

**Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in US Workplace: Differentiation Between
Superficial Diversity and Authentic Diversity**

A RESEARCH THESIS

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by

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Abstract

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in US Workplace: Differentiation Between Superficial
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Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) have become buzzwords for many companies. However, some companies promote DEI just for its financial outcome and reputation rather than aiming to establish an inclusive work environment for minority groups. This study is designed to differentiate authentic and superficial diversity and investigate the factors contributing to authentic diversity. The focused area is minority women in the US management consulting industry. This research applied qualitative interviews and thematic analysis to understand what types of DEI implementation would be perceived as authentic DEI in minority women's minds. Four themes regarding what has worked for building authentic DEI initiatives have been generated. They are respectively to build affinity groups, create diverse teams, break stereotypes, and let people out of the identity group get involved. With these research findings, we could make transparent which company is pursuing authentic DEI for a higher level of social equity and which company is just conducting lip service for its own interest. Ultimately, this study intends to reduce racial and gender inequity in the US consulting industry and the entire workplace accordingly.

Keywords: authentic DEI, superficial DEI, minority women, affinity groups, stereotypes

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Dedication

I dedicate my senior honors thesis to my dear family, friends, and all my loved ones. Thanks to my parents Ying Zhou and Xiongjiang Huang for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout the process.

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Introduction

In a highly competitive business world, an increasing number of companies across different industries have started devoting effort and capital to shaping a good company culture because they realize that is what can differentiate them from their peers. Recently, a majority of companies start to pursue DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) and believe it would become a catalyst for their development. This should be deemed as a positive transformation since a high level of DEI would help establish a more respectful and healthier working environment. The arising awareness of workplace diversity was commonly embodied in companies' recruiting materials and executive board demographics. As we could easily recognize, people of color appeared in media and decision-making roles much more often than before diverse workplace cultures became prevalent. However, these phenomena are sometimes misleading and deceptive if people fail to identify the superficial diversity or racial capitalism, interest convergence, and tokenism that might come along with the diversity initiatives on the surface level. In this research, I will focus on a serious type of diversity with a target group of minority women in the US management consulting industry. I selected consulting because DEI-related studies were rarely done in this field. Additionally, consulting is a newly emergent and high-paying industry where if inequality exists and is overlooked, it will influence other businesses for the worse. As DEI culture keeps progressing in the workplace, it is critically important to provide guidance on how to differentiate various types of diversity. This research will conduct qualitative interviews to delve into the difference between superficial and authentic diversity. The difference between them could be trivial enough to be often overlooked in research but could also be large enough to result in a fundamental social impact.

Research Questions

This study mainly investigated the following questions:

1. What differentiates superficial diversity and authentic diversity?
2. What factors will contribute to authentic diversity?

Significance

Historically, social equality has marked the milestones of human evolution, tracing back from the racial justice campaign promoted by Martin Luther King to the recent legalization of same-sex marriage announced by the U.S. Supreme Court. It shows that social justice and human equal rights are always pursued by our ancestors and passed along through generations. As the equality concept permeated through business areas and workplaces, it evolved with a new name DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion). Nowadays, DEI is a key value that exists in many companies' mission statements to achieve a lower possibility of workplace discrimination, and a higher level of employee diversity, and thus to shape a diverse working environment as a whole. This study will concentrate on racial and gender diversity in the US management consulting industry. I will underscore the significance of identifying real diversity and differentiating it from superficial diversity, particularly with these two focuses in the following.

Racial Diversity

With the enforceable legal regulations and a rising ideology in mass media realms, the number of workplace discrimination cases was supposed to largely decrease over time. However, according to the statistics provided by the US government, the number is still high enough to deserve the attention of industry professionals and academic scholars to collectively investigate the reasons behind it.

From a legal perspective, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 has declared that workplace discrimination is prohibited in terms of one's race, religion, sex, or national origin (Buckley et al., 2019). Other than aligning with this rule, employers are also required to notify employees of the federal employment discrimination laws and report the Equal Employment Form by action (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission). Since the requirements are legally binding, workplace discrimination seems to be weakened over the past decades.

From a mass media aspect, early scholars have widely advocated that providing too few images of certain groups is deemed as condemning the social and cultural value associated with those under-representative groups, which is also known as symbolic annihilation (Klein & Shiffman, 2009). Additionally, since mass media is an intermediary of information dissemination and a mechanism that helps folks establish worldviews and cultural identities (Klein & Shiffman, 2009), the partial representation coded in media will sow a seed of stereotype in the audience's minds that they could not even realize at once. Due to its long-lasting negative influence and popularity in public, the phenomena of symbolic annihilation has been proactively decreased on a large scale. Today, we can find out that many people of color and women are commonly featured, or even prioritized to be featured, in different companies' recruiting websites and social media posts, which is seen as a DEI advancement -- at least from a media perspective, companies are putting effort to boost the representation of different races.

Along the line, with the effort of legal institutions and communication scholars as well as their achievements in both areas, workplace discrimination should have dramatically dropped. However, official statistics show that the total number of workplace discrimination complaints is still comparatively high, which is at 61,331 in 2021. Among the total charges, the category with the highest proportion is racial discrimination, which accounts for 34.1% (Equal Employment

Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 2021). The inconsistency between phenomenal improvement and numerical change implicitly indicates that some companies or entities are pursuing workplace diversity on the surface but not necessarily leading to an essential transformation, which I call superficial diversity. The identifiable gap between phenomena and statistics motivates me to validate and differentiate superficial diversity in the US workplace; especially racial diversity, because it seems like the most impending one to be addressed based on the latest federal statistics.

Management Consulting Industry

Diversity, Equity Inclusion (DEI) has been a trending word in the US and global workplaces in the recent decade (Richard, 2000). A wide variety of companies regardless of their company size and industry sectors are dedicated to creating diversity in their working environment. Diversity is defined as a group of individuals living in one social network who is distinctively different from one another (Evans et al., 2022). Each individual could be categorized into various affiliated groups in terms of his/her gender, ethnicity, social status, sexual orientation, and physical capability. The positive perspectives on workplace diversity have been recognized for a long time (Evans et al., 2022), and the benefits in each segmented field, such as healthcare and technology, are successively uncovered by the corresponding research in those realms.

In the healthcare industry, Gomez and Bernet (2019) demonstrated that there is a positive association between diversity in pharmacy residency and the accessibility of healthcare resources as well as patient care qualities, particularly to disadvantaged patient groups in the United States. The remarkable diversity within healthcare organizations is racial and linguistic diversity, which allows practitioners to provide better-caring services to patients (Evans et al., 2022). This makes

sense to the phenomenon that most healthcare entities are gradually pursuing diversity to reach a higher-level medical performance.

For technology companies, workplace diversity is deemed to be critically important because the majority of employees in this industry are responsible to design our daily-used technological products (Alfrey, 2022). The failure to attain diversity in technology may lead to an unexpectedly harmful consequence that will expand inequity to the marginalized groups in society. For example, if the dominant product creators in a company are physically-capable white males, then the user demand of women, people of color, and disabled people might not be comprehensively considered. In this way, inequality will be further strengthened through technology access. Thus, to avoid this negative implication, the benefit of adopting diversity in the technology sector is easily foreseen.

Substantial diversity-related research has been conducted across a wide range of industries to illustrate the benefits between DEI initiatives and higher efficiency or greater performance. However, a limited number of scholars have investigated the diversity influence in the management consulting industry. Theoretically, management consulting was not an industry until recent years. It originated from professional outsourcing services in the business areas that help companies solve strategic and procedural issues such as accounting, taxation, and Information Technology (IT) (Srinivasan, 2014). Since it is a new-emergent industry with a high average salary and lots of interdisciplinary talents, this research would mainly focus on investigating the diversity effect on the development of consulting industry and professional consultants.

Literature Review

Causality Between Workplace Diversity and Company Performance

Roberson and Park (2007) proved that there is a causal relationship between racial diversity and company performance -- the reason behind it could be disaggregated into these two aspects: the improvement of financial outcomes and the rise of the company's reputation (Smulowitz et al., 2018). First of all, a higher level of racial diversity means more people from different backgrounds will join the team, and normally it also represents that more diverse ideas would be brought to the table. Their contribution of creativity and decision-making ability is the key to facilitating a company's success in terms of financial outcomes. Another reason is that workplace diversity will affect a company's "outside looking-in" reputation (Evans et al., 2022), which is associated with the impression the mass public holds toward the firm. If a company has diverse demographics, other potential employees will be more likely to believe that they will be respectfully treated if they choose to work at the firm. In folks' minds, such a company would tend to be perceived as a good employer, and this is the so-called "outside looking-in" prestige the company earned by improving diversity.

Echoing back to the statement that demographic diversity would benefit the company through creative thoughts and decision-making ability, diversity should be more prevalent in the executive team because they frequently have more power to make vital strategic decisions for the company. However, according to the research statistics, it is more common to see racial diversity at the lowest level of the organizational hierarchy (Smulowitz et al., 2018). The diversity rate would continue to decrease all the way up to the leadership team. Looking at the large picture, it is relatively rare to see faces from all genders and races on the executive board. This is deceptive unless the company is aiming to create a false impression that they value diversity while they are

not because recruiting a minority entry-level employee costs a lot less than promoting a minority to the leadership team. Such an abnormal phenomenon may elicit what I am calling superficial diversity.

Introduction of Superficial Diversity and Authentic Diversity

From my perspective, superficial diversity is an artificially fake process in that companies are committed to workplace diversity only for their own interests, which includes but is not limited to profitable growth, not weighing the people's value that follows from a diverse workplace. Superficial diversity is the opposition to authentic diversity which not only notices the difference across minority groups for business interests but understands, embraces, and values the diverse components that each minority employee carries on.

Superficial diversity should be discouraged in the workplace because, to some extent, it is the alternative to racial capitalism and interest convergence, both of which have been precisely stigmatized in social, economic, and political fields. Racial capitalism (Leong, 2013) is defined as the process of extracting value from others' racial identities. When a company recruits diverse staff merely for the benefit came along the way without investing any other efforts in increasing workplace diversity, it is conducting superficial diversity by commodifying the racial identity of minority people. Specifically, the diverse demographic in the company is served as racial capital for the company to exchange other business values. Racial capitalism has been long denied in academia because it is viewed as extremely unfair behavior toward underprivileged groups and will eventually result in a toxic racial bias in society.

Additionally, since many well-known companies are led by elite whites in the US, the superficial diversity is also aligning with the concept of interest convergence. It is a racial theory framework originated by Derrick Bell in the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision (Lynn & Dixson, 2022). Interest convergence was coined to state that people of color only win civil

rights when their and whites' interests converge. Based on this concept, superficial workplace diversity is pointing to diversity initiatives that are not originally advocated to benefit people with diverse racial identities. Instead, it passingly benefits people of color because it will end up bringing favorable interests to the firm, in which most of the shareholders are whites.

Both racial capitalism and interest convergence are theories existing in academia instead of the stipulated principles in real-world businesses. However, considering its extended damage to workplaces, it is essentially important to let employers intellectually recognize the presence of such unhealthy workplace phenomena and consciously realize the social responsibility of big employers to avoid superficial diversity in the firms.

Negative Effects of Tokenism on Individuals and Companies

If racial capitalism and interest convergence are too intangible, the negative effects of tokenism on individuals and companies are more tangible, and it is easy to associate them with the potential social harm of superficial diversity. Tokenism is defined as a process resulting when a group is skewed (Datta & Bhardwaj, 2015), in which the tokens are individuals who are appointed to a particular position just to show the representation of the marginalized subgroups. In workplaces, tokenism is a perfunctory effort that pretends to be inclusive to the minority group, which could be considered a behavior that justifies and normalizes superficial diversity. Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) argues that the tokens are more likely to experience higher work stress, and increased symptoms of depression and anxiety than others. Jackson's study (1995) also points out that tokens' psychological well-being will be put at risk. The studies above uncover that tokenism will detrimentally affect the mental health and work status of those who have passively assign to a role to symbolically fulfill the demand for diversity.

Tokenism not only has negative effects on individuals' mental health of those being tokenized but also on the companies which are conducting tokenism. A typical tokenism

example is when a female employee is promoted to a company's executive board, the likelihood of the second woman being promoted to the board will dramatically fall (Guldiken et al., 2019). The companies which implement tokenism believe that as long as they get one representative or token to the leadership team, they will benefit from the diversity while they can not. Research shows that only one member is not enough to get her voice heard by the public (Guldiken et al., 2019). Therefore, tokenism is extremely inefficient that can only lead to a no-win situation, benefiting none of the parties and even having detrimental effects on both individuals and companies.

Upon the disadvantages revealed above, tokenism should be commonly recognized and avoided in the workplace. There is some overlap in the definition of tokenism and superficial diversity. Thus, the significance of identifying superficial diversity in the workplace was partially projected and this research article will primarily focus on validating the existence of superficial diversity in the US workplace and further discern what factors would contribute to authentic and superficial diversity respectively through interviews.

Methodology

Approach

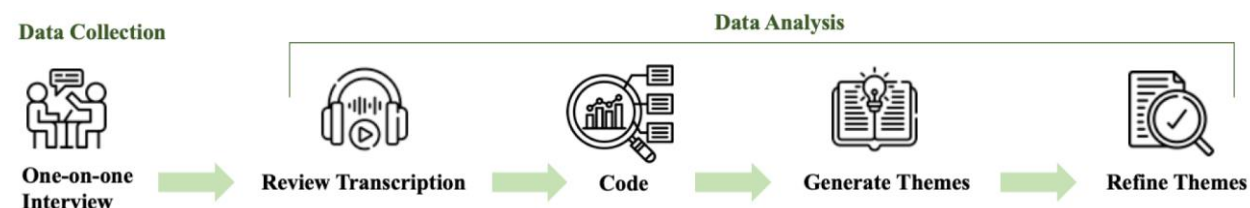
This study used qualitative interview methods, which is considered one of the most widely used research methodologies in general (Berger, 2011). The interview method goes beyond the observation but digs into learning about the attitudes and thoughts behind a behavior. Therefore, this method is well-aligned with my study because I focus on differentiating the authentic and superficial DEI essentially and not just analyzing the difference between these two types of DEI initiatives on the surface. By collecting the data through interviews, I was able to learn about employees' DEI perception, motivation, and implementation that I will not know by

observation alone. Additionally, I employed semi-structured interviews. Because my research questions may touch upon participants' privacy and employment status, I intended to create a relatively informal and comfortable environment for my people to express their authentic thoughts. I created a question list to guide each participant through the interview process and leave adequate spaces to discuss the novel topics they may bring up. In this way, I found a balance between conversations and interviews through the semi-structured format.

After data collection, I adopted the thematic analysis method to understand what minority female employees think would work for promoting DEI value. Thematic Analysis is a widely spread method in the qualitative research field. It helps researchers understand people's experiences, thoughts, or behaviors by emphasizing repeated patterns across a dataset (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). In this research, thematic analysis was applied to investigate a theory-driven, workplace diversity issue by analyzing a small number of interview transcripts. Inspired by Braun & Clarke's six steps of thematic analysis (2006), the data analysis comprises four different stages: they are respectively about transcribing, coding, generating themes, and refining themes (Figure 1). The entire process of thematic analysis will be further uncovered in the following Data Analysis session.

Figure 1

Procedure Diagram



Participants

Participants were minority women aged over 18 and currently working in the same top management consulting company (the company name was undisclosed to protect the privacy of participants) for at least one month. Such precondition ensured that each participant had some background information about the consulting industry and simultaneously had a sufficient amount of time to expose to the company culture. I intentionally targeted minority women because that is the focus group of my study. However, I looked for diversity from other dimensions. For example, I invited employees working in different teams or roles to gain multi-angle perspectives on DEI. The participants are titled as full-time employees coming from both the core business group and business support group at the same company. They were all recruited online through cold emails, personal networks, and outreach messages via LinkedIn, an employment-focused social media platform. The participants are considered self-selected volunteers because no incentives were offered throughout the process.

There were five volunteers eventually participating in the interview. All of them were female workers and most of them were Asian American. Their average age is 25.8 (range = 23 to 29), and their average time working for the company is 5 months (range = 1 to 11). Geographically, they reported three nationalities and a majority of them are living on the west coast of the United States. Participants belonged to one or more minority groups such as gender, racism, sex orientation, and physiological defect. This common ground was deliberately selected to match the research focus group, but the fact that they all turned out to be entry-level employees was a coincidence. Full details of the participants are provided in the Subject Profiles below (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Subject Profiles

| No. | Gender | Age | Job title | Office Location | Nationality | Tenure | Minority Groups |
|-----|--------|-----|---------------------|------------------|---------------|------------|--------------------|
| 1 | Female | 29 | Associate | Southwest–Dallas | China | 2.5 months | Asian & LGBTQ |
| 2 | Female | 23 | Business Analyst | West–Seattle | United States | 8 months | Asian American |
| 3 | Female | 26 | Associate | West–Seattle | United States | 2.5 months | Asian American |
| 4 | Female | 24 | Business Analyst | West–Seattle | Brazil | 1 month | Asian & Latino |
| 5 | Female | 27 | Executive Assistant | West–Seattle | United States | 11 months | Disability & LGBTQ |

Procedure

The research design and methodology were reviewed and approved by the University of Washington’s Internal Review Board (IRB) with Exempt Status (IRB ID: STUDY00017241). The procedure includes two major parts: data collection and data analysis. The data collection session was launched around one-on-one interviews while the data analysis stage was inspired by Braun & Clarke’s instructions on six phases of thematic analysis.

Data Collection

All participants are given the chance to read through the interview question list and the consent form before the interview day. By signing the consent form, participants gave the researcher permission to record the interviews. A verbal assent would still be required before the interview was embarked. The interview was researcher-hosted and fully conducted in English. It was confirmed in advance that each participant had high fluency in English. All interviews were taken placed virtually over Zoom and each participant has equally thirty minutes to answer the same list of questions. The interview date and time were mutually negotiated and selected according to the schedules of both participants and researchers.

To ensure the interview questions were well-clarified without any confusion or leading questions, two pilot interviews were run a month before.

Data Analysis

The data collected from each interview were immediately transcribed to textual material through an audio-to-text converter. To improve the accuracy of the notes, all transcription was proofread and corrected by the researcher for the second time. Even after the edition was completed, the transcriptions were re-read and re-visited multiple times because repeatedly active reading is always considered a key process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After I got the finalized transcription, I started to summarize each DEI-related story my interviewee shared. At the end of this first-round review, I would have about twenty brief summaries on my hands. Moving forward to the second-round review, I categorize these summaries based on the latent meanings they carry. Next, I will create a name for these groups according to the characteristics they have in common. Not each group I named here would end up becoming a theme, but at this stage, they would all be treated as potential themes. This is the process of coding and generating themes. If any categorization turned out to be fuzzy for some codes, it was indicating me to recirculate back to the transcription review stage and try to remove the disambiguation that restrict me from classifying. Due to the small data size in this study, all coding was done manually without using any computational programming tool.

At the final refine themes stage, some categories would be kept and some would be abandoned depending on their correlations with factors leading to authentic DEI. The titles would be paraphrased or condensed to better describe the overlapping pattern within each remaining category. At this stage, all existing themes and even the relationships among them would be re-examined using the Mutually Exclusive and Collectively Exhaustive (MECE) concept. In the process of refining themes, themes would be eliminated, combined, or written up and eventually outputted. This illustrated how the final theme formed through systematic progress.

Results

Through running through the thematic analysis stages, four main themes have been extracted and they were labeled as “Build Affinity Groups”, “Create Diverse Teams”, “Break Stereotypes”, and “Let People out of your Identity Group Get Involved”. Those themes were categorized based on the overlap across interviewees’ opinions, which informed what the authentic DEI initiative should look like in participants’ minds. Thus, the four themes are the key to helping readers understand what will contribute to the authentic DEI.

Theme 1: Build Affinity Groups¹

Affinity group consists of individuals sharing a common characteristic, interest, or cultural identity, which could be gender, race, and sexual orientation (Segal, 2013). It has been identified as a physical setting to facilitate members’ engagement in a collaborative environment (Gates et al., 1997), which includes but is not limited to profit-oriented companies, non-profit organizations, and educational institutions (Lambertz-Berndt, 2016). All interviewees recognized establishing affinity groups as an effective implementation to signify the company’s DEI value.

Participant #2: When I am trying to find people and find opportunities, the easiest place to start is here (affinity group)².

Participant #2 acknowledged that the affinity group was a subgroup where she would feel more comfortable starting her network. She expressed that people who shared a common identity with her could better mentor her because they can expect the barriers or challenges she would face based on their previous experiences. Additionally, their common points would allow them to initiate a conversation much quicker and easier.

¹ There is no hierarchical order for the theme number.

² All excerpts remain unedited to respect the interviewees.

Participant #4: I like affinity groups because I feel good to be included in some kind of social circle.

Participant #4 emphasized a sense of belonging that the affinity group can bring to her. She displayed that working in an extremely large company as a racial minority would make her mentally lonely or insecure sometimes. However, the appearance of affinity groups serves as a platform to meet people alike her, which enables her to feel more confident. From a social psychology perspective, Participant #4's desire to be included in certain social groups could be justified by the origins of belonging: humans always need to belong (Allen et al., 2021). The existence of affinity groups precisely fulfilled employees' desires of belonging and assist them to seek affiliations or bondings within a large community.

Participant #5: affinity group lets me see that my co-workers care about the same thing I do.

Participant #5 views building affinity groups as a strategy to strengthen the bonding among colleagues and the employees' loyalty toward the company. Affinity groups not only gather background-similar individuals but also hold events pertinent to their particular identities. For example, first-generation college student groups will strive for education resources for lower-income households. That way, affinity groups created an opportunity for their employees to make a social impact along with their co-workers. This experience will greatly improve the relationship among group members because they got to know some people that care about the same things as them. It will also deepen employees' relationship with the company because founding and supporting each affinity group shows that the company is committed to doing something that will benefit the local community.

Three participants respectively pointed out the advantages of affinity groups. No matter whether employees think it is a hub for resources and opportunities, a place to find belonging, or a community to promote relationships, it is no doubt that the affinity group could foster interaction among employees. By comparing the answer to why employees enjoy being part of the affinity groups, it is easy to identify that the reasons are varying. Thus, it is not necessarily the affinity per se that promotes the DEI initiative. Rather, it just provides a platform. What directly plays an effect is the conversation, mentorship, and cooperative experience that happened within the affinity groups. That being said, it is still true that building affinity groups is a validated strategy to motivate employees' involvement, and thus leave space for the authentic DEI initiative to thrive.

Theme 2: Create Diverse Teams

Creating diverse teams is another theme that a majority of participants think has worked for promoting authentic DEI. The diversity here represents a wide variety of different things which include gender, nationality, religion, and physical ability.

Participant #1: Anxiety fades away when I get to know everyone.

Participant #1 confessed that she had not gotten a collaborative opportunity to work with a diverse group of people as an entry-level employee coming out of a small liberal arts college. Thus, she felt nervous and scared when being assigned to a group with two Mormon colleagues for the first time. However, when she looked back on this experience, she reflected that there was nothing wrong with those Mormon colleagues but herself. The lack of exposure to Mormons made her consciously avoid them but it turned out that this feeling gradually faded away when she was given a chance to learn about this religion. In this case, it was demonstrated that the exclusions driven by interaction deficiency could be a barrier to establishing authentic DEI but fortunately, the action of placing employees into diverse teams could help them overcome the

barrier. This finding ended up aligning with the Theory of Generative Interactions, which suggests that positive interaction is an indispensable condition to facilitate inclusion in organizational scenarios (Bernstein et al., 2019).

Participant #4: It was interesting that twenty of us were coming from four continents.

Contrary to Participant #1, Participant #4 found it was fun to work with people with a great extent of diversity in nationality, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds. Compared with her work experience elsewhere, Participant #4 was impressed by how diverse the ideas they came up with as a team. When each member brings their unique thoughts to the table, it eventually boosts the work efficiency as a whole. The higher productivity resulting from diverse brainstorming made her feel more enjoyable and excited working with a diverse group of colleagues.

Participant #2: You kind of see a stark contrast between client team's profile (less diverse) and ours.

To provide some context first, management consulting is dedicated to providing professional advice and assistance about company management to business owners who are also known as their clients. In other words, a consulting team will generally work like a third-party think tank to help other businesses solve real-life problems. With this background in mind, it is relatively easier to comprehend the “stark contrast” Participant #2 mentioned. From her perspective, she often sees a less diverse team seek advice from a more diverse team, which would signify to her that a team's diversity is somehow associated with a team's comprehensive abilities. Therefore, when identifying a stark contrast between the client's and their team's profile, she felt their company's diversity initiative made the creative solutions possible, and simultaneously she would be proud that she was sitting on the more diverse side.

Theme 3: Break the Stereotype

This theme was found when participants unconsciously touched upon their prior work experience and the stereotype they had seen from their previous employers. The DEI initiative of their current company stood out when they compared it with other companies or organizations. The feeling was normally stronger across comparisons.

Participant #3: I don't drink alcohol. Because a lot of business students or people in consulting are quite drinking-heavy, I felt nervous in terms of whether I could build as close as relationship with my colleagues and my clients if I don't participate in those social activities. However, my engagement manager respected the fact that I don't drink and found a different social event that we can all enjoy.

Based on her observation, Participant #3 pointed out an industrial stereotype that people who work in business or client-facing positions will generally hang out to drink. It is common for them to build relationships through the so-called Happy Hours. As a team member who does not drink alcohol, Participant #3 worried it would become a barrier for her to be close to her team. In addition, her identity as an Asian woman made her feel more stressed about this expected stereotype. It is evident that Asians are frequently to be perceived as nerds and people are least likely to initiate a friendship with Asians and Hispanics (Zhang, 2010). Thus, Participant #3's anxiety regarding the fact that she cannot join the drinking social activities was understandable. If a relevant stereotype already existed, the stereotyped group will be more cautious and stressed when she encounter anything that may cause her to fall into the stereotype.

However, her manager's unexpected open-mindedness dissolved her pressure. Such a trivial behavior played a significant effect on Participant #3 and this was what made her feel the DEI initiative at the company. As a matter of fact, stereotypes exist everywhere. If a company could cultivate some inclusive leaders who are capable of discovering stereotypes and actively

breaking them, employees would be more likely to retain working here. Details like this are often more impactful than orally advocating DEI initiatives, especially for the information receivers known as marginalized groups. This indicated what differentiates meaningful DEI and rhetoric DEI.

Participant #1: From my past work experience, I feel like women are usually assigned to nitty-gritty work, like taking notes during meetings, ordering lunch, and stuff like that. So we (the company) had a system to ensure that everyone can rotate the responsibilities.

Participant #1 pointed out another gender stereotype that women are always taking care of the detailed work. Participant #1 objectively confessed that it is not necessarily women got assigned this type of work all the time. Instead, she identified that women are more likely to be volunteers than male workers even if they noticed that this type of work may not directly help their professional growth. This can be traced back to the history that male worker has been dominated in the workplace for many decades. Even though women started to thrive in professional scenarios, it is still a stereotype that male worker is responsible for the core business while women are placed in assisting roles. However, the rotation system in the company signified to employees that taking care of the small things is not always women's obligation and they do value equality among employees. In this case, it is shown that the rotation was not a big deal but it did work in building authentic DEI initiatives because it informed employees that the company realized the gender stereotypes and they have been putting effort to make a change.

Participant #4: I think the company's family planning initiative is a great support for women in the workplace. We can choose the percentage to work if we plan on adopting a child, freezing eggs, or allocating more time to family. This (the family planning policy)

made me feel like this (my plan for family) is not something that is kind of taboo to talk about inside the company.

There was evidence that Asian women are less willing to mention their families in the workplace because of the potential risk of losing jobs. In China where gender power was relatively imbalanced, a woman in a professional role might be replaced during her maternity leave (Wang, 2021). This phenomenon scared a majority of women. They choose not to be transparent about their family plans when attempting to maintain their positions in the workplace. As Participant #4 reveals, she was afraid of disclosing her family plan in the workplace because she worried that her work capability will be judged because of the dual roles she took as a wife and mother. In contrast, she has rarely seen the male colleagues around her would be disturbed by the same social voice. Men are less likely to be doubted when they are trying to balance their job and family. The stereotype about women having trouble balancing family and work has caused women to bypass this topic in the workplace. However, the company's family planning policy seems to bring the topic back to the table. Going against the gender stereotype, this policy did not marginalize the women who were also wives and mothers. Instead, it provides additional support for this group when they are in need. It relieves women's family anxiety a lot and eventually results in authentic DEI initiatives for women in the workplace.

Theme 4: Let People out of Your Identity Group Get Involved

As DEI initiatives grow to be more comprehensive and complex, people are no longer satisfied with the definition of diversity based on conventional traits. Nowadays, most affinity groups are generally categorized based on gender, ethnicity, and other typical identity labels. Though employees enjoy the benefits of these affinity groups as mentioned in theme#1, they

demonstrated that an authentic DEI should go far beyond the traditional affinity group and let those who are out of the group to get involved.

Participant #1: They (the company) will try to pair you up with someone who has a very similar background, but it's not necessarily like gender or sexuality labels, but more like personal background. I felt that having someone who understood my experience and was willing to support me throughout the process was really important.

Participant #1 clearly indicated that she would be more preferred to be mentored by a person who does not share a common identity with her but simultaneously they have something in common to initiate the conversation. For example, Participant #1 expressed that she enjoyed the experience mentored by a white guy. It does not mean there is a hierarchy across races. She showed that she felt more confident when her capability could be validated by a diverse group of people. Even though Participant #1 and her mentor neither identify as the same gender nor racial group, their similar educational background back in China allowed them to build relationships much more quickly. Compared to always being supported by people in the same identity group, participant #1 acknowledged that interracial mentorship can further embody a company's DEI initiatives because this implementation goes beyond individual labels and as well as boundary across affinity groups, and thus pursues the multi-dimensional diversity at the root.

Participant #2: In a Woman's Day breakfast, everyone is sharing experiences of how they felt supported by the woman around them. But there are also other co-workers who are males in the room and they're also sharing moments that they've been inspired by females in their life.

Participant #2 states that the recognition from people out of their identity group will weigh more than the ones from those who belong to the same identity group. Similarly, it does not represent

that any gender is superior to the others. Instead, it is the recognition that comes from a heterogeneous group that makes the difference. This is the power of diversity. This woman's day example shows that the participation of men provided a new perspective for women to view themselves or be proud of their own growth in a much more comprehensive way.

Participant #3: If it's only minorities who are willing to help each other, that kind of defeats the purpose of diversity. You need to have people who are not in the minority group also trying to bring up the minority throughout the organization.

Participant #3 indicated that authentic DEI starts when people who are not minorities also try to bring up minorities through the pipeline. This is how an authentic DEI functions in an organization. For minorities, if they are only helped by people who are also in the minority group, they will unconsciously doubt if they only deserve support from minorities. The sponsorship from people outside of their identity group made people feel they are not alone and they are not fighting by themselves. The additional support and approval from outside group people allowed them to reach their full potential in their positions. This is how inclusivity thrives in a company.

Discussion

Conflicting results between Theme 1 and Theme 4

Theme 1 indicated that people preferred to be included in one or more affinity groups. It shows that people enjoy being involved in a small community with peers alike. However, Theme 4 proposed that an advanced DEI initiative begins with interaction from people outside of the same identity groups. These two themes look contradictory at first glance, but they are not. Rather, Theme 1 and Theme 4 could be complementary to some extent. The seeming conflict brings out the findings that diversification of grouping is required in organizational communication. Specifically, it reveals the current market demand for both homogeneous and

heterogeneous affinity groups. A homogeneous group is made up of people sharing the same identity characteristics while a heterogeneous affinity group consists of not only the people who have the same identity but the ones who care about the same issues and do not necessarily fall into the same identity group (Lambertz-Berndt, 2016).

The appearance of homogeneous and heterogeneous affinity groups creates a broader definition for affinity groups and thus satisfies employees' desires mentioned in Theme 1 and Theme 2. Essentially, even though employees are in favor of small communities in a firm, they are gradually looking for a variety of types of diversity beyond what typical affinity groups have given. The homogeneous affinity was restricted to a certain type of diversity, such as gender, sexuality, and race, which no longer fulfilled employees' expectations toward DEI initiatives. Therefore, in order to reach advanced authentic DEI initiatives, heterogeneous affinity groups or anything creative implemental that goes beyond the traditional homogeneous groups should be set as a goal to pursue.

Inspirations from Four Themes

The four themes indicated different implements that have proved to work for building authentic DEI. At the same time, one common point across the four themes illustrated that sufficient capital inputs are required for achieving DEI initiatives. To find affinity groups (T1 & T4), the company needs to allocate a certain amount of budget for daily operations and event planning. In regard to creating a diverse team (T2), additional recruiting costs are foreseeable for the company to hire a diverse group of talents coming from different high-ranked universities and institutions. Last but not least, breaking stereotype (T3) is the hardest implementation to attain, especially for start-ups, because cultivating inclusive leaders with the awareness to break stereotypes will need long-term financial investment in training and education. In summary, the common points across the four themes demonstrated that capital investments are the back stone

for facilitating authentic DEI initiatives. This is also what differentiates it from superficial diversity which could be easily attained by devoting low costs to advertisements on the surface.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

The qualitative interviews and thematic analysis focusing on minority women employee groups reveal four themes that illustrate what has worked for authentic DEI initiatives. They are respectively 1) build affinity groups, 2) create diverse teams, 3) break stereotypes, and 4) let people out of your identity group get involved. Based on the comparison of the similarities and differences across these four themes, further insights have been uncovered that the implication of homogeneous and heterogeneous affinity groups can advance the DEI initiative to the standard that would fit the expectation of a majority of employees. Additionally, it has been found that building authentic DEI initiatives requires much more capital inputs than shaping the superficial DEI. Thus, a company's financial capability is possibly one of the differentiators for both authentic and superficial DEI.

Recommendations for Future Work

The first recommendation for future work is to interview people sitting in upper-level leadership teams to understand their thoughts toward DEI. This recommendation was derived from a research limitation that all participants in this study coincidentally ended up being entry-level employees. When they are asked about the areas of improvement related to DEI initiatives, most interviewees pointed out the gender and racial imbalance in the upper leadership team. However, it is not robust to conclude that there is something wrong with the DEI management on leadership positions because none of the interviewees is familiar with the promotion scheme up in the pipeline as entry-level employees. Therefore, interviewing people working in higher

leadership roles would be future work to figure out the DEI challenges the upper management teams have been facing.

Another direction for future work would be to research what does not work for shaping authentic DEI. Due to the limitation of time and resources, this study only finds out what differentiates authentic and superficial DEI and what has worked for facilitating the authentic ones. In order to inform a full picture of DEI initiatives to both employers and employees, it is critically important to touch upon the opposite side of the spectrum: the characteristics of superficial DEI. That way, people will gain a better understanding of what to pursue and what to avoid correspondingly when creating or selecting a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace in the US management consulting industry.

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Appendix

Appendix A. Interview Question List

General basic questions:

- What company are you working at?
- How long have you been working at this company?
- What is your current title/role at the company?
- What is your age?
- Do you consider yourself as part of the minority group in the US workplace? (Provide a further definition of the minority group if asked)

Topic-related questions:

- Do you think the company's leadership team personally values diversity & inclusion in the workplace?
- How does the leadership team signify their beliefs in diversity in day-to-day operations? Could you please share some examples?
- How does the HR team implement diversity practices in different processes, such as recruitment, promotion, and talent retention?
- Could you please tell me the most recent time you felt diversity in the company? (When it was? What happened? Under what scenario?)
- Could you please rank the company's DEI commitment, and justify it with some details? (Excellent, Good, Medium, Poor, Very Bad)