



Roxana D. Maiorescu-Murphy

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# Corporate Diversity Communication Strategy

An Insight into American  
MNCs' Online Communities  
and Social Media  
Engagement

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*With gratitude to my husband, Brian Murphy, and to our parents.*

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PART I

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# Online Corporate Diversity in the Financial Industry



## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

The multifarious projects that corporations develop to promote diversity and inclusion speak to the importance they attribute to embracing differences so as to abide by current legislation, understand and appeal to consumers, and attract and recruit top talent (Baker & Kelan, 2018; Knights & Omanović, 2016; Kulik, 2014; Maiorescu & Wrigley, 2016; Singh & Point, 2004; Swanson, 2002; Trittin & Schoeneborn, 2017; Wondrak & Segert, 2015). Despite these efforts, the recent discrimination lawsuits faced by corporations such as Ford (Associated Press, 2018), Lockheed Martin (Campbell, 2018), and IBM (Bloomberg, 2018) raise concerns about the effectiveness of diversity programs. The 13.6% surge in the number of sexual harassment charges that the US Equal Opportunity Commission addressed in 2018 (US Equal Opportunity Commission, 2019) and the recent research that evinces the reticence of job seekers to apply for jobs that stress commitment to diversity (Windscheid et al., 2017), showcase that the present approaches to diversity are in need of serious revamping. Internally, companies are facing employee fatigue and reluctance toward diversity trainings, programs, and recruitment strategies (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Kidder et al., 2004; Maiorescu & Wrigley, 2016) and such corporate initiatives were shown to lead to anxiety, fear (Schwabland & Tomlinson, 2015), misunderstanding, suspicion, and conflict (Bassett-Jones, 2005; Theodorakopoulos & Budhwar, 2015). Finally, studies showed that diversity recruitment and training may reinforce stereotypes and lead to employee backlash (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016;

Kidder et al., 2004). These results indicate that, in order to trigger significant societal changes and contribute to the well-being of the communities in which they operate, companies should take a different approach to diversity.

In addition, given the changes that took place and are underway at a societal and global level, revisiting corporate diversity practices represents a desideratum for business success. It is expected that by 2060 no ethnicity will represent a majority in the US (Colby & Ortman, 2015; Madera, 2013; Maiorescu & Wrigley, 2016; Vespa, Armstrong, & Medina, 2018). Further, the typical generation Z employee values collaborative projects to an even greater degree than their millennial predecessor and appreciates the varied expertise, opinions, skills, along with the creativity and innovation that stem from collaborating with diverse colleagues (Forbes Coaching Council, 2018). Finally, corporate approaches to diversity should be revisited as a result of the ongoing globalization of the market and the omnipresence of information and communications technologies (ICTs) that require companies to be culturally competent in order to survive and thrive in the marketplace (Den Hond, & de Bakker, 2016; Maiorescu & Wrigley, 2016; Roberge et al., 2011; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2019; Theodorakopoulos & Budhwar, 2015).

By analysis of the diversity communication employed by America's 2017 most profitable companies (Wieczner, 2017), this book led to the development of a theoretical framework with practical applications, which has the potential to address the aforementioned corporate challenges. Past research in business sciences and communication studies determined that the decreased interest in diversity programs, manifest by both employees and consumers, constitutes a consequence of the companies' implementation of a business approach to inclusion, which revolves predominantly around gaining competitive advantage (Egan & Bendick, 2003; Maiorescu & Wrigley, 2016; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2008; Uysal, 2013; Wrench, 2005) and leaves little to no room for stakeholder feedback. While several researchers pointed to the need for companies to address diversity by engaging their stakeholders in dialogue (Ciszek, 2019; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2008; Maiorescu & Wrigley, 2016; Uysal, 2013), to date, few studies have attempted to explore how dialogue should be construed (Ciszek, 2019; Mundy, 2015, 2016) and what its impact may be on a company's stakeholder groups. For example, Ciszek (2019) determined trust to be a precursor to dialogic communication with LGBTQ

publics and Mundy (2015, 2016) stressed the importance of an ongoing internal and external dialogue that organizations should foster in order to effectively embrace diversity. These studies have forged a new direction for research on communication and diversity that the current book is taking in order to contribute to the understanding of how dialogue should be construed. Further, the book contributes to the field by analyzing dialogue in online settings. The author was intrigued by the potential of the internet to foster conversations on diversity, particularly as offline settings were shown to be less conducive to doing so in general and with respect to dialogue during corporate trainings in particular (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Maiorescu & Wrigley, 2016).

The current chapter first discusses the literature review that led to the research questions investigated throughout this book. The literature review consists of recent and relevant research studies from social psychology, business, and communication studies. The interdisciplinary approach was necessary given the fact that the fields of social psychology and business have a longer tradition in diversity research than communication studies. However, the communication field in general and public relations in particular have the potential to make a significant contribution to creating effective dialogue on diversity. Further, this section will define the key concepts assessed in the book and explain the rationale behind their use. Next, the chapter will detail the research methodology employed for the purpose of this study and shed light on the data collection and analysis. The final section will provide a preview of the chapters.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The business studies literature has a long tradition in investigating diversity and researchers focused predominantly on (1) the potential impact of diversity on the bottom line (Christian et al., 2006; Knights & Omanović, 2016; Shoobridge, 2006; Theodorakopoulos & Budhwar, 2015); (2) inclusive organizational cultures (Fairfield, 2018; Ferdman, 2018; Hayashi, 2016; Mor Barak, 2015); (3) leadership and diversity (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015; Randel et al., 2018; Trittin & Schoeneborn, 2017); (4) the critique of corporate approaches to diversity (Lee et al., 2017; Ozturk & Tatli, 2016; Poulis & Poulis, 2016; Rachele, 2017; Wrench, 2005); and finally (5) diversity and corporate citizenship (Downey, van der Werff, & Plaut, 2015; Maiorescu & Wrigley, 2016; Trittin & Schoeneborn, 2017). The critique of corporate approaches to diversity

revolved around the diversity management paradigm with the help of which corporations proactively reach out to diverse groups so long as these represent primary stakeholder groups, who have the potential to impact the bottom line (Knights & Omanović, 2016; Rachele, 2017). It is within this context that the ethical dimension of embracing differences emerged and raised concerns with respect to societal issues faced by ethnic and minority groups that lack buying power and, therefore, fail to garner the attention of corporate conglomerates (Maiorescu & Wrigley, 2016; Wrench, 2005). Researchers argued that by dedicating resources to certain causes over others, corporations define diversity in accord with their business interests, intruding into a domain reserved for governments and elected officials (Wrench, 2005). The utmost power that corporations exert over the society is manifest at various levels (Alcadipani, & de Oliveira Medeiros, 2019; Deetz, 2004; McKee, Steele, & Stuckler, 2019) and, currently, a business focus on diversity enables them to “manage people with diverse characteristics” (Singh & Point, 2004, p. 296).

Given the external pressure to engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and to take an ethical approach to diversity, companies have started to address societal concerns raised by minority and ethnic groups that do not represent primary stakeholder groups. Research studies showed that companies have recently commenced to embrace differences by blending a business approach with a socially responsible one. Yet, the former prevails over programs directed at diverse groups that do not display buying potential (Maiorescu & Wrigley, 2016; Uysal, 2013).

Given their tremendous amount of resources, where could corporations make the most contribution to the cause of diversity and what arguments could be made with respect to a return on investment that would mobilize them to take action? Our diverse neighborhoods are characterized by few interactions, leading to concerns about building social capital (Putnam, 2007). Interactions increase among diverse residents as a consequence of identification with a neighborhood and a perceived sense of belonging, yet do not surge between Anglo groups and minorities (Liu, 2018). Addressing the concern of offline interactions and social capital, Bouchillon (2018) ascertained the potential of the internet to lead to increased interactions and the display of trust among individuals who live in racial and ethnic diverse neighborhoods and had been shown to display a high level of distrust offline (Bouchillon, 2014; Putnam, 2007). It is within this context that corporations can make a significant contribution to the cause of diversity. Namely, companies foster the development of

brand communities (Carlson et al., 2019; Clark, Black, & Judson, 2017; Herhausen et al., 2019) or online communities that form around a firm's official social media accounts, as users bond through the identification with the company. While brand communities have been studied in relation to their potential to shed light on consumer behavior (Liu et al., 2019; Snyder & Newman, 2019) and with regard to the relationship building process among users (Dass et al., 2019; Lima, Irigaray & Lourenco, 2019), research studies are yet to determine how diversity communication emerges in in this context. The present book aims to fill in this gap.

Online communities represent an important means to communicate (about) diversity as a result of their potential to erase social barriers among which gender, socio-economic status, and race (Matei & Bruno, 2015; Ruggs et al., 2016; Stevens et al., 2017). In contrast to offline environments, brand communities foster anonymity and, therefore, increase self-disclosure, blurring the boundaries between internal (employees) and external (e.g., consumers, activists, journalists, government officials) stakeholder groups (Mairescu & Wrigley, 2016). Today power relations have shifted from management to well-connected online users who have the tools needed to expose current corporate practices (Weinberger, 2011) and exert pressure on companies to take a different course of action. By shedding light on how a company's stakeholders socially construct diversity in their online communication, the results of this study have the potential to address the current challenges that companies face in their diversity programs. Specifically, while engendering dialogue on diversity in offline settings (employee forums, trainings, induction days, etc.) may be impeded by the employees' reluctance and reticence about the topic (Mairescu & Wrigley, 2016), the anonymity of the internet can foster genuine dialogue and allow for a deeper insight into the stakeholders' stances on present and future corporate programs. In addition, by communicating (about) diversity in online settings, companies can contribute to bridging social capital, as explained at a later stage in the chapter.

Given the fact that corporations represent for-profit organizations, it behooves one to ask what they can gain by engendering dialogue and interactions around diversity in their online communities. Internally, diversity engagement through a dialogic lens has the potential to lead to long-term benefits for corporations as a result of a socially responsible approach. Such benefits include increased employee identification with the company, loyalty, work motivation, and low turnover intentions

(Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Brammer & Pavelin, 2006; Brammer, He, & Mellahi, 2015; Jones, 2010). External stakeholders too may be more prone to identify with a company that uses dialogue to facilitate their direct participation in the development of diversity programs. For example, having direct input in corporate practices enables consumers to perceive diversity engagement as conducted out of a concern for the society, as opposed to representing attempts to shun litigation and gain competitive advantage. In turn, perceptions of the corporations' genuine interest in doing good may lead to increased engagement in organizational programs conducted offline (Korschun & Du, 2013; Maioreescu, 2013). Above all, corporations would gain the reputation of moral employers that past studies showed to represent an aura that allows for the recruitment and retention of top talent (Knights and Omanović, 2016; Trittin and Schoeneborn, 2017).

Based on past research studies, online users initially join a brand community as a result of an identity-based attachment (Chung, Nam, & Koo, 2016; Grabowicz et al., 2013; Ren et al., 2012) or identification with the company and the overall online community that serves the brand's purpose. In the present book the concepts of identity-based attachment and corporate identification are used interchangeably. In time, and by engaging in online interactions with other users, members of online communities are likely to exhibit bond-based attachment or attachment to other members (Grabowicz et al., 2013; Tausczik, Dabbish, & Kraut, 2014; Yu et al., 2017). Both identity-based attachment and bond-based attachment are likely to co-exist at some time or another in the life of an online community and the prevalence of one type of attachment over the other is contingent upon the number of newcomers and the degree to which online community members are willing to engage in interactions with one another (Grabowicz et al., 2013; Tausczik et al., 2014).

This book assesses if and to what extent a company's online communication about diversity manages to increase the bond-based attachment among members. Determining the presence of bond-based attachment is important due to its potential to bridge social capital (connecting people of different backgrounds) that would translate in offline settings (Bouchillon, 2014, 2018). Specifically, the reduced social distance fostered online (Atzori, Iera, & Morabito, 2014; Bauernschuster, Falck, & Woessmann, 2014) may lead to a perceived common identity as well as closeness, effects that are no longer found in offline settings (Putnam, 2007). It is likely that the way companies communicate about diversity in

their online communities will exert influence on the extent to which users display bond-based attachment. Consequently, a first research question was posed:

**RQ1:** Is there a relationship between the company's use of dialogic communication with respect to diversity and the users' display of bond-based attachment?

Dialogic communication was assessed by coding for the presence or absence of mutuality (Do companies attempt to collaborate with publics on diversity programs/proposals, etc.), propinquity (Do companies ask online users for suggestions/recommendations for future diversity initiatives?), empathy (Do companies show support for the goals of a specific ethnic/minority community?), risk (Do companies create dialogue about diversity on the publics' own terms?), and commitment (Are companies committed to diversity and to fostering dialogue about diversity? Do they value opposite views and do they try to find common ground?). These variables were derived from the main principles of dialogue developed in studies conducted in the realm of communication and public relations (Kent and Taylor, 2002; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018; Taylor & Kent, 2014). In addition, the companies' dialogic communication was assessed by coding for their use of one-way versus two-way communication. One-way online communication was assessed by determining the presence or absence of the sole transmission of information with no request for involvement or feedback (McQuail & Windahl, 2015). By contrast, the presence of two-way communication was determined by assessing whether companies asked direct questions, whether open- or closed-ended.

To ascertain whether corporate communication was conducive to triggering bond-based attachment, the study made use of several variables developed in social psychology (Bouchillon, 2014, 2018; Putnam, 2007), namely social distance, closeness (Do companies communicate about equality and/or commonalities among individuals and/or the common issues they face?), and shared experience (Do companies encourage their followers to share stories, talk about their experiences as these relate to diversity?). More precisely, the study assessed whether the companies' online communication aimed to decrease social distance, increase closeness among online followers, and encourage information sharing and storytelling. The concept of commonalities is not used to suppress differences in any way. Rather, it refers to the erasure of social barriers such as



gender, ethnicity, and race in online settings (Matei & Bruno, 2015). The concept has the potential to lead to a bridging effect should companies enact it to complement communicative practices that revolve around the uniqueness of minority and ethnic groups.

The users' comments present in the discussion thread pertaining to each company tweet were assessed with the help of theoretical concepts from social psychology. Past research on online communities (Ren, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007; Ren et al., 2012) determined that social interaction, self-disclosure, and personal attraction represented the main ingredients for bond-based attachment. Therefore, to assess the display of bond-based attachment among users, the study aimed to determine the extent to which online users made recurrent contributions in each discussion thread (social interaction) and the degree to which they engaged in storytelling which brought to light personal experiences with diversity (self-disclosure). Finally, personal attraction was assessed by taking into account the extent to which online users communicated around perceived similarities (Ren, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007; Ren et al., 2012).

RQ2 asked if there was a relationship between the companies' use of one-way communication and the users' display of bond-based attachment. The question was posed to explore whether the prevalence of one-way communication led to a low display of bond-based attachment. In other words, it could be possible that the predominance of one-way corporate communication about diversity prevents users from engaging in dialogue and fails to create online bonds. In time, One-way communication may not lead to the conversion of identity-based attachment, which users display when they initially follow a company online, in to the bond-based attachment they should finally exhibit toward other members of the online community. While the assessment of one-way communication was explained in the previous paragraphs, it is important to mention that identity-based attachment was coded by the display of the users' agreement with a company's operations, values, and products/services, namely in line with past studies that assessed corporate identification in online settings (Mairescu, 2013).

RQ3 investigated possible relationships among the users' display of bond-based attachment and their online interactivity (recurrent contributions within a discussion thread) as well as their expressed intention to participate in corporate diversity initiatives offline. This question aimed to assess whether bond-based attachment has the potential to translate into offline action, consequently showcasing the potential of brand communities to build social capital. Finally, RQ4 assessed if there was a relationship

among the users' display of identity-based attachment and their expressed intention to take part in diversity initiatives offline. RQ4 was worth pursuing in order to determine whether a solid corporate identification led users to take action offline and independent of the emergence of bond-based attachment. The four research questions were investigated in the case of each company analyzed in the present book.

Furthermore, companies were classified based on their industry, such as the banking, the financial sector, and the consumer goods industry. The study aimed to answer to three research questions, as follows: (1) Are there any differences in corporate diversity communication across the companies in a specific industry? (2) Are there any differences in the users' display of bond-based/identity-based attachment across the companies in a specific industry? And, finally, (3) Are there any differences in the users' online engagement and their stated intention to take part in diversity initiatives offline? These questions were considered paramount in understanding the most effective diversity communication practices within each sector.

The last stage of the study involved a comparison among the three industries analyzed. The comparison was conducted to reveal whether and to what extent there were differences in diversity communication among industries that relied more or less on innovation. Specifically, past studies (Mairescu & Wrigley, 2016; Wrench, 2005) alluded to the likelihood that companies that rely more on innovation, such as those pertaining to the pharmaceutical and tech industries, may value diversity to a larger degree than those whose operations revolve primarily around routine practices (Wrench, 2005).

Lastly, while tangential, the analysis also assessed the valence of the users' messages as well as the users' reactions to the companies' diversity communication in the US versus abroad. The assessment of these variables will be discussed throughout the book and represents an important step toward understanding how consumers react and respond to local and global corporate diversity efforts, a present gap in the current literature.

## METHODOLOGY

This book focuses on America's most profitable multinational corporations in 2017, as determined by *Forbes*. The selection of these companies, whose collective profit represents \$890 billion (Wieczner, 2017), is appropriate for the purpose of this study, due to the extensive resources

that such companies invest in programs meant to foster inclusion. The most profitable companies in 2017 were Apple, JPMorgan Chase & Co., Berkshire Hathaway, Wells Fargo, Alphabet, Bank of America, Microsoft, Johnson & Johnson, Citigroup, and Altria Group. Because Apple lacked a social media presence, the company was excluded from the analysis. Furthermore, Berkshire Hathaway's social media communication did not allow for a robust analysis, given the company's low online communication and user engagement. Therefore, Berkshire was excluded from the study. It was considered that the analysis of the four remaining banks—namely JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America, Wells Fargo, and Citigroup—would provide sufficient information to understand how diversity is communicated across the financial sector. In a similar vein, Alphabet's low online interactions would have made it impossible to draw reliable conclusions about its communication practices. Consequently, for the purpose of this analysis the researcher replaced Alphabet with Google and considered that being Google's parent company, Alphabet shared its values and employed similar communication practices.

The period of analysis for this study was 60 months, namely from January 1, 2013, to December 31, 2017. It was considered that studying social media communication over a period of five years will allow for an in-depth and robust analysis. The samples of analysis represented the companies' tweets that revolved around diversity and the discussion threads they triggered among online users. Tweets that did not make reference to diversity and inclusion were excluded from the sample, as were user comments that were not written in English or were classified as spam. Each tweet and each comment it generated represented a unit of analysis. The companies were analyzed separately based on their own sample. Finally, the total sample of analysis was used to analyze discrepancies in diversity engagement across industries and the companies therein. Each chapter that follows provides further details about the sample of analysis and breaks down the number of user comments and corporate tweets.

The data were collected from the social networking site Twitter. First, Twitter was considered the most suitable platform for this study due to user anonymity and increased self-disclosure. Second, Twitter was regarded as a medium where online users interact with corporations to a larger extent than other platforms and for reasons that range from product complaints to holding companies accountable for responsible business practices

(Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Nitins, & Burgess, 2014; Read, 2019/ in press).

The present study took a mixed-methods approach. Because to date no studies combined the dialogic theory (Taylor & Kent, 2014) of public relations with concepts from social psychology, the variables discussed in the previous paragraphs were assessed with the help of a codebook that had previously been compiled after conducting a thematic analysis of the first 50 tweets posted by each company in 2017. In addition, the user comments pertaining to each tweet were analyzed to determine the direction that the codebook would be taking to assess user perceptions. The thematic analysis was conducted at a latent level, namely by looking at not only semantic meanings, but also covert ideas and assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) to ensure the rigorous study of online communication. The thematic analysis took an inductive-deductive approach and was driven by both the collected data and the theoretical concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) previously discussed. During the first stage of the analysis, the researcher became familiar with the data corpus and took notes of first impressions, as recommended by Maguire and Delahunt (2017). Afterwards, the data were organized to generate initial codes that captured relevant information regarding the research questions asked in the study. New codes emerged as a result of multiple exposures to the text. The data were coded by hand, as recommended (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) when the purpose of the analysis is to capture covert and subtle meanings within text, something that cannot be accomplished by the use of qualitative software. The next step of the thematic analysis involved the search for preliminary themes that emerged as a result of the examination of the codes and of the extent to which the latter fitted together. It was determined that some codes were part of more than a single theme and were listed as such. The themes were later reviewed and defined (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Each company's communication was coded based on the guidelines that resulted from the preceding thematic analysis. Several coders were trained in the procedure and took turns in assessing intercoder reliability. The details of the process are provided in each chapter. Several frequency analyses, goodness of fit tests, and chi-square tests were conducted in order to answer to the research questions asked in this study. In the case of each company, a thematic analysis was conducted to provide a deeper understanding of the users' comments. The researcher took a bottom-up,

inductive approach, determined by the data themselves (Maguire & Delahunty, 2017). Finally, comparisons among the companies in a specific industry and among industries were done with the help of several chi-square tests.

## CHAPTER PREVIEW

The book is divided into four parts. Each part tackles a specific industry. The first part is dedicated to the financial industry. Chapter 2 discusses the details of a study conducted on JPMorgan Chase's online community and diversity communication. The chapter sheds light on the impact of a solid corporate reputation on the users' perceptions and response to diversity practices. Chapter 3 is dedicated to Wells Fargo. The results of several quantitative analyses conducted to assess online diversity communication revealed that the company's enactment of dialogue did not lead to bond-based attachment. The thematic analysis performed on the users' comments provided valuable explanations in this sense: the company's recurrent crises and the need to reestablish trust. Diversity at Bank of America is discussed in Chap. 4 and the analysis reveals that the company should further detail and clarify its diversity approaches in order to enhance the users' understanding of their impact. Diversity communication in Citigroup's brand community is discussed in Chap. 5, which highlights the importance of corporate identification as well as its potential to transform online users in active participants in diversity initiatives offline. Further, Chap. 6 compares and contrasts the banks' diversity communication and the users' interactions in order to ascertain the most effective ways to communicate (about) diversity in the financial sector. In addition, it proposes a model with practical applications.

The second part of the book tackles the tech sectors by looking at Microsoft (Chap. 7) and Google (Chap. 8) and draws comparisons between the two companies' online communities in Chap. 9. Chapter 9 discusses the development of an organizational legitimacy model that can be applied in the context of diversity communication in the tech sector.

The third part of the book discusses diversity communication in the consumer goods industry. Chapter 10 discusses the results of several analyses conducted on Johnson & Johnson's online community. Chapter 11 looks at Altria and assesses the company's diversity initiatives and their communication from the perspective of the "sin industry." Despite the fact that the two companies are classified as belonging to the consumer