Radboud Universiteit

Master's Thesis

How Women and Men Perceive Hypothetical Women-Targeted Diversity Initiatives in an Industry Dominated by Men: A Case Study of an FMCG Company.

Abstract

*The study explores women and men employees' perceptions of hypothetical diversity initiatives to understand what kinds of signals can be perceived. Women are classified as an underrepresented and men as an overrepresented group: the targets and non-targets of diversity initiatives respectively. Three hypothetical diversity initiatives are focused on: a mentoring programme for women's career development; a diversity taskforce for women's inclusion, and gender-balanced candidate slates during recruitment to improve women's representation. The study finds that employees' perceptions indicate fairness signals, inclusion signals and competence signals, confirming existing literature. This study's contribution to theory is its finding of a new type of signal: problem signals, which communicates to underrepresented groups that there is a gender equality issue at the company. The study's theoretical relevance is that negative signals can be perceived by underrepresented groups, contributing to existing theory that mainly highlights positive to this group. Its practical relevance is the finding that employees' perceptions of hypothetical diversity initiatives' signals can indicate potential unintended consequences, **before** implementation. Therefore, organisations' decisions can be made beforehand to mitigate risk and preserve resources.*

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Introduction

In the wake of social movements like Me Too and Time's Up, companies are being scrutinised about how seriously they are taking women's workplace challenges (Burgess et al., 2020). Firstly, women continue to face many barriers to advancement in the workplace, which negatively impacts society by perpetuating gender discrimination and unequal opportunities (Tatli et al., 2016). One reason for this is that women have been found to be less assertive than men when advocating for their own career and professional development opportunities in the workplace (Fielding-Singh et al., 2018). Another reason is that women fear being perceived negatively for self-promoting, which holds them back from doing so (Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010). Therefore, research shows that women's discomfort with self-promotion can often be a personal barrier in professional environments. Secondly, workplace cultures are not always conducive to women feeling included (a sense of belonging), especially in industries dominated by men (Rubin et al., 2019). For example, workplace cultures can be environments that are centred around performances of masculinity, which negatively impact both men's and women's wellbeing at work (Berdahl et al., 2018). Thirdly, women's workplace barriers mean that they continue to be underrepresented in management positions within organisations (Misic-Andric, 2015) and much less likely to be promoted to management roles than men (Vinkenburg et al., 2011). This ultimately means that women have less decision-making power within organisations (Babic & Hansez, 2021). These barriers for women in the workplace can be summarised as: (i) less or lack of support for women's self-advocacy and professional development, (ii) less or lack of inclusion of women in terms of companies' cultures that are based on masculine norms, and (iii) less or lack of representation of women in managerial, decision-making roles within organisations. Furthermore, women in industries dominated by men face barriers due to being excluded, such as lack of social support and acceptance by colleagues (Germain et al., 2012). In such industries, men can be categorised as an overrepresented group, whilst women can be categorised as an underrepresented group (Farndale et al., 2015).

In an attempt to alleviate women's workplace barriers and challenges, many organisations have implemented diversity initiatives such as mentoring programmes, diversity taskforces and recruitment initiatives (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Amongst others, these initiatives aim to create more "fair and inclusive workspaces" (Dover et al., 2019, p.154) and to "support the careers of traditionally underrepresented groups" (Dover et al., 2019, p.159).

By implementing diversity initiatives, organisations intend to send signals to

underrepresented groups to reassure them that work is being done to reduce their career gaps, improve their inclusion and increase their representation (Leslie, 2019). However, the problem is that, despite the good intentions of implementing diversity initiatives, the signals they send can cause a number of undesired effects (Leslie, 2019). Some crucial elements of our current understanding of diversity initiatives' signals are (i) signalling the intention to create a more inclusive workplace for underrepresented groups can lead to "false promises" (Dover et al., 2019, p.14) if the culture does not live up to expectations implied by the signal, (ii) signalling the intention to support underrepresented groups can results in overrepresented groups feeling disadvantaged in comparison (Dover et al., 2019), (iii) signalling the intention to support underrepresented groups can lead to them being perceived as less capable than overrepresented groups, due to needing extra help (Leslie, 2019), and (iv) signals can manifest in overrepresented groups treating underrepresented groups negatively, due to resentment, and questioning their capabilities (Leslie, 2019). Therefore, trying to signal fairness, inclusion and support to underrepresented groups can signal the opposite to overrepresented groups, which can counteract the intentions behind implementing diversity initiatives. Consequently, it is important to understand how *both* the targets and non-targets of diversity initiatives perceive diversity initiatives' signals (Dover et al., 2019), because ignoring the perceptions of either group would not give the full picture and could exacerbate potential unintended consequences.

Given this knowledge about the risk that the different signals of diversity initiatives can lead to potential unintended consequences (Dover et al., 2019), it is important to understand how employees perceive proposed diversity initiatives *before* they are implemented. This way, the nature of the signals perceived by employees can provide guidance to organisations on whether to implement certain initiatives. For example, if the signals perceived by employees give the company an indication (pre-implementation) that they would not be well-received, the company could decide not to waste resources on such initiatives, or to adapt them to better fit the company's culture. Otherwise, companies might implement diversity initiatives with presumptions about how employees will perceive them, which could lead to unintended consequences, rendering their investment a waste of company resources, which is often the case (Dobbin and Kalev, 2006).

However, there is still limited research into what diversity initiatives' signals can look like, and how companies can consider employees' perceptions of them before implementing diversity initiatives in practice (Burgess et al., 2020). This study, therefore, seeks to understand employees' perceptions of proposed diversity initiatives to explore the nature of the signals that the proposed hypothetical initiatives send pre-implementation. Given the findings that

diversity initiatives' signals can be the cause of unintended consequences, this study aims to contribute to Dover et al.'s (2019) literature on what the signals that are sent by diversity initiatives can look like to employees, and their corresponding potential unintended consequences. As such, the research question for this study is *"How do employees of an FMCG company perceive signals of hypothetical women-targeted diversity initiatives?"*

The academic relevance of this study is to add more knowledge on diversity initiatives' signals, so that the signals perceived by both underrepresented (in this case, women) and overrepresented groups (in this case, men) can be better understood to suggest how they might link to unintended consequences that they can cause. Additionally, Dover et al.'s (2019) research is based on a North American sample. Therefore, this study provides some insight into a Western European context in the specific practical case of a fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) company to contribute to the literature around signals in a different setting to existing research. This is a sub-aim of the study, as the primary goal is to provide practical recommendations to the company based on hypothetical diversity initiatives. The company will henceforth be referred to as European Refreshments to maintain the company's anonymity. There is also limited research into what signals are sent by women-targeted diversity initiatives in industries dominated by men (Cundiff et al., 2018).

Therefore, the main aim of this study is to provide practical recommendations for a fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) company that is considering implementing three women-targeted diversity initiatives. This company is the case study context on which this study is based. The practical recommendations aim to shed light on which (if any) of the proposed diversity initiatives seem to be well-received and allow both women (the underrepresented group) and men (the overrepresented group) to feel like the company culture is fair and inclusive, and that women are provided with the support that they need, without men feeling that the initiatives are unfair, exclusive and giving women undue support. Therefore, the study also aims to compare the responses of men employees (the overrepresented group) and women employees (the underrepresented group). The practical relevance of this study is that it aims to provide insights for other companies in industries dominated by men, when considering implementing diversity initiatives and how they will be perceived by women and men employees. Moreover, this company has been chosen as the case study to explore perceptions of diversity initiatives pre-implementation, because it is considering implementing the diversity initiatives that employees are asked about in this study.

The first section of this paper is the Theoretical Background, which will elaborate on what current literature tells us about diversity initiatives' signals and the unintended

consequences they can cause. It will also define and explore women-targeted diversity initiatives. The second section explains the study's Methodology. Thirdly, the Results section outlines the findings of the study. Finally, the Discussion will address the research question and explore the study's contribution to the literature, and its relevant implications for theory and practice.

Theoretical Background

This section first explores the mixed signals sent by diversity initiatives, these signals' corresponding potential unintended consequences, and the importance of including the perceptions of both underrepresented and overrepresented groups. Finally, it defines and explains the aims of the three women-targeted diversity initiatives introduced in the previous section: a mentoring for women's career development, a diversity taskforce for improving women's inclusion, and gender-balanced candidate slates at the interview stage of the recruitment process.

The Mixed Signals Sent by Diversity Initiatives

Currently, there is limited research on the diversity initiatives' signals (and their unintended consequences), therefore we have to rely on existing knowledge provided by Leslie (2019) and Dover et al. (2019). Therefore, this section focuses on these two authors' theories around this topic. The diversity initiatives' signals can have negative implications for the success of diversity initiatives, as well as for underrepresented groups who the initiatives are targeted towards (Leslie, 2019). For example, the mere presence of diversity initiatives can lead to the belief that underrepresented groups need more help than overrepresented groups to succeed in the workplace (Leslie, 2019). Similarly, diversity initiatives can signal that underrepresented groups have more chance of succeeding in their presence than if an organisation had no diversity initiatives, which can cause overrepresented groups to feel resentful at the opportunities given to underrepresented groups (Leslie, 2019). Signals can also include that morality is valued at the organisation in question, because diversity work is considered a social justice issue (Leslie, 2019). Finally, diversity initiatives can signal that diversity goal progress is valued, meaning that performance metrics around diversity are worked towards – however, this can lead to false progress if numbers are prioritised over supporting underrepresented groups (Leslie, 2019). Therefore, signals sent by diversity initiatives can be mixed and can also be the root issue for unintended consequences that can occur as a result of initiatives being implemented (Leslie, 2019). Therefore, understanding the signals that diversity initiatives send

to employees before they are implemented could be an important step in the design of organisational diversity initiatives, which is why this study aims to understand employees' perceptions pre-implementation.

   This study focuses on Dover et al.'s (2019) typology of the signals sent by diversity initiatives. Whilst there are some crossovers between the unintended consequences found by Leslie (2019) and Dover et al. (2019), Dover et al.'s (2019) framework specifically categorises potential unintended consequences according to how they correspond to underrepresented and overrepresented groups, whose perceptions are the focus of this study, which Leslie (2019) does not. This typology has been chosen instead of Leslie's (2019) typology, because it focuses on the differences between signals sent to underrepresented and overrepresented groups. Considering the perceptions of both of these groups is important to avoid one-sided information and attempt to avoid the potential unintended consequences that diversity initiatives can have for both groups (Dover et al., 2019). This is because underrepresented and overrepresented groups can receive different signals from diversity initiatives, as one group is the target group and the other is not (Dover et al., 2019; Leslie, 2019). For example, non-targets (overrepresented groups) can feel they are losing out on opportunities that are being unfairly given to the targets (underrepresented group) (Dover et al., 2019; Leslie, 2019). In other words, overrepresented groups do not always understand the need for diversity initiatives that target underrepresented groups. Overrepresented groups feeling like they are disadvantaged in this way defeats the purpose of inclusion (whereby all employees feel a sense of belonging (Nishii, 2013; Shore et al., 2011). It can also lead to their negative treatment of underrepresented groups (Dover et al., 2019), which is demonstrated in *Figure 1*, showing the potential unintended consequences of the signals sent by diversity initiatives. Therefore, this thesis investigates how women might perceive diversity initiatives targeted towards them favourably, whilst men might perceive them to be unfair. If this perception of unfairness manifests in negative treatment of women, it would have been useful to understand differences in perceptions before implementing the diversity initiatives. Furthermore, leaders have found that only including women in women-targeted diversity initiatives has much more limited success than including men in the solutions and initiatives as well (Valerio & Sawyer, 2021).

Figure 1

Dover et al.'s (2019, p.14) Typology of Diversity Initiatives' Signals and Their Corresponding Potential Unintended Consequences.

Signal	Potential Unintended Consequences
Fairness Signals — Underrepresented groups are treated fairly	• Underestimate anti-minority discrimination • Overlook/dismiss/delegitimize discrimination claims • Derogate minority discrimination claimants
Fairness Signals — Overrepresented groups are treated unfairly	• Overestimate anti-majority discrimination • Endorse unfair hiring practices • Compensate for perceived anti-majority bias
Inclusion Signals — Underrepresented groups are included	• False promises, unrealistic expectations (if signal and culture are mismatched) • Signal may not be as universal or strong for all groups in all parts of the hiring process
Inclusion Signals — Overrepresented groups are excluded	• Psychological and physiological threat • Backlash against policies, colleagues, or minority job candidates
Competence Signals — Underrepresented groups are less competent	• Underestimate competence of minority colleagues • Underestimate/doubt own competence
Competence Signals — Positive outcomes for minorities are unearned	• Stereotype activation • Attributional ambiguity about positive treatment and career opportunities

Because of these potential unintended consequences (and the differences between underrepresented and overrepresented groups), it is important that companies considering implementing diversity initiatives understand the nature of the signals that their planned diversity send to employees. Therefore, this study focuses on understanding both men and women employees' perceptions of the three aforementioned hypothetical diversity initiatives.

To elaborate on *Figure 1*, Dover et al. (2019) categorise three types of signals that diversity initiatives send to both underrepresented and overrepresented groups: fairness signals, inclusion signals, and competence signals. To underrepresented groups: (i) fairness signals can communicate that a workplace is a fair environment for underrepresented groups, (ii) inclusion signals can communicate that underrepresented groups are included, and (iii) competence

signals can communicate that underrepresented groups need more support in the workplace (Dover et al., 2019). On the other hand, diversity initiatives can unintentionally give the opposite signals to overrepresented groups: (i) fairness signals can communicate that overrepresented groups are treated unfairly, (ii) inclusion signals can communicate that overrepresented groups are excluded, and (iii) competence signals can communicate that opportunities given to underrepresented groups are not earned (Dover et al., 2019). These signals for both groups can translate into potential unintended consequences, such as overrepresented groups treating underrepresented groups negatively, because of the initiatives' perceived unfairness, or believe them to be less capable than overrepresented groups, questioning their abilities in the workplace (Dover et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important to understand how these types of signals can look.

Diversity initiatives aim to target underrepresented groups (Dover et al., 2019). Whilst their aim is to create fairer, more inclusive workplaces that support the careers of underrepresented groups, overrepresented groups can feel disadvantaged by not having initiatives that focus on supporting them (Dover et al., 2019). Additionally, underrepresented groups can feel alienated by diversity initiatives that target them. For example, diversity initiatives that only target women, as opposed to all employees regardless of demographics, can threaten both men and women employees' sense of identity safety and make them both worried about being treated unfairly (Cundiff et al., 2018). Therefore, the intention to signal inclusivity towards underrepresented groups is not always achieved, and overrepresented groups can feel negatively towards diversity initiatives.

Given that underrepresented and overrepresented groups can receive different signals from diversity initiatives, as represented in *Figure 1*, this study analyses the perceptions of, both, women employees (the underrepresented group) and men employees (the overrepresented group). By understanding both groups of employees' perceptions of hypothetical diversity initiatives, the study aims to provide insight that will lead to practical recommendations for European Refreshments. The practical recommendations aim to suggest which (if any) of the hypothetical diversity initiatives would be worthwhile investments for the company, based on how well they are perceived by its employees. For the initiatives that garner positive perceptions from employees, recommendations on whether or how to tailor the initiatives aim to be provided. For the initiatives that are not perceived positively by employees, alternative initiatives may be recommended based on employees' perceptions.

Defining the Aims of Women-Targeted Diversity Initiatives

Women experience less or lack of support for their career and professional development opportunities compared to men, especially in industries dominated by men (Germain et al., 2012). They also experience less or lack of inclusion in terms of companies' masculine-centric cultures (Berdahl et al., 2018). Finally, they also experience less or lack of representation than men in managerial, decision-making positions (Babic & Hansez, 2021). Therefore, women continue to be an underrepresented group in the workplace (Ferdman, 2020), which impacts their career success and experience of inclusion in the workplace. Diversity initiatives are "programs and policies" (Dover et al., 2019, p.152) that aim to create more "fair and inclusive workplaces" (Dover et al., 2019, p.154) "and support the careers of traditionally underrepresented groups" (Dover et al., 2019, p.159). Therefore, this study uses this definition of diversity initiatives, with *women* as the underrepresented group. In other words, women-targeted diversity initiatives are "programs and policies" (Dover et al., 2019, p.152) that aim to create more "fair and inclusive workplaces" (Dover et al., 2019, p.154) "and support the careers of [women]" (Dover et al., 2019, p.159).

Women tend to be targeted by diversity initiatives to improve their workplace outcomes and experiences (Leslie, 2019). European Refreshments is considering implementing three hypothetical diversity initiatives targeted towards women, as part of its *Women in Leadership* Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DE&I) pillar. Three hypothetical diversity initiatives have been chosen by the company to potentially implement, and for this study, based on each initiative targeting a different aspect of women employees' workplace experiences. To understand the nature of the signals sent to employees by each of the initiatives, employees' perceptions of each initiative will be sought in this study. This aims to provide insights to European Refreshments about how well each designed hypothetical initiative is received by employees to provide guidance as to which initiatives' implementation might be worth investing in.

The three initiatives that have been chosen for this study are a mentoring programme to aid women's professional and career growth, a diversity taskforce for problem-solving company cultural inclusion issues for women, and gender-balanced candidate slates (requiring hiring managers to interview equal numbers of men and women for job positions). Leslie (2019) finds that diversity initiatives intend to focus on (i) equalising differences in career success between underrepresented and overrepresented groups, (ii) increasing inclusion (feeling valued and a sense of belonging (Nishii, 2013; Shore et al., 2011)) of the underrepresented group they target, (iii) and increasing the representation of the underrepresented group they target. In summary, diversity initiatives aim to achieve: "increased target representation, reduced gaps in career success between targets and nontargets, and

increased target inclusion" (Leslie, 2019, p. 538). The mentoring initiative aims to improve career prospects, professional growth and the confidence of mentees (Santos et al., 2020). The diversity taskforce initiative aims to improve inclusion (sense of belonging and being valued (Nishii (2013); Shore et al., (2011)) of women. Diversity taskforces also aim to create social accountability to improve diversity and inclusion outcomes (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). The gender-balanced candidate slates initiative aims to increase the representation of women, by reducing gender bias in the recruitment process that lead to more equal hiring outcomes (Peng et al., 2019). Dover et al. (2019) and Leslie (2019) do not attribute signals and corresponding consequences they can cause to individual diversity initiatives. Therefore, current theory does not connect each of these diversity initiatives to signals and potential unintended consequences individually. However, these specific diversity initiatives' connection to the signals and corresponding consequences will be addressed in the Discussion, wherein the findings shed light on this. *Table 1* summarises the targets and aims of each of the three hypothetical diversity initiatives.

Table 1

Summary of This Study's Three Types of Diversity Initiatives, Their Target Groups and Aims.

Initiative	Target Group and Aim
Mentoring	Existing women employees, to aid *career growth* and professional development
	Key words: existing women, **career development/women talent progression**
Diversity taskforce	Existing women employees, to improve the company's *culture* of inclusion of women
	Key words: existing women, **company culture/employee experience**
Gender-balanced candidate slates	Existing and prospective women employees, to increase *numerical representation* of women in men-dominated job-types and

departments, and in decision-making positions

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Methodology

Research Paradigm and Philosophical Underpinnings

This study focuses on perceptions, which are projections of consciousness and reality are constructed socially (Symon & Cassell, 2012). Therefore, from an ontological point of view, this study will follow a subjectivist approach (Symon & Cassell, 2012), because of its focus on perceptions. From an epistemological standpoint, this study follows an interpretivist subjectivist approach (Endres & Weibler, 2016), because it aims to understand interpret human meaning from employees' perceptions (Carson et al., 2001). This is viewed as an appropriate perspective for an insider researcher, due to having a better understanding of the organisation's culture than an external researcher (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). This is important, as I was employed by the company whilst conducting the research, although the study was not commissioned by the company. This is elaborated on in the Research Ethics and Reflexivity section.

Case Study Approach

This research uses a case study approach, whose benefits include revealing detailed and nuanced data (Lee & Saunders, 2017), which this study sought. The case chosen is a multinational fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) company (named European Refreshments in this study as requested). European Refreshments was chosen for the case study, because the FMCG industry is typically dominated by men as the overrepresented group (Brammer et al., 2007). There is limited research into what the signals sent by diversity initiatives look like in industries dominated by men compared to women. Therefore, European Refreshments was an ideal context in which to study women-targeted diversity initiatives. Further context about the company is that it has 3,400 employees in its European region, but is part of a larger global parent company, which has 42,000 employees worldwide. European Refreshments and its parent company have a focus on sustainability, which includes its DE&I strategy that focuses

on *Women in Leadership* globally. In addition to focusing on women, each regional part of the company is encouraged to focus its DE&I work on other aspects like disability, race & ethnicity, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and different age groups. However, its parent company and European Refreshments itself are in the early stages of their DE&I journey, with "raising awareness" being the current aim of any internal DE&I activity. Therefore, European Refreshments was also an ideal case study, it is starting to take steps towards improving all aspects of diversity but is focusing on *Women in Leadership* across all parts of the company, including the European Refreshments subsidiary. This means that the company is not yet well-versed in implementing diversity initiatives, so is an ideal case study to understand employees' perceptions in pre-implementation. The company also provides an environment in which to explore employees' perceptions of women-targeted initiatives, because the company is FMCG industry, which is typically dominated by men; for example, over 95% of FMCG board members are male (Brammer et al., 2007, p.400). Therefore, the company is in an industry in which men are a clear overrepresented group, whilst women are a clear underrepresented group. This makes it an ideal setting to understand differences in perceptions between men and women with respect to proposed diversity initiatives that are targeted towards women.

Data Collection Method

A qualitative method was deemed the most appropriate, as this research aimed to explore in-depth perceptions, making it suitable to gain insight into subjective topics (Cypress, 2015) and due to the explanatory nature of the study (Pratt, 2009). Perceptions of diversity initiatives' initiatives signals also require meaning-making from the researcher, which also makes a qualitative method suitable (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). Data collection was therefore conducted via semi-structured interviews with open questions to allow for deeper, more rich responses than structured ones (Bryman, 2022). This was conducive to a focused interview, whilst keeping the questions open-ended to allow respondents to expand on their answers (Alsaawi, 2014). Therefore, the questions could provide important insights, whilst also being flexible (Saunders et al., 2022) and allow unexpected data to come to light that a structured interview would be too strict to facilitate (Alsaawi, 2014). Therefore, aside from the planned questions, participants were asked to clarify and elaborate on their answers where relevant, to uncover unexpected data from insightful responses (Alsaawi, 2014). These clarifications were especially useful, because there is a layer of complexity involved in cross-cultural communication and interpretation (Halualani, 2008).

To provide the structured element, an interview guide (*Appendix C*) was prepared to uncover perceptions that related to the nature of the signals that the hypothetical diversity initiatives were sending to participants. For example, the interview guide contained open questions like "What impressions do you get from this initiative?" to understand participants' perceptions in as much detail as they wanted to share. Questions designed to expose perceptions that indicated types of signals included: *"What do you think about this initiative in terms of fairness?"* (Fairness signals); *"How inclusive do you feel this initiative would be for women/men?"* (Inclusion signals), and *"How do you think you would think of or treat women differently if this initiative were to be implemented?"* (Competence signals). Participants were primarily asked about their personal perceptions. However, women participants were also asked how they would perceive the initiatives if they were an external, prospective woman candidate. Men participants were asked what perceptions they thought an external, prospective woman might have of the initiatives. These extra questions were to gauge possible external perceptions of targets of the initiative from an external perspective.

A description of each of the hypothetical initiatives was sent to all participants in a written Word document via email attachment, so that they all received the information consistently to avoid framing biases (Martin, 2017). This enabled participants to familiarise themselves with the design of the hypothetical initiatives before having their perceptions questioned. To accurately save the data (Alsaawi, 2014), interviews took place via Microsoft Teams and were recorded via the camera and microphone functions. The interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes to allow participants flexibility to answer all questions and add extra detail for more contextual responses. During the interviews, participants were asked open questions from the prepared interview guide, which allowed for clarification and elaboration.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

This study's focus is on employees who are part of an underrepresented group (women) and overrepresented group (men) to understand how differences between these group's perceptions look. The organisation has an existing diversity taskforce of 65 employee volunteers, used as a company sounding board for diversity & inclusion matters generally (not specific to women). Its members were invited to join the study via email with an explanation, a response deadline and interview dates and a request to respond directly to the researcher. The primary criterion for joining the study was that participants had to identify as either a man or a woman for binary simplicity of being part of the underrepresented or overrepresented group for this study. Whilst

minority ethnic men can be an underrepresented group rather than overrepresented group (Wong, 2015), it was not a specified criteria to identify as a White man to qualify as being part of the overrepresented group for this study. However, the sample contained no men from minority ethnic backgrounds, so this was naturally in line with the typical overrepresented group being White men (Wong, 2015). European Refreshments has office locations in London and Amsterdam, so the sample contains both British and Dutch participants. Therefore, it was also necessary that participants were fluent in English, as the interviews were conducted in this language. Participants from any department or job type were invited to join the study to enable a variety of employee backgrounds regarding position, department and seniority. A minimum sample of six women and six men were sought in total. In addition to the original email advertisement, snowball sampling was also used to reach the minimum sample size, whereby participants recruit others from their own networks (Mason, 2002). The snowball sampling approach resulted in exceeding the minimum sample requirement. Therefore, the final sample contained fifteen participants: nine women and six men. *Table 2* shows the (anonymous) details of the participants' gender, ethnicity and nationality, current job department, previous job department, tenure at the company and seniority level.

Table 2

Summary Statistics of From Participants Sample.

Participant Number	Gender	Ethnicity & Nationality	Job Department	Previous Department	Tenure at Company	Senior (Director or Above)?
1	Woman	White British	R&D	Sales	<5 Years	No
2	Woman	White British	Legal	HR	5-10 Years	Yes
3	Woman	Black (Caribbean British)	Sales	-	<5 Years	No
4	Woman	White British	External Affairs & Sustainability	-	5-10 Years	Yes
5	Woman	South-Asian British	Legal	-	<5 Years	No
6	Woman	White British	HR	-	<5 Years	No
7	Man	White British	Sales	-	<5 Years	No
8	Man	White British	Marketing	-	<5 Years	No
9	Man	White British	Sales	-	<5 Years	No

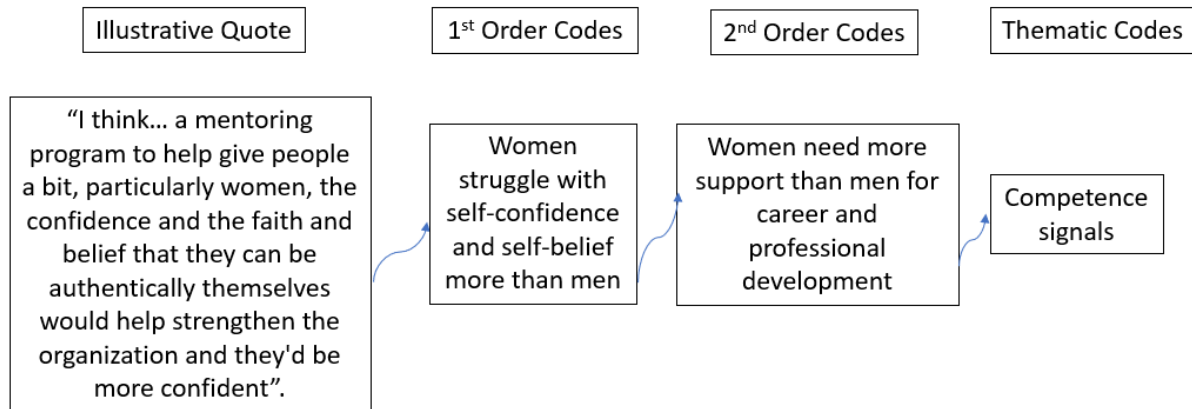|						
10	Woman	White Dutch	HR	HR	5-10 Years	Yes
11	Woman	White Dutch	Data & Compliance	Legal	5-10 Years	No
12	Woman	White Dutch	Marketing	-	<5 Years	No
13	Man	White Dutch	Supply Chain	-	>10 Years	Yes
14	Man	White Dutch	IT	No	5-10 Years	No
15	Man	White Dutch	Marketing	-	>10 Years	No

Analysis

Once the interview recordings were transcribed, template analysis was used to analyse the data through coding. Open coding of interview phrases took an abductive approach to allow codes to be based on theory, whilst also allowing codes to emerge naturally from the data. Template analysis allows a deductive approach that draws from theory, and it also gives the researcher flexibility to use an inductive method to allow other themes to emerge from the data that did not fit the prescribed a priori codes (King et al., 2017). This approach allowed focus on the concepts "that are known to be important in the existing literature" (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019, p.13) and provided "structure and theoretical relevance" (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019, p.14). For the deductive aspect, a priori codes were centred around Dover et al.'s (2019) typology of the signals sent by diversity initiatives: *fairness signals*, *inclusion signals*, and *competence signals* were the thematic codes. For the inductive aspect, codes emerged outside of this typology. For example, *Figure 2* shows an excerpt showing inductive first-, second- and third-order codes that lead towards the thematic code of *competence signals*. *Appendix A* shows a coding tree further exemplifying the combined approach of inductive and deductive coding using template analysis.

Figure 2

Excerpt From Code Tree Demonstrating Combined Analysis Method.

Illustrative Quote	1st Order Codes	2nd Order Codes	Thematic Codes

"I think… a mentoring program to help give people a bit, particularly women, the confidence and the faith and belief that they can be authentically themselves would help strengthen the organization and they'd be more confident". → Women struggle with self-confidence and self-belief more than men → Women need more support than men for career and professional development → Competence signals

Research Ethics and Reflexivity

Regarding ethics, to ensure the anonymity of participants' responses, all references to names, positions and other identifying comments were removed. Prior to conducting the interviews, participants received emails, which contained: consent forms for participating and being recorded; assurance of the anonymity of the individual and company, plus what to expect; and a document describing the three proposed diversity initiatives of which their perceptions would be sought. They could also request a copy of their transcript if desired. Therefore, all participants were informed, and took part consensually.

Reflexivity is also important when conducting qualitative research, as the researcher's own position, methods and assumptions can impact how the study is conducted (Symon & Cassell, 2012). In this respect, my part-time employment as Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DE&I) Specialist at the company was influential. In this capacity, I am responsible for making strategic DE&I decisions for the European region of the business. Therefore, whilst I am not being paid to conduct this study, its findings provided insights for my job role. My position also meant that I had a working relationship with two of the participants, which could have affected my interpretation of those participants' responses (Greene, 2014). However, my personal reflection is that it only (at least consciously) made a difference during the interviews in which these participants seemed more forthcoming in sharing their perceptions than other participants, due to trust. Despite this ethical quandary, having internal access as a researcher makes finding prospective participants easier than being external to the organisation (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Furthermore, I have a greater understanding of how the organisation works

than an external researcher would (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007), enabling tailored interview questions for the company to extract the most important information.

Although the focus of this study was on differences in gender, not nationality, another consideration is my identity as a British woman when interviewing British and Dutch participants. I have been familiarised with Dutch culture by living, studying and working in the Netherlands for one year. However, I noticed a better understanding of British participants' responses versus Dutch participants. Therefore, my interpretation and analysis of the results may have been affected by having a better subconscious understanding of how British people communicate versus Dutch people. For example, the ability to pick up on subtext, or misunderstandings when responses get lost in translation. I have also observed that Dutch people communicate more literally than British people, therefore I might not have encouraged Dutch participants to elaborate enough to reveal as much detail as the British participants. It was important to limit these factors' influence on my analysis and interpretation of the data. Therefore, I frequently discussed and reflected on my observations with my fellow students to challenge my approach and views.

Results

To understand the question, *"How do employees of an FMCG company perceive signals of hypothetical women-targeted diversity initiatives?"*, this section explores the types of signals that employees' perceive each of the three diversity initiatives to indicate. As this study combined an inductive and deductive approach, employees' perceptions are explored in terms of the types of signals that they indicate, outlined in the Theoretical Background by Dover et al. (2019) (fairness signals, inclusion signals, and competence signals). Additionally, new insights have been found that contribute to this theory in the form of *problem signals*. The three diversity initiatives that participants were asked about their perceptions of were a mentoring programme for woman, a diversity taskforce for women's inclusion, and gender-balanced candidate slates at the interview stage of the recruitment process. Each of the three sections will explore what women and men employees' perceptions tell us about the signals of the hypothetical diversity initiatives.

Mentoring Programme for Women's Career Development

The mentoring programme for women is hypothetically designed to be just for women to minimise the career gap between women and men. Whilst the programme would be targeted towards women as the mentees, men would be welcome to join the initiative as mentors. This

initiative was described in this way to participants in the explanatory document they received prior to being interviewed. This section explores how women and men participants both perceived this initiative to signal *fairness signals* and *competence signals*. Firstly, *fairness signals* perceived by women, followed by men, will be explored. Secondly, *competence signals* perceived by women, followed by men, will be explored.

Fairness Signals: Women Perceive the Signal that Mentoring Would be Unfair if Only for Women

The majority of women participants perceived that this initiative would be unfair, indicating *fairness signals*. Whilst the mentoring initiative was well-received and women could see the benefits of it, their perceptions indicated that they felt it would not be fair if men did not also have access to mentoring. This perception is demonstrated in the quotes below.

British woman, Sales department (mid-level): *"I think a mentoring programme should exist in general, like for everybody but I do think there's probably space for specific considerations to be made for women's careers and the type of issues they might face, specifically, and ensure that things are tailored to help develop them…"*

Dutch woman, Data & Compliance department (mid-level): "…fairness would be if everybody, of course, receives mentoring."

Dutch woman, Marketing department (mid-level): "I personally think that something like this should not be only implemented for women, but also for men, because … everybody here in the company's super eager to learn."

These quotes demonstrate several points. Firstly, the quotes show that there is an appetite for a mentoring programme at the company, because people are generally interested in self-development and learning. For example, *"I think a mentoring programme should exist in general…"*, *"I don't think anyone would be in disagreement that mentoring is a really positive thing to do"* and *"everybody here in the company's super eager to learn."* These phrases indicate people's interest in learning and that a mentoring programme is perceived to be a good initiative for the company. Secondly, however, the quotes clearly indicate the perception that a mentoring programme should be for everybody, not just for women, with the word "everybody" or "everyone" being mentioned in every excerpt. This shows participants' discomfort with only focusing on supporting women's development and not other people in the organisation. Finally, these perceptions hint at feelings of unfairness, because the comments

focus on the people who would not receive mentoring. For example, one participant even explicitly states that *"...fairness would be if, of course, everybody receives mentoring."* Therefore, these perceptions indicate *fairness signals*, with the common theme being that women-only mentoring would be an unfair initiative for other people at the company.

To summarise and conclude: Most women shared the perception that mentoring women would be a beneficial initiative for people's development, but that it should not be an opportunity just for women. These perceptions suggest that a mentoring programme just for women would signal unfairness to those who would not be targeted, in other words, men. Therefore, this initiative is perceived by women participants to indicate *fairness signals.* This perception also indicates signs of the potential unintended consequence, *"overestimate anti-majority discrimination"*, highlighted in *Table 4*, because the initiative aims to level the playing field for women's careers, but is overestimated to be discriminatory towards men who are being treated unfairly by not having access to this initiative.

Table 4: Fairness Signals and corresponding Potential Unintended Consequence of Mentoring Initiative.

Signal	Potential Unintended Consequences
Fairness Signals Underrepresented groups are treated fairly	• Underestimate anti-minority discrimination • Overlook/dismiss/delegitimize discrimination claims • Derogate minority discrimination claimants
Overrepresented groups are treated unfairly	• Overestimate anti-majority discrimination • Endorse unfair hiring practices • Compensate for perceived anti-majority bias

Fairness Signals: Men Also Perceive the Signal that Mentoring Would be Unfair if Only for Women

Men participants also shared perceptions of unfairness about the mentoring programme if it were only for women. The majority of men participants also felt that mentoring should be an opportunity available to everyone, and that it would be unfair if men were not afforded access, thereby also indicating *fairness signals*. Men participants' perceptions also indicate *inclusion signals* by demonstrating feelings of exclusion as a result of the unfairness. These perceptions are demonstrated in the quotes below.

British man, Sales department (mid-level): "I think if I got an advert saying, 'women, would you like a mentor?', I'll be like 'what about me?' I think when you start deliberately calling out gender or calling out race or calling out anything like that you'd polarize against the other side, so for me you could make this a mentoring program and then have the topics targeted towards women.

Dutch man, IT department (mid-level): "I think there should be a mentoring program for males and females, because otherwise you're I think you're going to get the cross eyes ... as long as you have also a mentoring for the other people in the organization ... I would think that's the most promising one ... and I can imagine that then a mentoring program targeted towards women would have a bit of a different content then towards male probably".

British man, Sales department (mid-senior): "I think mentoring particularly needs to be not just focused on the women's mentoring. It is around ... mentoring everybody within our business. I think if we only mentored, mentored the women, then you would still be losing a lot of the ... people who can help affect the way that the women work within the business".

Dutch man, Supply Chain department (senior): "if you ask me, would some of the men may feel [they're] being put back in priority. Yes, I think so. I think we should have a mentoring program for everybody ... not just for women."

These quotes highlight several key perceptions. Firstly, just like with women participants, there is a common thread of men participants believing that mentoring should be for everyone in the business, not just women. Again, the word "everyone" or "everybody" is mentioned in each quote, emphasising its importance and signalling the need for *fairness*. Secondly, men participants perceive a clear signal of unfairness for men specifically. For example, feeling *"put back in priority"* and *"I'll be like, 'what about me?'"*. Not only do these phrases indicate perceptions of unfairness, but also feelings of exclusion by men, as being de-prioritised and forgotten about does not denote a sense of belonging. Thirdly, the perceptions indicate that targeted mentoring towards certain topics that women encounter would be a fairer design for the programme, rather than an exclusive programme that men cannot join.

To summarise and conclude: Men perceive a clear signal of unfairness for men if only women are able to receive mentoring, indicating *fairness signals*. This again indicates the potential unintended consequence of overestimating anti-majority discrimination, highlighted in *Figure 3*. Due to this unfairness, men participants also perceived feelings of exclusion, indicating *inclusion signals*. *Figure 3* highlights the potential unintended consequence of *psychological*

threat, which is also indicated in men's perceptions of feeling excluded and de-prioritised. Instead, a mentoring programme for both genders could tailor the content of the mentoring by being targeted towards certain workplace topics, rather than gender, would be perceived as fair.

Figure 3

Inclusion Signals of Diversity Initiatives and Their Potential Unintended Consequences (Dover et al., 2019, p.14).
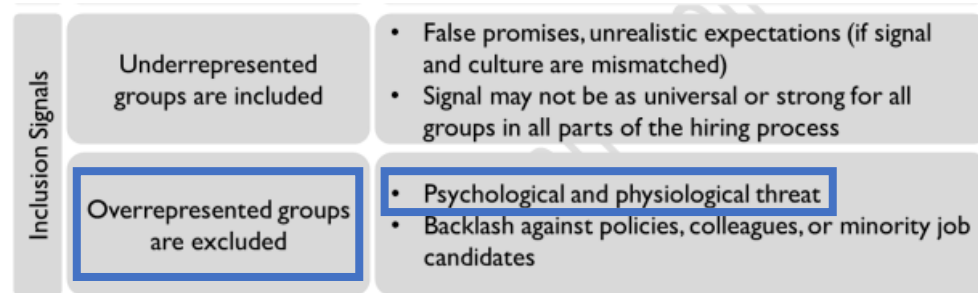
Competence Signals: Women Perceive the Signal that Women Need the Career Support this Initiative Offers More than Men

A minority of women participants perceived this initiative to be beneficial to women, due to their low self-confidence and self-advocacy compared to men. This perception is demonstrated in the quotes below.

British woman, Legal department (mid-level): I think it's important to have this sort of [initiative] in an organization of our size in particular, because actually there are ways in which I think women often can inadvertently hold themselves back in the workplace by action and non-action actually compared to men. I've seen this myself. I've had experiences of this and therefore I think a mentoring program would help, because actually it can help in many ways develop someone's confidence."

Dutch woman, Marketing department (mid-level): "I think it's definitely something a lot of women would love to participate in because they are still sometimes, I think a little bit too afraid ... to speak their mind and to really show ... 'I want to have this role. How do I get there?' Or, how do you say? To grab it and to definitely go for it, because ... men are more confident about their skills".

These quotes indicate that women would likely be keen to participate in a mentoring programme to improve their confidence in their own capabilities and improve their ability to

advocate for themselves with respect to being ambitious and striving for what they want. They particularly demonstrate the perception that men are more capable in these respects. For example, *"women often can inadvertently hold themselves back in the workplace ... compared to men"* and *"men are more confident about their skills"*. This indicates the perception of *competence signals*, by suggesting that women are less competent than men when it comes to self-advocacy and self-confidence. These perceptions interestingly also contradict the perception of the initiative's unfairness: participants simultaneously indicate the perception that women are less confident than men, so could benefit more from mentoring; meanwhile, they believe that mentoring should also be available for men, because they should also have this opportunity, despite needing it less than women.

To summarise and conclude: Women participants perceive this initiative benefit women's lower self-confidence and self-advocacy than men, indicating *competence signals* by believing that women are less competent. This also indicates the potential unintended consequence of *underestimat[ing]/doubt[ing] own competence* highlighted in *Figure 4*.

Figure 4

Competence Signals of diversity initiatives and their Potential Unintended Consequences (Dover et al., 2019, p.14).
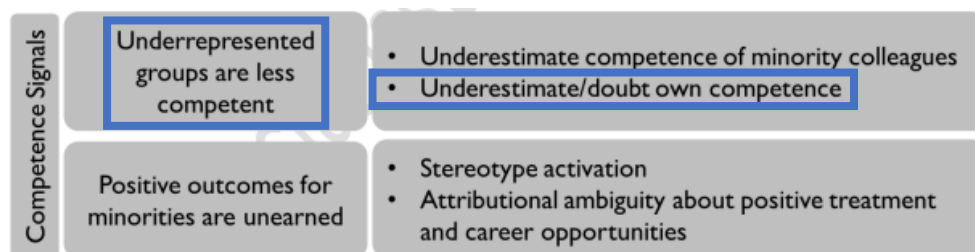
Competence Signals: Men Also Perceive the Signal that Mentoring is Necessary to Improve Women's Confidence

Men participants also indicated the perception that women could benefit from a mentoring programme, through learning and being encouraged to put themselves forward, thereby indicating *competence signals*. This perception is demonstrated below.

British man, Sales department (mid-senior): *"...my perception of it is it gives everybody the opportunity where if we have to encourage women to step up ... So, I think it's very good and we'll get more women applying for those [senior] roles."*

British man, Marketing department (mid-senior): "I can just see all the benefits that would bring. I can see the support, the safe space. The learning, they like, up-skilling and down-skilling of information…"

These quotes indicate the perception that women have a lot to gain from mentoring, for example having a *"safe space"* and *"encourage women to step up"*. These phrases imply that women need protection and encouragement in the workplace to be able to advocate for themselves, that a mentoring programme could provide. This indicates *competence signals.* by suggesting that women can be less competent in terms of ambition and self-support. A minority of men participants even directly indicated the perception that women-only mentoring could lead to men viewing women as *"lesser"*. This is demonstrated in the quote below.

Dutch man, IT department (mid-level): "… it's giving the impression that females … need, by standard, more mentoring or more specific mentoring, which actually could have a reverse effect that you start looking at females and thinking well they are lesser, because they need more mentoring … that's quite interesting. Didn't realize that."

This quote shows this participant's realisation in the moment of the possibility of men looking down on women if they were perceived to need mentoring by virtue of being women. Therefore, this also indicates *competence signals* by suggesting the perception that women are not on par with men in the workplace, again due to needing extra support, and being less capable and competent than men.

To summarise and conclude: Men participants perceived this initiative to indicate *competence signals* based on the association that women need more support in the workplace, so are less competent than men. This also indicates the potential unintended consequence highlighted in *Figure 5,* whereby employees can *underestimate [the] competence of minority colleagues*.

Figure 5

Competence Signals of diversity initiatives and their Potential Unintended Consequences (Dover et al., 2019, p.14).
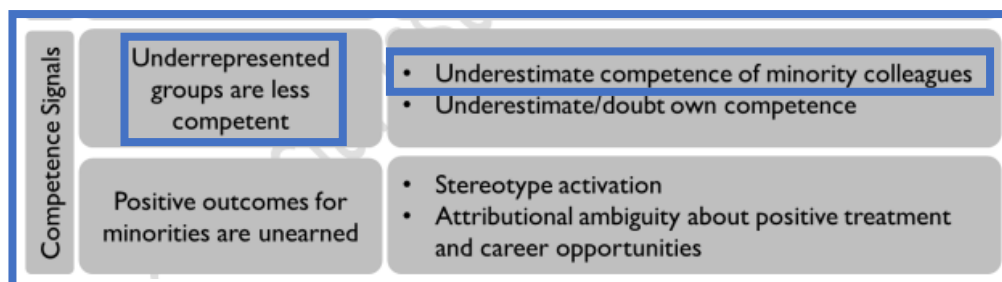
Gender-Balanced Candidate Slates for Increasing Women's Representation

The gender-balanced candidate slates initiative would require hiring managers to interview an equal number of women and men at the interview stage during the recruitment process. This section firstly explores how women and men participants both perceived this initiative to signal a combination of *fairness* and *competence signals*. Secondly it explores how women participants perceived this initiative to signal *problem signals*, a novel contribution to Dover et al.'s (2019) typology.

Fairness and Competence Signals: Women Perceptive that Initiative Signals an Unfair Focus on Gender, Rather Than Candidates' Skills, Leading to Negative Associations with Women's Capability

When women participants were asked about their perceptions of this initiative, some common themes were found with respect to *fairness signals*. Most women participants were personally opposed to the gender-balanced candidate slates initiative. They perceived the initiative to be an infringement upon finding the most talented and deserving candidate based on merit, thereby deeming it to be unfair on whomever the best candidate would be. This perception was held by women participants at both office locations and who worked in various departments (for example, legal, HR and sales), showing a common thread across different parts of the business. These perceptions can be demonstrated by the interview excerpts below.

British woman, Legal department, mid-level: *"I don't particularly think that's fair ... I don't know if the term's reverse discrimination, but ... if you just don't find a good female candidate ... I wouldn't ... just take them to interview stage because we need to ... it has to be done on talent and merit..."*

Dutch woman, HR department, senior: *"I believe we need to go for the best candidate, and I think from an external point of view as a candidate, I would also like to be chosen, because I am the best candidate ... because that's when you actually won ... It could be perceived by someone to say, well, I actually don't even deserve maybe to be based on my credentials. I normally I would not have been selected for this interview because there's five other male people that have just better capabilities and credentials than I have".*

Dutch woman, Sales department, mid-level: *"...for me personally. It's more about the quality of the candidates, than specifically the gender ... women really want to have more opportunities and more, how do you say it, responsibility within the company, but on the other hand, they*

also want to be equal ... and I personally think especially within a recruitment process ... someone should be really hired based on their skills ... and not specifically on their gender because for me it's personally more important to have the equality than to have full focus on getting more women into the company."

British woman, Sales department (mid-level): "...you would be thinking have I got this job because of this [initiative] and ... I don't think that's the best way to go about things. It's not fair ... you'd be questioning people's credibility. Are they on your team for this reason or because they're actually good at their job? And I think when you're trying to combat any prejudice that certain men might have of women and not seeing them as equals, you're making that problem worse..."

British woman, Sales department (mid-level): "I don't actually think that's fair. I think there's a difference in making sure there's no restrictions and that's why I said my solution would be to anonymize CVs because there might be that prejudice ... but just having a literally a quota to say, oh, we have to have this amount of women ... It's not fair on men that might be better suited to the job".

These interview extracts highlight several points. Firstly, they indicate the fear that this initiative would signal that women have an unfair advantage in the hiring process over men. Women participants indicate in these quotes that they want to *feel* like they have been appointed to a role based on their talent and capabilities, not their gender. Moreover, these quotes show women's concern that it could signal that their *credibility amongst colleagues* could be undermined by the presence of such an initiative, indicating *competence signals*. Secondly, the initiative is perceived to signal that the *recruitment process would be discredited* by focusing on gender, rather than candidates' qualifications. The term "*reverse discrimination*", for example, suggests the perception that gender is being focused on unjustly, and that men would unfairly lose out as a result, indicating *fairness signals*. Thirdly, the quotes hint at a belief in meritocracy, for example, "…*it has to be done on talent and merit…*" Therefore, it hints that women would perceive the signal that their gender would be a fast-track ticket to the interview stage with this initiative. As a result, their belief in meritocracy would be violated by this initiative if gender were to be prioritised during recruitment. Therefore, for women participants, this initiative signalled that women's gender would be considered more important than their talent, thereby undermining their achievement of being hired for a position. In turn, this was perceived to have implications for women's perceived competence – both in terms of how

others perceive their capability and how they perceive their own capability, indicating *competence signals*.

To summarise and conclude: These perceptions indicate *fairness signals*, by being perceived to unfairly focusing on gender, not candidates' qualities. In addition, these perceptions indicate the fear that this initiative would signal that their colleagues could attribute gender as the reason for women being hired, rather than their suitability to the role, signalling *competence signals*. At the same time, these excerpts demonstrate the perception that this initiative would signal that women should question their own talent and skills if they were recruited in the presence of it, also signalling *competence signals*. The potential unintended consequences of these *fairness signals* and *competence signals* are highlighted in *Figure 6* and *Figure 7*: *overestimate[ing] anti-majority discrimination* and *attributional ambiguity about positive treatment and career opportunities* (attributing women being hired to the initiative alone, rather than talent).

Figure 6

Fairness Signals of Diversity Initiatives and Their Potential Unintended Consequences (Dover et al., 2019, p.14).

Figure 7

Competence Signals of Diversity Initiatives and Their Potential Unintended Consequences (Dover et al., 2019, p.14).

Fairness and Competence Signals: Men Could Perceive Women as Token Hires and Question Their Capability

Most men participants were sceptical about this initiative in terms of fairness, with the underlying theme being that a candidate's qualities should be prioritised over their gender. In addition, men participants indicated some concern for women being perceived as or feeling like token hires if they were recruited in the presence of this initiative. These perceptions are demonstrated in the quotes below.

Dutch man, IT department (mid-level): *"...in the recruitment process, you're focusing on the content of people, not so much on the statistics or you should at least ... the good people are going to go away."*

British man, Sales department (mid-senior): "So if ... 20% of the total business are females, for example, but you've got 50% of candidates going for every job that are female, then it's weighted in the other way. So, you just gotta make sure that are those individuals that are going for it still capable of doing it? Everybody wants a level playing field to be able to say you choose the right candidate for the right reasons for the roles so, you don't have positive discrimination".

Dutch man, Supply Chain department (senior): "...of course there will be men saying or thinking ... that's not fair ... I'm not getting the role because a woman has to have the preference ... that I can imagine that people will not find fair as such."

British man, Sales department (mid-level): "I know a lot of women that say I don't just wanna get this job because I'm a woman. So as long as again there is a certain amount of candidates, if you know that you're up against at least 7/8 other people, I think you feel more confident. I think you don't want to create a situation where people feel like they've only got it to tick a box, so that's important".

These quotes demonstrate two main points. Firstly, the perception that this initiative could prohibit finding the best candidate for the job is indicated by phrases in the first two quotes above, like *"in the recruitment process, you're focusing on the content of people, not so much on the statistics..."* and *"...are those individuals that are going for it still capable of doing it? Everybody wants a level playing field to be able to say you choose the right candidate for the right reasons for the roles so, you don't have positive discrimination.* These phrases indicate the perception of the importance of focusing on candidates' suitability to the role, which this

initiative is perceived to risk preventing. In addition, the contrast between having a "level playing field" and "positive discrimination" indicates that this initiative is perceived to be discriminatory even though it aims to reduce gender bias in the recruitment process. They also indicate that the "right reason" for choosing a candidate would be not because they are a woman, but because they are qualified and capable of doing the role. The same participant suggests in that striving for a 50:50 gender split would be unfair on men if women only represented, for example, 20% of the organisation's workforce. Secondly, the latter two quotes above imply that focusing on gender would be tokenistic. For example, phrases like, "*…I'm not getting the role because a woman has to have the preference…*" and "*I know a lot of women that say I don't just wanna get this job because I'm a woman.*" These phrases indicate the perception that this initiative would be unfair for both men and women. For men, it would be unfair, because they are perceived to be unjustly de-prioritised over women. For women, they are perceived to not want to be hired based on their gender. These perceptions indicate fairness signals in the form of unfairness. They also indicate competence signals, by suggesting that women might feel like token hires, rather than deserved successful candidates.

To summarise and conclude: Men participants' perceptions indicated two main points. Firstly, that this initiative would prohibit finding the best candidate for the job by considering gender in the recruitment process. Secondly, that men might feel unfairly de-prioritised over women, and that women might also feel that they did not earn their position if they were to feel like a token hire. Therefore, these perceptions indicate both *fairness* and *competence signals*: unfairness towards men, and women being incompetent, because of being hired based on gender, not job suitability. The corresponding potential unintended consequences that these perceptions demonstrate are highlighted in *Figure 6* and *Figure 7*.

Problem Signals: Women Perceive that Initiative Signals Problem with Gender Equality

A minority of women participants perceived this initiative to run the risk of signalling that there is a problem with gender equality at the company. This perception is demonstrated by the quotes below.

British woman, External Affairs & Sustainability department (senior): "I personally would first of all think they're paying attention [to gender equality], so then I would start to query, 'have they got an issue [with gender equality]?'"

British woman, Legal department (senior): "I think it would make me think that there was an issue [with gender equality] and I think that when I then joined, I'd be like 'there's not an issue,

so why have they got [this initiative]?' But I say that from working in an area that is gender balanced. I suspect the experience of somebody working in a different department might be very different ... but in my role with my sort of job, I think that I would think it was odd. And then I think I'd arrive and be like, 'well, they didn't really need that. I'd probably have got the job anyway.'"

These quotes indicate women participants' perception that, if they were a prospective external candidate applying to the company, they would get a negative signal from this initiative. Primarily, the perception they indicate is that there is a problem at the company with gender equality. For example, the phrases," *I think it would make me think that there was an issue [with gender equality..."* and *"I would start to query, have they got an issue [with gender equality]?'"* These phrases highlight perceptions of concern for how this signal could be perceived by others. Whilst these quotes speculate about others' perceptions, they indicate warnings signs that this initiative could be viewed negatively from an external perspective. The participants who expressed this view work in the External Affairs and Legal departments respectively, therefore, a key responsibility of their jobs is to consider reputation risk to the company. Therefore, whilst these speculations might not be accurate, these participants are well-versed in pre-empting and mitigating reputational risks, so their perceptions can arguably offer an important insight. In particular, this perception indicates a signal that Dover et al.'s (2019) typology does not include: *problem signals*. The signals included in Dover et al.'s (2019) typology are mostly presumed to be positive signals to underrepresented groups: that the organisation is fair (fairness signals), inclusive (inclusion signals) and supports them with their challenges (competence signals). This finding contributes a negative signal to the theory for underrepresented groups, by suggesting that underrepresented groups (women in this case) do not always perceive diversity initiatives targeting them to be fair, inclusive or supportive. This could lead to the potential unintended consequence of prospective external candidates from an underrepresented group being dissuaded from applying to the company, although this is speculation that would be worth investigating in future research. This signal and corresponding potential unintended consequence are depicted visually in *Figure 8*.

Figure 8

Problem Signals of Diversity Initiatives and Their Potential Unintended Consequences (This Study's Novel Contribution to Dover et al.'s (2019) Typology).
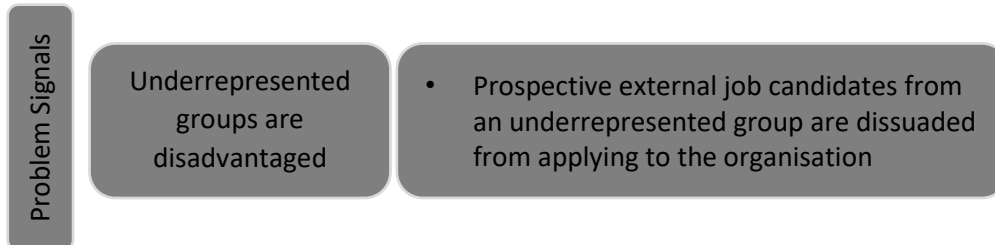
To summarise and conclude: Women participants perceived that this initiative could signal that there is a problem with gender equality at the company, indicating *problem signals* (highlighted in *Figure 8* – an addition to Dover et al.'s (2019) typology). The (possible) corresponding potential unintended consequence could be the dissuasion of prospective women job applicants to the organisation.

Diversity Taskforce for Improving Women's Inclusion

The diversity taskforce initiative would be a group of voluntary employees who discuss women's workplace challenges with the aim of creating solutions to improve women's inclusion within the organisation. This section firstly explores how women participants perceived this initiative to signal *inclusion signals*. Secondly it explores how men participants perceived this initiative to signal a combination of *inclusion, competence and fairness signals.* Finally, it explores how *both* women and men participants perceived this initiative to signal *problem signals*, the novel contribution to Dover et al.'s (2019) typology.

Inclusion Signals: A Diversity Taskforce Could Improve Inclusion of Working Parents, Especially Mothers

A minority of women expressed that this initiative would be particularly useful for addressing challenges that women face when returning to work after maternity leave. This indicated *inclusion signals*, by suggesting that women coming back from maternity leave are currently experiencing exclusion, which could be improved by this initiative. This perception is demonstrated by the quotes below.

British woman, Legal department (senior): "…I have seen very clearly when I was … in HR, how difficult women find it coming back from maternity leave … So if you can start to be clear

that it's around things like that as opposed to how women are gonna get promoted, I think that the narrative could work internally".

British woman, Legal department (mid-level): "I think it can be a positive initiative, certainly ... having just come back from [maternity] leave a few a months ago ... things have moved so quickly over the last year, I'm not completely up to speed with things ... I think that is something that quite a few women probably feel, like on the back foot when they come back from maternity leave ... there has been talk that some women in the past ... had a bad experience when coming back, because their manager wasn't in contact with them ... So actually a female-focused group could address things like women coming back from maternity leave ... and how they're navigating the new [challenge]".

These quotes indicate the perception that a prevalent challenge in the business for women is struggling to adapt and feel included once they return to the business from maternity leave. They demonstrate that, with many things having changed whilst they were away and lack of communication from their managers, women can feel excluded by the organisation post-maternity leave. They also suggest, therefore, that a diversity taskforce initiative would be a good environment in which to address this kind of challenge for women, and raise these concerns to improve women's post-maternity experience in the organisation. For example, ... *there has been talk that some women in the past ... had a bad experience when coming back, because their manager wasn't in contact with them ... So actually a female-focused group could address things like women coming back from maternity leave ... and how they're navigating the new [challenge]"* and *"...I have seen very clearly when I was ... in HR, how difficult women find it coming back from maternity leave..."* Therefore, these perceptions suggest that this initiative indicates *inclusion signals*, as it it perceived to improve women's inclusion in the organisation. Another key point that is raised, is that the narrative behind this initiative is important. For example, *"...if you can start to be clear that it's around things like that as opposed to how women are gonna get promoted, I think that the narrative could work internally".* This demonstrates that communication is key internally to prevent employees from perceiving this initiative to unfairly give women promotional advantages. Therefore, this indicates that internal communication is important to avoid the initiative signalling exclusion of others instead of inclusion of women returning from maternity leave.

To summarise and conclude: Women participants mainly perceived the diversity taskforce for women's inclusion to be a positive initiative for women returning to the business after

maternity leave that indicated *inclusion signals*, as this is currently a prevalent challenge for women in the organisation. Therefore, it could address this challenge in particular and improve women's inclusion for a major existing issue. However, arguably, this indicates the potential unintended consequence that the signal may not be as universal for all groups (highlighted in *Figure 9*), because women participants' perceptions were focused specifically on women who were returning from maternity leave, and not women who have other workplace challenges.

Figure 9

Inclusion Signals of Diversity Initiatives and Their Potential Unintended Consequences (Dover et al., 2019, p.14).
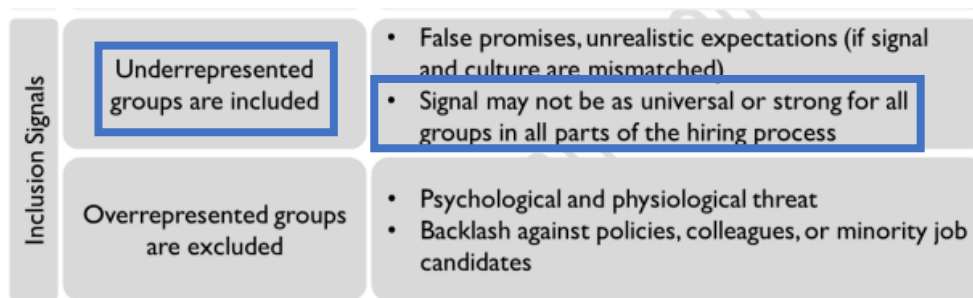
Inclusion, Fairness and Competence Signals: Men Perceive Initiative to be Exclusive of and Unfair on Men if Not Involved in Diversity Taskforce Decision-Making

A minority of men participants perceived this initiative to be both exclusive and unfair on men if they were to be excluded from the problem-solving or decision-making aspect of the taskforce. They also perceived some competence signals by implying that it would not be right to allow women-only groups to make decisions on behalf of the wider business. These perceptions are demonstrated by the quotes below.

British man, Sales department (mid-senior): "I think if decisions were made on the back of the taskforce, without consulting ... a broader group of people, including men, then I think it would be deemed unfair if you did it where you gathered the opinions and the perspectives ... if it was a women-only group ... just because women have faced a particular challenge ... doesn't mean that challenge doesn't exist for men ... It could be a business issue for everybody ..."

British man, Sales department (mid-level): "I think the problems that men face are ignored and ... viewed as less than what the women go through. You'll get resentment..."

Dutch man, Marketing department (mid-senior): "...here you are doing what you shouldn't do, which is picking up one group and putting them in a certain position as 'you're part of group one'. That also means you have a group two ... [if] we find out [issues are experienced by the] total female population, then you cannot solve it within that group. I guess the only thing you can do is create recommendations ... and you will get responses from the other side and ... you might get into bounce-back there ... and then bring those recommendations to those that have to implement it, which is not a female group only".

These quotes show a common theme of men perceiving this initiative to be exclusive of and unfair on men. Three main points can be drawn from these quotes. Firstly, when it comes to decision-making, men participants indicate the perception that men should be involved. This can be demonstrated by phrases, such as, *"I think if decisions were made on the back of the taskforce, without consulting ... a broader group of people, including men, then I think it would be deemed unfair..."* This phrase indicates fairness signals, as well as inclusion signals, because it indicates that by not including men in decision-making, this would not be a fair initiative. Crucially, men participants indicate that decisions should not only be made by women, because men might also be affected by the outcomes. The other phrases that indicates this perception are *"...you cannot solve it in that group..."* and *"...then bring those recommendations to those that have to implement it, which is not a female group only"*. This quote suggests that only including women in taskforce solution- and decision-making would not be representative of other parts of the business, such as managers who would be responsible for implementing solutions. Therefore, both of these quotes indicate that it would not be *fair* or *inclusive* to have a women-only taskforce group. The quotes arguably also indicate *competence signals*, by implying that women are incapable of making decisions on behalf of the wider employee population. However, the strongest signals that can be drawn from these quotes are arguably *fairness* and *inclusion signals*. Secondly, the quotes indicate the perception that issues discussed by the taskforce might be women-only issues. For example, *"...just because women have faced a particular challenge ... doesn't mean that challenge doesn't exist for men ... It could be a business issue for everybody..."* and *"I think the problems that men face are ignored and ... viewed as less than what the women go through. You'll get resentment..."* These excerpts indicate the perception that men also face workplace challenges that are not always addressed, therefore it would be unfair to only focus on helping women with their challenges in the workplace. They also indicate the perception that issues discussed could be universal, rather than only experienced by women. In which case, it would not be fair

to only help women with issues that are also experienced by men. Thirdly, the quotes indicate that this initiative could create *"resentment"* and an in- versus out-group, "…*which is picking up one group and putting them in a certain position as 'you're part of group one'. That also means you have a group two…"*. These excerpts indicate the perception that this initiative could lead to the segregation of women and men into two groups, which could cause resentment and polarisation. This indicates *inclusion signals*, by suggesting that the two groups could create exclusion of men.

To summarise and conclude: Men participants' perceptions of this initiative indicate *fairness signals, inclusion signals* and, to a degree, *competence signals*. The main theme of these perceptions is that men feel excluded by the initiative, with respect to decision-making if it were women-only. The second theme is that men's issues would be seen to be excluded from discussions that might involves issues that also affect them, that would indicate both *fairness signals* and *inclusion signals.* Finally, the initiative is perceived to create polarisation between women and men, which would also indicate *inclusion signals* by excluded men. The corresponding potential unintended consequences that these signals indicated are higlighted in *Figure 6 (fairness signals)* and *Figure 10 (inclusion signals)*.

Figure 10

Inclusion Signals of Diversity Initiatives and Their Potential Unintended Consequences – Highlighting Overrepresented Groups (Dover et al., 2019, p.14).
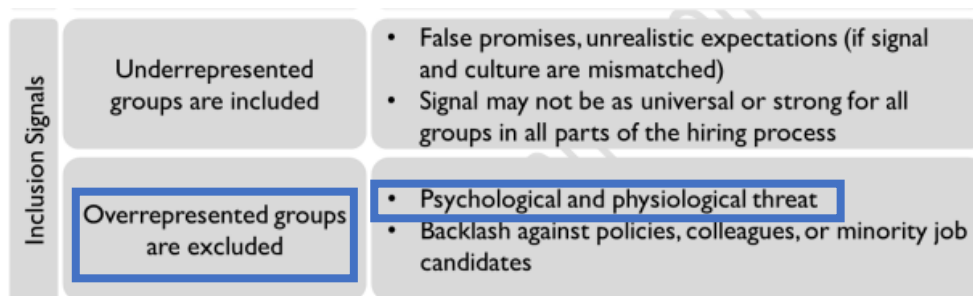
Problem Signals: Women Perceived the Signal that There is a Gender Equality Issue at the Company

Similar to the gender-balanced candidate slates initiative, for the diversity taskforce initiative, a minority of women participants expressed the perception that this initiative could indicate that there is a problem with gender equality in the organisation. This perception is highlighted by the quote below.

British woman, External Affairs & Sustainability department (senior): "You are gonna wonder why they're doing this. 'Is there an issue there?' … people will see it as an opportunity to maybe fix some of the problems that … are increasing at the moment in society."

This quote demonstrates the perception that this initiative could also signal a problem with gender equality at the company: *"You are gonna wonder why they're doing this. 'Is there an issue there?'"* This phrase indicates the perception that the initiative might communicate that the reason behind its implementation would be the need to address gender inequality, thereby signalling that there is a *problem* at the organisation. This is visualised in *Figure 8* with the (possible) potential unintended consequence of *dissuading prospective women applicants.* Once again, this adds to the finding with respect to the gender-balanced candiate slates initiative that underrepresented groups do not only receive positive signals, as per Dover et al.'s (2019) typology of the signals of diversity initiatives.

Problem signals: Men Perceive the Initiative to Signal to Women that There is a Problem at the Company

Although they were also in the minority, more men participants than women participants perceived *problem signals* from the diversity taskforce initiative. They also perceived this initiative to communicate that there is a problem with gender equality and women's inclusion at the company, because the taskforce is perceived as a serious initiative that would be implemented to address big problems at the company. These perceptions are demonstrated by the quotes below.

British man, Sales department (mid-level): "… it might make you think '[the company has] got a problem that they need to solve, so actually at the higher levels, do they still have an issue?' … you'll probably then start to look … on the positive, you might go 'this company is aware it has a problem it's looking to resolve, it would be great to join them on that journey, because actually there may be great career progression opportunities for me if this is something that they're proactively trying to resolve, so some women might view it as … 'I'll fast track my career here, because they need women'. But I would imagine a majority of people look at it and go 'if they're putting that much effort into it, is there a bigger problem that I need to be aware of'".

Dutch man, IT department (mid-level): "…it may indicate that there are issues in the organization that a taskforce is required because … a task force sounds a bit like there needs

to be focused on targeting something, but there's something wrong it could even be a could be a bit negative, less positive than the other [initiatives]".

Dutch man, Marketing department (mid-senior): "I would first for myself at least drop the question like 'is this needed?' ... because I don't see any of this reflected, I don't see that the inclusion of women in our company is not at the right place but again, that comes from a male perspective ... so my first response would be, 'hey, a specific task force, that means there's something wrong'. That will be my first [thought]."

All of these quotes indicate the perception that the initiative would give the impression that there is a *"problem"* or *"issues"* or *"something wrong"* at the organisation with respect to *"the inclusion of women"* or representation *"at the higher levels".* Whilst participants were asked to speculate how they thought a prospective women candidate would perceive this initiative, these perceptions give an interesting insight, as this theme occurred in both men and women participants. Although this perception is speculative and not from men participants' personal perspective, it again indicates that this initiative could communicate *problem signals* externally. Furthermore, the participants indicated that they held this perception, because the taskforce initiative implies to them that it exists to solve a serious problem within the company: *"…'hey, a specific task force, that means there's something wrong'",* and *"because ... a task force sounds a bit like there needs to be focused on targeting something, but there's something wrong.*" Interestingly, one participant briefly speculates that an external woman might perceive the initiative to mean that their career could be *"fast track[ed]"*, because *"they need women"*, he concluded by expressing the perception that most women perceive the initiative to indicate that the company has a problem, and that they should take this as a warning sign: *"there is a bigger problem that I need to be aware of."* Therefore, these perceptions all indicate that this initiative could communicate *problem signals* to women (the underrepresented group) targeted by the initiative.

To summarise and conclude: Men participants perceived this initiative to signal a problem with gender equality at the company more than women participants did. Men participants perceived that a taskforce is a serious initiative, thereby indicating a serious issue. One participant suggested women might consider the initiative positively, as a signal that they could be advantaged by the company's pursuit of focusing on solving gender inequality. However, perceptions largely indicated *problem signals*, highlighted in *Figure 8* with the aforementioned potential unintended consequence.

Results Summary and Conclusion

The findings showed that both women and men perceived fairness and competence signals from the mentoring initiative. For the diversity taskforce initiative, both women and men participants perceived inclusion signals and problem signals. Additionally, men participants perceived fairness signals. Finally, for the gender-balanced candidate slates initiative, both women and men perceived fairness and competence signals. Additionally, women participants perceived problem signals. In some cases, women and men participants shared similar perceptions. For example, both women and men participants perceived the mentoring and gender-balanced candidate slates to be unfair and to indicate that women were less competent than men. Both genders also perceived women to be less competent from the diversity taskforce initiative and both also perceived *problem signals* from this initiative by signalling that the company has a big issue with gender inequality and women's inclusion. However, there were also some disparities in perceptions between the genders. For example, women participants perceived the diversity taskforce initiative to be inclusive, whilst men perceived it to be exclusive and unfair. Finally, women participants perceived the gender-balanced candidate slates initiative to indicate *problem signals*, whereas men participants did not.

Discussion and Conclusion

This section firstly discusses the results that have been analysed, found in the Discussion section. Secondly, the study's contribution to theory, its theoretical implications and suggested future research will be explored. Thirdly, its limitations and the researcher's reflexivity will be addressed. Finally, the study's practical implications and recommendations will be outlined, followed by the conclusion summarising the study's main points.

Discussion

Based on the analysis of the results, this section will address the research question, *"How do employees of an FMCG company perceive signals of hypothetical women-targeted diversity initiatives?"* The findings conclude that employees' perceptions of the diversity initiatives indicated the presence of all three types of signals from Dover et al.'s (2019) typology: *fairness signals, inclusion signals,* and *competence signals*, thereby confirming the theory. Specifically, perceptions of the mentoring initiative indicated *fairness signals*, *inclusion signals* and *competence signals*. Perceptions of the gender-balanced candidate slates initiative indicated *fairness signals* and *competence signals*. The common perception amongst these two initiatives

suggests that focusing on aspects of diversity initiatives like merit and competence is an important way of framing them (Gündemir et al., 2017; Walton, Spencer, & Erman, 2013). However, the belief in meritocracy can be an organisational myth as opposed to reality (Razack et al, 2020). The common perception of fairness signals also indicates a lack of consideration for differences amongst colleagues, known as "colour blindness" (Schachner, 2019). Perceptions of the diversity taskforce initiative indicated *inclusion signals*. Their perceptions also indicated signals that were mostly concerned about fairness and inclusion of men employees, and on the competence of women employees. As not all signals were perceived for all three initiatives, this suggests that how signals are perceived depends on the type of diversity initiative in question.

This study also identifies *problem signals*. This new type of signal was indicated by perceptions of the gender-balanced candidate slates and diversity taskforce initiatives, but not the mentoring initiative. This again suggests that how signals are perceived depends on the type of diversity initiative. The corresponding potential unintended consequence suggested for *problem signals* is that prospective job applicants from an underrepresented group could be dissuaded from applying to the organisation. Therefore, this signal could have consequences for an organisation's ability to recruit members of an underrepresented group, for example, women. This possible recruitment consequence could exacerbate the lack of representation of women or other underrepresented groups in the organisation. However, this consequence is purely speculative, therefore future research on this will be suggested in the next section.

With respect to how gender played a role in how the diversity initiatives' signals were perceived, there were both similarities and differences between women and men participants' perceptions. Women and men participants both perceived women-only initiatives to be unfair, apart from the diversity taskforce, which women perceived to be inclusive and did not indicate perceptions of unfairness. Both genders also indicated perceptions of questioning women's competence as a result of mentoring and gender-balanced candidate slates, but only men perceived the diversity taskforce in this way. These disparities confirm the importance of considering perceptions of both targets (underrepresented groups) and non-targets (overrepresented groups) when implementing diversity initiatives, as their signals are not always universally perceived by both groups.

Finally, this study was based on hypothetical diversity initiatives, but that employees' perceptions of these already showed signs of potential unintended consequences pre-implementation. Therefore, warning signs of negative consequences can be detected without implementing diversity initiatives in reality. As a result, the theoretical implication of this is

that perceptions of hypothetical initiatives can provide more insight than might be expected. The Practical Implications of this will be elaborated on in the Practical Implications section.

Theoretical Implications and Future Research

The finding that not all initiatives indicated every type of signal identified by Dover et al. (2019) has theoretical implications. This finding suggests that how signals are perceived depends on the type of diversity initiative in question. Therefore, typologies such as Dover et al.'s (2019) and Leslie's (2019) may not fully consider the non-universality of their theorised signals with respect to different types of diversity initiatives. This means that, when conducting research into diversity initiatives' signals, a one-size-fits-all approach should be reconsidered, with different diversity initiatives being researched individually. Therefore, future research could explore this further to understand the universality (or not) of diversity initiatives depending on the type of initiative.

The theoretical implications of the novel finding of *problem signals* suggests that Dover et al.'s (2019) typology has not considered negative signals to underrepresented groups other than *competence signals*. This is arguably an important angle, because even *competence signals* communicate to underrepresented groups that initiatives aim to support them. The findings of *problem signals* adds a purely negative spin on the existing theory by providing a warning that an organisation's work on gender equality and women's inclusion is further behind that it might be. As suggested, this could affect an organisation's ability to recruit people from underrepresented groups and exacerbate their lack of representation.

This provides an opportunity for future research to further explore what these problem signals can look like. For example, this study indicated problem signals in the context of participants speculating about prospective women employees. Therefore, future research could specifically focus on the perceptions of prospective women employees themselves to understand whether they also perceive problem signals from the gender-balanced candidate slates and diversity taskforce initiatives. It could also further explore the potential unintended consequence that this study proposed of *dissuading prospective employees from an underrepresented group* to see whether such a consequence would manifest.

This study explored perceptions of hypothetical diversity initiatives, which already showed signs of potential unintended consequences of implementation. However, perceptions of hypothetical scenarios can only give limited information about employees' true perceptions. Therefore, another suggestion is that future research could compare the same participants' perceptions of the hypothetical initiatives versus their perceptions if the initiatives are actually

implemented by European Refreshments. This could contribute to research about diversity initiatives' signals and their potential unintended consequences to understand whether warning signs pre-implementation would actually manifest during implementation. This could help companies to better understand how employees' perceptions pre-implementation can predict actual unintended consequences of implementation, rather than just potential ones. This could, therefore, help companies make more informed decisions before implementing diversity initiatives.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was selection bias when finding participants, as there was a target group, meaning a less randomised selection of employees (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). The company's existing diversity taskforce (which discusses general diversity topics) was targeted for participants. This taskforce's voluntary members are more interested in diversity matters than the wider employee population. Therefore, they offered a more expert view for hypothetical initiatives. However, the taskforce could not supply enough men and women participants in time for the study's timeline, so snowball sampling was required to reach the minimum sample size. Therefore, almost half the sample contained taskforce members and the rest were their invitees outside of the taskforce. Subsequently, many participants were keenly interested in possible outcomes of implementing diversity initiatives. Despite this intention, this sample's perceptions may not reflect the wider employee population. For example, it did not include people who were apathetic about diversity, meaning the findings may represent extreme views.

Reflexivity

This sample contained both women and men from the UK and the Netherlands. Whilst these differences were not the focuses of the study, my own identity as a British woman may have affected my research when interviewing British and Dutch participants and interpreting the results. For example, I noticed a better understanding of British participants' responses versus Dutch participants. I have also observed that Dutch people communicate more literally than British people, which could be cultural or due to a language barrier, therefore I may have collected richer interview data from British participants. It was important to limit these factors' influence on my analysis and interpretation of the data. Therefore, I frequently discussed and reflected on my observations with my fellow students to challenge my approach and views (especially my Dutch peers) to increase my cultural awareness, and challenge my views and

British perspective. For example, I discussed my observations of participants' different communication styles with one of my peers who is also an international student in the Netherlands and also conducted a thesis study on diversity & inclusion. Her thesis study was conducted in collaboration with a Dutch peer. She shared with me that her Dutch peer seemed to extract more in-depth interview responses from Dutch participants than she was able to. She believed that this was due to not being able to speak to Dutch participants in their native language or having the common ground of the same nationality. This challenged my view about communication style, as I realised that the language barrier may have played a role in limiting the information I could extract from my own interviews with Dutch participants.

Practical Implications

The practical implication of this study's findings is that companies can pre-empt some of the potential unintended consequences of implementing diversity initiative *prior* to implementing them by understanding employees' perceptions beforehand. The diversity initiatives that participants were asked to provide their perceptions on were all hypothetical, yet they all showed signs of Dover et al.'s (2019) potential unintended consequences. Therefore, as hoped for by one of the aims of this study, this suggests that some unintended consequences can be detected pre-implementation, which could enable companies to mitigate the risks of potential unintended consequences and make decisions accordingly before committing resources to certain diversity initiatives. For example, if employees' perceptions indicate that one group will feel excluded by certain initiatives, plans could be put in place to avoid this. This brings us to the study's recommendations.

Recommendations

Regarding the mentoring initiative, I would recommend a topic-based programme available to all employees, instead of one targeted towards gender. For example, a mentoring programme targeted towards supporting "working parents" instead of the broad and more exclusive category of "women". This could have the dual benefit of attracting women who have returned from maternity leave and are looking for support, as well as not creating feelings of unfairness amongst men or women. Additionally, men employees could choose whether to participate, rather than being automatically excluded based on gender. This could also give people from minority backgrounds (including minority men) access to this opportunity as well, thereby increasing inclusion of minority groups.

Regarding the diversity taskforce, I recommend occasionally involving men in

conversations and decision-making. This could prevent men's feelings of exclusion towards not being involved in decision-making, whilst providing a wider problem-solving perspective and avoiding echo chambers that might not represent women outside the taskforce or, indeed, the wider business. Additionally, it could increase understanding of women's workplace challenges and further men's gender equality allyship. It could also allow the taskforce to remain as a safe space most of the time for women to discuss workplace challenges in more depth without the presence of men.

Finally, regarding gender-balanced candidate slates, I would recommend implementing an alternative recruitment initiative: anonymising candidates' CVs. This initiative could be a more palatable alternative for employees, because it could avoid triggering the perception that the organisation's supposed meritocracy is being violated by focusing on gender. Instead, candidates' skills and qualifications would become the sole focus, which was noted as being important to both women and participants. This could, therefore, mitigate the feelings of unfairness observed from both women and men participants, as well as negative associations with women's competence, which could have wider repercussions for how women are treated in the organisation. Moreover, this initiative could also unintentionally increase the number of applicants from minority backgrounds, again as an added diversity benefit.

Conclusion

In summary, employees' perceptions of all of the hypothetical diversity initiatives indicated one or more of the three types of signals theorised by Dover et al. (2019). Despite these initiatives being hypothetical, they also showed signs the signals' corresponding potential unintended consequences. This provides some insight for European Refreshments and other companies considering implementing diversity initiatives by showing that warning signs of possible consequences can be seen pre-implementation. Additionally, a novel contribution to Dover et al.'s (2019) typology is *problem signals,* whereby diversity initiatives can signal that there is a problem with gender equality and women's inclusion at the organisation. A speculative unintended consequence could be difficulty attracting future talent from underrepresented groups, which is a recommended area for future research.

Women's (the underrepresented group) and men's (the overrepresented group) perceptions of the hypothetical diversity initiatives were most similar regarding the mentoring initiative, which they both perceived to indicate *fairness signals* and *competence signals.*

Regarding the gender-balanced candidate slates initiative, both genders' perceptions also indicated *fairness signals* and *competence signals*. in addition, women participants perceived *problem signals.* The most noticeable difference between women' and men's perceptions was regarding the diversity taskforce initiative: both genders perceived to indicate *problem signals* and *inclusion signals,* but women felt included, whilst men felt excluded. Additionally, men participants also perceived fairness and competence signals from this initiative, which women participants did not. Mostly, employees' perceptions indicated signals that were mostly concerned about fairness and inclusion of men employees, and on the competence of women employees. Recommendations for the company include involving implementing a mentoring programme for all employees that target topic areas instead of gender. Another recommendation is to involve men occasionally in the diversity taskforce to provide a feeling of inclusion, whilst allowing women to maintain a safe space to discuss issues. Finally, anonymising CVs is recommended as a more acceptable initiative than gender-balanced candidate slates to avoid feelings of unfairness and associated incompetence of women.

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