporate diversity model, scholars have critiqued its lack of efficacy, its neglect of questions of power and privilege, and its reliance on a superficial individualistic and additive approach to hiring women and people of color (Ely and Thomas 2020; Kochan et al. 2003). Empirically, corporate DEI
programs have limited impact on improving workplace diversity (Dobbin and Kalev 2020). Instead, they function as a means of impression management, allowing organizations to convey the appearance of valuing and endorsing diversity while leaving underlying organizational inequalities unaddressed (Ahmed 2012; Thomas 2020). For instance, analysis of the short and long-term impacts of mandatory diversity training—a critical piece of the corporate DEI toolkit—shows that such trainings do more harm than good (Dobbin and Kalev 2022). Not only does mandatory training not increase diversity, but such trainings often serve to reinforce the same biases they seek to remedy (Kalev and Dobbin 2016).

By incorporating an individualistic additive approach to diversity, the corporate model also fails to address the various ways in which gender intersects with other identities, such as race, ability, sexuality, and social class (Collins 2000). Consequently, this approach neglects to examine the economic and sociocultural power of elites and the structural and intersectional inequalities that emerge from market organizations (Fisher et al. 2015). By centering the individual and emphasizing individual responsibility, the corporate DEI model obscures systemic and structural inequalities, rendering them invisible. As a result, many policies and programs derived from this approach focus on “fixing” prejudice in members of the dominant group while simultaneously augmenting the representation of non-dominant groups. This "add diversity and stir" approach overlooks power dynamics, structural obstacles, social hierarchies, status, and cultural discourse (Janssens and Steyaert 2019).
Diversity in Tech

Empirical research on diversity in the tech industry is scarce. However, the available literature indicates that sociological critiques of the corporate diversity model apply to the tech industry, particularly concerning the experiences of women of color. For instance, research by Twine (2018) revealed that, unlike their white and Asian counterparts, Black women in tech have limited access to information and mentorship opportunities. Black women's underrepresentation in tech means that social support systems are non-existent, making their experiences more challenging (Twine 2018).

Alfrey and Twine (2017) investigated the intersections of gender, race, and sexual identity for women in tech. They found that when white and Asian women identified as gender fluid, they experienced fewer microaggressions, were perceived as more competent, and had a better sense of belonging when compared to their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts. Importantly, these benefits did not extend to Black and Latina women who also identified as gender fluid. For these women, their race had a larger impact on their workplace experience than their sexuality or gender identity (Alfrey and Twine 2017). A more recent study by Alegria (2019) found that white women—but not women of color—experience a glass escalator, similar to that of white men in female-dominated fields (Williams 1992). Indeed, Alegria (2019) found that white women in tech get promoted to low- and mid-level management roles, moving from technical positions into management. While this might be seen as an advantage for white women, Alegria argues that tech companies do that to avoid fully integrating women into their technical teams. She referred to this phenomenon as a “step stool” approach to diversity and inclusion (Alegria 2019).
Despite the increasing attention to diversity within the tech industry, there is a general lack of intersectional research that focuses on the experiences of women of color. While research on diversity in tech has expanded in recent years, very few studies have accounted for the unique challenges and barriers faced by individuals with multiple marginalized identities, such as women of color. This gap is particularly concerning given the well-documented experiences of discrimination, underrepresentation, and limited opportunities faced by women of color within the technology industry. The current study aims to fill this gap by centering the perspectives and lived experiences of women of color in tech. I now turn to a description of the methodological approach before discussing key findings.

Methods

The current study relied on semi-structured interviews to collect data from a cohort of twenty-four women of color who work within the tech industry. The majority of participants worked or are currently working at one of the major tech companies including Google, Meta, Pinterest, Microsoft, DropBox, LinkedIn, and Amazon.

Data collection was conducted during September and October 2022 via the remote communication platform Zoom. Each interview lasted approximately 50 to 60 minutes, and with the informed consent of participants, an audio recording was made for purposes of transcription. Prior to interviews, participants were invited to complete a brief survey, which collected demographic information such as age, race, educational attainment, citizenship status, marital and parental status, sexual orientation, disability status, and political and religious affiliations. A full list of the demographic data captured by the survey is available in Table 1.
Sampling originated within my professional network, which includes many women of color in tech. Fourteen participants were recruited in this way, while five participants were recruited through snowball sampling, and five responded to recruitment posts on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook. Given my personal connections within the industry, I was expecting the recruiting process to be fairly easy. However, I quickly realized that it was a lot more challenging than I anticipated. The response to the initial recruitment call showed significant interest. Sixty-four women completed the pre-interview demographic survey, yet many dropped out during the interview phase.

Sample Characteristics

The sample consisted of 24 women of color who work(ed) in the tech industry. To avoid lumping all women of color under one category, I was intentional in recruiting women of color from different racial backgrounds. 6 of the participants were Black, 5 Middle Eastern, 5 South Asian, 3 East Asian, 2 Latinas, 1 Native American, 1 Southeast Asian, and 1 mixed race. (See table 1 for full sample characteristics). Despite my strong connections within the industry, I found it quite challenging to recruit Asian and Latinx women to participate in the study. Those women seemed less interested in a conversation about their experience in tech compared to Black, Middle Eastern, and South Asian women who were not only very interested in this conversation but also believed it was an important one that needs to be had. The most challenging of all was recruiting Native American women, despite my multiple attempts.

Table 4: Sample Characteristics

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<th>Race</th>
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According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), semi-structured interviews are a valuable method when conducting qualitative studies because they encourage a precise and thorough reflection of interviewees' lived experience and provide participants with the flexibility to adjust their descriptions and perspectives during the interview (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015)

Interview questions focused on the participants' experiences with diversity programs in the tech industry, including their perceptions of the effectiveness of these programs, their personal experiences with various DEI programs, and their suggestions for improving, restructuring, or refocusing these programs. The study's participants responded to a series of interview questions concerning their experiences working in the tech industry, with a particular focus on the challenges they have encountered, including various patterns of
bias and structural and cultural barriers. Additionally, participants were queried about
their respective definitions of diversity, as compared to the perception of diversity held
by their employers. Interviews also probed participants' involvement with diversity
programs and their experiences with such initiatives. Furthermore, participants were
asked to comment on the extent to which diversity policies and programs have
contributed to the progression of their careers, in addition to detailing any potential
diversity-related policies, programs, or resources that could have supported their career
advancement at pivotal points.

Data Analysis
All participant’s cameras were on when they logged into the meeting. However, before
starting the interview, I asked for their consent to record the interview and gave them the
option to either turn their cameras off or keep them on. For meetings that are recorded on
Zoom with cameras on, Zoom saves a video recording and an audio recording separately.
At the end of every interview, I permanently deleted the video recording and only kept
the audio recording for transcription. Once all interviews were completed, I used an
artificial-intelligence-powered transcription service called Otter to generate the initial
transcription of all interviews, then I listened to and edited the interviews to ensure that
they accurately reflected the audio recordings.

Once interviews were transcribed, I began the coding process. I used a reiterative
thematic analysis process to identify the key themes within each section of the interview:
how women of color defined diversity, how women of color experienced DEI initiatives,
and how women of color assessed of the efficacy of those initiatives.
Findings

In the following sections, I analyze three key themes that emerged across interviews: (1) how women make sense of and define DEI in contrast to corporate definitions; (2) the invisible and uncompensated labor of DEI that often falls on the shoulders of women of color themselves; and (3) participants’ assessment of the shortcomings and possibilities for DEI.

**Definitional Dilemmas: Making Sense of DEI at Work**

The study started with an analysis of the responses provided by participants to a series of questions regarding their perceptions of the concepts of diversity and inclusion as women of color employed in the tech industry. Participants were first asked to share their own definitions of these terms, followed by a query about the degree of similarity or divergence between their own definitions and that of their respective employers. Participants were also asked about their perceptions of the motivations that underlie their employers’ commitment to DEI. While some respondents defined diversity using corporate frames, most respondents defined diversity in ways that depart from the conceptualization of their employers and provided nuanced responses that reflected their unique experiences and perspectives. Those whose definitions departed from corporate frames provided insight into why their employers’ DEI policies had not addressed their needs as women of color in tech.

All participants provided complex and nuanced definitions of diversity and inclusion that reflected their own unique experiences, and predominantly focused on matters pertaining to representation, equity, and inclusivity. When asked about their perceptions of employers’ definitions of diversity, participants expressed a shared sense of skepticism
toward the tech industry's purported commitments to diversity. A majority of participants expressed the view that their employers lacked a comprehensive or substantial understanding of diversity, and that their purported commitments to the cause were primarily driven by external pressures to meet certain standards rather than a genuine commitment to the principles of equality and inclusion. Participants therefore perceived their employers' approach to diversity as being largely symbolic, motivated more by a desire to generate positive publicity than by a sincere investment in organizational change or restructuring.

Representation
Most participants centered their definitions of diversity and inclusion by underscoring the importance of representation for everyone. However, as participants delved deeper into their own definitions, some of them emphasized the crucial need for promoting gender and racial diversity in the workplace. Specifically, participants who identified as Black and US-born women of South Asian and Middle Eastern descent were explicit about the imperative to increase recruitment of Black and Brown employees in their respective organizations.

Participants concurred that their employers primarily conceptualized diversity in quantitative terms, focusing on numerical targets and quotas with people of color viewed primarily as statistics to be incorporated into diversity reports. Alice, who is an Indian American woman who has been working in tech for over 10 years described it this way: “You know, most of them are just like, it's a quota we got to fill it? You know, it's a
10% quota of this group or that group and so we have it filled with, you know, this one lady. And that's it. We're good.”

Just like Alice, Nora, who is an Arab American Muslim woman who was born in the Bay Area and been working in tech for over 8 years, had a similar perception:

*My guess is that they’ll take anyone who even identifies as partially Black because they want, they want the numbers... [they] try to hire a little bit more diversity. Do they actually care about it? Absolutely not. I don't think they do. Because if they did, the numbers would have moved much quicker*

While corporate efforts aim to reach certain quotas, participants viewed representation as a crucial mechanism for survival within predominantly white and male organizations. Specifically, they emphasized the importance of having more people who look like them, those who can relate to their experiences, validate their stories, and can understand their perspectives without requiring an explanation. For example, Hannah is of Asian Middle Eastern ethnicity with a computer science degree who has worked as a senior developer in a major tech company in the Bay Area, describes this perspective well:

*In general, being a woman already is pretty lonely. Being a woman of color, that just adds like a whole other dimension to it, where you have even less people to bond with. There's an added factor of not finding people to connect with or talk to you about certain things. As I mentioned, even in different groups that they offer at companies, it's hard to find a place where you actually fit. And also who can just relate to your experiences as well. Because I think, even for my friends, who are these very pretty white girls, you know, a lot of them are blonde, cute, white girls who work in tech, are gonna have a different experience than I do. That has always also been something that has been a little difficult for me to find somebody who I can talk to about things.*

When I asked Nora what diversity and inclusion means to her, she said, “For me, diversity and inclusion is like seeing people who look like me, you know, when I'm
walking around campus, and also not just seeing them there, but like seeing them at
different levels, like higher up positions.”

Some participants also drew attention to the potential influence of improved
representation on the types of roles in which they were employed. For example, Grace is
a Black lesbian woman who grew up in a small town in the South but had the opportunity
to get a computer science degree from Stanford. Grace started her career in tech in a
technical role on the product side, but eventually decided to move to the business side.

When asked how she views diversity, Grace said:

I am capable of working in the product space, I'm qualified, I could do a lot more
technical work than I do right now and I wouldn't, because I don't want to be in that
space again, I don't want to be alone. I don't want to have a manager who has no
concept of what I'm going through, has no concept of what that would even be like,
doesn't believe that discrimination exists, which itself is mind boggling... the tech
bro stereotype is 100% true.

Results from research focusing on representation as a major part of the corporate
diversity model are mixed at best and contradictory at worst. Kanter’s classic token
theory (1977) argues that increasing the numerical representation of a minority group
leads to a decrease in workplace bias. However, subsequent research finds that
representation is often necessary but insufficient for driving organizational change (Turco
2010). Butler (2007) argues that increasing representation without acknowledging issues
of power within organizations leads to “segregated diversity”, where companies mandate
hiring more employees from underrepresented groups but do not require equity or parity
between dominant and non-dominant groups (Butler 2007). Nevertheless, scholars find
that increasing representation serves as one mechanism for enhancing opportunities for
underrepresented groups and individuals. For participants, having more representation
creates a sense of community, and builds a support system that can help them survive the loneliness of existing in this “brotopia land” of the tech industry.

Equity and Inclusion

As previously mentioned, the diversity model has been criticized for its failure to recognize issues of power and inequality. Despite the emphasis on representation from all participants in this study, equity and equality were also integral components of their definitions. Wilcox (2021) revealed that tech employees tend to utilize "uncritical" definitions of diversity, which often diminish the importance of categorical inequalities. While 16 out of 31 participants in Wilcox's study were labeled as "racial minorities," it is unclear how many of them were women of color. In contrast, every woman of color who took part in my study explicitly linked equality with diversity, highlighting the importance of fair treatment, equal opportunities, and justice for all individuals regardless of background.

After working at a prominent tech company for five years, Rebecca, an Arab American woman born in the US, became a manager for a team responsible for analyzing employee data to detect disparities in pay, job levels, and career advancement opportunities. While the team's focus on equity appears commendable, Rebecca noted that the recommendations her team provides when identifying gaps are often viewed as optional. She further observed that there is no mechanism in place to force managers to act on those recommendations or to hold them accountable for addressing inequities of any kind. Consequently, Rebecca concluded that:

*I feel like they think about diversity in terms of representation. And I think it's a lot more than representation...It's about opportunity. Are you working your ass off to
find the right opportunities for this person, to thrive, and to grow, and to get promoted and take on new other opportunities? And I don't think that's done equitably.

Hannah, a US-born mixed race tech worker echoed a similar sentiment when describing her own perception of the meaning of diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace:

[DEI] should mean that people like me, people of color, people who are minorities, should be included equally, in every step of the process. From early on when they're searching for candidates, we should all have an equal chance of this and even once we're in the actual pipeline, getting that equal opportunity for promotions, for projects for work.

Sarah is an East Asian woman who worked in multiple tech companies over the last decade. She shared her frustration with the convoluted way some of the tech companies use diversity promises of equality to perpetuate inequality in ways that cause harm to women of color in the industry. She recalled an incident when she was pregnant to illustrate this concern:

Everybody's welcome. Everybody's equal, and we accept everybody the way they are. And I kind of felt the same working in, in a company, which I have mentioned. It, it looked like everybody was equal, because everybody was talking about that we're equal. But when it came to the time, I remember my manager saying, I was nine months pregnant, and we had some problems at work. And I was so tired. I work till 10pm. And I was sitting on a cell phone, and he comes to me, he said, “I want you to remember that everybody's equal here.” And I didn't know what it meant. Did it mean, “I don't care that you're pregnant, and I'm making you work till 10 pm because you're like everybody else?” Or I don't know, because he kept throughout my pregnancy, he kept telling me that everybody's equal here.

Sheryl Sandberg, the former COO of Meta, famously encouraged women to "sit at the table" as a means of asserting their presence and claiming their space within organizations. This approach, known as Lean In, is predicated on the assumption that women lack assertiveness and need to be more proactive in asserting their position (Sandberg 2015). However, research on representation suggests that simply occupying a
A seat at the table is insufficient to drive meaningful change (e.g., Watkins, Simmons, and Umphress 2019). Acker (2006) has argued that inequalities are embedded in the very fabric of organizations, with processes designed to perpetuate the subordination of women and people of color and maintain their position at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy. Thus, merely occupying a seat at the table does not necessarily translate to greater influence or the dismantling of structural inequalities. Moreover, the act of speaking up and highlighting issues can sometimes backfire. Ahmed (2021) has argued that raising problems or concerns can lead to the individual being viewed as a problem themselves. Therefore, without a concerted effort to embed equity and inclusion within diversity initiatives, women and people of color may continue to remain silent even if they occupy positions of influence within the organization. Nora, a US-born Middle Eastern woman described this gulf between representation and inclusion during her interview:

*I think what I’m noticing in tech is there’s so much focus on getting people in the room and to me diversity and inclusion is not just getting them in the room, it’s making them feel comfortable in the room, it’s making them thrive in the room, and making them want to stay in that room.*

Corporate Motivation

All participants agreed that their employers are spending a lot of money on diversity and inclusion efforts, and that those issues seem to be the center of many of internal and external communications. However, when asked about what they think motivates this push, the responses were consistent: diversity is good PR. Thus, most respondents expressed cynicism regarding the investments – financial and symbolic – that their companies were making in DEI programming.
Grace, a US-born, Black woman, emphasized this point, as did many others when she said, “Oh, PR. It's 100% PR. ... Like I'm under no illusion that they're doing this because they think it's the right thing to do or because they understand that diversity is going to benefit them immensely”. Hannah echoed Grace’s cynicism about the various ways company promote their DEI efforts while failing to promote actual women of color:

*I could be wrong about this, but I feel like there's a lot of marketing for diversity and inclusion, you know, they want to put it on posters, they want to be in the LGBTQ parades, they want to make T shirts that say inclusion and stuff, I feel like there’s a lot of showy aspects.*

Susan, an Arab-American woman who has been working in tech for over 20 years, reached the same conclusion, noting that companies view promoting DEI as good for the bottom line, at least for now:

*PR, right? At the end of the day, this is corporate America, it’s a business. Right? So if, if, if being ethical is hot in the media, now, the all these companies will go do something. If they're talking about the environment, everybody's gonna, you know, that's what's, you know, popular. That's what these companies are gonna do. So, at the end of the day, it's just a business. Right?*

Samantha referred to corporate DEI as “diversity theater”, emphasizing the mismatch between what companies say they care about and what they actually do:

*One of my favorite things that I've heard recently or read about recently as a term is diversity theater. I think it's brilliant. It's like, external, we're so supportive of diversity. And then actually the people inside are like, this is bullshit, you're not living half of these things that you're talking about.*

Participants also pointed to the fact that the focus on diversity and inclusion have dramatically increased in the last couple of years. Many connected this renewed interest to the political climate in the US, emphasizing the ways tech companies wish to brand themselves in ways that align with certain customers and clients. Rachel, who is a US-
born South Asian American woman, emphasized these shifts as well as the underlying push for these efforts from internal stakeholders:

*I really think the aftermath of the George Floyd protests is what really drove everyone to feel more motivated...I'm sure a big part of it is PR. And I think the other part is, it's coming from employees who want to see the change. And unfortunately, that's mostly from employees of color.*

Sally, a South Asian American woman, shared the same sentiment as Rachel, “I think a lot of it honestly, was a political climate, especially last few years, you've seen a huge increase in focus on diversity in tech, quite frankly.”

*The Invisible Labor of DEI: From Tokenism to Organizational Housework*

The second theme this study focused on is assessing women of color’s experiences with diversity work. The analysis of our qualitative data suggests a very clear theme: DEI work is an uncompensated labor that is often expected from women of color. Seventeen out of the twenty-four women interviewed for this study shared that they have felt unspoken pressure to participate in DEI-related work, although many of them shared that it was always framed as “volunteer”. Claudia described this subtle pressure placed on women of color to lead DEI efforts in the following way: “Not like pressure but I think there's expectation. I think there is this expectation of like, oh, you know, because you look a certain way, you should try to be like the face of or at the forefront,”

In smaller companies, or companies that don’t yet have robust DEI programming, women of color took it upon themselves to launch programs. Amy, a Black woman working at a tech startup described her experience in such a company:

*I started a DEI program for [COMPANY NAME]. Because I'm like, somebody needs to start this. Y'all gonna look bad if nobody ever started. Somebody needs to do it.*
And I was like, hello, today is the first day of the DEIB program, we’re gonna do this because this is insane. Like what? We’ve been in operation for a whole year, and we don’t have any programs!

Nora also experienced subtle pressure or expectations that she would lead DEI efforts at her company. For Nora, part of the expectation was due in part to the absence of any white colleagues willing to engage in or lead such work. She experienced frustration that any DEI work required efforts by those least supported by existing programs and policies.

I wasn’t asked explicitly. But you know, at [COMPANY NAME] when it was like, Hey, here’s a diversity board, whoever wants to get involved, only people wanting to get involved were the non-white people. So, it was one of those things. It’s like, yes, I do feel passionate about diversity. But I find myself so conflicted, because I know that most of the time, the people who actually should be doing the hard lifting, like unlearning how they’re thinking about it, are the white people. But the Brown people are always the ones who sign up because we feel the most passionate about it. So, it felt like unspoken, not pressure, but like, if you don’t do it, no one will.

Women of color also felt that DEI work often tokenized them as the face of or spokesperson for diversity. When I asked Nora if she had ever been asked to be on marketing or diversity related material, her answer revealed the multiple ways she and other Muslim women are tokenized by their company’s DEI efforts:

I don’t think I’ve ever done marketing, but I know a lot of hijab girls who have been into like, hey, stop by for video, or like the software engineer [girl] with hijab I know she was put on like the marketing material, but it’s terms of like, being tasked as a subject matter expert, like, tell us about Ramadan. Yeah, definitely has happened... [one time my manager said] “I think you should present this to the entire team and explain to them what Ramadan is, how long is it? What does it mean for you?” And I’m like, okay, so I have to go create like five or six slides, to present to the team, which like, I understand the idea behind it is to, you know, make people more aware. But it felt like more labor for me. And frankly, I just didn’t want to do it. But I did it. And like, I got great feedback from people like, “thanks so much for explaining”. But I still didn’t want to.

Grace shared that despite being frequently asked, she refuses to be on “glossy photos”. She also expressed frustration at the constant pressure to take part in DEI work.
I don't know if this is what managers are told or what but every manager I've ever had has asked me if I'm involved in whatever their equivalent ERG is. They're always like, “You should get involved, and then send me a bunch of stuff.” And they're like, “You should do this and you should do that. You should do this, you should do that.” It is absurd, the pressure I received to do this… I constantly feel like I'm being pushed to these things. If I removed myself from those mailing lists, I am re-added. My manager's constantly sending me stuff, even though I've been like, I don't do this.

Grace also went on to explain how this kind of work is always uncompensated and unaccounted for in performance evaluations and other metrics that can lead to promotion, compensation increases, and/or positive visibility. For Grace, these expectations are harmful especially for women of color who often feel like they have to work extra hard to be recognized as highly skilled workers:

Again, if I take two hours out of my week to do this thing, I still have to work those two hours. It is not considered work for me to go participate in those ERGs [...] I already feel like I have to be significantly more qualified than everyone else, and you're asking me to spend all this time on ERG stuff that I do not get paid for and I do not get recognized for, it is considered extra. I'm not gonna do that. I don't have any interest in that. I don't get paid to do that. I don't mean to be exceptionally cynical. It's just, if I were a white guy in his mid 30s, nobody would expect me to do all this stuff on my own time.

Michelle, a Black woman, called these expectations placed on women of color “bullshit” and underscored the superficiality of these efforts: “I honestly think it's just this super performative thing that at the end of the day, ends up being a labor of the marginalized people and not those who made them marginalized to begin with.”

Amber, an East Asian woman who’s been working in tech for over 25 years, has worked in many different types of tech companies, from startups to major corporations. In each work organization she was often the only—or one of the only—women of color in programming/engineering roles. When asked about DEI work, she emphasized the ways in which those most in need of more supportive work environments are often placed in
the role of doing the work of DEI. For Amber, the uncompensated nature of this work undermined any perception that companies are truly committed to change:

To me it feels like, if you are making people who have full time real jobs do it, they don't get reviewed for the work that they're doing, then you're saying that this thing is not important. Right? It's like, is it important or not? And if it's important, don't pay lip service to it. Don't tell me it's important and then not compensate me for it or not give me reviews based on it, right? Because if you're telling me it's important then it's like, evaluate my performance for it, because that's what I'm doing. Right? And so that's where I think that, you know, you can tell whether or not a company is really meaning it or they're just saying it because it's easy to say these things like that.

The Value of Corporate DEI: Living the Mismatch

Tech companies, like many other corporates, follow the same set of diversity best practices that often include diversity recruiting (Dobbin, Kim, and Kalev 2012; Flory et al. 2021; Mckay and Avery 2016), diversity trainings (King, Gulick, and Avery 2009; Roberson et al. 2003; Thomas, Tran, and Dawson 2010), and mentoring and networking (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006; Kim 2006; Landfeld 2009; Madera 2013). Scholars Dobbin and Kalev (2022) have studied diversity programs and their impact on increasing the representation of employees from historically excluded groups and concluded that diversity training continues to have the least impact on improving diversity in the workplace, while mentoring and networking have a better though still moderate impact. As for recruitment, findings suggest that diversity recruiting that focuses on targeting women and minority talent, especially in colleges, had a positive impact on workplace diversity, and that it “turned the managers into diversity champions” (Dobbin and Kalev 2016). However, most of the studies interrogating the “effectiveness” of diversity programs, look at them from the business perspective, and whether they are achieving their intended goals set by businesses, while very few research have considered their
effectiveness from the perspectives of the target groups (Gündemir, Martin, and Homan 2019; Kirby and Kaiser 2021; Kirby, Silva Rego, and Kaiser 2020; Tessa L. Dover et al. 2020)

Findings from the current study present a clear picture on the effectiveness of diversity blueprint practices from the perspective of women of color: some of the practices impact women’s experiences in tech, but none impact their careers. When asked to evaluate the diversity programs they have in their companies, participants reached no consensus on which programs are effective and which are not; they were, however, able to identify pros and cons for each of the programs. When asked to identify diversity programs that have directly impacted their careers, all participants answered the same: none. For example, only one participant in the study sarcastically suggested that she benefited from diversity programs because of her Black identity. When asked if there are any diversity programs that had a direct impact (harmed or benefited) on her career, Amy said:

*I mean, yes, I think they hired me because I was Black. I think on their list was to hire a Black person, because they were all white. So I think that affected me in that way. I got paid because I was Black.*

Participants had mixed opinions about all programs but seemed to have a slightly more favorable assessments of formal and informal mentoring and Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). While all participants mentioned diversity training as one of the most prevalent diversity programs, their assessment of the effectiveness of trainings was mixed. Some participants questioned the real impact of trainings and identified them as the least effective type of programming, while others thought they were important and needed. Additionally, almost all participants pointed out that in the absence of a genuine commitment to diversity, even potentially effective programs will fail.
Affinity groups, known as Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), were one of the most popular diversity approaches discussed by participants. Despite the cynicism that many participants expressed towards the uncompensated labor that goes into running ERGs, some of them spoke about the impact that ERGs had on their experiences. Many of the participants who identified as Muslim mentioned the efforts that were put into Ramadan as very important. For example, Elizabeth, who is a South Asian American woman who identifies as Muslim, said:

So, if we didn't have interfaith ERG, I feel like no one would even know about Ramadan. Right. And, and that's something really important for me, right? It's a month of Ramadan. And I want to make sure that my VPS and managers are aware of it, that my team is aware of it, I may need some special accommodation, right? So, if we didn't have the ERG, I don't, I don't want to be the one to make the awareness for everyone. Like I want it to come from top down. Right. So that's the value that adds for me, like I want to make sure that these type of main events that impact you as a Muslim employee, that there is a different channel that this information is distributed from other than myself.

Nancy, who identifies as half Arab and half white, shared the same sentiment regarding the impact of the work that was done through the ERG:

Okay, they got right, Ramadan awareness, and communicating to my manager without me having to tell my manager that it's Ramadan. And I appreciated that because I shouldn't have to, say, “Hey, I have a problem.” That's how it just sounds, when Ramadan is not a problem, right. But so, I think that that did happen, where Ramadan was oh, when [EMPLOYEE NAME] got the balloons to our desk, I think that's what it communicated. And then everybody asked “What's going on? Oh, it's Ramadan?” You know, I'm fasting. And they got it, you know?

However, some participants pushed back on the idea that ERGs are “safe spaces” for underrepresented employees. Grace said

I'm deeply skeptical, I would not consider them a safe space. Now, what they do do, especially when on a day-to-day basis, you are unlikely to encounter someone like you, they do put you in touch with those people, so you can then have one on one or small group instances where you as a person, are relating to other people as people
and that is obviously enormously beneficial. But that's more a side effect than the initial purpose. I'm not saying get rid of them [...] But do I think that that is happening to benefit me as an individual in a career? I mean, no, I don't.

For Michelle, the role of the ERGs that she had seen in the two companies that she worked at wasn’t to help underrepresented employees, but rather serve as a business function that can be leveraged to help source more underrepresented employees. She said:

It's just something that's on some deck that floats around when we're talking to new hires about our ERGs. Like, that's pretty much all it is, and I also have come to realize, like, for the last two companies that I've worked at, like, the ERG sponsor for the black group was always the Chief Revenue guy, right? It's like, well, he wants to get more black people in, in the sales roles, but then he'd like, never promoted them to anything. So you're here to like, kind of poached for your pipeline, and like, help us get people in. But then they don't go anywhere, like their career either is at a standstill, and that they have to leave the organization to like, move to the next level

Grace also criticized the professional development and identity-based events that are usually organized by the ERGs. For her, the content of those events isn’t very beneficial.

It's difficult because I come at this from two angles, one of them being, I do think they are good events, but I think the reasons that they're good events, don't really have anything to do with the actual events that the company puts on. I think having an opportunity for all of us to get together, talk about what's real, have lunch, be able to rely on one another and meet people in positions of power, meet people who for whom you are the person in position of power, that is beneficial [...] I don't necessarily think of the content is as particularly useful. I think that one challenge I've had with these programs, is that the content is always exactly the same. It's like, we're gonna get somebody in here to talk to you about getting a promotion. And we're gonna get somebody in here to talk to you about managing up. It's this list of pretty simple, how to have a Career stuff, which can start to feel infantilizing pretty quickly. No, I understand how to get a promotion, there's probably something stopping me from getting a promotion, that might be my identity, it might be something else. Regardless, I don't really need a fifth lecture on how to have a professional career. I don't want to hear from the Bootstrappers. I don't want to go up there and be a bootstrapper and be like, yeah I was poor once and now I work at [MAJOR TECH COMPANY].

For Hannah, the content is good, but it’s targeted to the wrong audience:
It was frustrating for me to go to these events, I know everything that they're telling me, have lived a lot of it, and be looking around and seeing all women who feel the same way, but yet there were no men there, who were the ones who would actually benefit the most from these kinds of talks and events. That was something that was always frustrating to me, I would try and encourage the men on my team to come with me, sometimes it would work, sometimes it wouldn't. I really feel like those kinds of things should be more company wide and mandatory rather than just the women in tech people are gonna go to the women in tech event, because those aren't the people who need to hear about those issues. We're aware of it, we already know, you don't need to tell us, you need to tell everybody else. Even though I think that those groups have potential, I feel like they're not being used in the way that they should all the time, the content is there, but it's not being heard by the right people.

Monica, an Arab-American immigrant, spoke about the role mentoring had played in her career. Although not directly targeted at women of color or as part of diversity efforts, Monica signed up to the formal mentoring program that her employer offered and was matched with a white executive from one of the company's offices in Europe. Despite the unlikely match, she shared that this mentoring relationship has had a very positive influence on her career, “We just get together every two weeks, we talk about anything concerning anything I want to kind of discuss, any growth. This is…he helped me actually put like together how I want to ask for a raise.”

Grace also emphasized the importance of mentoring, although for her, the most important type of mentoring has been informal. She said, “I believe that mentorship is really critical. And you should find people to mentor you. And I have been unbelievably benefited by mentorship, [but] not one of those has ever come from a formal program.”

As for mandatory diversity training, participants in this study had mixed feelings about them. Some thought that such trainings were important and needed, like Sally:

Yeah, I do think that unconscious bias training is actually an important one to have across the company. Just because all of us have unconscious biases that we are in aren't aware of. And I believe that is a really good training to create a more
inclusive environment make everyone more accountable and responsible for how they show up at work.

Other participants, like Elizabeth, saw them as ineffective and largely part of a check-the-box approach to DEI rather than reflecting a genuine commitment to organizational change:

*I mean, this training, you know, I felt like the training is their checkbox, you know, all the companies are doing these trainings for hiring people, managers, individual contributors. I don't know if it's really changing anyone's behavior because it's just so hard to change people. So the only thing you can hold them accountable is to policy.*

Women of color in this study also discussed the impact of diversity recruiting on bringing in more people of color. However, while most participants recognized that diversity recruiting efforts seem to be effective in hiring more women and people of color, companies continue to struggle to retain them. Thus, while inclusive training is good, the ability to retain diverse recruits is dependent on organizational changes that are not happening. As Michelle put it:

*Because there's always like, you can get them [referring to Black employees] no problem. But like that retention piece, especially when you get into like, where does my career go from here? Right? If I join a company, and there's no Black manager and no Black this, okay, then I know that I'm just here again to try to build some skill, make some money, and then go to the next organization.*

Like Michelle, Sally also expressed doubts about recruiting a diverse pool without ongoing effort to support the careers of a diverse employee base from the moment of hire onwards:

*This has come up for me in multiple conversations with leaders where they say we need to bring in more top of funnel but the question I ask is, “You know, how inclusive is our interview process? How is our onboarding? How are we performance managing? How is our manager effectiveness? How are we growing*
our individuals? How are your engineers growing over time versus our non-engineers? Are we promoting people in a capacity that we want to see?"

**Imagining the Possible**

Lastly, we asked participants to identify ways that DEI programs could be made more effective. Several key themes emerged including the need for companies to communicate with individuals from underrepresented groups to better understand their needs, introduce greater transparency about diversity goals and the metrics used to track them, and implement enforceable diversity policies in which managers are held accountable for making progress toward goals. For Amy, companies need to understand people’s background in order to better serve them and this understanding requires ongoing, sustained, and authentic communication about the needs and perspectives of those who remain underrepresented in the company and industry:

*I think that some of the things that they could possibly do, is spend more time learning about people’s culture. So I think that more understanding like how people grew up, I think, what they were exposed to, I think that to me is like the foundation of a DEI program, or DEIB program, because you don't really know who people are and what they really need and what they've experienced. [...] I feel like there isn't really like this humanization aspect of like, each of us individually.*

Grace described an example of an effective approach from a previous tech employer that she thinks should be implemented by all DEI programs in tech:

*So at [COMPANY NAME], one of the things I really like, is the [INTERSECTIONAL BASED] program. There’s a very clear problem. They looked at this problem, they went to actual [RACIAL MINORITY] women. And they said, here’s a bunch of money for you to do what you think you need to do to make the space better for [RACIAL MINORITY] women. And like, we’re actually going to put time and money and headcount behind this problem, right, and we’re going to let this community and the experts in this community figure out what needs to happen. And we are actually going to implement those changes, right?*
Many participants discussed the need to have enforceable diversity policies combined with managerial accountability for implementing those policies and making progress on goals. According to Amber, accountability is critical for any successful DEI program because without it, very little progress can or will be made:

*I actually think that the only effective thing is that if you hold a very strong line, and what I mean by that is, I am very explicit that we need this role to be filled with a person of color, or with a woman or with a woman of color. And we are going to wait to fill this role until we find that person. That means that, don't even scan candidates who are not fitting of that category, make your recruiting team make like all your internal people to cast the net and look inside the network, right, to find somebody that fits that role. That's the only thing [that can work].*

For Samantha, the issue of inclusion runs deeper than simply introducing practices or even policies because, according to her, bias is often built into the measures and metrics used to evaluate talent:

*The issue is not the practices, the issue is the mindset around how the practices get executed [...] So I wouldn't say that we need to change the practices like the practices are really well documented, right? We need to have strong short interviews, inclusive questions, and process interview debriefs; all of those things are important. But if at intake, everything that you defined as a requirement was biased, then bias is going to follow you throughout your process.*

Lastly, many participants criticized the ambiguous goals and metrics their companies use to track diversity as well as the absence of accountability for making progress. Alice was particularly critical of the ability of companies to claim success without being held accountable to clear and transparent goals:

*I've noticed is that they are not really that transparent in regards to the numbers that they have, you know, with, especially with attracting minorities and talent that way. So that's why I've caught myself thinking, “you're telling me that we're doing great, but what are the metrics? on a scale of what? what's the metrics that you're using?” If you want me to trust you, show me how you got to those numbers.*
Discussion & Conclusion

The current study filled an important gap in the literature by analyzing the views and experiences of women of color employed in the tech industry concerning diversity and inclusion programs. In-depth interviews revealed that women of color hold differing definitions of diversity compared to tech companies, leading to skepticism and distrust regarding the real motivations behind diversity programs. Respondents also identified significant gaps between the intended and actual impacts of several diversity programs and policies, further emphasizing the need for tailored and evidence-based initiatives that cater to the needs and perspectives of women of color. Finally, interviews revealed participants' recommendations for addressing diversity, including the need for greater transparency and accountability from tech companies, and the importance of developing and implementing initiatives that go beyond token gestures.

Although women of color in this study defined diversity and inclusion using terms similar to those used by companies, their meanings go beyond the superficial definitions their companies deploy. For example, while many companies focus on representation as numerical goals to include in annual diversity reports, women of color saw the need for increasing representation as a mean for survival in the often lonely and isolating spaces of tech. Additionally, many diversity initiatives are designed to “fix” individuals, like the “Lean In” concept that encourages women to sit at the table and speak up (Sandberg 2015). However, women of color pointed to the fact that equity and inclusion are not individual problems but corporate-level challenges that must be approached systemically. For respondents, companies must create processes that can foster and enable employees
from historically excluded groups to be hired, to cultivate their careers, and to advance to position of authority.

Overall, respondents were cynical towards diversity and inclusion and wary of the performative efforts that have had very little impact on their careers. Respondents noted that their careers have been shaped by racialized gender stereotypes, and corporate diversity management efforts often place the burden of fixing bias on the shoulders of employees of color themselves. Women of color often find themselves pressured to initiate, lead, and/or participate in many diversity efforts in a way that is often de-valued. Thus, while their companies might proclaim the importance of those efforts, those doing most of the labor of diversity are rarely compensated or rewarded for their efforts in performance evaluations. Additionally, women of color reported experiencing a form of “coercive diversity” when they were expected to serve as the public face of their company’s diversity communications.

The gap between the intended and actual impacts of corporate diversity management illustrates the ways in which diversity programs where not designed with the needs of women of color in mind. None of our respondents were able to identify a single diversity initiative that had a direct and positive impact on her career. As a result, many of the participants were looking for an exit strategy away from their current jobs, reporting that they do not plan to remain in the tech industry over time. While respondents acknowledged the financial benefits of working in the tech industry, many agreed that the workplace cultures and hierarchies created an environment that was excessively exhausting and stressful. In this way, the findings from this study illuminate some of the
factors that contribute to the high rates of turnover for women of color relative to other groups across the tech industry.

The findings of this study contribute to the current literature on diversity and inclusion in the workplace by illuminating the challenges faced by women of color in tech and their views on the efficacy of diversity programs. This study can inform research and practice in at least two ways. First, this study underscores the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to studying diversity and inclusion in organizations. Diversity research often focuses on the impact of diversity programs on organizations, and the effectiveness of those programs is often measured by their ability to meet organizational goals. However, relatively less attention has been paid to studying the impact of these policies and programs on women of color. Despite the ample research that shows that women of color experience workplace bias in ways unique to white women and men of color (see Rosette et al. 2019 for a review, research on the impact of diversity on target groups often lumps women of color under either “minorities” or “women” (Kirby and Kaiser 2021; Kirby et al. 2020). A full understanding of the challenges women of color face, however, requires scholars (and practitioners) to account for the “double jeopardy” women of color face in male and white dominated jobs and professions (Berdahl and Moore 2006; Williams et al. 2016).

Second, insights gained from this study can inform the design of more equitable, inclusive, and impactful policies and practices that better reflect the needs and perspectives of women of color in the tech industry. Diversity programs that aim to increase diversity and inclusion must attend to cultural and structural barriers that
contribute to the compounding impacts of racial and gender bias in the workplace. Findings from this study highlight the limitations of initiatives that focus solely on demographic representation without addressing the underlying issues that contribute to the underrepresentation of women of color in tech, including systemic bias, a lack of opportunities for mentorship and sponsorship, and a culture that is not inclusive of diverse perspectives and experiences. Absent policies that address the unique challenges faced by women of color, DEI policies risk disproportionately benefitting white women and maintain the status quo (Crenshaw 2007). Indeed, recent research finds that increasing the representation of white women in male-dominated professions does not fully address the needs of women of color (Abulbasal et al. 2023). Together with the findings from the current study, this evidence underscores the critical importance of designing DEI practices in ways that attend to the intersectional needs and identities of women of color.

While the current study makes an important contribution to our understanding of women of color experiences with diversity programs, the study is limited to interviews with women of color in the tech industry. Future research build upon this study by centering the experiences of women of color in other industries. Comparative analyses may reveal important differences and similarities across sectors, jobs, or industries that impact the entrance, retention, and promotion of women of color. Second, future research can explore the career experiences of women with other intersectional identities, including religion, sexuality, and disability. Such studies could better illuminate the shortcomings of current diversity management paradigms in addressing the needs of diverse stakeholders. Finally, future research could trace the experiences of women of color over
time, to assess the impact or lack thereof of DEI policies at each career stages, from initial job search to career exit. Such a study could better specify the ways corporate diversity management intervenes at key points in the career to affect – or not – the career trajectory of women of color.

References


Chapter 5: Conclusion
Tech enterprises allocate substantial financial resources annually towards diversity programs and initiatives, establishing dedicated teams and roles specifically aimed at addressing the underrepresentation of diverse groups within their workforce. To demonstrate their commitment, they also release Annual Diversity Reports showcasing the outcomes of these diversity endeavors (Nader, 2018). Despite the rapid expansion of the tech industry, the percentage of BIPOC employees in most tech companies remains disappointingly low, as documented in earlier research (Alegria & Branch, 2015).

These trends underscore a misalignment between the manner in which corporations conceptualize and implement diversity initiatives, and their actual impact on the workforce. Surprisingly, there is a paucity of scholarly investigations exploring the reasons, mechanisms, and contexts underlying this disparity. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to comprehensively examine the notion of diversity as a concept, analyzing its practical implementation and effects in the tech industry, with the ultimate goal of elucidating the reasons behind the failure of corporate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts to achieve their articulated objectives.

The research commenced with an exhaustive review of the historical evolution of corporate diversity management, complemented by a systematic examination of sociological critiques concerning diversity management regimes. Subsequently, empirical investigations were conducted from two vantage points: first, a scrutiny of the framing strategies employed by tech companies on their websites to present their diversity initiatives; and second, an analysis of the perceptions and experiences of women of color working within the tech industry regarding diversity, as well as the influence of DEI policies and programs on their professional trajectories.
In the following sections, a succinct summary of the key findings from each of the three chapters is presented, accompanied by a discussion of the study's implications, limitations, and prospects for future research.

**Sociological Perspectives on Diversity Management**

This chapter sheds light on the apparent discrepancy between investments in diversity and the actual outcomes of diversity initiatives. Despite the increasing allocation of resources and widespread adoption of corporate diversity management, many professional workplaces remain inequitable and non-inclusive. A historical analysis of the evolution of the corporate diversity model provides insight into the limited effectiveness of standard diversity management strategies, frameworks, and policies. These approaches have failed to achieve their intended goals because they were originally designed to serve internal purposes, such as mitigating legal liabilities, rather than advancing gender and racial justice in the workplace. The continued use of these policies reflects a path-dependent process, not only for the policies themselves but also for human resource professionals who rely on them to reinforce their professional status.

**View From the Top: How Tech Corporations Conceptualize Diversity**

This chapter centered on the analysis of how prominent technology companies frame their diversity management endeavors. Despite being widely acknowledged as champions of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), the representation of women and individuals of color in these firms, as well as in the broader tech sector, has shown limited progress. A historical review of corporate DEI practices indicates that the primary objective of diversity management was historically driven by a concern for legal liability mitigation
rather than a genuine commitment to achieving equity and inclusion. Previous research has pointed out that public-facing diversity claims made by companies, such as those displayed on their websites, often serve as tools for impression management, while the internal dynamics regarding access and career advancement remain largely unchanged.

To conduct an in-depth analysis of corporate framing, this study employed a systematic examination of the diversity-related content on the websites of eight leading tech companies, chosen based on their inclusion in Glassdoor's 2021 Best Places to Work list. The findings of the content analysis revealed the existence of three predominant themes consistently present among the examined companies: (1) an ongoing reliance on the business rationale for diversity, wherein companies present diversity initiatives as critical for achieving business success; (2) strategic ambiguity surrounding the root causes of inequality, with firms attributing the issue to broader societal trends beyond their sphere of control or influence; and (3) cultivation of an impression that the company is actively engaged in efforts to address diversity challenges, while simultaneously outsourcing responsibility and perpetuating the existing status quo.

In light of the overall findings, it becomes apparent that diversity management within the technology industry primarily operates symbolically, enabling companies to project an image of equity and inclusivity without effecting significant structural change. Notably, this symbolic function of DEI construction is strategically ambiguous, emphasizing the communication of the presence of diversity programs over their actual efficacy or impact. Consequently, diversity management serves primarily as a tool for impression management, rather than being a set of interventions aimed at dismantling barriers to entry and advancement within work organizations.
View from the Margins: How Women of Color Experience Diversity

This chapter undertook an examination of the perspectives and lived experiences of women of color who are employed in the tech industry. Through in-depth interviews, it was discerned that these women hold distinct conceptualizations of diversity when compared to those propagated by tech companies. This variance has led to a sense of skepticism and distrust concerning the genuine motivations driving corporate diversity programs. Moreover, the study unveiled substantial disparities between the intended objectives of various diversity initiatives and their actual impacts, further underscoring the imperative for tailored and empirically-grounded initiatives that are attuned to the unique needs and viewpoints of women of color.

The interviews also shed light on the participants' recommendations for ameliorating diversity efforts. Key suggestions included the demand for enhanced transparency and accountability from tech companies, and the recognition of the significance of developing and implementing initiatives that transcend mere tokenism or symbolic gestures.

The discrepancy between the intended and actual impacts of corporate diversity management revealed through this study demonstrates that existing diversity programs have not been designed with due consideration for the specific requirements of women of color. Remarkably, none of the respondents were able to identify a single diversity initiative that directly and positively affected their career trajectories. Consequently, many participants expressed a desire to seek alternative employment opportunities, indicating a lack of long-term commitment to remaining in the tech industry. While the respondents acknowledged the financial benefits associated with tech industry
employment, they also concurred that the prevailing workplace climates and hierarchies engendered an exceedingly taxing and stressful environment. These findings offer insights into the factors contributing to the disproportionately high turnover rates among women of color compared to other demographic groups within the tech industry.

Implications

The exploration of corporate diversity management by sociologists and social scientists has yielded a range of critiques, which highlight the shortcomings of this approach and offer guidance on more efficacious ways for work organizations to address systemic barriers to entry and success for women and people of color. In addition, scholars have begun to map out new directions and possibilities for organizing work and restructuring equity policies to reduce gendered and racialized workplace hierarchies. Despite these proposals, there is a need to incorporate the insights of critical race and intersectional scholars to forge new and innovative problem-solving pathways for achieving workplace justice.

This current research has implications for both practice and future research. First, the insights derived from this study can inform the design of more just, inclusive, and effective policies and practices that better reflect the needs and perspectives of underrepresented employees in the tech industry, especially women of color. To achieve this, diversity programs must address the cultural and structural barriers that contribute to the cumulative effects of racial and gender bias in the workplace. Standard corporate DEI policies and programs have failed to achieve significant increases in representation and
some even have a negative impact on the representation of women and men and women of color in leadership over time. Therefore, companies must do more than offer performative or remedial diversity policies in order limit diversity backlash and burnout. Instead, companies must develop and implement effective and sustainable DEI strategies that actually reduce bias, discrimination, and harassment in the workplace.

The study also underscores the significance of adopting an intersectional approach to examining diversity and inclusion in organizations. Prior research on diversity programs has focused on their impact on organizations, and their efficacy has been assessed based on their ability to meet organizational objectives. However, there has been relatively little research focused on the effects of these programs on women of color. Despite ample evidence that women of color face workplace bias in ways distinct from those faced by white women and men of color (Rosette et al., 2019), research on the impact of diversity programs often conflate women of color with “minorities” or “women” (Kirby and Kaiser, 2021; Kirby et al., 2020). A comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by women of color necessitates that scholars and practitioners consider the “double jeopardy” that women of color experience in male and white-dominated jobs and professions (Berdahl and Moore, 2006; Williams et al., 2016).

Limitations

As with all academic research, this study has limitations that can inform future research. The primary focus of the study is on the contemporary technology industry within the United States, and as such, the findings may not necessarily be generalizable to other industries or other time periods. To address this limitation, future research could utilize longitudinal analyses to track the evolution of companies' diversity messaging over time.
Such research would provide valuable insights into the factors that influence changes in companies' diversity messaging, including external pressures such as regulatory changes or public opinion, as well as internal factors such as changes in leadership, internal stakeholder demands, or shifts in strategic priorities.

Additionally, this study only provides perspectives from upper management and marginalized groups within the industry. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of diversity initiatives, future research could include the perspectives of the majority group (e.g., the view from the middle) within organizations. Quantitative methods could be used to investigate how the majority group perceives diversity initiatives and the factors that influence their attitudes towards diversity, including potential backlash and diversity fatigue.

While this study provides insights into diversity issues in the technology industry, future research could broaden the focus to other industries. Comparative analyses across sectors, occupations, and industries could reveal valuable insights about potential variances and similarities concerning the misalignment between diversity framing and its impact. Such research would provide a broader understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by diversity and inclusion initiatives in different organizational contexts and fields.

In conclusion, while this study provides important insights into diversity and inclusion initiatives in the technology industry, future research should utilize longitudinal data to track the evolution of companies' diversity messaging over time, include perspectives from the majority group, and expand the focus to other industries. Such research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the
effectiveness of diversity and inclusion initiatives and the strategies that can be employed to promote transparent and efficacious diversity management.
References


Appendices
Appendices
Appendix A. Interview Questions

Thank you for participating in the study! First I want to iterate that this interview is confidential. All identifiers will be removed from the interview transcripts, and no identifiable information about you or your employer will be publicly shared in any form. Also, if there’s any question that you prefer not to answer, just let me know and we can move on to the next one.

Do you have any questions before we start?

1. General Background Questions:
   - Please tell me about your career up until this point. How did you get into tech? was it difficult to get to where you at now? Why?
   - How long have you been working for your current employer?
   - How long have you been working in the tech industry?
   - Do you plan to remain in the industry? If not, why not? And, if so, where do you see your career going from here and what might the challenges be?

2. Work experience in tech
   - Tell me a about your experience as a (Black, Latina, Arab, etc.) in tech right now
   - Tell me about your opportunities for advancement in tech for you as a woman of color.
     What role do you believe other parts of your identity (gender, sexuality, language, religion, etc…) have played in your experience as a leader
   - Many folks of color say that tech can be a lonely place. Has this been true for you? Why?

3. Diversity in Tech
   - What do the words diversity and inclusion mean for you in tech? You mentioned that you work remotely – do you think that your opinion on diversity would’ve been different if you worked from the office?
• How important is it for you (if at all) that the employer have a clear commitment for
diversity before you apply for/accept a job offer? Why?
• Tech doesn’t have a great reputation for gender or racial diversity. Why do you think that
is? Is that reputation deserved or not?

4. Diversity Practices
• Do you think your employer is committed to diversity? Can you share some examples?
• What is your employer doing well when it comes to diversity efforts?
• What do you think drives your employer commitment to diversity?
• Have you ever been asked to help with diversity work that is outside of your job
responsibilities? For example, being asked to be on marketing materials or serve on
diversity panels. If so, how did it make you feel?
• Have you ever been asked to give your opinion/feedback on diversity issues such as
religious or cultural holidays(Example: company public posts regarding Juneteenth or Eid
etc.)
• Do you participate in diversity events at work? If so, which ones and why?
• Have you ever felt that because of your identity, there’s a certain pressure on you to
participate in diversity related work?
• How do your co-workers respond to your participation?
• Do you feel support/resentment/resistance?
• Now let’s talk about some of the most common diversity practices… You’ve indicated in
the survey that your employer offers the following programs/practices (list based on the
participant answers in the survey))
  o Targeted recruitment of diverse job candidates (mandatory)
○ Development of a pipeline of diverse leaders (mandatory)
○ Formal mentorship program (voluntary)
○ Sexual harassment training (mandatory)
○ Diversity training (voluntary)
○ Support for affinity or resource groups – ask if the answer is yes: (voluntary)
  ▪ Were you a leader or a member of the ERG?
  ▪ Did you get compensated for the work you do for the ERG?
  ▪ Does your work with the ERG get included in your performance evaluation? How?

    for each one of them, I want you to tell me

○ Have you been involved/participated in it? why (not)?
○ Do you think it’s effective or ineffective? Why?
○ Do you think it helped/harmed/ or had no effect on your career? How/why?
    • As a manager, how easy/difficult is it to implement and promote diversity initiatives within your team
    • What are some of the diversity practices that you think are important, but your employer is missing?
    • What else would you like me to know that we haven’t yet talked about?
    • Are there any other folks in your networks who might want to speak to me?
Appendix B - Vita
RANA ABULBASAL, PH.D.
Rana.abulbasal@gmail.com  (503)740-4640

Education

2023  Doctor of Philosophy, Sociology, Minor: Social Inequality. Utah State University
2012  Master of International Management, Portland State University
2006  Bachelor of Science, Management Information Systems, Balqa’ Applied University

Research and Teaching Interest

Social inequality; Gender; Race and ethnicity; Work and organizations; Intersectionality; Diversity, Social problems.

Publications

Journal Articles

- Guldbrandsen, Racheal, Glass, Christy, Martinez-Cola, Marisela, Abulbasal, Rana, “I Try to Take the Whole Family Thing Out of the Picture”: How Professional Navigate Motherhood Bias at Work.” Gender & Society (under review)

Book Chapters


Project Reports

- Barriers to Advancement: Findings from the 2020 Study of Gender & Racial Bias in Utah’s Legal Profession

Manuscripts in Progress
- Abulbasal, Rana. “View From the Top: How Tech Corporations Conceptualize Diversity”. In preparation for submission to Social Science Research.

### Honors and Awards

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Award Description</th>
<th>Institution</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>Outstanding Student Contribution Award - Inclusion Center and Sexual Assault and Anti-Violence Information (SAAVI) Office</td>
<td>Utah State University</td>
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<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>Graduate Instructor of the Year - Sociology Department, Utah State University</td>
<td>Utah State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>Graduate Oral Presentation Award – Student Research Symposium, Utah State University</td>
<td>Utah State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Graduate Researcher of the Year – Sociology Department, Utah State University</td>
<td>Utah State University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Grants Received

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Grant Description</th>
<th>Amount (in dollars)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>Summer Graduate Student-Faculty Funding, College of Humanities and Social Science, Utah State University</td>
<td>$4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>Graduate Research and Creative Opportunities (GRCO) Grant</td>
<td>$1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022 - 2023</td>
<td>Inclusive Excellence Fellowship – School of Graduate Studies, Utah State University</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>Summer Graduate Student-Faculty Funding, College of Humanities and Social Science, Utah State University</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>Calvin Maurer Fellowship</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Graduate Fellowship – Center of Intersectional Gender Studies and Research, Utah State University</td>
<td>$1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>CARES Act – Utah State University</td>
<td>$4,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Earl A. and Carmen D. Fredrickson Fellowship</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Nazih Alrashid Scholarship</td>
<td>$1000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Teaching Experience

**Utah State University**

- **Spring 2023**  SOC 2370: Sociology of Gender *(Graduate Instructor)*
Fall 2022  SOC 3310: Social Inequality (*Teaching Assistant*)
SOC 3320: Work, Inequality & the American Dream (*Teaching Assistant*)

Fall 2021  SOC 2370: Sociology of Gender (*Graduate Instructor*)

Fall 2020  SOC 1010: Introduction to Sociology (*Teaching Assistant*)
SOC 3420: Criminology (*Teaching Assistant*)

**Research Experience**

2021-2023  Dissertation Project – “*Diversity in Tech: Analyzing the Mismatch Between Corporate Framing and Impact*”. Supervised by Dr. Christy Glass

2019-2023  Graduate Research Assistant to Professor Christy Glass


- Developed survey instrument for a statewide survey.
- Conducted in-depth interviews with lawyers and judges.
- Analyzed survey and interview data for project reports and publications.
- Supervised undergraduate researchers.

**Presentations**

**Conference Presentations**

2022  “Exploring the Impact of Women’s Representation on the Professional Careers of Women of Color” Presented at the *Student Research Symposium, Utah State University* (April)

2022  “Diversity in Tech: Analyzing the Mismatch Between Corporate Approaches and Impact”. Presented at the annual meetings of the *Pacific Sociological Association* (April)

2022  “Exploring the Impact of Women’s Representation on the Professional Careers of Women of Color” Presented at the WU Gender and Diversity Conference 2022, *Vienna University of Economics and Business* (March)

2021  “Limits of Representation? How Gender Diversity Affects Bias against Women of Color.” Presented at the annual meetings of the *Pacific Sociological Association* (March)

**Invited Presentations**

2022  “Gender, Women, and Inequalities”. Guest Lecture, Department of Social Work, Utah State University

2021 Invited panelist - Intersection on Inclusion, Center of Intersectional Gender Studies and Research, Utah State University

Services

2022 & 2023 Committee Chair – USU Ramadan program
2021 – 2022 Faculty Search Committee, Sociology
2021 Evaluator - Undergraduate Research Symposium, Utah State University

Professional Experiences

Facebook, Inc.
- Project Manager, Sourcing and Operations Engineering (Jan 2016 – Oct 2017)
- Senior Sourcing Analyst, Data Center Infrastructure (July 2013 – Jan 2016)

Microsoft Corp.
- Senior Sourcing Analyst, Global Procurement Group (Feb 2012 – June 2013)

Royal Jordanian Airlines
- Senior Officer, Cargo Systems and Procedures (Jan 2007 – July 2009)