

Exploring the Framing of Diversity Rhetoric in “Top-Rated in Diversity” Organizations

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Abstract

This study provides a summative content analysis and framing analysis of 15 of the top 20 corporate websites identified on the 2010 *DiversityInc* Survey as “top-ranked” in diversity management, to assess how diversity is framed by organizations ranked highly in diversity criteria and to gain a better understanding of linguistic and semiotic consistency in diversity rhetoric and framing. Findings reveal three primary approaches in how organizations frame diversity: first, as an organizational asset promoted and preserved through its human resources and corporate values; second, as a driver of business excellence and competitive advantage; and finally, as a structural mechanism supported by diversity and inclusion initiatives such as employee mentoring, networking, diversity training, and institutionalized governance. While these mechanisms themselves are questionable in terms of their actual results in increasing levels of diversity and inclusion, corporate websites serve as symbolic and necessary contemporary representations of impression management among stakeholders, stockholders, and employees. Additional findings highlight a high level of consistency in linguistic and semiotic use regardless of organization type, industry, or intended audiences.

Keywords

corporate diversity, corporate websites, framing rhetoric

According to Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita (2001), *diversity rhetoric*, which I define 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

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practices, is standard in contemporary organizational management. "In each of these settings," note the authors, "diversity rhetoric extols the virtues of a diverse workforce and advocates 'managing diversity' and 'valuing diversity'" (Edelman et al., 2001, p. 1590), focusing heavily on inclusion, tolerance, and the establishment of institutional and symbolic mechanisms intent on promoting the appearance of equality in the workforce (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998). Similar to the rhetoric employed during the U.S. Civil Rights movement in the 1960s that upheld virtues of tolerance, inclusiveness, and equality, *diversity rhetoric*, which has become common in American management approaches, argues the merits of a pluralistic, meritocratic, and integrated workforce (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006).

A major challenge for researchers investigating how organizational diversity manifests in external-facing communicative practices—defined as those targeting stakeholders, stockholders, customers, recipients, and the general public—is to link actual diversity practices to stakeholder perception of said practices and communication mediums. This study seeks to examine how diversity is framed on *corporate websites* for companies deemed to be diversity leaders. Is the diversity rhetoric reflective of actualized organizational diversity, or is it merely a symbolic nod to what, in contemporary times, is deemed a "must-have" ideology to satisfy external and internal stakeholders' and shareholders' expectations? What are the implications if organizations present strongly divergent interventions, such as employee training, networking, college recruitment, diversity councils, and mentoring programs to define and manage diversity as a problem, when significant research has demonstrated that many of these solutions are not effective in ensuring a diverse workforce? Framing methodology allows for a broader exploration of answers to these questions.

Drawing on Entman's (1993, 2003) framing theory, this study unpacks and examines the multiplicity and positionality of *corporate diversity rhetoric* as manifested in corporate websites. It seeks to add to research on organizational communication and how diversity and inclusion relational constructs are defined, packaged, marketed, and promoted to external constituents. It further investigates how diversity is perceived and received by audiences, also exploring the consistencies and variabilities of framing this "unique" corporate ideology across organizations. Additionally, this study is designed to place corporations, in particular those organizational functions engaged in managing diversity, on "alert" status by recognizing constituents' and consumers' nuanced abilities to uncloak an organization's authentic practices in diversity management, particularly those focused on employee inclusion.

Literature Review

Defining Organizational Diversity

Diversity is a challenging concept to define in the workplace, at least from the perspective of social science researchers who find the term to be less theoretically grounded and more organizationally enforced through proscribed institutional policies and practices. The ambiguity of the 1968 Civil Rights Act and subsequent 1991 amendment is

paradoxically evident on examination of the definition of *diversity* within these documents: there isn't one. From an organizational perspective, there is similar ambiguity in how companies prescribe and interpret the term: According to a recent report from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), although organizations collectively believe that diversity has merit in the workplace, only 30% have an agreed-upon definition of diversity (SHRM, 2007). In addition, Gotsis and Kortezi (2014) note, "the term carries multiple, overlapping and often conflicting meanings (Hays-Thomas, 2004; Prasad & Mills, 1997)" via a socially-constructed framework.

Organizations have subsequently assumed the burden of defining *diversity* in their institutional practices in a variety of ways. Most have undertaken the process of definition by associating the presence of certain characteristics, processes, and resources within the organization as representative of diversity, subsequently correlating this presence with corporate metrics designed to measure their effectiveness. Thus, diversity is frequently characterized by the presence of multiple demographic and genderized dimensions within the workforce: race, sex, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and physical attributes and abilities (Point & Singh, 2003). Harrison and Sin (2006) present diversity as "the collective amount of differences among members within a social unit," a construct echoed by Putnam (1995), via his conceptualization of social capital which highlights the relational nature of diversity as contingent upon social networks and norms of reciprocity, linking individuals with similar attributes and characteristics into affinity groups. Workplace demographic analysis examines diversity as related to numerical composition, or the number of individuals who represent different minority communities within the workforce (Kalev et al., 2006; Thomas, 1996), but it is also related to behavioral inclusion, which signifies the state of being valued via an organizational strategy, culture, and practice that allows each individual to achieve his or her full potential (Rosenzweig, 1998).

DiversityInc, a third-party evaluator of *Fortune 500* organizations with proscribed diversity activities, defines diversity management as "the proactive management of race/culture, gender, orientation, disability and age to ensure equal outcome in relationships with employees, customers, investors and suppliers" (DiversityInc; <http://www.diversityinc.com>). The first two factors—race and gender—retain the highest status in both assessing and implementing diversity practices "because they impact the treatment of the other three factors and are the most dominant loci of discrimination" (DiversityInc). Interestingly, although some workforce demographic metrics indicate that the proportion of minority and female employees has risen since the late 1970s (Bound & Freeman, 1989; Leonard, 1984), more recent studies find the progress of minorities has slowed and even retrogressed in certain industries (Edelman, 1992). This is unfortunate, particularly as research studies repeatedly show that companies with greater racial and ethnic diversity are 30% more likely to reflect stronger financial performance (measured as earnings before income and tax [EBIT]): "U.S. companies with 10% greater gender and racial or ethnic diversity on management teams and boards experienced 1.1% higher EBIT" (Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015).

The difficulty of pinpointing a concrete definition of diversity results in myriad negative organizational outputs, particularly those focused on employee interactions

(or the lack thereof). Social identity theory, formulated by Tajfel and Turner in the 1980s, conceptualizes how individuals gain self-perception through interaction within larger group memberships (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This theory indicates that individuals assume multiple identity categories, some of which are more salient in the workplace, and base these typologies on what has been commonly associated with diversity, specifically gender, race, and ethnicity. The potential for implicit bias—the preference of individuals toward a socially accepted “in group” versus an “out group”—is inherent through this process of categorization, creating problematic stereotyping and negative attitudes toward others (Devine & Elliot, 1995; Nelson, Acker, & Manis, 1996). Specifically, they argue that sex stereotypes often operate as automatic influences when we evaluate or judge another person, an assertion validated by Deaux and Lewis (1984) around gender roles related to occupational likelihood (the ability to engage in equitable career advancement) and sexual orientation (sexual preference toward others). The lack of a consistent definition of diversity, therefore, reinforces discrimination bias and stereotyping within the workplace, creating an even greater challenge in addressing the multitude of equality issues diversity management was originally designed to alleviate.

Currently, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on race, age, and sex status. Additionally, states may choose to implement local legislation to which organizations can opt to adhere (Dobbin, 2009). Organizations have taken note of these possibilities, given that “the number of employment discrimination suits filed in federal district courts doubled between 1992 and 1997, reaching a peak of 20,000 suits per year in 1995” (Donohue & Siegelman, 2005). Furthermore, the number of class action lawsuits against U.S. businesses rose more than 100% in 2003 (James & Wooten, 2006). Correspondingly, organizations have begun the process of responding to and managing external perceptions of the way they conduct business. Discrimination has become a “legitimate business concern,” note James and Wooten (p. 1104); as a result, the development of appropriate communicate strategies for managing and circumventing these crises has become more paramount. Indeed, those organizations that lack a concrete definition of diversity or do not take strategic measures to enforce initiatives supporting diversity may face gender disparity, lack of cohesion among employees, and a corresponding decline of economic productivity (Ibarra, 1993).

Employing Mechanisms to Drive Inclusion

As a result, many organizations have responded to combat the sinister forces of discriminatory behavior by implementing diversity programs designed to drive inclusion, which is defined as the specific processes, acts, mechanisms, or interventions taken to actively support, engage, and enhance employee assimilation and performance (Roberson, 2006). These interventions include hosting employee networking events, developing manager-to-peer mentoring initiatives, and providing diversity training designed to indoctrinate employees in appropriate antidiscrimination behaviors; initiating diversity metrics to measure efficacy of diversity programs; and increasing

promotion and hiring levels of minorities and traditionally underrepresented groups. These diversity management strategies are designed to present organizations as proactive agents of diversity measures (Dobbin, 2009) driving *inclusion*, which Roberson (2006) defines as those interventions “focused on organizational objectives designed to increase the participation of all employees and to leverage diversity effects on the organization” (p. 219). Diversity acknowledges differences in and among workplace cultures, ethnicities, gender, races, and sex; inclusion attempts to capitalize upon those differences by developing an organizational culture in which “the richness of ideas, backgrounds, and perspectives are harnessed to create business value” notes T. Hudson Jordan (n.d.), Director of Global Diversity & Talent Strategies at Pitney Bowes via specific diversity interventions. *DiversityInc* research shows

a connection between formal mentoring, especially cross-cultural mentoring, and talent development. We also see a correlation between employee-resource group participation and promotions into first management jobs, as well as retention and engagement. *DiversityInc* Top 50 companies also have more flexible workplaces, which is a key factor cited by Millennials, women and people with disabilities in deciding where to work. Other progressive benefits, such as paid paternity leave and transgender health benefits, are also perceived as signs of inclusive employers. (Frankel, 2015, Best Practices section)

Interestingly, Kalev et al. (2006) contend that relative numbers may or may not make a difference in developing a diverse workforce; it is the structural efficacy of diversity initiatives rather than sex composition or quantity of a specific gender that determine the overall success of an organization. In fact, numerous research findings suggest a negative effect of employing a demographically diverse workforce, including intercultural or intragroup conflict (Grimes & Richard, 2003; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999), impaired communication, degradation to group effectiveness, lower employee satisfaction, and increased absenteeism and turnover (Jackson et al., 1991). In sum, there are a number of factors that moderate the effectiveness of the relationship between workforce diversity and the approaches undertaken to achieve it. This study aims to examine the communicative practices utilized by corporations on their websites as one of these possible factors.

Corporate Approaches to Managing Diversity: 1968-1990s. As a concept and applied practice, diversity has its roots in the U.S. employment history from the early 20th century (Dobbin, 2009, p. 35). Many diversity practices—including employee networking, mentoring, and training programs, as well as hiring, promotion, and restructuring initiatives—burgeoned as a result of the advent of the affirmative action and Equal Employment Opportunity rhetoric and programs that occurred with the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. Although making discrimination illegal (despite never conclusively defining the term *discrimination* itself), the Civil Rights Act successfully paved the way for compliance against discriminatory practices to rest upon organizational and legislative interpretation within multiple judicial courts (Dobbin, 2009, p. 6). Organizations seized the opportunity to implement compliance initiatives in an effort to

limit employee litigation alleging discrimination, and as safeguard measures to protect organizational public relations and stakeholder engagement. The most visible elements of procedural compliance practices were the establishment of diversity programs en masse, particularly in the early 1970s (p. 32), followed closely by the institutionalization of human resource management positions (human resource officers, personnel managers) and diversity offices and programs.

By the 1980s and 1990s, corporations had collectively started to understand the imperative of utilizing diversity-oriented business practices as levers supporting financial performance. Recent research indicates that *Fortune 500* firms, in particular, are trying to employ diversity practices that extend beyond the legally mandated minimum in regard to affirmative action and antidiscrimination efforts. Eric Peterson, diversity manager at the SHRM, notes that these organizations “have gotten on the diversity train and aren’t going to get off it anytime soon . . . they realize it’s necessary for their long-term prosperity” (Whitelaw, 2010).

Framing Organizational Diversity: Theory and Practice

Organizations have responded to the need to position themselves by developing a keen and nuanced approach to diversity management. In essence, organizations are considering how to present or frame their approaches to diversity management to external audiences. Correspondingly, a growing body of mass media research centers on the once-ambiguous concept of “framing” and its applicability to organizational analysis. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) define a frame as the “central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue” (p. 57). Entman (1993) echoes this definition, describing the process as “select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (p. 52). Entman’s theoretical approach offers the possibility of describing the power of text (1993, p. 51) via *salience* (the importance or prominence of an issue), using an active four-step selection process to (1) define a problem, (2) diagnose and evaluate potential causes, (3) evaluate moral or ethical considerations, and (4) prescribe solutions. It is with this theoretical standpoint in mind that I approached this analysis.

The power of frames, particularly in the context of corporate communications, is readily apparent yet operates with a form of organizational transparency, through which an employer’s power, identity construct, and ideological positioning on the value of diversity are revealed (Fiol, 2002). Symbols, metaphors, analogies, case studies, and employee narratives form the language of diversity rhetoric embedded in external communication vehicles, including corporate websites, portraying companies associated with extensive diversity practices as transformative, embracing of different cultures, employee-oriented, progressive, and committed to outcomes (Dutton, Fahey, & Narayanan, 1983; Dutton & Jackson, 1987). Framing is a methodical, calculated approach that leverages communicative practices with the intent of forming positive construals of organizational behavior, and this is particularly evident in externally

focused communications dedicated to priming an audience's receptiveness to a positively-perceived organizational identity.

Framing Diversity in External Communications

Corporations systematically employ a variety of internal- and external-facing communication mediums to inform, engage, and entice audiences regarding their corporate values, mission, employment practices, financial performance, and rankings. These mechanisms include corporate websites, annual reports, press releases, career-related job links, client and customer lists, and testimonials. Studies have shown the relevance of such data in measuring cognitive aspects involved in messaging structure, positioning, and context (Bettman & Weitz, 1983; Bowman, 1976, 1978, 1984; Fiol, 1989). Research demonstrates that future-oriented statements (Fiol, 1995) may reflect internal-planning documents, conveying similar future attributions due to cognitive processing mechanisms that are inherently triggered when communication content is created around related messaging events. How an individual corporate communications manager interprets the way in which a larger organization should position diversity to external constituents, then, is likely to be related and relevant, though limited research to date has compared internal and external versions of future-oriented communication (Fiol, 1995).

Contradictory research has questioned the degree to which informational content of these reports "reliably measures company practices" (Bowman, 1978), as some evidence of framing bias exists in how managers communicate interpretations to external audiences. However, those companies deemed "outstandingly responsible" by *Business and Society* highlighted aspects of social responsibility significantly more in their annual reports than competitors (Fiol, 1995, p. 525). There appears to be a correlation which merits additional examination between the messages or organizational narratives employed by organizations and the subsequent perception of corporate identity as interpreted by external audiences. It is with this in mind that this study limits its focus to corporate websites, which have evolved into a dominant form of corporate communication since the mid-1990s.

Online External Communications: The Evolution of the Corporate Website. For purposes of this study, I rely on the broad definition of corporate websites employed by Esrock and Leichty (2000), which presents websites as centralized locations that provide audiences with information about a company's products, services, and identity, all of which are used to define corporate image to the public. The advent of the Internet in the early 1990s and its widespread use by corporations as a necessary communicative tool for consumer relationship management, expanded the development of corporate website as a "tool for diversity management" (Point & Singh, 2003, p. 750). The format of the standard corporate website may vary based on industry and audience needs, but most of these websites generally follow a standard structure intended to convey an organizational narrative to a variety of audiences, including current and potential customers, investors, job seekers, and the press. As Salvi, Turnbull, and Pontesilli (2007) note, common items on websites

include company history; product and service information; company location and geographic reach; financial information, including annual reports; press releases; career sections; and corporate responsibility signifiers, such as mission, vision, sustainability, and community engagement statements (Len-Rios, 2003).

With the inclusion of diversity management as a strategic process to enhance corporate visibility, community relations, and profitability, organizations began modifying their websites' context and content to advance public perceptions of their steadfast commitment to diversity rhetoric, modifying mission statements, creating multiethnic-centered website photographs, and including quotes from senior management on the criticality of diversity initiatives to global success. Corporate communications, legitimized as a valid organizational function through engagement in legal battles, used the power of the web to promote corporate diversity initiatives and carve out symbolic positioning with respective industries as "leaders of diversity management." This practice gained heightened significance with the expansion of social media and consumer insight that demands a "virtual corporate identity" (Fiol, 2002) and positive reinforcement of an organization's role in fostering diversity practices.

Assessing Diversity Effectiveness

In 2002, *DiversityInc*, an American firm dedicated to exploring corporate diversity issues, launched its print (magazine) version after establishing its successful online presence in 1998. In 2001, recognizing the sea of change among organizations now using diversity as a strategic competency, *DiversityInc* implemented an international recognition process for companies ranked highly in the diversity management arena, using an annual survey process to solicit data from organizations in a variety of industries. The *2010 DiversityInc's Top 50 Companies for Diversity Annual Survey* asked companies with a minimum of 1,000 employees to respond to 200 empirically grounded questions focused on four areas: Talent Pipeline, Equitable Talent Development, CEO/Leadership Commitment, and Supplier Diversity. At the time this study was conducted, the category of Corporate and Organizational Communications was considered separately; it has since been absorbed in the CEO/Leadership Commitment category. Likewise, a category of Human Capital was subsequently broken into the first two current categories (Talent Pipeline and Equitable Talent Development).

Participation in the survey, which is free and not mandatory, has increased substantially throughout recent years: In 2009, 401 companies participated; in 2010, 449 companies participated, a 12% increase. The 2016 list included more than 1,800 companies (*DiversityInc*). The *DiversityInc* list is still considered a paragon for assessing an organization's diversity practices. To be considered for the list, companies must score "above average" in all four areas (*DiversityInc*, n.d., *Top 50 Methodology*); they are compared only to others within their same industry. There is also a significant shift annually in rankings: On the 2010 list, 30 companies moved up from the previous year, 19 went down in rankings, and 3 appeared on the list for the first time.

As companies vie for higher rankings on the prestigious *DiversityInc* list, they seek to emphasize their commitment to diversity practices through communication channels which include their corporate websites. These virtual sources of information allow organizations to inform, educate, and influence the perception of the public, stockholders, future investors, and current and potential employees assessing the extent of corporate diversity practices in regards to “how the organization promotes diversity, and whether or not the organization emphasizes values that are important to the individual applying for the position” (Gallagher, 2009). Naturally, websites are not free from their secondary purpose: to strategically position the organization in the mind of the public in a manner that displays optimal structural and institutional values. It is therefore a viable hypothesis that the exploration of select websites will yield a consistent and cross-site cornucopia of symbolic diversity categories traditionally associated with a higher presence of diversity within an organization, signaling how keenly aware companies are of what it takes to be considered diverse.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine how organizations that have received accolades for valuing diversity define and frame diversity through their company websites, and to better understand consistencies and discrepancies in the patterning of rhetoric within these corporate narratives using Entman’s framing theory. To that end, the following research questions were posed:

Research Question 1: What definition of diversity is adopted in top-rated diversity corporate websites?

Research Question 2: How is diversity framed by these websites?

Method

This study employed a qualitative textual analysis of selected corporate websites to understand how diversity is defined and framed by organizations ranked highly in diversity criteria, and identify the presence of symbolic and applied diversity practices as expressed through semiotic language use and diversity programs. The sample in this study was limited to 15 of the top 20 websites identified on the 2010 *DiversityInc* survey as “top-ranked” in diversity management. These 15 sites comprised a cross-representation of nine industries that collectively represent 17% of the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) from the *Fortune 500* list (<http://beta.fortune.com/fortune500>), and are presented with their corresponding list rankings. Industries included consumer products (14. Colgate Palmolive, 17. The Coca-Cola Co., 18. Procter and Gamble), professional services (5. Ernst & Young, 6. PricewaterhouseCoopers, 25. Deloitte), financial services (12. American Express, 32. Prudential Financial), information/technology/telecommunications (3. AT&T, 8. IBM), hospitality (7. Marriott International, 19. Starwood), health care/insurance (4. Kaiser Permanente), pharmaceutical (13. Merck & Company), and freight services (26. Cummins). These

selections parallel the number and type of industries represented by the entire list of 50. The first of each kind of company within an industry was thus used as a proxy for the remaining companies on the list: For example, American Express, which ranks number 12, appeared as the first financial services firm on the list and was therefore included and followed by Prudential Financial (Number 32). A complete list of the 15 companies selected as well as the entire 50 is available in Appendices A and B respectively. Entman's (1993, 2003) framing theory was employed in the analysis to better understand salience and how diversity is presented within the narrative construct.

Each website was visited, closely scrutinized, and analyzed by the researcher over a 2-month period in 2011, using summative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kondracki & Wellman, 2002; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999), a theoretical approach through which the researcher takes into account the context, purpose, time period, and audience for the text, going "beyond mere word counts to include a latent content analysis, [which] refers to the process of interpretation of content (Holsti, 1969) to discover underlying meanings of the text messages" (Babbie, 1992). Textalyser.net, a free online software text analysis program that allows for the selection and coding of websites based on previously defined key search terms, was used to conduct the summative content coding analysis. In regard to content coding and word selection, I employed 13 search terms considered to be most relevant and historically associated with the construct of diversity, including *diversity*, *equality*, *equal opportunity*, *culture*, *women*, *minorities*, *traditionally underrepresented groups*, *LGBT*, *networking*, *mentoring*, *training*, *diversity committees*, and *Office of Diversity* (or similar accountable organizational entity), for the purpose of assessing the degree and type of symbolic representation of diversity across corporate websites. Second, I identified the overall positioning of diversity in terms of its framing as a problem or issue to be addressed strategically, along with the organizations' respective solutions to address this issue for each site. The intent of this second approach was to discover pattern consistencies as well as anomalies in framing within the larger narrative construct.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to identify how organizations defined as "top-rated" by *DiversityInc* in demonstrating diversity metrics define and frame diversity on their corporate websites, assess the extent to which diversity as a strategic human resources-driven initiative is positioned as a problem to be managed, and gain a better understanding of linguistic and semiotic consistency in diversity rhetoric and framing.

Findings reveal three primary approaches in how organizations frame diversity: first, as an organizational asset promoted and preserved through its human resources and corporate values; second, as a driver of business excellence and competitive advantage; and finally, as a structural mechanism supported by diversity initiatives such as employee mentoring, networking, diversity training, and institutionalized governance. While these mechanisms themselves are questionable in terms of their intended and actual results in increasing levels of diversity and inclusion, corporate websites serve as symbolic and necessary contemporary representations of impression

management among stakeholders, stockholders, and employees. Additional findings highlight a high level of consistency in linguistic and semiotic use regardless of organization type, industry, or intended audiences.

Fifteen of fifteen, or 100%, of the websites had an independent webpage uniquely dedicated to discussing diversity management and respective organizational approaches to advancing a culture including diversity practices. Patterns across all examined websites indicate extreme consistency with very little divergence in corporate messaging: 100% of the companies analyzed linked definitions of diversity to mediated strategies such as networking, mentoring, training, employee networks, leadership development, and public/institutional recognition of their efforts through corporate awards similar to *DiversityInc's* recognition. In essence, the language and rhetoric between sites is so consistent that any unique elements around an organization's diversity practices are essentially indistinguishable from any other, regardless of industry, financial performance, or organizational culture.

Research Question 1 Findings

The first research question attempted to analyze the variety of definitions organizational websites employed around diversity. Corporate websites emphasized two primary messages: the first focused on people and values as the organization's assets, defining diversity with respect to individual and collective workplace values such as respect, tolerance, and talent; the second positioned diversity within the larger construct of business excellence. Most organizations (11 of 15, or 73%) adopted a definition of diversity as a business imperative, competitive advantage, and strategic business initiative. Nine of 15 (60%) used definitional rhetoric that positioned individuals—employees, suppliers, and customers—as valued members responsible for creating a high-performing culture.

Without exception, the 15 organizations heavily emphasized the elements of inclusion, equality, and equal opportunities for career seekers and advancers. The concept of racial inequality and gender disparity—two of the primary areas ripe for litigation—was squarely denounced through the use of diversity metrics. Kaiser Permanente, for example, declared its “labor force reflects no racial majority, with nearly 60 percent of the staff comprising people of color. Additionally, three-quarters of employees, nearly half of the executive team, and more than one-third of our physicians are women” (Kaiser Permanente, n.d.). Ernst & Young (n.d.), a professional services firm, noted that its Inclusiveness Recruiting Team “works with national and local organizations that promote the interest of minority groups.” IBM's website reiterated their leadership's role in creating a “work environment free of all forms of discrimination and harassment,” implementing programs “on behalf of women, minorities, people with disabilities, special disabled veteran and other veterans,” all traditionally under-represented groups in the organizational context.

From a problem-definition standpoint, which is the first step in Entman's framing model, the majority of organizations position the lack of diversity as a culturally centered phenomenon rather than an organizationally driven construct. PricewaterhouseCoopers

stated, “At PwC, we believe in confronting the hard realities—and *then doing something about it*” [italics added] (PricewaterhouseCoopers, n.d.). The disparity in minority recruitment drives much of the discourse around “the problem”: AT&T has spent more than \$50 billion with minority, women, and disabled veteran businesses; IBM confronted equal opportunity concerns “long before it was required by law . . . through a focus on eliminating barriers and understanding regional constituencies and differences between constituencies” (IBM, n.d.). The need to enhance multiculturalism to better reflect the pluralistic nature of the world is “critical to our sustainability,” stated Coca-Cola (n.d.). The problem, then, is positioned as the lack of a diverse environment jeopardizing cultural values and business objectives, and the need to expand the diversity of the workforce to maximize long-term sustainability, in addition to advancing the concepts of inclusion and fairness. These two concepts—business success and individuals as assets who represent organizational norms and values—were closely and consistently linked on all websites.

Research Question 2 Findings

The second research question examined how diversity was framed on the websites in terms of semiotic and linguistic positioning. Framing theory reveals narratives around fixing the problem of a lack of diversity by integrating diversity initiatives. In terms of the second step of the cascade theory, then, diversity issues stem from “differences” that need to be appreciated rather than eradicated. Deloitte (n.d.) stated, “Diversity is not about erasing differences—it’s about benefitting from them . . . every person brings a different portfolio of strengths based upon where he or she comes from in life. That’s something we hope never changes” (Deloitte, “Inclusion”, n.d.). There are no specific causes or contributors to discriminatory bias that diversity initiatives can solve. In fact, none of the organizations examined took ownership or accountability for misaligned gender or racial discrepancies in historical hiring practices; by contrast, the rhetoric employed was forward-looking and intentionally inspirational (Fiol, 2002). Moralistic factors such as stereotyping are not presented as a core issue; there is no evidence of causal retribution or narrative that reflects historical discriminatory practices. Signifiers of rhetoric, particularly action verbs, were instead focused around creating, developing, motivating, including, and supporting employees, rather than redressing inequalities from the past. The individual employee is positioned instead, in Step 4, as the “solution” to any diversity concerns. The unique aspects of culturally and gender-diverse workforces—indeed, the uniqueness of each individual’s insights and their life experiences—are “vital to our culture” stated Colgate-Palmolive; “focusing on diversity keeps us open to new possibilities” echoed Deloitte. Diversity, then, is framed as the appropriate course of action, the equitable, morally responsible, and ethically appropriate goal to achieve, one toward which organizations can and should aspire: “Everyone should feel free to live honestly and openly, without the need to conform to anyone else’s expectations about culture or lifestyle” (Deloitte, “Code of Ethics”, n.d.), because diversity is “not about changing people’s beliefs” (Cummings, “Working at Cummings”, n.d.). Rather, it is about fostering environments of mutual respect, tolerance, and validation, with little need to dredge up or harp on past corporate behaviors.

The realization of these objectives is achieved most effectively through organizational diversity initiatives, all of which are framed as solutions to the overall problem of lack of diversity (Step 4). Only two organizations—Coca-Cola and IBM, both of which have a history of more recent discrimination lawsuits and extensive financial settlements and have reinvented themselves as diversity leaders—mentioned legal motivations for developing diversity initiatives; and even in these cases, it was done indirectly by positioning the implementation of diversity initiatives such as networking and mentoring opportunities between employees, as customer- or stakeholder-driven, rather than mandated by legal injunctions. All 15 websites revealed a minimum of three diversity programs/initiatives under active engagement. Most organizations (10 of 15, or 67%) developed affinity groups, described as “voluntary employee-driven groups that typically focus on a shared interest” with the intention of providing employee support, networking opportunities, and cultural awareness activities. The engagement of employees as both assets of diversity and drivers of diversity initiatives is a common strategy within these organizations, linking inclusionary practices to strategic business objectives.

Eleven of 15 (73%) organizations indicated their establishment formal institutionalized governance and compliance bodies or organizational functions specifically dedicated to implementing diversity strategies, metrics and assessment, and demonstrating the effectiveness of initiatives. Ranging from management/employee inclusion committees, to Ethnicity Task Forces, to Offices of Diversity and Inclusion managed by a CEO of Diversity Initiatives, these structures are framed as legitimacy-enhancing entities that advance the positive corporate reputation of each organization, serve as a distinct corporate advantage, and demonstrate to external stakeholders that organizations have taken active steps to reduce discriminatory practices.

Discussion

Dobbin (2009) emphasizes the formalization and structuralization of diversity processes in organizational contexts as representative of managerial rhetoric. Rather than simply relying on diversity policies as necessary adjudicators to prevent legal ramifications for discriminatory practices, diversity rhetoric has become operationalized as managerial rhetoric, and vice versa. Companies frame diversity as a link to business and managerial objectives, messaging that is immediately recognizable within the examined websites. This reinforces the appearance of symbolic diversity in the form of a “checklist” that gives the subsequent appearance of inclusion: The more robust initiatives of inclusion and tolerance an organization has, the more it is successful at presenting itself as representative of a diverse organization.

The use of these diversity dimensions furthermore advances corporate business goals, tying the presence of diversity to an economically and financially successful corporation. As previously mentioned, however, ample research has demonstrated that many of the ascribed and symbolic diversity solutions are not considered to be effective in mitigating discriminatory practices. Why, then, do companies continue to pursue diversity rhetoric in their corporate websites, framing it as culturally and

economically necessary to the lifeblood of the business? A tentative explanation can, I believe, be posited in three areas.

First, current practices and trends related to metrics within diversity strategies may be symbolically representational of diversity practices, and these symbolisms serve as sufficient semiotic indicators to external audiences that (1) diversity is something an organization on the *DiversityInc* list considers relevant enough to invest time and effort around assessing and managing, due to internal and external stakeholder demands and (2) metrics and results that assess diversity criteria are not as relevant as the establishment and presence of diversity initiatives, that is, the “solution” to the “problem” of diversity is to manage it via strategic interventions, but the actual efficacy of these initiatives are less important than their mere presence. Indeed, results of diversity initiatives are not the emphasis of these corporate websites; rather, it is the appearance of an organization acting aggressively to address weaknesses that yields the greatest bang for the buck in external appearances. This may account for why there is little traction on the sites in terms of hiring practices, percentages, and sheer numbers that would serve as conclusive indicators of success (more minorities hired, greater career advancement opportunities for undervalued employees, and so forth), and instead greater emphasis on the breadth and depth of diversity management programs implemented. According to Brown (2006), the preponderance of organizations continue to rely on affirmative action/Equal Employment Opportunity data to measure recruitment and retention rates for employees in traditionally underrepresented groups (minorities, women, people with disabilities, veterans). This type of data analysis does not speak to the broader issues or identity groups included in the contemporary definitions and categorizations of diversity, largely because simple increases in relative numbers of employees from these groups does not necessarily represent a more diverse corporate environment. Organizations would therefore likely downplay this data in favor of symbolic and semisymbolic institutional programs with which the public can easily resonate (“they must be a diverse organization if they have mentoring, networking, and training initiatives”).

However, the relative number of diversity initiatives, as opposed to their scope and relevance within the organization’s cultural context, does not necessarily represent advancements in adherence to diversity practices. Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991) discuss the idea of statistical discrimination, the process by which “use of a group membership—or signaling—as a proxy for aspects of productivity that are relatively expensive or impossible to measure” (p. 204). Essentially employers draw inferences about individuals based on large racial categories of workers, and by engaging in hiring practices that increase the relative numbers of workers from a certain racial or gender group, does not necessarily equate to the expansion of more diversity practices. It does, however, inflate AA and Equal Employment Opportunity metrics that reinforce the symbolic appearance of effective diversity management.

Second, much of the approach of contemporary diversity rhetoric may be rooted in impression management (Goffman, 1959) or a type of collective reputation. In daily life, individuals shape their behavior and appearance within various contexts to determine and control the way in which they are perceived by others. Social interactions are aimed at creating specific impressions according to the desired purpose of the actor.

The result is a *face*, or a mask that varies according to the social situations, defined by Goffman (1959) as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (p. 5). A face is therefore a successful staging of an identity. An actor within a given social framework can make use of different tools to create his or her face, a mask that changes according to the actor’s role, the audience, and the social interaction (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Extending this rationale in to the organizational context, impression management is considered to be a “natural” and “major component of organizational life” (Dubrin, 2010), the “face” through which organizations seek to link a publicly branded self with an idealized internal self-view. Organizations, then, make concerted efforts to reconcile these competing personifications, using external communicative practices to align internally mediated diversity practices with externally managed rhetoric. Indeed, their efforts toward impression management move into the realm of what Highhouse, Brooks, and Gregarus (2009) call corporate reputation. “By viewing the corporation as a social actor with self-presentation goals” (Whetten, Felin, & King, 2009) who is concerned with achieving specific social objectives, we gain a deeper understanding of self-presentation motives firms use to promote their use of diversity initiatives and inclusion to external audiences. Corporations seek approval, status, and admiration, suggest Highhouse et al. (2009), in an effort to gain reputational advancement in self-presentation. My findings suggest that corporate websites are easily deployed mechanisms for advancing corporate reputation. This is most obviously represented on the websites in two veins: first, from the perspective of a legal framing with companies like Coca-Cola and IBM who have rebranded their external images despite extensive discrimination lawsuits, and second, with companies like Deloitte who have argued that diversity is a moral imperative, or the “right thing to do” given the necessity of presenting individuals as deserving of corporate behavior reflecting equality.

Finally, relating this to Entman’s problem-solution construct, organizations benefit from positioning the absence of diversity as significantly damaging to corporate values and business success, and thereby rationalizing the development of diversity programs created to address this issue. By coupling diversity programs with corporate success, organizations reinforce the ideological construct of discrimination as negative and diversity programs as positively oriented and effective interventions. Organizations that pursue diversity rhetoric as a strategy are perceived by the public as engaged, concerned with employee and stakeholder welfare, and legally compliant. It is for this reason that the majority of observed websites frame diversity management via their use of rhetoric as an effective solution to an issue that organizations have the power to address, because they have reframed the issue itself as not one caused by organizational culture or systemic institutionalized discrimination, but rather by customers and stakeholders who expect (and are groomed to expect) diversity initiatives to be the “solution.”

Directions for Future Research and Conclusion

The topic of diversity and how organizations employ diversity rhetoric in their external-facing communication strategies continues to be relevant in the sphere of business

communication and corporate identity management. There is certainly room for additional and broader research on the topic of diversity as manifested, reproduced, and positioned on corporate websites. In particular, future research avenues might compare more current *DiversityInc* rankings and websites to this study for a deeper understanding of semiotic and rhetorical shifts over time. Additionally, the analysis of more websites might reinforce findings from this study or yield alternate patterns and data that expand upon how organizations employ diversity rhetoric. Exploration of other external-facing communication modalities, specifically annual reports which provide information on diversity initiatives, and press releases which are heavily utilized as impression management tools, could provide more insights into semiotic representations.

By employing Entman's four-step framing model, this study was able to elucidate how website content positions diversity as an issue to be addressed through the use of inclusionary tactics, which elements of diversity most organizations consider to be most salient and use with consistency to build their diversity rhetoric, how lack of diversity is considered to be a culturally driven phenomenon rather than an organizationally constructed issue, and how diversity rhetoric serves as a solution to systemic, structural, and institutional concerns that manifest outside the organization, but which companies have adopted as a cause du jour to address for brand identity management, corporate reputation, and financial results. The level of consistency employed by these organizations in terms of content management is extremely high: Most websites downplay legal or historical discrimination issues and instead focus on how successfully they have implemented inclusion programs (networking, mentoring, community engagement, and the like). Metrics that reflect more robust diversity initiatives are mentioned but not highlighted as the key rationale for why organizations elect to adopt diversity programs. Neither do economic drivers serve as motivators for diversity rhetoric. Rather, it would appear that organizations employ diversity rhetoric on their websites as a symbolic representation of their moral stance as kind-hearted firms dedicated to bettering the world of their employees because it seems the "right thing to do." Framing diversity rhetoric, then, shows us the power of language and its ability to showcase what organizations want us to see through a particular lens; this may not reflect actual transformation in making diversity and inclusion a more real and achievable objective: that of true equality in the workplace as realized through diversity management initiatives.

Appendix A

Companies Selected for Analysis by 2010 DiversityInc List, by Ranking and Industry (Total of 15)

3. AT&T
4. Kaiser Permanente
5. Ernst and Young
6. PricewaterhouseCoopers
7. Marriott International

8. IBM Corp.
12. American Express
13. Merck & Company
14. Colgate Palmolive
17. The Coca-Cola Co.
18. Procter & Gamble
19. Starwood International
25. Deloitte
26. Cummins
32. Prudential Financial

Appendix B

List of 2010 DiversityInc “Top in Diversity” Top 50 List

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- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Sodexo | 26. Cummins |
| 2. Johnson & Johnson | 27. HSBC—North America |
| 3. AT&T | 28. Monsanto Co. |
| 4. Kaiser Permanente | 29. General Mills |
| 5. Ernst & Young | 30. Aetna |
| 6. PricewaterhouseCoopers | 31. Capital One |
| 7. Marriott International | 32. Prudential Financial |
| 8. IBM Corp. | 33. The Walt Disney Co. |
| 9. Bank of America | 34. JPMorgan Chase |
| 10. Abbott | 35. Kraft Foods |
| 11. Verizon Communications | 36. Toyota Motor North America |
| 12. American Express Co. | 37. Cisco Systems |
| 13. Merck & Co. | 38. Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Florida |
| 14. Colgate-Palmolive | 39. Time Warner |
| 15. KPMG | 40. Target Corp. |
| 16. Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corp. | 41. SC Johnson |
| 17. The Coca-Cola Co. | 42. MetLife |
| 18. Procter & Gamble | 43. Wells Fargo & Co. |
| 19. Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide | 44. Ford Motor Co. |
| 20. Health Care Service Corp. | 45. Comerica |
| 21. Cox Communications | 46. JCPenney |
| 22. Accenture | 47. Northrop Grumman Corp. |
| 23. Time Warner Cable | 48. Xerox Corp. |
| 24. MGM MIRAGE | 49. Automatic Data Processing |
| 25. Deloitte | 50. WellPoint |
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