

Rethinking diversity management during Covid-19 pandemic: The revelatory case of Danone



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1. Introduction

“The COVID-19 looking glass does not show us a world turned upside down because of the effects of a global pandemic; it shows us more starkly than ever how unequal our world is, has always been.” (Kennedy-Macfoy, 2020, p. 5)

Assessing the impact of Covid-19 on society has been the focus of researchers for only one year, especially in the field of social injustice (Gibson et al., 2020; Kennedy-Macfoy, 2020; Özkazanç-Pan, & Pullen, 2020; Yearby & Mohapatra, 2020). However, studies analyzing the effects in organizations are still lacking. Certainly, “the Covid-19 looking glass” as defined by Kennedy-Macfoy (2020) is exposing inequalities in society, and perhaps as well in organizations, that are costly (both figuratively and materially) for individuals and for organizations. For instance, as noted in the analysis by Mc Kinsey (2020, December 14), overall women’s jobs and livelihoods are more vulnerable to the crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, using data and trends from unemployment surveys in the United States and India, the researchers (Madgavkar, White, Krishnan, Mahajan, & Azcue, 2020) estimated that female job loss-rates due to Covid-19 are about 1.8 times higher than male job loss rates globally, at 5.7 % versus 3.1% respectively. Additionally, their analysis shows that only one-fourth of the difference between job loss rates for men and women is explained by the gendered nature of work across industries and labor market specifics, leaving the other three-quarters to be explicated by factors which are mainly reconducted to social norms and attitudes. In this context, big organizations, either moved by the business case for diversity, or by environmental pressure to be more “responsible and equal”(Pitts et al., 2010), are starting to revise their processes and practices in order to prevent the perpetuation of discrimination. Such management policies, practices and processes are what is being called diversity management.

Despite more than 20 years of research in diversity management, there is no universal model on how to manage workforce diversity, especially in a global context. There have been some attempts to provide conceptual frameworks in the academic debate (e.g., Nishii & Özbilgin, 2007; Özbilgin, Ellis & Gibbs, 2019), however a definitive answer or model is, as of date, not available. The main reason for this is that diversity issues vary per country, culture and institutional context of reference (Shen et al., 2009). Nevertheless, it is possible for organizations to effectively value workforce diversity through human resource management policies and practices (Shen et al., 2009). Diversity management practices can be defined as: “A set of formalized practices, processes or systems developed and implemented by organizations to manage diversity effectively among all organizational stakeholders” (Yang & Konrad, 2011, p. 6). Assessing diversity management

practices in multinational organizations and exploring the qualitative changes as a result of the ongoing pandemic, are, as of date, not researched yet. Therefore, this study wants to address this knowledge gap in global diversity management literature and contribute to reveal the critical issues surrounding global diversity management in multinational organizations during the ongoing pandemic. The study intends to reveal insights on how to build a more sustainable diversity management in the aftermath of Covid-19 pandemic. It aims to do so by answering the following research question and sub questions:

How to rethink diversity management in multinational organizations after Covid-19 pandemic?

- What are the consequences and issues for diversity management practices?
- How are inequalities perceived by organizational actors?
- How can these challenges be solved?

Hence, reflecting on the issues surrounding the international management of diversity during the ongoing pandemic has significant relevance for both academic literature, as well as management practice. The context for this analysis will be the case organization, Danone. Being a multinational organization with highly pervasive international presence and declared commitment to include and value people in their strategy (Danone Annual Report 2019), it represents the perfect case organization to investigate how diversity management might have been affected by the pandemic and how this has been dealt in organizations. In order to analyze this unexplored phenomenon, an inductive approach was adopted. In this way, it was possible to capture the richness of the social processes, as well as unexpected findings (Gioia et al., 2012).

In the following sections a short literature review on the main themes of this inductive research will be presented. Secondly, the methodology section will illustrate the methods used to conduct the study. Finally, results from data collection will be discussed in detail against existing literature in order to establish new theoretical developments and suggest managerial implications.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter an overview of the current state of the art of diversity management literature, will be provided, together with a summary on the global diversity management challenges known as of now. I will also provide a review of some of the most recent articles dealing with Covid-19 pandemic effects on society and labor market. The chapter is divided in different paragraphs, each one corresponding to four main themes which will be the starting point of the inductive inquiry. First of all, I will review the concept of workforce differences and inequalities in organizations, which are the very reason for the existence of diversity management practices. Secondly, I will present an overview on the history of diversity management in general and in multinational contexts. In the third section, I will review the role of diversity management practices towards the ideal of inclusion in organizations and, in the final section, I will introduce some highlights from the very novel literature connecting Covid-19 to social and structural inequalities in order to orientate myself on the possible consequences that the organization might face when dealing with diversity and inequality during the pandemic.

2.1 Workforce differences and inequalities in organizations

Jonsen, Maznevski and Schneider, (2011), evidenced that although cultural anthropologists have studied cultural diversity for almost 150 years, diversity in management literature is a topic which has been only addressed for the last 30 years. Additionally, the definition of diversity is often taken for granted (Harrison & Klein, 2007) or used interchangeably to indicate dispersion, heterogeneity, dissimilarity, divergence and variation. In order to bring more clarity into the topic, Mor Barak (2005) created a typology of diversity definitions which can be divided into narrow-category-based, broad-category based or based on a conceptual rule. Mor Barak (2005) herself provides a comprehensive definition of workforce difference as:

Division of the workforce into distinct categories that have a perceived commonality within a given cultural or national context and that impact potentially harmful or beneficial employment outcomes such as job opportunities, treatment in the workplace and promotion prospects, irrespective of job-related skills and qualifications (p.123),

Moreover, Harrison et al. (2002), identify the diversity literature as being characterized by both surface and deep level attributes. Therefore, it is possible to distinguish between demographic diversity constituted by categories such as race, gender and age, and finally invisible diversities such as work experience, educational background, functional background, as well as diversity in terms of

values, culture and religion. Surface or observable traits are estimated to be the focus of 89% of existing research (Jackson et al, 2003), because they are easy to operationalize and are assumed to be proxies for underlying or deeper traits (Harrison et al., 1998, 2002; Jackson et al., 2003; Jehn et al., 1999; Pelled, 1996; Pfeffer, 1983). In this research, the definition of Mor Barak (2005) is the starting point to define differences in the studied organizational context, in order to focus on observable factors as well as invisible factors, which might determine the different contribution of employees in the organization (Jackson et al., 2003). Ultimately, acknowledging differences means having to deal with inequalities, both in societies and by reflection, in organizations (McPherson, 2009). A very comprehensive and multidimensional definition of workplace inequalities is provided by Acker (2006) where she introduces the revolutionary concept of “inequality regimes”. Inequality regimes are defined as “loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender and racial inequalities within particular organizations (Acker, 2006 p. 443)”. In this view, inequalities are to be seen in practice as “systemic disparities between participants in power and control over goals, resources and outcomes (Acker, 2006 p.443). Inequality regimes are continuously changing, and they are directly linked to societal inequalities, in terms of history, politics and cultural heritage. In her work, Acker (2006) continues on describing the components of inequality regimes, which can serve as analytical tool in order to assess inequalities in organizations: *bases of inequality* that is to say, gender, class and race as omniscient processes generating inequality; *shape and degree of inequality*, where shape refers to organizational structure (hierarchical or flat) and degree refers to possible emerging patterns of inequalities reproduction; *visibility of inequality*, defined as the degree of awareness of inequalities; *legitimacy of inequalities* again mostly depending on the type of organization, where the most rigid bureaucracy for instance would even come to legitimize inequalities. Finally, interaction practices themselves generating inequalities are more than often subtle and not spoken, therefore they cannot be always documented or traced in the long term (Acker, 2006). Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly (2006) mentioned in their study that a preponderance of empirical research shows that inequalities in organizations can be caused by managerial bias and poor network connections, however actions aimed at changing individuals do not seem to bring the expected results. Thus, researchers introduced the notion of transformative potential. Transformative potential means the potential for diversity practices to diminish inequalities, defined as systematic disparities in power and control over goals, resources, and outcomes (Acker 2006), by changing organizational work practices, norms, routines, and interactions. Even more so in virtual environments, Boyer et al. (2006) demonstrated that diversity can be expressed differently through contents like websites and social media pages. Still, it is not known if and how the transformative potential of diversity management practices is in any way influenced by a virtual work context.

Consequently, it is important to explore organizational settings and be aware of the key issues emerging from the history of managing diversity, which will be dealt in the following paragraph.

2.2 Diversity management history

Diversity management was initiated in North America, being rooted in the anti-discrimination movement for civil rights during the 1960s. Consequences of such debates were the establishment of Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) and Affirmative Action (AA), which are the “product” of both the issues brought up to the public attention, and the liberal political philosophy (Webb, 1997). Both EEO and AA addressed inequalities, especially in the US, focusing on legislative issues, guaranteeing access to employment for historically disadvantaged minorities (Jonsen et al. 2011). What is striking is that policies, like EEO and AA, focus on always specific categories, one by one, however the intersection of inequalities is hardly ever considered (Dennissen, Benschop, & van den Brink, 2016). Thus, diversity management research is relatively recent, and perhaps limited in its analysis, being not particularly diverse in itself (Jonsen et al. 2011). The peak of the discussion around diversity management in academic literature started approximately around the 1990s, when it first became a popular topic of discussion among organizational studies and business practice (Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2009). However, important to notice is that, as Ghorash and Sabelis (2013) highlighted, the interest in managing diversity and its discussion in the academic debate, only emerged when the economic benefits became the main argument, generating to the so-called “business case” for diversity. According to the critical perspective on diversity management (e.g., Zanoni and Janssens, 2004), managing diversity in terms of individual differences that can be exploited to achieve greater organizational success, should not be the only driver for organizations, as this may leave structural inequalities unchallenged, if not even reinforced. Indeed, the potential for the social justice case is often overshadowed by the business case, since organizations are mostly focused on making profit (Zanoni et al., 2010). However, focusing on the social justice case of diversity, it is possible to reduce inequalities that inherently characterize the workforce. According to Randel et al., (2018) employees will feel included when they both feel a sense of belongingness and uniqueness, which is of course difficult to put in practice. Nevertheless, when inclusion is the focus in teams, this can benefit organizations and overall performance (Randell et al., 2018). The employees, if included, will feel that in the organization they can be their unique selves, while identifying at the same time to the organization (Randel et al., 2018). This sense of uniqueness and identification, which might appear as paradoxical, is instead a key focus for organizations, as this can generate more engagement and enhance innovation processes and performance (Randel et al., 2018).

Thus, economic as well as moral reasons for social justice should guide organizations in striving towards the ideal of inclusion of all individuals composing the workforce, meeting their needs and letting them express their own multiple identities (Holck, Muhr, & Villesèche, 2016).

Acknowledging workforce diversity and making sure that everyone is included is a strategic choice, and downplaying its cultural, social and institutional roots, as well as dynamics of power, it means to simplistically flatten all differences and perpetuate the dominant norm (Zanoni & Janssens, 2004). As a result, diversity management towards the ideal of inclusion in organizations is mainly influenced by power dynamics, organizational actors and discourses around the implementation of such practices (Dennissen, Benschop & van den Brink, 2016).

2.3 Diversity management practices in organizations

Reviewing current literature available on the contribution of diversity management practices, the first thing that is possible to notice is that again interpretations, approaches and practices vary significantly. The clearest definition of diversity management practices is provided by Yang & Konrad (2011). Diversity management practices refer to formalized practices developed and implemented by organizations to manage diversity effectively (Yang & Konrad 2011).

Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly (2006) in their study advanced that there are at least three broad approaches to promoting diversity: some programs are designed to instill organizational responsibility for diversity, others aim only at changing individuals, especially managers, in order to reduce managerial bias through training and feedback and finally, others try to reduce social isolation of women and minority workers. Always in the same study, the authors aimed to assess the efficacy of each of these three broad categories of approaches in achieving the aims of promoting inclusion and valuing diversity. The findings by Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly (2006) show that efforts aimed at making changes at individual level tackling bias are the least effective at increasing the share of white women, black women and black men in management. Efforts that aim to prevent social isolation through mentoring and networking show modest effects. Finally, efforts to establish shared responsibility for diversity lead to better outcomes in terms of increase in managerial diversity. What was also highlighted by the authors was that once organizations appoint responsibility to individuals for targets towards change, then the joint combination of the individualistic and networking approaches to diversity contribute to a significant remediation of workplace inequality.

Other studies like the one by Dennissen, Benschop & van den Brink (2016) focused on showing the potential and issues around specific diversity management practices, namely diversity networks.

Diversity networks are associations of workers that aim to provide support to employees who are historically excluded and marginalized (Green, 2018; Pini, Brown & Ryan, 2004), career advice (Friedman, 1996; O’Neil, Hopkins & Sullivan, 2011) and voice (Bell, Özbilgin, Beauregard & Sürgevil, 2011; Creed, 2003; McNulty, McPhail, Inversi, Dundon & Nechanska, 2018). Despite the apparent benefit that these associations bring to the workplace, it was demonstrated by Dennissen, Benschop & van den Brink (2016) that network leaders tend to construct the value of their networks mainly for their contributions in career development and community building, they are not specifically concerned on how networks could remove barriers to inclusion in organizations. Thus, the value of networks conceived as such may be limited, since it leaves systemic inequalities at the organizational level unchallenged (Dennissen, Benschop & van den Brink, 2016). On the importance of structural inequalities and power, the work by Benschop et al., (2015) is emblematic as it highlights how the subdimension of the power perspective is needed when choosing the content of diversity practices and disseminating awareness about it. If power is absent in the discourses, then inequalities are not challenged deeply enough (Benschop et al., 2015).

When it comes to apply diversity management strategies and practices in international contexts there is even more unclarity in the existing literature, as it is an underexplored phenomenon from the practice point of view. Indeed, literature available on global diversity management is quite limited to the sole aspect of theorizing, lacking to provide nuances on the actual implementation and assumptions behind practices. Despite this, insightful findings were provided by Sippola & Smale (2007) who developed a theoretical framework for global integration of diversity management practices. The authors thanks to a longitudinal case study, showed that the process of global integration is influenced by institutional pressures exactly in the same way as it happens with global HRM practices (e.g., Rosenzweig and Nohria, 1994; Bae et al., 1998; Bjoörkman and Lu, 2001). Therefore, diversity and inclusion practices vary locally, while, at the policy and philosophy level, integration is easily reached (Sippola & Smale, 2007). The same authors also suggest that there is a need for “internalization” (Kostova, 1999) more than formalization of diversity and inclusion practices which is hard to achieve for organizations. Internalization is meant here in the sense of recognition of the value and use of diversity management practices by organizational members. Nevertheless, through a system of appointed responsibilities via diversity coordinators, the policies and procedures were adopted by all employees and managers who were somehow obliged to “think about everyday diversity issues when self-initiative was not forthcoming”, receiving a top-down process of implementation. The ultimate “answer” to the issue of global diversity management is then for multinational organizations to aim for consistency on diversity philosophy, with a multidomestic approach to diversity policies and practices which are susceptible to demographical and institutional

characteristics of each country of reference (Sippola & Smale, 2007). However, this localization should never result in total local autonomy, what the authors suggest is that it is crucial that subsidiary and parent organization should co-operate to find mutually beneficial solutions by sharing and brainstorming ideas. Concluding, the more recent work by Özbilgin, Bartels-Ellis & Gibbs (2019) identifies three main issues for global diversity management, which reside in the nature of the capitalist system surrounding multinational organizations. Namely effective management of diversity in global contexts faces the challenges of individualization, deregulation and financialization, all of which corrode and destroy the moral and social value of diversity and inclusion (Özbilgin, Bartels-Ellis & Gibbs, 2019). Individualization consists of the tendency to focus organizational efforts on changing individuals, through awareness, without giving enough attention to changing of structures and systems which lead to unequal distribution of power and influence, more than often this is done intentionally to keep the status quo (Özbilgin, Bartels-Ellis & Gibbs, 2019). Deregulation issue corresponds instead to the regulatory vacuum in which global diversity management operates (Özbilgin et al., 2016a, 2016b): there is indeed not enough regulatory pressure at international level encouraging organizations to have truly consistent diversity standards across countries, with highly regulated and protected markets and poorly regulated ones where labor is exploited, and human rights are at risk. The risk of financialization consists instead of prioritizing financial rationales of diversity and inclusion because of its contribution to the profitability of the organization, overshadowing the social and economic rationales, without considering the overall global value chain. In order to solve such issues, the authors suggest three different approaches: intersectional solidarity to transcend individualization and focus on the structures and processes, global value chain to transcend deregulation by focusing on all the aspects of produced value, beyond monetary resources and synchronicity to transcend financialization.

In the next and last section of this theoretical framework, I will delineate the findings of the very recent studies about Covid-19 effects on social inequalities, in order to orientate myself in the exploration of the consequences in organizations specifically.

2.4 Covid-19 pandemic effects on inequalities

Since its outbreak, Covid-19 has been having an enormous impact on the global landscape, both in terms of economic, as well as social and human aspects, changing drastically the reality we used to live. After almost one year since the pandemic started, we are able to preliminarily assess the detrimental economic consequences in many countries, which are unfortunately still ongoing. Governments around the world have adopted social distancing, travel restrictions and quarantine measures in the attempt to control the infection rate among the population. However, these measures

have directly led to reduced (if not completely stopped) activities across all economic sectors, leading ultimately to losses in productivity and massive unemployment, especially in low-waged and low skilled sectors, comparable only to post-war scenarios (Nicola et al., 2020). According to the same authors, the disparate economic effects are identified in primary, secondary and tertiary sectors, resulting, for instance, in a severe crisis in manufacturing and hospitality industry, but also to incredible demand boosts in other sectors, such as video-gaming industry or online meeting platforms. With many people being constrained at home and not being able to physically meet, industries which require physical contact are perishing, while other businesses are seeing enormous benefits, generating an unforeseen transformation of society: the “work-from home revolution” (The Economist 2020, June 25). The just recently published study by Chung et al., (2021) examined how flexible working from home during the pandemic impacted gender equality, analyzing the UK social context. The results of their survey showed that in most families, mothers were mainly responsible for households and childcare tasks both before and during the pandemic. Moreover, fathers working from home declared that they are doing more housework and childcare work during the lockdown than ever before. The findings by Chung et al., (2021) show persistent patterns of inequality that were exacerbated by the pandemic. Therefore, despite the large diffusion of flexible work could generate the conditions to reduce gender inequalities, as also fathers are now working from home, what is evident is that if cultures and discourses are not challenged, then patriarchal values and practices are perpetuated.

Another article, just being published in March by Agarwal (2021), tries to reflect and challenge the relationship between gender and Covid-19 in India. The researcher highlights some more visible and immediate effects such as job losses, food shortages and increased domestic duties, as well as other effects which will emerge with time. For instance, depletion of savings and assets, pandemic related widowhood that will make the recovery difficult, coupled with more hidden effects such as care work and domestic violence. What can be certainly drawn from this study is the importance of trying to predict and delineate not only the immediate direct effects, but also the long-term effects of the pandemic on pre-existing social inequalities. Hence, in this study the objective is to explore how the actors are experiencing diversity management practices and inequalities during the ongoing pandemic in the organization, in order to draw conclusions on the eventual changes and to suggest a more conscious management practice.

Concluding, having presented theories and concepts which have been the guiding reference in this exploratory study, the methodology that led to data collection and results is illustrated.

3. Methodology

In the following sections, the methodology chosen to conduct the research project will be presented and explained in detail. Specifically, it will be first included the research approach and philosophical stance, secondly the research context, background, and sources of data, the approach to data analysis and finally a more reflective paragraph on reflexivity of research and ethical issues.

3.1 Research approach and philosophical stance

Being this study focused on the exploration of qualitative changes happening around diversity management policies and practices, during an ongoing pandemic and in a virtual context, it would benefit an inductive approach to research, as well as an interpretivist standpoint, in order to describe how the actors, interpret and actively contribute to the social construction of knowledge (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). Having a more open and grounded approach on how the actors are interpreting the changes they are experiencing and contributing to, will enable me to discover if these were also influenced in any way by the global pandemic and what are the consequences for organizational strategies and practices. Moreover, in order to describe in depth qualitative changes happening in one specific social context, I chose to adopt the single case study method as theorized by Gioia et al. (2012). The single case study method will allow me to delve deeper into the specific research context, Danone, and I will be able to describe it providing richer insights. The single case study method as defined by Gioia et al., (2012) allows for description and explanation of a revelatory case, in this case Danone, which, being a multinational organization located in different countries around the world, necessarily requires more contextualization and analysis.

The interpretive approach to research assumes that human understanding and action are based on the interpretation of information and events by the people experiencing them (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1997). Understanding depends on the meaning assigned to any set of events (cf. Daft & Weick, 1984). However, meaning is not only subjective, rather it is a “socially constructed phenomenon” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Weick, 1979). Thus, meaning making process is highly dependent on the context and goals that the actors are trying to achieve. The implications of this perspective in the study are therefore that the actors are “knowledgeable agents” (Gioia et al, 2012 p. 1) and their interpretations, declared and enacted are the explanation and antecedents for what is happening and why it is so. Concluding, the meanings as expressed and seen in artefacts produced by the members of the organization will be the primary focus of the analysis.

3.2 Research background, context and sources of data

The context of research is the multinational organization Danone. I chose this organization as case study first of all, because it is a company that openly declares and translates its commitment to diversity into concrete actions: partnering with the UN campaign #Heforshe, introducing the new gender-neutral Global Parental Policy and finally, allowing employees many opportunities for networking with online events. The second reason for this choice is that having started my six-month internship in Danone, allowed me as researcher to have direct access to informants and to gather even richer insights through direct observation on how diversity management is being approached during the global pandemic. My dual role as insider and outsider in the research I believe, though challenging, is able to reveal even more valuable findings. I collected data by purposively sampling 11 informants from different levels across the organizations: HR managers and “diversity activists”, that is to say employees who have obtained a badge, visible on the social media “Workplace”, because of having completed the global e-learning on diversity and inclusion offered by Danone. I decided to especially focus on people who were familiar with the topic or directly involved because the research aims to understand how Covid-19 changed the ways of working and challenged the management of inequalities in the organization. The main portal through which I gathered data was the internal social media “Workplace”, where employees from all levels in the organization and from all regions across the world, actively share content and communications. Therefore, I conducted eleven semi-structured interviews online via WebEx with people within the company that are recognizable on the internal social media by the diversity activist badge. Down below, I provide a table overview of each interviewee’s characteristics such as gender, country of responsibility and job title, which are useful in order to contextualize the findings for the research:

Interview	Gender	Country Responsibility	Job Title
1	Female	Benelux	Learning manager
2	Female	Netherlands	Food scientist
3	Male	Netherlands	Supply Chain Coordinator
4	Female	Benelux	Junior Internal Communications Manager
5	Male	Benelux	Learning manager
6	Female	Global	Global Talent Manager for operations
7	Female	Netherlands	Senior Scientist
8	Male	North America (US and Canada)	Senior Director of Diversity and Inclusion
9	Female	Global	Global Specialized Nutrition Management Lead
10	Female	Benelux	Talent manager for finance
11	Female	Netherlands	Senior manager at General Secretary

Secondly, I observed three different diversity related workshops/events promoted on the Workplace group especially dedicated, called “Inclusive Diversity”. In particular, I attended one “Diversity

Nudge” on unconscious bias, secondly a webinar on the power of brands in order to market diversity and inclusion in Danone (with internal and external guest speakers) and finally I observed a webinar to celebrate the introduction of the new global and gender-neutral parental policy. Concluding, I triangulated data from all these different sources in order to answer the complex research question on the qualitative changes surrounding diversity management in organizations during the current pandemic.

3.3 Data analysis approach

The sensitizing concepts which were the starting point of this inductive analysis on the qualitative changes in diversity management during the covid-19 outbreak are presented. In particular, workforce differences, diversity management practices and covid-19 impact on inequalities, as defined in the previous theoretical framework, are the sensitizing concepts which informed the data gathering in the field. The objective of sensitizing concepts is far from providing definitive concepts. As Blumer (1954, p. 7) explained:

A definitive concept refers precisely to what is common to a class of objects, by the aid of a clear definition in terms of attributes or fixed benchmarks. . . A sensitizing concept lacks such specification of attributes or benchmarks and consequently it does not enable the user to move directly to the instance and its relevant content. Instead, it gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look.

Thus, sensitizing concepts are interpretive devices and starting point for a qualitative study (Glaser, 1978; Padgett, 2004; Patton, 2002). They provide ultimately guidelines for researchers in specific unexplored settings. Since as of date, there are no studies which can predict the consequences and issues arising on diversity management due to Covid-19 outbreak, assuming this inductive perspective allowed for exploration of phenomena, achieving deeper insights, without being constrained by a priori constructs (Gioia et al. , 2012). Following the methodological suggestions and experiences shown by the study of Gioia et al., (2012), the data analysis approach in a single interpretive case study is characterized by different stages. There is a first-order analysis, which tries to adhere faithfully to informant terms, identifying all possible categories, terms and codes that emerge early in the research (a process identified by Strauss and Corbin, 1997 under the notion of open coding). In this first order analysis, the number of categories tends to be vast. As the analysis

progresses, the researcher starts to seek similarities and differences among the many categories (axial coding, as defined by Strauss and Corbin, 1997) a process which reduces categories to a more manageable number. The researcher needs then to give those categories labels or phrasal descriptions retaining informants term and then consider the deeper structure among them and the relationships. At this point the researcher turns from observer to “knowledgeable agent” who will think about multiple levels simultaneously: the level of informant terms and codes and at the more abstract level of themes and dimensions identified, and ultimately, to the level of larger narrative, assessing patterns and phenomena. Once the first order and second order terms and aggregate dimensions are ready, these will be the basis for the researcher to build the data structure, which is a visual aid to represent how the researcher progressed from collected data into themes, showing the methodological rigor behind the analysis. As noted by Gioia et al. (2012) “there is value in semi-ignorance or enforced ignorance of the literature”, because knowing literature too intimately too early puts blinders on and leads to prior hypothesis bias (confirmation bias). Some combination of knowing and not knowing allows for discovery without reinventing the already known.

Finally, in order to develop the grounded theory model, Gioia et al. (2012) identify as last step the assessing of relationships and the dynamic of what is represented statically in the data structure. That is to say, the researcher needs to account in this last step for dynamic interrelationships and depict the theory underlying the data collected. The result of this whole process described is illustrated in a table depicted by Figure 1.1, Appendix B.

3.4 Research ethics and reflexivity

Addressing complexity and collecting data, especially in virtual environments, involves quite some ethical issues and risks. For instance, identities and privacy of online users are at stake. Adopting an interpretivist standpoint in research, means letting know participants that they are observed. However, this is not always possible. The practice of lurking (Varis, 2014) entails that researchers participate invisibly to the field, and they are unknown to the people whose activities are being observed. Lurking might happen for example analyzing social media activity of the case organization, or observing as participant a diversity related workshop, which constitute key sources of data for this study, together with informants’ interviews and official documents.

In order to address these issues, anonymity has been a priority. Every cited social media post on LinkedIn or workplace (the social media especially for Danone employees), every claim from participants during the workshops or in the interviews, was analyzed only concerning its content and in relation to the theme of investigation. Moreover, confidentiality and transferability of findings were

the main focus during the entire research project. Extracting transferable concepts and principles (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) allows to address the findings to a larger audience, in this case, to apply findings to all multinational organizations dealing with the management of diversity, during the ongoing global pandemic. Moreover, assuming the perspective of Gioia et al. (2012) and an interpretivist standpoint of view, does not mean that findings are idiosyncratic. Social processes are happening with the interaction of contexts and actors; however, they are not always so unique. According to the authors indeed, many concepts and processes in human social life are similar and they happen to have an equivalent structure (Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999). Hence, it is possible to generalize by providing thick descriptions of events and accounting for transferability and anonymity of people, the agents revealing such findings. Moreover, if the case generates concepts or principles with obvious relevance to some other domain, it can exemplify a general principle or better a “principle that is portable” from one setting to another (Gioia et al., 2012).

Finally, in order to tackle my dual role as employee and researcher, I will adopt alternatively the role of participant observer (for instance during the observation of internal events aimed at increasing awareness of diversity) and pure observer, aiming to critically assess the underlying implications and meanings behind respondents’ claims and factual information gathered from documents and observations. In this way, I will be able to collect in depth qualitative data that will inform the rich descriptions and narrative of the findings (Gioia et al., 2012). Ethical considerations of this mixed role could be my impartiality when assessing organizational practices. Nevertheless, by alternating roles, by using the Gioia methodology and going back and forth in an ongoing discovery process between websites, field notes and interviews, I will be able to still achieve rigorous method and provide valuable non-biased findings.

4. Results

Analyzing all the data collected from interviews, observations, and official company's websites, one thing appeared quite clear: diversity management has been impacted by Covid-19, just as business and social relationships did. In particular, interviewing respondents in charge of the implementation of initiatives, both strategically and operationally, they were all agreeing on the fact that the pandemic at first slowed down the activities, but quickly, online events of all sorts became the norm for diversity management, or Inclusive Diversity, as denominated in the company. Concerning the consequences for inequalities instead, the results were pointing towards subtle forms of discrimination which are nevertheless balanced out by a pervasive inclusive culture, as I will explain in the next sections.

In order to illustrate the findings, I will dive into the three dimensions emerging from the data: Inclusive Diversity in Danone, Workforce Diversity and Inclusive Diversity post Covid-19 pandemic.

4.1 Inclusive Diversity in Danone

In the next sections, Diversity management within the case organization is analyzed according to the second order concepts emerged from the process of interview coding. I will firstly introduce strategies and discourses around diversity and inclusion and its perception from the interviewees who are all involved in diversity management. Secondly, I will analyze the actual implementation and practices in order to assess what is already being practiced and how, by comparing global to local strategies in the Benelux area.

4.1.1 *Strategies and discourses around diversity*

Diversity management in Danone group appears to be as a shared commitment across more than 55 countries in the world, supported simultaneously by company policies and passionate activists "Inclusive Diversity Champions", who create a movement within the company to personally act towards making Danone's ambition to be an inclusive workplace reality. The term itself "diversity management" is replaced by the coined phrase "Inclusive Diversity, or ID". Completing and studying the 15 minutes global e-learning *Inclusive diversity for all*, it was possible to understand clearly how diversity management is being proposed to employees and what are the discourses around it. Indeed, precise definitions of diversity and inclusion, as intended in the organization, are provided. Citing the slides in this course, diversity is:

“A mix of differences and similarities that make people unique, these can include, but not limited to, values, perspectives, beliefs, backgrounds, and certain physical attributes such as gender, race, color, ethnicity, size, weight, height, age and behaviors.”

While inclusion is defined as:

“The achievement of a work environment in which all individuals can bring their true selves and are treated fairly and respectfully, have equal access to opportunities and resources and can contribute fully to an organization’s success.”

Both videos and slides of *the Inclusive diversity for all* e-learning, mentioned that diversity can be achieved with the implementation of company policies like recruitment policy, parental leave and KPIs, however inclusion is supposed to be driven by individuals with their every day’s behavior. Moreover, reaching inclusion in the workplace is presented as having significant benefits for the business, which are described again in the e-learning as: “collaboration, trust, top talents are attracted, innovation and creativity are enhanced, turnover is low, and customers are satisfied”. It is therefore possible to establish, following this observation, that Danone adopts a very broad definition of diversity, like Mor Barak (2005) conceptualized, including both visible and non-visible traits. Also, the company tries to go further than just applying an individualistic or network approach to diversity management (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006), as it appoints responsibility to a global dedicated team. In turn, observing the engagement activity in the social network Workplace, the global team encourages employees in all countries to become Inclusive Diversity activists, by inviting them to join events and if passionate about the topic, become inclusive diversity activists. This decentralized approach has the objective of creating a sense of urgency and ownership across regions and make sure that inclusive diversity is perceived as business strategy and priority.

Analyzing further policy documents and interviews, it was possible to discover that the company in the last 3 years underwent a big implementation process concerning diversity and inclusion. Starting from almost no formal processes or strategies, to a simultaneous bottom-up and top driven strategy for Inclusive Diversity, which allegedly allows for adaptation to each regional specificity. At the same time three global priorities are set as starting reference in the categories of gender, cultural diversity and inclusive behaviors (Danone’s company commitment, 2019). Empowering local actors to make a change and strive to identify their local issues, specificities and priorities, is undoubtedly a very interesting engagement strategy, but this is causing a confused perception on how Inclusive Diversity is approached in the company, as it is possible to notice in these quotes from two respondents:

Learning Manager (Interview 5): “Well, there are diversity champions, but for me the governance needs to be adjusted. It is not working that easily in the sense that people are not that clear about their roles and responsibilities. About... the ways of working. So, I think that clarifying on the ways of working for the diversity champions could make a difference.”

Talent Manager (Interview 10): “For sure there is a lack of clarity and there is also a lack of communication. I have the feeling that some global campaigns are launched with high exposure, others you don't know what they are doing, and sometimes you miss the connection with local. So, I think that what global has been doing in the last years, it is now moving to a good direction, but it's still a baby of 2-3 years old.”

Both interviewees highlighted that governance and ways of working are “not clear enough”, and that there is not a sufficient synergy between global and local initiatives. However, while the learning manager just briefly mentions that ways of working are not clear enough, the talent manager provides more nuances to the issue, by highlighting a “lack of clarity” combined with a “lack of communication”. She also suggests that in her perception some campaigns and projects are pushed with high exposure, while others are less known. Considering she is involved first line, as HeForShe leader in Benelux, the fact that the objectives of global campaigns are not fully shared locally can be harmful for the desirable synergy between regions and global level (Sippola & Smale, 2007). Concluding, she justifies this unclarity by mentioning that Inclusive diversity is a “baby”, and it is the result of new global strategies and therefore, this might be the reason why initiatives are still not integrated optimally.

Another interviewed diversity activist, a senior manager at General Secretary who initiated the activities in the Benelux region with the UN movement HeForShe, critically pointed to another more serious problem in diversity management governance in the company: the absence of formal recognition for leaders deciding to step in inclusive diversity matters.

Senior manager General Secretary (Interview 11): “The way it's done is either bottom up, or top down through the inclusion and diversity teams globally. In the middle there's no one. Between all these initiatives, you see mostly managers, no directors, because once again at director level you don't see the benefit of stepping in. It's not that people are not interested in that, they are, it's just that there is no recognition by the organization, and they cannot find enough time to dedicate to those activities.”

From this claim, what emerges is again a lack of integration from top-down to bottom up, which is exemplified by the lack of involvement of directors. The senior manager's claim is corroborated as

well by the 6-month observation of the social media engagement activity, in which it was possible to notice that communications are universally addressed, and local inclusive diversity champions are periodically ambassadors of projects, however it was very difficult to identify among them directors. Despite this fact, the values of inclusion are part of the core company values represented by the acronym HOPE (People & Communities-Danone, 2021) which stands for Humanism, Openness, Proximity and Enthusiasm. More specifically, Humanism is defined as “sharing responsibility, respect for others, paying attention to individuals. Whether they are consumers, colleagues or fellow citizens is at the heart of our decisions” (People & Communities-Danone, 2021). Openness is the value which refers explicitly to inclusive diversity, and it is described as “curiosity, agility and dialogue; diversity is a source of wealth and change as constant opportunity” (People & Communities-Danone, 2021). The core value of proximity is also indirectly referring to welcoming the others, indeed proximity corresponds to “accessibility, authenticity and empathy; it means engaging with communities in our common quest to find better health through food for the greatest number” (People & Communities-Danone, 2021). Finally, the core value of Enthusiasm is described as “Boldness, passion and appetite; there are no limits, there are only obstacles to be overcome” (People & Communities-Danone, 2021). As it was possible to see from these statements, three, out of the four declared core values on the corporate’s website, refer to different aspects of valuing otherness connecting it to humanism, proximity and openness to diversity, in order to include and benefit from such natural differences. Therefore, the fact that directors are not visibly involved like other inclusive diversity champions is an apparent contradiction, which is explained by the senior manager at General Secretary as happening because of lack of formal recognition, or benefit in stepping in. Another suggested reason is also the fact that “they cannot find enough time to dedicate to those activities” (Int. 11 Senior manager at General Secretary), questioning in this way the priority of diversity and inclusion initiatives, which instead should be considered as fundamental premise for the business, if faced against formal company statements.

Analyzing more in depth if there are any benefits in joining the Inclusive Diversity movement, the Global Specialized Nutrition Management Lead based in the Netherlands, highlights that the only form of recognition is the addition of Inclusive Diversity (ID) involvements to the annual objectives:

Global Specialized Nutrition Management Lead and ID Champion (Interview 9): “We are not mobilized. We are doing it voluntarily. On top of what we do. There is no benefit. Basically, the only thing we can do is, I can put a proportion of my annual objectives on ID because I am ID champion. Which I don't know is 5%. If I don't do it, I haven't done it.”

Evidently, the passion for inclusion in ID champions is there, and that is what drives the numerous local initiatives supported by the network of inclusive diversity champions (more than 400 globally) and as well, it compensates for the lack of formal recognition. This fact shows that locally, or at bottom level, there is a significant adherence to the social justice case for diversity (Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2009) in people's attitudes following also corporate culture. Indeed, Diversity and Inclusion is not just a "business strategy" as stated formally in the company's commitment, but it is something which is felt by the activists as moral responsibility. However, the respondents clearly highlight some significant pitfalls in the system including lack of communication and lack of clarity on the ways of working and responsibilities of ID champions. More importantly, the lack of formal recognition is perhaps the biggest de-motivator for potential inclusive diversity champions, especially when it comes to directors.

Continuing on analyzing practices from facts and perceptions of respondents, I will dive deeper in the next section on the initiatives in place.

4.1.2 Global Initiatives

Diversity and Inclusion initiatives, as mentioned earlier, have the characteristic of being mostly of bottom-up nature, completely voluntary and managed locally. Nevertheless, there are events and activations being organized by the global team, which are more of a top-down nature. First of all, the main platform for advertisement and engagement around these online events is again the internal social media "Workplace", with in particular one group where all the communications are shared which is called "Inclusive Diversity". Next to this, there are global e-learnings on the digital learning platform of the company. There are in particular 3 different courses composed by "smart cards" which can be videos, slides with text or interactive quizzes. These courses are available for everyone to complete, at all levels and from all regions around the world. The global e-learnings are quite detailed on the ways of working of Inclusive Diversity, mission and vision and they seem to provide clarity. However, by comparing this fact against the evidence that many of the respondents found the governance system to be confusing, such trainings are apparently not enough known across countries and entities. Thus, materials are there for everyone interested enough to find out more about it, but they are not particularly pushed, except for the communications in the dedicated Workplace group. The global approach is strikingly different than the one adopted by Danone North America. Citing the senior director of Inclusive Diversity initiatives in the Noram region:

Senior Director of Inclusive Diversity (Interview 8): "I conduct what's called managing unconscious bias training. And you may have seen this in Danone also in Benelux, but I do a

training that is mandatory for all employees in North America. We have about roughly about 5500 employees. This training is mandatory for all of them, so you know, on a pretty frequent basis.”

Inclusive diversity training on unconscious bias, is a global training organized by local managers and facilitators, and, as it might be seen from this claim, it is mandatory for all employees in North America. The choice of mandating diversity trainings is interesting, considering that in many other regions, such as Benelux, the unconscious bias training is facilitated and organized by local champions who do this on top of their job and ad-hoc, responding to teams’ requests. Therefore, the top-down approach adopted in North America, is certainly questionable. Indeed, hundreds of studies, some even dating back to the 1930s, have shown that antibias training does not reduce bias, alter behavior, or change the workplace by itself. Despite this and the significant costs, diversity training is by far the most popular go-to solution adopted by public and private organizations (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018). Moreover, mandatory diversity training has been shown to be detrimental by decades of social psychology and anthropology. Indeed, studying human behavior, one of the basic proven principles is that people react negatively to tentative control of thoughts and actions, that is why mandating a training on unconscious bias has been proven to increase instead of reducing bias (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Legault et al. 2007). Mandating participation sends a clear message to the workforce: an external power tries to control their behavior, and this will ignite opposite than desired attitudes (Kidder et al., 2004; Legault et al., 2007). Concluding, the choice for mandatory training in North America can be reconducted to a precise desire of the company to prevent discrimination in the workplace in a society, especially the American one, very much affected by the rising of infections of Covid-19 and by the recent social agitations following the episodes of violent discrimination, which affected particularly the Black and Asian community (Demsas & Ramirez, 2021). However, looking at decades of research in human behavior and its findings, there is a very significant chance of obtaining the opposite than wanted effect by utilizing mandatory training on diversity and inclusion.

Continuing analyzing global achievements of the company in diversity management, a crucial milestone was the recent introduction of the new gender-neutral parental policy, which was celebrated by online events and discussions with employees who already profited of the extended leave. Having participated in one of these meetings online organized at global level, it was interesting to see how the topic was addressed with enthusiasm, but also with a down-to-earth approach as the sponsors themselves, were quite honest. Especially a dad from the US who mentioned explicitly how uncomfortable he felt at the beginning, with the sole idea of taking such extended leave, which for

American society is unheard of. Finally, he challenged the stigma attached to the “maternity leave” and decided to opt for his rights. His experience was defined by himself as being beneficial in order to reconnect with his family and for once step back from his work routine, for the significant period of time of 18 weeks. Indeed, the new global parental policy consists of 18 weeks of paid leave for primary caregivers, independently of gender, and 10 days of paid leave for secondary caregivers. Alongside paid leave, additional benefits are available, such as lactation rooms in offices for new moms, counselling, mentoring programs and flexible working arrangements to support working parents in Danone, both before and after the pregnancy. Looking at even more visible achievements, a summary of the last 3 years global strategies has been communicated internally on the Workplace group “Inclusive Diversity”: the establishment of a network composed by 400 ID champions across the world and the listing on the Bloomberg Gender Equality Index 2021. Finally, concerning KPIs measurement, the global target on gender balance was achieved, with a female representation of 42% at Director level and 30% at Executive level (Danone’s company commitment, 2019). Confronting these results to the perception of KPIs from the respondents’, it was quite clear that everyone was aligned on the official communications. As also mentioned briefly before this paragraph, the main global KPIs are around three categories: gender equality, inclusive behaviors and cultural diversity. Clear is also the process on how these are being measured, as for instance in this excerpt, the senior scientist and inclusive diversity champion for the Benelux region, even suggests possible pitfalls:

Senior scientist (Interview 7): “For inclusive culture. I feel like we could do better because we didn't meet the target of the KPI, but also, I feel that's the way that's articulated. Now it's based on the Danone People survey question, which I think is just something like ‘Do we have an inclusive culture?’ And then people can say agree, not agree etc. So, to me there we could definitely dig deeper and articulate it better, as measurement.”

The vagueness of the people survey question in pointing to the perceived presence of an inclusive culture is certainly a good point of criticism, coming of course from a senior scientist who is used to critically assess and analyze her surroundings in order to get to precise and reliable insights on which base decisions. It could definitely be more accurate and of interest to measure inclusive culture according to shared actions and values which can be sponsored and recognized at global level. The leader of Inclusive Diversity for the Benelux region, being herself a young woman in a position of Global talent manager for operations, knows quite in depth the struggle in attracting and retaining minorities, especially in certain segments of the business such as operations. She also points to the need to collect more data, while being aware of the risks for employees’ privacy. For instance, there is no data about disability, or LGTQI.

Global Talent Manager for Operations (Interview 6): “Still, Inclusive Diversity is a big topic. There could be more KPIs like for example on how many disabled people we have, or how many gay people we have. This does not exist. Why? Because these are confidential. I mean even you don't put this information in the system, so you can't find any data to keep track.”

Therefore, there is a significant difficulty in designing measures and handling data in the company, which are instead worth of attention for a more tailored strategy for diversity management. For instance, by asking for employees on permission to handle sensitive data. Despite some limitations, it is always the global talent manager for operations to highlight another crucial element of Danone global strategy: the power of brands in marketing inclusive diversity all over the world.

Global Talent Manager for Operations (Interview 6): “It is super important that Inclusive Diversity is embedded in our brands because with the brand power you can shift it. With your advertisements you can change mindsets in society, not only in your company but also in society. So, I truly believe that big corporations have a big role to play impacting society for the better and that is what Danone is doing it with its brands.”

The talent manager for operations, being nominated recently Benelux Lead for Diversity and Inclusion, has contacts with global diversity managers and she is updated on new campaigns organized globally. She also explained that she contributes to the meetings with the other Inclusive Diversity champions and global diversity managers in order to build a roadmap of regional priorities established on a yearly basis. Hence, this is the reason why she can testify so vividly and clearly for the importance of marketing for the inclusive diversity strategy. She also continues by providing some examples of how exactly brands in Danone are marketing diversity and inclusion:

Global Talent Manager for Operations (Interview 6): “For example Danone Bonafont one of the Danone brands in Mexico, they are pioneering gender equality and in every advertisement they make, you can see like they are...for example in one of the last campaigns, they are showing young little girls giving an important message: to become who they want to be by fighting for a more equal society. They try to give this message on young girl empowerment and that's really what Bonafont is always doing, what they are known for.”

Having the chance to participate to the webinar on the power of brands in marketing inclusion and diversity in the outside society, with Danone champions, as well as public speakers from other companies, I was able to observe myself and learn more in detail what the global talent manager means with the “power” of brands for inclusive and diversity. Indeed, during this online event, the Bonafont advertisement was shown as example of one of the best practices within Danone. Once the

video was played it was indeed possible to see that the product, in this case bottled water, is not the main focus of the campaign, rather a powerful scene is depicted with little girls and boys having a lesson with their teacher and they are all being asked what their dream career is. After all the girls have answered, the teacher abruptly tells them that they cannot be what they want, only boys can. The little girls are then sad, and their parents are joining the scene by responding to the teacher that this is not fair, that he should not say this to children, little girls are allowed to be scientists or astronauts. Then the commercial continues with the teacher explaining why they cannot, providing shocking facts and figures on gender-based violence in Mexico and occupational segregation. At the end, hope is given by associating positive images of social change together with the brand, in order to fight against these inequalities. Investigating more in depth on the mission and vision of the brand, I was also able to discover that Bonafont organized different projects throughout the years in order to move consciousness more concretely in Mexican society. For instance, the race for women equality in 2018 allowing more than 5 thousand women to run and manifest against gender inequality in Mexico, as well as the partnering with UN Women to create a special edition water bottle featuring the HeforShe logo (“When women perform, companies perform,” 2019). All the proceeds from this last project have been leveraged for projects dedicated to women’s empowerment, especially in regions affected by the 2017 earthquake (“When women perform, companies perform,” 2019).

Another Danone brand publicly committed to diversity and inclusion is Evian who initiated the EVE Program back in 2010 to spread awareness on the importance of balanced leadership (“Developing Women’s Access to Decision-Making Positions - Danone,” 2019). The program is focused on training a generation of inspired and enlightened managers that can act to transform the organization through their performance valuing diversity (“Developing Women’s Access to Decision-Making Positions - Danone,” 2019). Since the launch of the project, the EVE program has conquered two regions in particular Asia-Pacific and Africa, where different seminars have been held. For instance, the EVE Africa Seminar held in Dakar from the 27th to the 29th of November 2018 with Danone and L’Oréal as lead partners, and Orange and BNP Paribas as sponsors in order to discuss on gender diversity, empowerment and balance (“Developing Women’s Access to Decision-Making Positions - Danone,” 2019). Evidently, Danone is taking concrete action in order to advocate for diversity and inclusion, not only within the company, but outside, in the tissue of the social context in which each business is rooted. Such social commitment has been recognized with the GEEIS-DIVERSITY which stands for Gender Equality & Diversity European & International Standard certification for 3 Danone subsidiaries: Italy, Singapore and the Paris headquarters (“When women perform, companies perform,” - Danone 2019).

Finally, despite the highlighted pitfalls in the very young governance system for diversity and inclusion, it is still possible to recognize the valuable social and human commitment for a business that tries to be sustainable towards communities, hence justifying the B Corp certification for more than 50% of the business (“B Corp” - Danone, 2021). In the next paragraph, I will continue identifying projects, events and initiatives for diversity and inclusion within the Benelux region, in order to have a better view on how the local and global level interact between each other.

4.1.3 Benelux ID initiatives

The Benelux region, encompassing two countries at the same time, Netherlands and Belgium, is unconventional in its nature and can be considered as the embodiment of diversity. Danone itself is composed by diverse entities and scopes, for instance, as the Talent Manager in Benelux highlights:

Talent Manager (Interview 10): “Just if we look for example at one entity that is Nutricia Worldwide. You have 100 employees with 44 different nationalities, so I think this is feeding into the idea of diversity, diversity management in Danone and how we run ID topics inside.”

Clearly, managing such pervasive diversity requires simultaneous and multiple efforts which are being highlighted by the interviewees, each and every one being a local, voluntary initiative. In particular there are 5 employee resource groups, or diversity networks, all focusing on different aspects of diversity separately: “HeForShe Benelux” for gender equality, “Yup” the network for young urban professionals, “Benelux Inclusive Diversity factories”, the “Pride” network and finally the brand new “Accessibility” group. Starting with the most popular network in the organization, HeForShe is a solidarity movement initiated by the United Nations in order to create awareness on gender equality in higher positions, and Danone as a group has decided to start a partnership to reach this objective. The activists are reaching these aims by organizing online events and talks, as well as managing a special project, the mentoring program, highlighted by the learning manager later on in the interview, as being the most powerful tool to drive change and allow women to raise up in the ladder of the organization. Explaining further the initiatives within HeForShe, the Talent manager in Benelux and also leader of HeForShe in the Benelux region, highlighted the fact that there are mainly two types of activities in Danone’s Inclusive Diversity: events, trainings and projects aimed at increasing awareness and other projects which are instead trying to drive change, referring to her specific claim:

Talent Manager Benelux and HeforShe Lead in Benelux (Interview 10): “ If for example we have the International Women’s Day and we want to activate some videos, then we are sitting in the awareness area and for me what is still missing today is... that awareness, this area, is very big, with all of our activities not only with HeForShe, but driving the change is still so small.”

Evidently, projects aimed at driving change are still not many compared to the numerous engaging events whose objective is to increase awareness of minorities and inequalities. Despite this, the mentoring program within HeForShe, together with the ID Nudge on unconscious bias and the recent “Benelux Inclusive Diversity Factories” are initiatives aimed at going further than just creating awareness. As explained by two activists leading these two projects:

Supply Chain Coordinator (Interview 3):“ So, I started to bring people together at the supply point and try to convince them of the importance of this topic (diversity and inclusion). And I was able to put together 11 people, from which we made a group in Zoetermeer. Thanks to that, the Benelux team and the global team have kind of named me a Benelux leader for them. So, they officialized the group and now we are called *Inclusive diversity factories Benelux*. The idea is that in the future we can spread these activities that we are doing in Zoetermeer for the whole factories in Benelux and drive change”.

Senior scientist and trainer for ID Nudges (Interview 7): “The Inclusive Diversity Nudges, are really intended to do an exercise that allows people to realize bias in themselves, or patterns of behavior that people exhibit, and then it's really something that by experiencing it, you realize that it's, something that you can change for the better, perhaps. Hopefully to create this sort of ‘aha!’ experience, of having people realize things that they do.”

Both initiatives, the ID Nudge and the Inclusive Diversity Factories in Benelux, are projects with a clear intention of influencing and directing people’s behavior towards a positive change, without condemning it, rather by making sure to educate, inform and let people reflect on their experiences and behavior. Indeed, especially the ID Nudge on unconscious bias, has the objective of giving people a safe space to share their own experiences and issues in their daily work environment. I was able to attend myself an ID Nudge organized online for the whole Benelux population, I could see that, despite being an online event with a significant number of participants, there was a lot of interaction among participants who were genuinely triggered by the exercise and video chosen for the session. Theory on unconscious bias is kept to the minimum, in order to give more space to discussion in breakout rooms and create trust among participants.

Benelux Inclusive Diversity Factories is instead a project confined for the moment to a specific context, the factory in Zoetermeer and a sector, operations, which is described by the interviewees as mainly oriented towards business results, speed and competitiveness, typically mainly behavior associated values. Nevertheless, the leader of the project is trying to challenge the status quo:

Inclusive Diversity Factories Benelux Lead and Supply Coordinator (Interview 3): “Yesterday we have started a very ambitious project. We created a survey on inclusive diversity. We asked 18 questions to the people of the Zoetermeer factory on how do you feel? Do you feel happy? Do you feel discriminated? So, 18 different questions. The idea behind this survey is to be able to measure how are we doing, because, what we agreed with the group is that we can do a lot of different things, but maybe we are missing the point of what people really need.”

Running a project with the objective of gathering data on what are the actual needs of the workforce, or to understand the level of awareness on diversity and inequalities in the factories, is definitely an important move, which is far from common in the organization, as it was highlighted in many different claims of interviewees, for instance:

Senior manager General Secretary (Interview 11): “Getting data in this organization is not something that is supported, so it's super difficult to get any insights on any type of data. We know data is not all, but not having figures at all does not even allow for instance to spot a pay gap, or to demonstrate that there is bias in recruitment.”

Thus, respondents perceive a need for more transparency when it comes to data collection on workforce diversity, certainly a topic of utmost importance, but as well of difficult implementation, especially concerning sensitive information of individuals, for instance related to their sexual orientation.

Continuing mentioning the activations in the Benelux region, the Yup network, or Young Urban professionals is a network whose main objective is to allow young employees to connect between each other, both in a perspective of future career development, and personally to establish meaningful and fun relationships. However, the network does not seem to focus on fighting inequalities that affect the workforce, by using the words of one of the Yup board members:

Yup Board member and Food scientist (Interview 2): “Yup is a group that was created to connect Danoners below 30 years of age, so it excludes Danoners even if we don't check the age. It is mainly because yeah, young Danoners, usually it's their first job for example and they don't know a lot of people, or they don't have a family where they live, so it's also to connect to other colleagues who have similar interests.”

Therefore, the aims of the employee resource group are only to give a platform for young Danoners to network. Later on in the interview, however, the food scientist mentioned there is a timid involvement in global inclusive diversity initiatives, in her own words:

Food scientist (Interview 2): “Uh, so last year there was a big event around inclusive diversity where the Yup was also invited. We have within the Yup two people who are representative also for the inclusive diversity movement. For this purpose, we created some posts to raise awareness on what inclusive diversity is and in order to encourage people to think about this topic.”

The employee network focuses on building awareness, rather than trying to challenge the status quo or discuss about privileges and inequalities that young people might experience in such a large multinational organization. These findings are not far from what was found in the study by Dennissen et al., (2016), where employee networks from different organizations were analyzed in depth, exposing indeed that majority of diversity networks in organizations are not aiming to challenge structural inequalities. Instead, employee networks find their own purpose in offering networking opportunities, especially the young employee network whose main objective in both Dennissen et al.(2016) and in this research, is about organizing networking opportunities through informal and formal socialization in order for young professionals to expand their network.

Last but not least, it has been recently organized a workplace group called “Accessibility for all”, where accessibility stands for a positive connotation of disability, looking not at the impairment, rather on solutions that could solve employees’ issues at large. Given it is a very recent project, the objectives are still not exactly defined however, this was mentioned as essential purposes by one of the initiators of the project:

Global Specialized Nutrition Management Lead (Interview 9): “Accessibility group in Benelux that focuses on not only disability, but overall Accessibility topic that means. For example, if you have some issues that makes your work harder. What is it that we can do in Danone to help you to do that better? It can be also ADHD, or even cancer, or it can be physical impairment or color blindness. Yeah, so it's in Benelux the small team and we are just at the beginning, defining what our next steps.”

Concluding, we can see that in the Benelux region, as well as globally, there is significant attention on building awareness of inequalities, less on challenging the status quo in more concrete ways and projects. Despite this, there is a proven intention from top management to engage people throughout the entire organization, across levels, functions and regions, in order to let them become activists with

the objective of building a more inclusive company for everyone. What it is also possible to notice is that every diversity category is “treated” in isolation with separate workgroups and approaches which rarely come to a synergy, confirming observations coming from much of the critical research around diversity and gender imbalance (e.g., Benschop, Dennissen & Van den Brink, 2016). In the following section, I will dive deeper into workforce diversity, that is to say, trying to understand and picture how differences are being dealt in the everyday life organization, how are these perceived by organizational actors and what are the consequences in terms of self-perceived discrimination, during the ongoing global pandemic.

4.2 Workforce Diversity

Diversity is a visible constant in Danone. Starting from the business itself being extremely diversified among 4 categories present in 55 countries around the world: Essential Dairy and Plant-Based products, Early Life Nutrition, Advanced Medical Nutrition and Waters. The workforce too is mirroring this diversity, as denoted in one of the interviews:

Junior internal communications manager Benelux (Interview 4): “What I can see is that in Benelux we have a lot of international teams, multicultural. So, a lot of different people from different cultures, different places. And there is also a lot of diversity in consumers, so I think that's why diversity is so important in Danone.”

In this claim, the junior manager reconstitutes cultural diversity she sees in her surrounding context, to the diversity of consumers Danone is targeting. Hence, workforce diversity is considered as an asset in order to best serve market needs (Inclusive Diversity Position paper, 2019). While so far, I have analyzed mainly formal company’s commitment, in the following section, I will dive deeper into how diversity is being defined by the actors within the organization itself and how this relates to the strategies and discourses from top management.

4.2.1 Defining Diversity

Comparing the official definitions of diversity and inclusion provided by the e-learning analyzed in the previous chapter, to the ones provided by the respondents and their perception of what actually means diversity within the company, both do not distance themselves shockingly. Especially whenever the interviewee is closer and more involved at top level, then the discourses and definitions closely match, as in the case of the Senior director for Inclusive diversity in North America:

Senior Director for Inclusive Diversity (Interview 8): “In North America, as well as globally, though, diversity...it's very broad, you know? So, it's not just about women. It's not just about race. I mean, it's about diversity of thought, diversity of perspective, diversity of culture. But also, you know, like I said, LGBTQ, whether or not you're a US veteran, religious background, whether you're a parent. Yeah, all these things are part of the way we see diversity”.

Diversity is therefore broadly considered and reconducted primarily to difference in thought, experiences and culture, aligning with the reasoning for the business case for diversity which considers individual differences as assets for performance (Dixon-Fyle, Dolan, Hunt, & Prince, 2021). Interviewees in lower hierarchical positions confirm the idea of considering diversity as valuable differences which contribute positively to the performance of the organization. However, they also add nuances of meaning which can be reconducted to the discourses they are more often exposed because of their role in the organization. Indeed, we can alternatively see a focus on humanity, creativity and personality when it comes to HR managers describing diversity, while in other more technical positions, the interviewees highlight more objective aspects of diversity. Comparing two illustrative examples:

Learning manager (Interview 5): “So, there are a lot of different ways on how to express yourself, and when I say express, it is also a difference in terms of who we are as human beings; when you talk about diversity as well, is to go beyond the norms, to go beyond the standards and then to really enable people to flourish.”

Senior Scientist (Interview 7): “So, I think diversity is sort of the mixture of the fact that you have people from different backgrounds, gender, age, nationality, etc., But also, I think a very important part of it is the fact that there's room for people to be themselves and actually have those differences make the difference because they are to bring themselves to work”.

These two slightly different approaches in seeing diversity are still converging into one main premise: workforce diversity is positive, and it will boost business performance whenever employees feel included, and they are able to “bring their whole self to work”. In this last aspect, a claim from the junior communication manager shows how eradicated the culture of inclusion is in Danone:

Junior Internal Communications Manager (Interview 4): “I really think we value difference to make change. The main reason for that is that we see differences as a strength to go further, because everyone must feel included. It is also I think about giving the same rights for everyone, same opportunities. So, it's not only about performance, I think it's also a lot about humanity and the fact that we are employees, but we are also human beings.”

These findings confirm the framework introduced in the study by Janssens & Zanoni (2007), which highlighted that organizational practices aimed at inclusion both look at diversity blindly, therefore creating a “sameness feeling”, and by valuing individual identities in a perspective of relational inclusion at work. It is very hard to achieve the “perfect” balance between sameness and individualization and most evidently the case organization focuses on sameness feelings, sometimes perhaps neglecting more specific needs. In the next paragraph, I will explore how respondents perceive inequalities in the company and how it is experienced. Indeed, the objective is to go beyond formal statements on inclusive diversity, in order to assess to which degree, the organization is preventing intergroup conflicts, lessening power relations and discrimination which naturally manifest themselves in intergroup dynamics (Stott & Drury, 2004).

4.3 Inequalities in the organization

The analysis on organizational inequalities in this case is contextualized to the Benelux region only. In this way it was possible for me as a researcher to compare respondents’ claims with observations in a perspective of virtual proximity. Generalizing data, it was possible to notice that there were some inequalities caused by the covid-19 outbreak, which the company tried to contrast by supporting employees materially and spiritually, with different initiatives. Nevertheless, subtle inequalities are identified which are not necessarily connected to the current turbulent environment. Indeed, what emerged clearly from the participants’ claims is that direct discrimination in the case organization is not present, because of the eradicated inclusive values and behaviors coming from corporate culture. Despite this gender-based micro aggressions and language-based ones are present. These inequalities are also reconducted only to the lack of awareness and education in individuals who need to fight their “unconscious bias”, no mention of social influence and systemic inequalities by organizational actors. This finding is especially important in order to understand that the approach on diversity and inclusion strategies and practices is very much individualized and focused on correcting individuals and making them aware.

4.3.1 Perceived discrimination

Defining, describing and identifying discrimination is a very difficult task because of the competing theoretical perspectives that aim to detangle such complex social phenomenon (Kohler-Hausmann, 2011). Nevertheless, a comprehensive definition of discrimination could be the following:

“Discrimination is an action or practice that excludes, disadvantages, or merely differentiates between individuals or groups of individuals on the basis of some ascribed or perceived trait”(Kohler-Hausmann, 2011).

This definition is also reflective of interviewees’ perception who, when asked if they have ever witnessed or experienced any type of discrimination in the organization, mostly found it difficult to explain or recall, showing signs of perplexity and uncertainty on their facial expression. However, two types of discrimination in particular emerged quite clearly, discrimination based on spoken language and in more subtle everyday actions, gender based micro aggressions and sexual orientation ones. The supply coordinator was the only interviewee being completely open and direct about his perception of discrimination. Being himself part of a minority because of being homosexual and Latin American living in the Netherlands, he has always experienced the feeling of being an outcast, in his own words:

Supply Coordinator (Interview 3): “Absolutely more than once (I have felt discriminated). Especially because I am not a Dutch speaker. Uh, I'm learning, and I must say it's a very difficult language. So yeah, in many times I have arrived in rooms where they were having a meeting in Dutch and I have always said, well, I cannot be part of the meeting if you're not able to do it in English. It's also not my first language, but I'm doing an effort because we work for a multinational.”

From this claim, it is quite evident that a direct form of discrimination connected to the language spoken in the workplace is experienced by the employee, which may at times constitute an obstacle if other colleagues are not willing to switch language and talk in English. Nevertheless, he is not the only employee highlighting language discrimination in the company, the learning manager too being a French professional working in Belgium, he perceived and experienced by himself discrimination based on language. More in particular:

Learning manager male (Interview 5): “Mm well there is one in Belgium. It is discrimination about the language. And I say that because we tend to hear very often that in order to have this job in Belgium you need to speak Flemish. And afterwards you notice that Flemish is not mandatory in the role, so this is really a kind of discrimination that is often used by Flemish people to stick together. That is a challenge for now in the Benelux. Dutch people from the Netherlands are by far more inclusive in terms of diversity than Flemish people in general, without generalizing. I mean, this is at least the trends that I saw.”

Language discrimination in Belgium is described as a defense mechanism for Belgian employees who tend to push back the “other” in order to stick together and protect their ingroup. This finding is definitely confirming results coming from years of studies on intergroup behavior, where laboratory experiments showed how powerful ingroup bias is in triggering alone discriminatory responses and intergroup conflict (Tajfel et al., 1971; Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Tajfel & Billig, 1974; Doise, Csepe, Dann, Gouge, Larsen & Ostell, 1972; Turner, 1975). It is also very interesting to notice, almost at the end of the claim of the learning manager, how he expects Dutch people to be more willing to accept diversity in the workplace, while in practice in the same organization, a colleague of his, happened to be many times in difficulty in front of colleagues speaking in Dutch despite the official language of the company is English.

Another type of more subtle discrimination is described, again, by the supply Coordinator. Indeed, the employee is not always able to bring his own full identity, given operations is felt and described as a “macho environment”, therefore he somehow feels he does not fit into the definition of what is expected by the social context. Nevertheless, given his strong personality, he did not submit to such norms, rather, he is networking with other colleagues both next to him and in a position of power, in order to challenge this preconception by creating the Benelux Inclusive Diversity Factory group and allow other people like him to be able, in the future, to express their own identity according to their own free will. Analyzing his own words:

Supply Coordinator (Interview 3): “That's why I started the group. The idea is that in the future we can spread these activities that we are doing in Zoetermeer for the whole factories in Benelux. Last year we did a campaign with the aim of raising awareness on Unconscious bias and yesterday we have just launched the ambitious project of the Benelux Inclusive Diversity factory survey, in order to build a roadmap and priorities from real needs”.

Evidently, proactivity and networking are very powerful in challenging workplace inequalities. Building alliances with stakeholders, with people in position of power, coming up with a concrete project has a significant potential for change (Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2009) . It is indeed about creating a task force with appointed responsibilities, aiming to create more inclusive operations, where diversity and inclusion are valued and cherished for the wellbeing of people and the business (Dobbin & Kalev, 2012).

Furthermore, as it was shown in the previous paragraph, inclusion and values of sameness are being highlighted by both interviewees and top management as being core part of Danone’s culture.

However, when looking at internal management processes, the focus is not always on creating transparency, especially in breakdown salary that appears to be a very hard to achieve goal in practice:

Senior Scientist (Interview 7): “HR is not completely transparent about how much people get paid, so it could be that there is a pay gap, for example between men and women within research. And so yeah, I think it is hard to say a definitive yes or no when it comes to discrimination in the company. The breakdown in salary is something that we have been trying to get on the 2025 road map to have transparency about any kind of pay gap that there is. But so far, it's not something that we've succeeded to get openness about.”

Not only in the case organization, but many activists also believe that pay transparency could contribute in solving inequalities related to wage setting such as gender pay gap. Nonetheless, management paradoxes, such as pay transparency, are not inscribable into black and white categories, rather, they can be compared to a complicated grey area in which it is not possible to find a right or wrong. As denoted by Zenger (2016), pay transparency has mainly three major drawbacks or downsides which have been already demonstrated in research: firstly, employees who discover they are paid lower than their relative median by unit and occupation, they become automatically more dissatisfied with their employer and they are more likely to leave, generating an increase in turnover (Card, Mas, Moretti, & Saez, 2012); secondly, employees' productivity is consistently reduced in case social comparison results in perceptions of envy and unfairness of rewards (Obloj & Zenger, 2015); thirdly, once employees are made aware of their peers high pay, they take the instance politicking for change (Zenger, 2016). In particular, what Zenger (2016) essentially argues is that unless pay is directly linked to performance in the most quantifiable way possible, transparency may lead to more issues for management than benefits. Indeed, pay transparency complicates and exacerbates social inequalities, provoking even more potential conflicts and losses for the organization. Moreover, even more recent findings from (Gulyas, Seitz, & Sinha, 2020) demonstrated that pay transparency has had no direct effect on gender pay gap. Hence, the question of pay transparency for Danone may be more challenging than what appears to be from the interviewee's claim. It can be the intention of top management to keep things unclear as they are, as this may have the least damaging consequences for the business.

Inequalities are fully entrenched with politics and people in positions of power are the ultimate determinant of social equality or inequality, this is why it is particularly difficult to erase any form of discrimination in organizations, especially if private and driven mainly by profit. In the next section, I will analyze another form of inequality, more subtle but nevertheless particularly harmful for the victims as this can be physical and psychological, or both at the same time.

4.3.2 *Micro aggressions*

Micro aggressions differ from discrimination mainly in the aspect of intentionality. More specifically, micro aggressions can be defined as “subtle insults, verbal, nonverbal or visual directed toward people often automatically or unconsciously” (Moore, Calvin, & Beale, 2015). The definition provided by the American Psychiatric Glossary (8th edition) highlights instead the result of micro-aggressions, which are then to be defined as: “Offensive mechanisms or actions by a person that are designed to keep other individuals in an inferior, dependent or helpless role. These actions (...) are well suited to control space, time, energy, and mobility of an individual (usually non-white or female) while producing feelings of degradation.” Along with these definitions, two interviewees in particular, both women, came up with instances of microaggressions that match the description of such acts. In particular, already from the first interview, I had the opportunity to conversate with one of the learning managers for the Benelux region and when asked if she has ever experienced any form of discrimination in the company, after initial perplexity, she remembered one episode happened approximately one year earlier than the interview date.

Learning Manager (female) Interview 2: “It was a meeting with directors where a lot of highly placed people are involved, and I was leading a certain topic and there was this person who really did not take me seriously and who was openly undermining everything that I was saying. And then after I stepped out of the meeting. He spoke to everyone in the room saying, ‘oh what is she doing here? What is she paid for?’ I know about it because there was another HR person in the room who then addressed this behavior and at least I was told that this was dealt with.”

Clearly, the aggressor perpetuated a verbal micro-aggression throughout the entire meeting by discrediting everything the learning manager was presenting and not taking her role as serious. The reasons behind this micro aggression are to be reconnected to sexism, given the learning manager, being a young good-looking woman, must have appeared as easy target for the prejudice against women in business. Sexism is indeed defined as “individuals' attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and organizational, institutional, and cultural practices that either reflect negative evaluations of individuals based on their gender or support unequal status of women and men” (Swim & Hyers, 2009). Hence, the aggressor with his unfriendly attitude and directly downplaying the learning manager once she left the room, psychologically attacked the victim by implying indirectly his unprofessional behavior, which is undermining her reputation and self-esteem. Luckily, she found

support from an HR responsible present in the room who promptly reacted and took measures to prevent the person from doing it again. However, when being asked exactly what type of action was being taken after this episode, the interviewee did not know, as she was not involved in the process. Following up on this confession, I also wanted to understand what her feelings towards this incident were and how did she elaborate such direct attack on her professional figure. Her answer interestingly shows another aspect which is also very often in victims of such type of sexist micro aggressions:

Learning Manager (female) Interview 1: “It has affected me because my first reaction was to think what did I do wrong or say wrong? Or maybe I did not lead the conversation effectively? Or maybe I didn't take the right posture but yeah, I received a lot of support from the team, from my manager, from the HR person who was there in the room. So that really helped.”

From this quote, evident is the feeling of being somehow “guilty” of triggering this unfavorable reaction, something which is not new when it comes to victims of gender-based aggressions. For instance, many women victim of abuse rarely denounce their aggressors and they even provide reasons as of why their actions might have triggered the aggressive act (Dutton, 2007). Fortunately, in this case, the learning manager was not left alone, and the behavior has been recognized immediately by her colleagues as illegitimate act. Nevertheless, majority of the time, micro-aggressions as such are not detected and more than often, they are perpetuated in a very subtle and undetectable way for others to see. Like in the case of the senior scientist, a woman working in the R&I department:

Senior Scientist (female) Interview 7: “Uh, yeah, that's also sort of anecdotal. One of the first months that I worked in Danone there was one of the very senior scientists and at some point, he said something like ‘oh, are you the new intern?’ And at that point I was well in my 30s with a PhD etc. so I was like, oh is it a joke? Small stuff. But yeah, it does make you realize how some people perceive you. And to me definitely at that point, I still felt that, you know, that it was always a struggle to be taken seriously.”

Particularly the last words of the scientist: “I still felt that it was always a struggle to be taken seriously”, are summarizing vividly the issue that many women victim of gender-based stereotype at work live every day, especially in organizations. Being discredited for the sole reason of gender identification is still a very concrete reality rooted in societal conventions, despite common sense would exclude it. Clearly, if in the case of two Caucasian women we see this pattern, with the intersections of inequalities, for instance when there is both the conjuncture of ethnicity and gender, like in the case of Black women, or Asian women it is possible to encounter even stronger systemic

patterns of inequality which may lead to entrepreneurship and withdrawal of the organization altogether, as it was shown in recent research (Meléndez & Özkazanç-Pan, 2020). In order to conclude Danone case analysis, in the following chapter I will analyze the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of company's support and change in the ways of working for diversity management.

4.4 Inclusive Diversity post Covid-19 pandemic

In order to identify and analyze the issues and consequences experienced in the case organization concerning global management of diversity after the Covid-19 outbreak, I wanted to first investigate how the uncertainty of the pandemic has been perceived by the interviewees. Certainly, given the gravity, pervasiveness and lasting duration, the global pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 has challenged individuals and societies at large, all over the world. Not only social relationships were affected because of social distancing measures and isolation, but also, the pandemic challenged the traditional way of working for knowledge workers, allowing for the emergence of a new reality: working from home. The technologies that allow for remote working such as laptops and cloud services were already there before the pandemic, however this event accelerated the digitalization process in many workplaces, normalizing something which was already under the public eye, but was simply not conceived before on such a large scale. Realizing that offices are expensive buildings to pay rent for, companies are now coming up with increasingly creative measures in order to rethink working spaces in smart and efficient ways, allowing employees to choose to work either from home or in the office, or to alternate between the two options according to their own choice (The Economist, 2020). In the same perspective, the case organization is looking for innovative ways on conceiving work schedules and it is also listening to its employees through surveys, however being still a project in inquiry phase it was not possible to assess it further. In the following sections, I will start by reviewing the impressions of the interviewees on the pandemic, how did they perceive the pervasive uncertainty and how are they dealing with it after more than one year. Finally, I will reflect on the traced consequences of the pandemic in the ways of working and implementing diversity and inclusion practices.

4.4.1 Covid-19 perception

The pandemic has been experienced differently according to each employee and their own personality. When asking the interviewees, they all had various opinions on the topic, which ranged from enjoying having more free time at home, to the extreme opposite of the spectrum feeling fear, sadness and desire to come back to “normal”. For instance, the female learning manager mentioned that she went through different stages of emotions, rather than having only one impression altogether, in her own words:

Learning Manager (female, Interview 1): “Yeah, I guess I've been through different stages. In the very beginning, when we went in lockdown last year in March, it was a bit worrying, because you don't know what's happening and it's a bit scary. I think I was also worried because it was not clear what's going to happen with us in terms of the role in the organization. We've always organized classroom trainings and in the first month we just cancelled everything and then of course there is the question ‘does the organization need us?’ But then we started coming back and being active and moving to virtual”.

From this claim, the interviewee firstly experienced a state of intense worry and fear, generated by the very novelty and gravity of the outbreak of the pandemic impacting directly on the ways of working of the learning team, impeding face to face trainings which was the norm. Secondly, together with her team, they brainstormed new solutions and finally, they started being active again with virtual trainings, regaining hope. Therefore, the state of fear and anxiety, which characterized the first months, has been replaced by a feeling of hope, despite the uncertainty in the workplace is still very pervasive due to the ongoing pandemic and a significant process of organizational restructuring threatening the future of teams in the Benelux area. Big life events such as Covid-19 pandemic have been proven to trigger feelings of extreme fear and anxiety whose intensity is depending on the type of personality of the individual perceiving this impact (Anglim & Horwood, 2021). Therefore, each individual had different responses to their wellbeing and psychological functioning after the Covid-19 pandemic, building various degrees of resilience (Zager Kocjan, Kavčič & Avsec, 2021; Anglim & Horwood, 2021). The same was found among the respondents. For instance, a far more positive experience of the pandemic was highlighted by the supply chain coordinator, a strong personality who is introverted enough to enjoy some time on his own, not being extremely affected by the lack of social interaction, like extrovert personalities instead do (Anglim & Horwood, 2021). Analyzing specifically the claim of the interviewee:

Supply Chain Coordinator (Interview 3): “Uhm yeah, for me, it's just such a subjective topic because it depends on how you assume life, on how you are as a person. I myself I'm very, very creative and I'm very comfortable being at home. So, for me it's been a time where I have enjoyed a lot of my own company, let's say. Of course, it's difficult. But I mean, it's ok.”

Looking at existing research in order to understand this finding in depth, it has been already proved that the individual's response to a stressful situation is the complex result of the interaction between personal characteristics, available resources and cultural features (Biggs et al., 2017). Some people are simply more likely to adapt and thrive in challenging situations, resulting to be more resilient. Resilience is the capacity of individuals to effectively adapt to stressful situations (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Even more recent research has investigated the relationship between the Big Five dimensions of personality (a self-report measure of basic personality traits) and the effect of covid-19 on stress and wellbeing mediated by resilience (Zager Kocjan, Kavčič & Avsec, 2021). The results have shown that individuals high on the openness dimension, might find more resources to adaptively respond to the adverse situation (Zager Kocjan, Kavčič & Avsec, 2021). Additionally, resilience fully or partially mediated the relationships between all the Big Five dimensions of personality, with neuroticism being the strongest predictor of less adaptive psychological functioning, both directly and through diminished resilience (Zager Kocjan, Kavčič & Avsec, 2021). In the case of the supply chain coordinator, we can imagine that being himself an expat living in the Netherlands, coming from a totally different continent and culture, in this case being Latin American, he might have developed effective coping strategies and resilience. Hence, there is support in predicting the impact of Covid-19 on wellbeing and stress levels will differ according to the personality traits of each individual. The more extrovert a person is, the bigger the negative impact on wellbeing will be (Zager Kocjan, Kavčič & Avsec, 2021). In the next paragraph, I will analyze more practical consequences rather than of mental nature, that impacted more collectively the workplace.

4.4.2 Consequences of the pandemic

After conversing with the interviewees and observing for six months the reality of the Benelux region, despite being it filtered through virtual means of communication, I was able to assess that there are consequences which stemmed from the global pandemic, and these are four: a negative impact on wellbeing and work life balance; secondly, increased company support; thirdly, there has been a change in interactions and finally, a change in the ways of working for diversity and inclusion practices. Starting with analyzing the impact on wellbeing and work life balance, there is clear evidence to sustain that the pandemic increased stress and uncertainty among workers. This pressure

was accompanied by an increase in information overload due to virtual communication and resulted in perceived higher workload. It is now up to each individual to set boundaries and make sure it is evenly spread. As explained by the interviewees:

Learning Manager (Interview 1) Female: “So, I do see that workload is first of all uneven. Sometimes I may have days which are rather quiet, and then there are others where I can find myself in front of my screen at eight in the evening or like disconnecting and then connecting again at 9 because something comes to my mind. So, there are less boundaries between professional and private, and the workload is pretty high and very ad hoc. A lot of things just come on top, so the pressure is pretty high.”

The learning manager in particular, but also other interviewees believe that working from home has somehow raised the bar for them in terms of expectations. Since working from home there are less boundaries between work and private life, because of the lack of physical separation between the two, it is much easier to reconnect after working hours and constantly checking emails. In this way there is never a real separation from life and work, compared to working from the office and leaving it every day to come back home. Pressure and urgency are also perceived in a starker way because of the lack of proximity with other colleagues and line managers, which is being replaced by the expectation of entire teams to be always reachable and ready to act. The reality is that unfortunately if a person is not able to detach mentally from his/her work, especially if fatigued and in a time pressure, there are serious negative consequences for wellbeing, as showed by the research of Sonnentag & Bayer (2005). It is important to have defined work and free time in order to build up resilience and stay productive even under high pressure environments like many organizations are facing now. In the study by Ivbijaro et al. (2020), feelings of loneliness caused by forced social isolation, working from home and uncertainty connected to the end of the quarantine, resulted in about 90% of respondents around the world to perceive a negative impact of the coronavirus on their mental health and dignity, confirming findings of other authors as well (e.g., Nilima et al., 2020). Another challenge impacting work life balance is combining parenting with home working. For instance, the senior scientist mentioned about her struggle especially at the beginning of the pandemic, to divide herself between the role of mom and scientist, manage significant workloads, while having to work from home and take care of her children. However, thanks to the support of her family and childcare, as well as setting clear rules with colleagues, helped her in understanding how to manage her time efficiently and protect herself from the stress:

Senior Scientist (Interview 7): “Well, it's basically when the schools were closed. That was hard. I do have to say that my ex and I have 50-50 co-parenting, so my kids are with me only

half of the time, so that really helps. But yeah, the period when the schools were closed, having meetings, while at the same time helping my kids with schoolwork...after a while I concluded that's just not doable. So, I just had to be very clear to people. If you want my undivided attention in a meeting, we have to do it at these times because otherwise I'm with my kids.”

According to some recent studies, women are experiencing the hardest consequences of the pandemic in the aspect of gendered division of labor outside and in their homes, as well as work life balance issues because of the combining effects home care and working, oftentimes resulting in job loss (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2020; Zaki Dajani & Mostafa, 2021; Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020; Alon et al., 2020.) Nevertheless, as we can see from the example of the senior scientist, when social support is there, even if just coming from the family, is sufficient enough to make sure that a woman is not obliged to choose between childcare and her own career. I also had the opportunity to hear about more initiatives in Danone focused on supporting women, for instance the re-integration program after parental leave which is part of the Global Parental Policy. Always at global level, during the Covid-19 outbreak, more frequent surveys were launched to all employees in order to monitor their wellbeing, satisfaction and commitment in the attempt to avoid lowering of performance and show support from top management. This initiative in particular, to which I also took part of, was very interesting to observe because the results were shared to everyone on the internal social network sending positive business recovery signals, as well as points for improvement concerning wellbeing and satisfaction. Looking more specifically at forms of support in the Benelux region, the leaders gave more importance to recreating that physical proximity which was not possible during quarantine periods. For instance, the HR directors sent small packages consisting of gifts, and encouraging cards in order to boost commitment among the population. I received myself boxes with either food or other utilities, along with thanking messages addressed to everyone in the HR team, in order to recognize the efforts. Additionally, when the pandemic started, top management had immediately thought of providing more practical support for their employees, in terms of monetary resources in order to set up their own work from home environments:

Global Talent Manager for Operations (Interview 6): “When the Covid situation started, the company supported every employee with some payments. They made payments for your chair, for your desktop. That was provided by the company, and I think that was super helpful. And we were also receiving some letters from the company, you know, saying like, stay safe, stay strong it. Take care of you. Pay attention on your wellbeing these type of things was nice as well, so there were lots of practices that has been done.”

Clearly, this statement together with field observations show that Danone as a company made efforts to sustain employees both materially and mentally against the threat of the global pandemic. Unfortunately, despite these actions, difficulties and changes in the ways of working and interactions were inevitable, at all levels of operations. For instance, as noted in this interview excerpt:

Global Talent Manager for Operations (Interview 6): “It's been tough. For lots of people, I guess. Because that required us to change. The way we live. To change the way we interact with people, change the way we work; you know it changed everything. But it also made us to think differently, to approach things in a different way. For example, to learn how to work in virtual environments, how to create a proximity with people in the virtual environment without touching them. So, in every struggle there is opportunity.”

The manager mentions a universal need for everyone in the company to revise their ways of working and interacting in order to make it fit to the new virtual environment. Managers are now challenging themselves trying to create proximity in virtual environments, without touching people, and ensuring productivity. In order to do so, communication strategies and media to be used are changing. All interviewees highlighted a shift in the ways of doing inclusive and diversity practices consisting of using exclusively online activations and meetings in order to continue to bring awareness, being compliant with the social distancing rules. Along with this shift to fully virtual, challenges have arisen in the actual implementation of such initiatives. An example of the difficulties of communicating through virtual meeting platforms is provided by the junior manager for internal communications:

Junior Internal Communications Manager, (Interview 2): “Some things take a while to understand. Because it is just going through email. The process can be very slow compared to just having a quick discussion in person and then clarifying everything in the office. Also, communications need to be planned in advance, because you need to organize a meeting online and it's taking much more time than it should.”

Despite the online medium of communication is fast and on demand by definition, it does not reflect the reality of daily work in a big matrix organization. Everyone seems to be always busy and there is a need to plan ahead meetings. Much of the spontaneity of communications happening face to face in the office is lost and in case of arising issues is therefore not possible to quickly confront with colleagues. This can cause indeed delays in understanding and execution of tasks. Moreover, another obstacle of online communication is the issue of maintaining the attention of the audience high. The speaker is indeed challenged to find innovative ways to engage with people who are instead hiding behind their cameras, usually on off. This issue is quite known for many leaders who have been

holding speeches during virtual meetings and they struggle sometimes to find ways to establish the conversation, as noted by the supply chain coordinator and leader of Benelux Inclusive Diversity Factories project:

Supply Chain Coordinator (Interview 3): “It is difficult, but there are nowadays a lot of different tools that allow people to participate in virtual environments, answering questions and things like that. So, I think we just need to be more creative. It's about finding the way to let them participate and talk between themselves. For example, since few months, when I start monthly meetings, I start asking someone to prepare 5 minutes of inspirational speech. So, these kinds of things so you do the inspirational talking and then you help with that. And then we try to make a conversation instead of just a speech.”

Interacting online, especially in case of meetings or online events to raise awareness on diversity and inclusion, require different tools which have never been used before such as online quizzes inside the meeting platform, or planning activities and exercises in breakout rooms in order to make sure that everyone keeps being engaged in the discussion. Communication strategies have changed and will continue to change according to the medium of communication used, however, the strategies for effective public speaking stay essentially the same and are briefly mentioned by the interviewees too. Indeed, the main factor for an effective communication is making it conversational, engaging with the audience rather than delivering a one-directional monotonous speech. Recalling the Aristotelian philosophy of rhetoric (e.g., Beason, 1991; Quinn et al., 1991; Roos, 2013; Baccarani & Bonafanti, 2015) the dimensions of effective public speaking are to be reconducted to logos, ethos and pathos. Logos, refers to the importance of persuading the audience by building strong logical arguments and knowledge of the subject. Ethos is instead relating to the credibility of the speaker, because even if the arguments are based on reasoning, the speaker needs to be perceived as worth of listening, otherwise the whole message of communication is lost (Kenton, 1989). Finally, pathos in this case refers to the importance of persuading the audience by involving it emotionally, arousing emotions by using for instance visual examples, personal stories, metaphors and anecdotes (e.g., Yale, 2014; Murray, 2007; Denning, 2008; Randall and Harms, 2011). The information to be delivered in this way will leave an imprint in the memory of the listeners and will be therefore more effective. Contrasting this theoretical evidence against the communication strategies I was able to observe in some online events aimed at raising awareness on inclusion, the speakers were following these principles and trying to engage as much as possible with the audience despite the virtual medium, which in this case can be seen both as a tool to create proximity, as well as distancing people, making it more difficult to establish a real connection. Nevertheless, exercises, pauses, songs, or more than

one guest intervention with the help of slides and emotional moving videos were tactics used by the facilitators and were quite effective in keeping the interest high even in case of two hours meetings.

Finally, adding on the changes happening to the ways of working, it is also worth mentioning the change in strategizing in the case organization. Indeed, given the pervasive uncertainty coming from both the lasting global pandemic and the announcement of the restructuring of the company, long term planning and strategizing seems almost impossible:

Junior Internal Communications Manager and Yup board member (Interview 2): “So now it's a lot about the short term, and even the plan that we have for the Yup, before it was for the year, while now we have a plan for the semester. Uh, also because of the reorganization that we have internally within Danone, it's not super easy to know what we will be able to do and what scope and how we will be able to reach people.”

According to the internal communications manager, when looking at both ways of working in her main role as communication manager and also in her secondary role as Yup network board member, planning is now only possible on the short term. This was confirmed by the claims of other interviewees, and it is indeed a logic reaction in order to ensure business continuity (Spender, 2013). Analyzing more specifically the impact of the pandemic on Inclusive Diversity, other than the switch from face to face to virtual activations, it was also possible to notice that in Benelux pervasive uncertainty has led to a de-prioritization of diversity and inclusion among the activists.

Learning manager male (Interview 5): “I believe that there is definitely an impact unfortunately, negative impact. The first one is in terms of focus. Because now in this setup we are so much in a crisis mode that we need to be even more competent in terms of prioritization. And unfortunately, this may not be the very first topic on which you will be working (Inclusive Diversity) and negative impact is also in terms of engagement, I mean first Covid and also the announcement of the restructuring in the company, I see that in the HeForShe team the level of engagement has significantly dropped.”

First of all, prioritization of Inclusive Diversity has significantly dropped as recognized by the interviewee, secondly low engagement levels, in particular in the HeForShe team, have resulted in a freeze of activities which will be difficult to challenge given the current organizational setup. However, when looking at initiatives branded in the workplace group Inclusive Diversity at global level, managers and activists are still active. Initiatives being fully activated online have incredible upsides, as well as of downsides. As explained by the learning manager and activist for HeForShe,

the positive consequence of doing virtual events is the increased scope resulting in a higher number of potential participants, more in particular:

Learning manager male (Interview 5): In terms of positive things (of moving to fully online Inclusive Diversity), there is availability, both in terms of scope and interest. I am thinking now about the Ted talk that Sonia Malaspina will be doing soon. Before the pandemic I think that it would have been only 100% face to face, while now we will have all the opportunity to tune in and watch it, from wherever we are. So, I think this is giving more opportunities for people if they are curious and they already have an interest in the topic.”

The opportunity to reach larger audiences communicating online did not go unnoticed from the global diversity managers who evidently increased activations addressed to anyone in Danone, however they do not give enough exposure for people who are not already interested to the topic. Their main channel of communication is indeed the group on the internal social media (Inclusive Diversity) that employees need to join in order to be able to see posts and being updated on the latest news and projects. Therefore, if there is not prior interest in diversity and inclusion, a big part of the population might be excluded altogether.

Finally, reflecting on the overall efficacy of this new way of doing diversity and inclusion practices in organizations, I asked the participants what they were thinking about it and what kind of communication was more appropriate according to their own experiences. The responses, even though varying slightly, they all pointed to one conclusion: online inclusive diversity can indeed have a bigger impact and reach people across geographical distances, however, face to face meetings remain the best way in order to establish “the human touch” (Talent Manager, Interview 10) which is so important to create feelings of inclusion. Despite the difficulty of creating a sense of belonging through virtual platforms only, all interviewees agreed that online activations are “here to stay” and most probably even after the pandemic a mixture of both online and face to face events will be the best option to go for. In this way, it will be possible to benefit from the advantages of both options: meeting physically allows to create feelings of proximity, human connection and inclusion which is almost impossible to recreate in virtual environments; online streaming events on the other hand have the advantage of reaching to a wider audience and allow people to flexibly join to the discussion, without committing by commuting to the location of the event. Concluding, diversity management in multinational organizations during the global pandemic discovered the disruptive potential of online conferencing as powerful communication tool. Initially, extensively adopted in order to be compliant to social isolation measures, later on it has been consciously chosen as tool of management and awareness, because more convenient and with higher impact. In the next and last chapter, I will

provide an overall reflection on all the findings in order to answer the research question and provide managerial recommendations.

5. Conclusion and discussion

In this final chapter, I will summarize and discuss the results of this research project against the research question in order to answer it, as well as providing managerial recommendations, limitations and directions for future research.

5.1 Conclusion

The aim of this investigation was to contribute both to academic literature and managerial practice by assessing diversity management practices in multinational organizations during the ongoing global pandemic, exploring qualitative changes happening and providing managerial recommendations accordingly. In order to do so, the following research question was formulated: *How to rethink diversity management in multinational organizations after Covid-19 pandemic?* Collecting interviewees' claims, official statements and virtually mediated observations, it was possible to conclude that there have been mainly four consequences affecting diversity management and inclusion in multinational organizations: first of all there was a negative impact on wellbeing and work life balance; secondly, there has been increased company support in order to compensate for inequalities that have stemmed from this exceptional situation; thirdly, there has been a change in ways of communicating and finally, a change in the ways of working for diversity and inclusion.

In particular, the impact on wellbeing and work life balance is evidenced by feelings of loneliness, strong uncertainty and excessive workload, because the boundaries between work and private life are much harder to manage, especially for extroverted people who are energized by social and human contact. The increased company support aimed at sustaining employee wellbeing, as well as compensating for eventual material inequalities such as lack of equipment and resources by providing a working from home allowance. The case organization put particular emphasis on improving mental health of employees, providing messages of support and little gifts to boost the morale. Virtual working has had tangible and intangible consequences both in the ways employees interact between each other and in the ways of working. Interactions, being almost fully online mediated, are not always instant like they could be face to face. There is an information overload experienced by the workers who receive more emails every day, calls and chats and constantly reply may be impossible at times. This constant interaction can cause stress and misinterpretations because nonverbal forms of communication are often hidden, therefore, there is a risk of inefficiency. Concluding, the change

in the ways of working for diversity and inclusion in a multinational context, consisted in turning face to face events to fully virtual. Online video conferencing is being perceived by organizational actors as particularly impactful in order to reach to a broader audience, but less effective in building proximity and feelings of inclusion. Indeed, uniting everyone in a room has a bigger impact in order to reach the ideal of inclusion in the organization, because human contact and feelings of belongingness are best build with face-to-face interactions. Hence, diversity and inclusion activists in the case organization believe in a near future where they could use hybrid models of connection. For instance, connecting with a live streaming from a room with a group of people, allowing participants to choose their preference with either online or face-to-face engagement. Overall, diversity and inclusion practices were not de-prioritized because of the pandemic, with the only exception of one employee resource group which slowed down the activities because of the surrounding uncertainty. Practices aimed at raising awareness were the most popular, showing a tendency in the organization which is already known in literature. In particular, the tendency of organizations to focus their efforts on individualizing diversity issues, rather than highlighting dynamics of power and systemic inequalities, in the hope of changing organizational behavior through control of individual behavior, fighting against unconscious bias (Özbilgin, Bartels-Ellis, & Gibbs, 2019). This approach is an impediment to effective global diversity management (Özbilgin, Bartels-Ellis, & Gibbs, 2019), therefore, in the section of managerial recommendations, I will dive deeper into alternative approaches which could better challenge organizational inequalities and contribute to a more equal work environment.

5.3 Managerial recommendations

In light of all the findings, different issues in the governance system for diversity management in the case organization have been identified. First of all, a lack of communication and synergy between local diversity activists and global diversity managers, which is causing unclarity in the ways of working and where exactly to stand. Secondly, communications aimed at raising awareness on diversity are numerous, but mainly targeted to internal stakeholders who are already interested to the topic and decide to join the group on the internal social media, excluding in this way people who are not so active on the platform. Thirdly, the organization demonstrated tendency for individualization on global diversity management as theorized and described by Sippola & Smale (2007).

In particular, the focus is mainly on initiatives aimed at changing individual behavior and treating each diversity issue in isolation. There is a timid tentative of establishing a dialogue between the different networks at regional level with global, however such meetings are not regular or clear enough on the ways of working, resulting in confusion for the organizational actors who are given

almost total freedom on how to manage diversity within their regions. In order to solve such issues, multinational organizations should always strive for clear formalization in policies, procedures and governance system for diversity, making sure that everyone is aware of such documents. Moreover, in order to contrast for individualization and aim to a more effective diversity and inclusion management system, it is beneficial for diversity managers to create intersectionality by connecting diversity networks and external social movements in order to cooperate together on a common agenda, so to galvanize greater support and push for more social and organizational change rather than working at the individual level (Özbilgin, Bartels-Ellis & Gibbs, 2019) . Indeed, if the agenda of each network is left unmanaged and independent from each other, the risk is that conflict could arise among these different objectives, which instead should converge together, in order to better reflect the nature of individuals which is intersectional because composed of different categories altogether in one person: there is not just a woman, without her ethnicity or age for instance. Therefore, regular cross functional cooperation and clarity through formalization and centralization in processes of diversity and inclusion should help in strengthening their effectiveness. At the moment the case organization has already in place people and information-based mechanisms for integration, however formalization and centralization ones are lacking. More specifically, taking as a reference the framework of integration mechanisms proposed by Sippola & Smale (2007), formalization-based mechanisms could be for instance D&I policy framework and diversity criteria on individual balanced scorecards connected to rewards and bonus schemes, equal across all regions. Centralization based integration mechanisms are instead represented by creation of Diversity councils at corporate level, steering groups or Regional Hub centers where diversity coordinators or like in the case organization, activists, can come together share best practices and align on diversity standards and issues. Overall, the case organization has been proven to have a very inclusive culture which reduces perceived inequalities in the workplace, however in order to fully optimize the management of diversity such practical suggestions could help in building an even more impactful governance system.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to diversity management literature in mainly two aspects. First of all, it provides rich insights to fill in a very recent and relevant knowledge gap in the academic debate, that is to say, assessing qualitative changes in diversity management and inclusion practices in multinational organizations, during an ongoing pandemic. Secondly, it builds upon the under researched topic of global diversity management, providing a thick description of the challenges faced by organizations and the solutions built in order to overcome it, by critically assessing it against existing literature. Analyzing emerging issues in the case description, it was showed the importance

of global mechanisms of integration in diversity management, especially in the aspect of formalization and centralization, as fundamental factors which contribute to create an efficient governance system for diversity and inclusion globally. Concluding, this study helps in laying on the foundations for theorizing on Covid-19 effects in the workplaces, by providing evidence for 4 type of consequences and issues which impact the workforce and in particular diversity and inclusion practices. Leading the way for future research exploring the issues experienced by the workforce during the global pandemic which impacted on organization inclusiveness.

5.4 Limitations and future research

This research given its design and context comes inevitably with some limitations and pitfalls. First of all, being focused exclusively on the qualitative changes of diversity management practices perceived by a restricted number of employees in a large multinational organization, transferability of findings can be limited. Additionally, the sample of respondents is not balanced with representatives from all the regions in the company, because of the impressive number of countries involved (more than 55) and because in a virtual environment it was harder to identify key activists from different regions. This resulted in the possibility to reach mainly to employees based in one region, Benelux, with the exception of one interviewee from outside Europe. Also, collecting data and observing the organization completely in a virtual environment may lack additional hidden insights which could have emerged with a closer observation of the physical space in which organizational actors operate in. However, because of the global pandemic which was still ongoing during the investigation, face-to-face interactions and observations of respondents, out of their own private homes was not possible. Finally, the choice of focusing only on employees personally involved in diversity management practices can be disputable, because in this way it was not possible to fully picture how employees not implicated are perceiving such practices. Nevertheless, the choice was made in order to assess qualitative changes in strategies and practices, as this was the main focus of investigation. Concluding, despite the limitations the research contributed to providing rich insights on how multinational organizations are coping with the global pandemic and the ways in which diversity and inclusion are prioritized, contributing significantly to academic literature and managerial practice. Future research on the effects of Covid-19 on inequality in the workplace is needed. Investigating a more quantitative effect of the pandemic on diversity management issues, for instance utilizing a survey, will complement and add on the current study in order to advance literature and managerial practice on global diversity management, which is still an under researched field in business administration (Özbilgin, Bartels-Ellis, & Gibbs, 2019).

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Appendix A: Interview guide

First of all, I want to thank you for your cooperation and your willingness to participate to this research project. I am a master student from the department of Business Administration at Radboud University in Nijmegen. I am conducting this research for my master thesis, and I would like to investigate the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on diversity management in multinational organizations. The investigation is supervised by Dr. Caroline Essers, Business Administration, Faculty of Management at Radboud University.

The interview will last approximately one hour. If you do not have any objections, I would like to record the interview. This recording is to prevent information from being misunderstood and it will help me to achieve a better analysis. The information will be reported anonymously and only the job function will be mentioned. Unless you agree to have also your name cited.

After the interview, I will offer you the opportunity to check the interview on paper and if necessary, adapt quotes. The result will be dealt with confidentiality and will remain the possession of Radboud University and not available for third parties. The research report will be sent to you by July. With the results of the interview, together with documents and observations, I will write a paper that will be assessed by the Master thesis commission.

Do you have any questions about this interview at this moment? If not, I will start with the interview right now.

>>>> INTERVIEWER STARTS RECORDER

AND

WRITES DOWN THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION<<<<

Number interview: 2

Date interview:/04/2021

Time of the interview:

Location of the interview: Online on WebEx

Name interviewer: Alessia Luciana Faiola

Interview questions

Ice breaker:

1. Can you tell me about yourself?
2. Can you describe your position in Danone?
3. Why are you passionate about diversity management?
4. How would you describe diversity?

Theme 1 diversity management in Danone:

1. How would you describe diversity management policies and practices in Danone?
2. Could you please elaborate providing some examples?
3. Are there official global policies or is it managed locally?
4. Does HR support the efforts of including and managing diversity? If yes, in which ways?
(Question especially for ID managers and HR managers)
5. What do you think is the role of management and the role of people in enacting such processes?
6. What is the role of KPIs ? How do you think it helps in reaching the ideal of inclusion in the workplace?
7. What do you think is the most influential cause of discrimination in the workplace?
8. How could it be prevented in organizations?

Theme 2: The impact of Covid-19 pandemic

9. How are you experiencing this global situation of uncertainty?
10. How do you think Covid-19 impacted on workplace inequalities?
11. What is instead the impact on diversity management policies and practices ?
12. How do virtual and flexible work play a role in the transformation of diversity management ?
13. What do you think are currently the biggest obstacles in achieving equality in the workplace?
14. Do these relate to structural issues in the companies?
15. How do you think structural discrimination in society is impacting diversity management in the organization?
16. What is the role of a multinational organization like Danone?
17. What is the future of inclusion according to you? What has been achieved and what still needs to be done?

Appendix B: Gioia method Coding Template

Figure 1.1: Data structure from interviews, observations and official websites

1st Order Concepts	2nd Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions 1.0	Aggregate Dimensions 2.0
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I/W*: B-Corp certification in Benelux and many other countries is making sure that there are actions to support communities and environment. - I/W*: Human values are the core of corporate culture. - I*: Human element is embodied in corporate values, Codes. - I*: Inclusion and Diversity are important topics because of team innovation, team engagement, young generations retention 	<p>Diversity brings value both to the business, as well as being a social responsibility</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - -I*: No clarity and lack of communication in the integration global-local as it is still a baby 2/3 years old - -I*: At the moment there are a lot of initiatives sitting in the area of awareness creation, still little is done in the area of driving change - -I*: Inclusive diversity is not taken seriously enough, only because other competitors do it and it is considered as a must - -I*: No real benefit in stepping in or they cannot find enough time to dedicate it 	<p>Ineffectiveness of the current system</p>	<p>Strategies and discourses around diversity</p>	<p>Inclusive Diversity in Danone</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I*: Global policies and guidelines are cascaded - I*: initiatives lead locally, which are bottom up and they are encouraged by the company. - I*: Governance at higher level is perceived as blurry, more clarity on roles is needed 	<p>Diversity management governance</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I/W/O*: New Global Parental policy . - I*: ID champions, a network of 400 people who voluntarily works for diversity and inclusion on top of their jobs - W*: 3 global e-learnings on inclusive diversity - O*: Global trainings managed locally on Unconscious Bias and Cross-cultural competence 	<p>Global ID achievements</p>	<p>Initiatives in place globally</p>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I*: Inclusive Diversity is now integrated in brands because in this way it can have an impact on society - -O/W*: Brands such as Activia, Bonafont and Evian market inclusive diversity - Role of brands in sending important social messages 	Marketing for ID		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I*: HeForShe is a network aims at promoting gender equality - I*: In Danone, the crocodile mouth phenomenon is quite evident - W*: UN mujeres partnered with Bonafont Mexico 	HeForShe Benelux	Initiatives in place in Benelux	Inclusive Diversity in Danone
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I*: Yup is the network for employees under 30s. It excludes Danoners even though age is not checked - I*:The main purpose of the Yup is to help young Danoners to connect with colleagues and socialize. 	Yup Benelux		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I/O*: The Inclusive Diversity Nudge is a behavior changing initiative where people group together and share experiences around bias - I*:The inclusive Diversity Nudge has been virtualized and exposed to the whole Benelux as a consequence 	ID Nudges Benelux		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I*: Accessibility group in Benelux which just started, and they are establishing the priorities - W*: Accessibility for all not just physical disabilities 	Accessibility Group Benelux		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I/W*: Pride Group has the aim to give people the opportunity to express their sexual orientation or identity without fear 	Pride Group Benelux		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I*: Unconscious Bias training is organized to help teams reflect more on themselves, but it is not an expert initiative. - I*: It is managed locally by volunteers 	Global Unconscious Bias Training		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I*: I was able to put together 11 people, from which we made a group in Zoetermeer. Thanks to that, the Benelux team and the global team have kind of named me a Benelux leader for them. So, they kind of officialized the group and now we are called “Inclusive diversity factories Benelux”. - I*: So, the idea is that in the future we can spread these activities that we are doing in Zoetermeer for the whole factories in Benelux 	Inclusive Diversity Factories Benelux		

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I*: Diversity is the representation of various profiles of people. Based not only on visual elements but also on mental characteristics like thoughts, experiences, values and motivations. - I*: The definition of Diversity within Danone is broad, and it is aiming at including different perspectives, cultures, thoughts and it could be about visible and invisible differences 	Definition of diversity	Individual perception of diversity	Workforce Diversity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I*: In a meeting the respondent did not take her seriously, undermined everything she claimed - I*: Subtle discrimination in factories because of sexual orientation 	Self-perceived micro aggressions	Inequalities in the organization	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I*: Witnessed discrimination for the language in Belgium mainly - I*: Danone being a French organization might be positively discriminating in terms of nationality 	Perceived Discrimination		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I*: Negative work life balance impact is a problem for a lot of people - I*: Work life balance for a working mom was hard with schools closed but she had help from her ex 	Impact on the workforce	Consequences of the pandemic	Diversity and inclusion post Covid-19 pandemic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I*: Company's support after the Covid-19 outbreak in terms of resources and wellbeing - W*: Danone communities 	Company's support		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I/O*: Difficulty of planning long term strategies for the network, due to the pandemic and Local First Transformation - I*: Shift to online engagement and initiatives 	Change in the ways of working		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I*: Creative ways to reproduce social interaction in virtual meetings are key to include everyone. - I*: Virtuality can impede shy people to have feelings of belonging or to participate in the meetings, they are just passive. - I*: it is not possible to communicate spontaneously and quickly like in real life 	Change in interactions		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - (Int.3) Combining online and in person initiatives would be best because there is no way back as of before. - (Int.6) in the future it is foreseen to keep both physical and online events 	Future events will be both online and offline		

***Legend:**

I= Interview

O= observation

W= website