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# The Face of the Firm: The Impact of Employer Branding on Diversity

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**Drawing upon an employer branding lens to help explore and inform our understanding of the marketing of workforce diversity, here we argue that diversity is understood and used in an aesthetic and commercialized way, rather than with a focus upon the inclusion of disadvantaged groups. Our analysis of the marketing and diversity practices of four small and medium-sized law firms demonstrates a continued access-and-legitimacy approach to diversity: that a desire for successful employer branding still supersedes organizational commitment to equal opportunities and diversity management in practice. We argue that this commercialized approach leads to several contradictions, which in turn reproduce the market-based perspective of diversity, relegating employees primarily to the aesthetics of race and gender and the affiliated skills and resources. In theorizing the processes by which diversity is undermined and functions solely to enhance business image and increase organizational performance, we highlight how an employer branding lens enables us to identify and understand contradictions between diversity policy and practice in a different way, by linking aesthetics with the marketing of the brand.**

## Introduction

In a bid to become an employer of choice, organizations recognize the need to embrace workforce diversity as a competitive necessity (Byrd, 2018; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al*., 2015; Jonsen *et al*., 2019). Since the remodelling of the recruitment regulations discourses purported by equal opportunities (EO) into a broader view of diversity management practices as offering strategic organizational benefits (Heres and Benschop, 2010; Tatli, 2011), proponents of this business case claim that increased workplace diversity affords greater innovation (Dickens, 1999), boosted profits (Zanoni *et al*., 2010) and business image (Byrd, 2018), amongst other benefits. Hence, organizations use diversity initiatives in their branding to attract talented applicants and connect with customers (Avery and McKay, 2006; Burgess, Wilkie and Dolan, 2021; Edwards and Kelan, 2011; Windscheid *et al*., 2018). In serving the interests of their consumers, employees and stakeholders, the management and production of diversity are crucial for a company's value proposition to showcase its favourable employment offerings and organizational brand (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Pasztor, 2019).

Here, we propose that employer branding is a productive way to theorize and understand the representation of diversity in organizations. Responding to calls by Jonsen *et al*. (2019) to examine the incompatibility between employer branding and diversity management (Edwards and Kelan, 2011), our findings highlight the contradictions of four law firms as to their use and management of workforce diversity. Akin to work by Ortlieb and Sieben (2013), in the highly competitive UK legal sector, the use of demographic diversity is applied aesthetically by our case study firms for impression management purposes, therefore solely for commercial gain. The contribution of our research, in applying an employer branding lens to diversity management, is to show a sustained

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access-and-legitimacy organizational approach to diversity (Ely and Thomas, 2001). While outwardly projecting an inclusive workplace through employer branding, the internal branding message of these firms deviates from this. We demonstrate how the commercialization of demographic diversity, to extract its benefits at face value, relegates employees to aesthetics and the affiliated skills and resources, and supersedes diversity management in practice. Although scholars have highlighted suspicion around the business case for diversity and the extent to which it can lead to progression for disadvantaged groups, using an employer branding lens, we are able to highlight the distinctive processes by which diversity becomes undermined, commodified and functions solely to achieve competitive advantage. Highlighting these processes offers HR practitioners the opportunity to intervene. We turn to the literature on the marketing of workforce diversity and employer branding to position our work.

## The marketing of workforce diversity

It is now well recognized that as organizations planned how best to confront the demographic changes within the workforce brought about by globalization, mass migration (Tatli, 2011) and increasing global competition, the original legal and social justice EO project aimed at increasing equality was overtaken by the value-in-diversity approach and the pressurized attainment of organizational benefits (Schwabenland and Tomlinson, 2015). This business case altered the perception of differences into strategic resources, which provide tangible business outcomes and competitive advantage (Dickens, 1999; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al*., 2015; Özbilgin and Tatli, 2011; Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010). Although countless differences are conceptualized by diversity management scholars (Jonsen *et al*., 2013; Zanoni *et al*., 2010), practitioners and academics tend to focus on a few diversity dimensions, usually demographic characteristics, such as gender and race (Köllen, 2019), rather than job-related diversity, such as knowledge or experience. This is mirrored in organizational approaches: analysing how companies leverage and frame diversity via the perspectives of discrimination and fairness (aligned with EO), access and legitimacy (aligned with the business case) and integration and learning; the organizational learning and cultural growth that comes from incorporating employee insights about their work (Ely and Thomas, 2001), revealing to what extent firms perceive diversity as necessary to achieving business goals (Janssens and Zanoni, 2005; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2013). In the last decade in particular, for both legal compliance and enhanced business image, organizations have rapidly redesigned their corporate communications to persuade the public of their dedicated commitment to diversity and inclusion via updating their diversity rhetoric, modifying mission statements and incorporating photographs of their diverse employees in their annual reports, websites and other internal and external communications (Burgess, Wilkie and Dolan, 2021; Pasztor, 2019). However, such actions have been criticized as persuasive impression management and strategically manufactured symbols of corporate citizenship, used due to pressures to visibly respond to wider social and political issues (Burgess, Wilkie and Dolan, 2021; Long, Doerer and Stewart, 2015; Windscheid *et al*., 2018).

Indeed, it may be that an organization's marketing of diversity on their websites, and proclamation of their equality and diversity policies and practices, is not an accurate and authentic depiction of workforce diversity in the firm (Schwabenland and Tomlinson, 2015; Windscheid *et al*., 2018). Moreover, the selling, telling and framing of organizational diversity communications tends to be strategically vague (Long, Doerer and Stewart, 2015). This discrepancy is also observed in research on diversity statements on corporate websites when compared with actual business practice (Heres and Benschop, 2010; Jonsen *et al*., 2019; Singh and Point, 2006).

Additionally problematic is that while creating the perception of a fair and accommodating organizational culture, diversity branding strategies lacking accountability for the social justice case may camouflage organizational bias and other negative behaviours that disadvantage marginalized groups (Burgess, Wilkie and Dolan, 2021; Byrd, 2018). By reducing diversity to demographic organizational commodities (Swan, 2010), organizations only ascribe importance to the attraction of diverse groups, rather than creating a more inclusive workplace where diverse employees can thrive (Köllen, 2019). As such, diversity within the corporate environment acquires a certain sheen, providing organizations with moral credibility (Byrd, 2018; Long, Doerer and Stewart,

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2015), without them necessarily having substantive actions in place: 'empty shells' (Hoque and Noon, 2004).

## Employer branding

Akin to the business case for diversity, supported by the resource-based view, employer branding is viewed as a valuable organizational strategy associated with increased competitive advantage (Jonsen *et al*., 2019; Lievens and Slaughter, 2016), particularly in relation to the gain from human capital and hiring the most talented candidates (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al*., 2015; Jonsen *et al*., 2019). By applying 'branding concepts and marketing, communications and HR techniques' (Martin, Gollan and Grigg, 2011: 3619), employer branding aims to differentiate the organization, internally and externally, from competitors through its employment offering (Ambler and Barrow, 1996), unique employment experience and attractiveness as a desirable employer (Edwards, 2010; Jonsen *et al*., 2019; Martin, 2008). Central to winning this war for talent is creating a strong employer brand as communicated through recruitment strategies (Martin, Gollan and Grigg, 2011). A unique and well-crafted employer image enables prospective candidates to recognize the firm's values and see how they compare to their own (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Köllen, 2019), and is likely to broaden the organization's potential talent pool (Jonsen *et al*., 2019).

Employer branding has amassed, and been broadened by, various complementary and multidisciplinary concepts, such as reputation, talent management and employee engagement strategies, and is considered a core organizational tool (Martin, Gollan and Grigg, 2011; Theurer *et al*., 2018). Here, we use the term employer branding as equating to 'employer image management', whereby the company image is managed as perceived through potential applicants (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016: 410). It is here where notions of employer branding may help advance our knowledge of how diversity is marketed in firms, as it highlights the image the brand seeks to portray. We envisage that this may encapsulate some attempt at diversity positioning, in illustrating the firm's diversity situation or approach.

This is particularly useful in terms of the visual aspects of demographic diversity. Image is central for sociologists of work investigating different forms of embodiment of aesthetic labourers who look good and sound right (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007; Witz, Warhurst and Nickson, 2003). In relation to diversity, here the concern is to explore how workers with the 'right' look are recruited and subsequently commercialized to fit the corporate brand and the desired image for customers (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007: 111). The branding literature tells us that organizational identity, image and reputation are thus perceived symbiotically via socially constructed phenomena co-created between a company and its stakeholders (Edwards and Kelan, 2011; Hatch and Schultz, 2001; Highhouse, Brooks and Gregarus, 2009).

Applying this employer branding lens to diversity management has several potential implications. First, as diversity has become moulded into a commercialized product (Janssens and Zanoni, 2005; Swan, 2010), one could argue that organizational interest in employing minority-ethnic staff is, in most part, due to the critical resources (language skills, different perspectives, cultural knowledge and social networks) that they control and influence (Ortlieb and Sieben, 2013). However, this lens also draws attention to their contribution to the visual branding of the firm. Second, it provides another way of looking at the potential value gaps in authenticity between true intention in business practice and impression management. In the literature, there are calls for further investigation into these value gaps (Jonsen *et al*., 2019: 27; Long, Doerer and Stewart, 2015). Studies of diversity management and the implementation of diversity policies often highlight a clear value gap between what is espoused in theory and what happens in practice. This resonates with our interest here, which is to ascertain how notions of employer branding may be a productive way to theorize the representation of diversity in organizations, both in image and in practice.

Hence, the contribution of our work is to evaluate what an employer branding approach can offer for our understanding of diversity in organizations and the implications of this for traditionally excluded groups. In summary, the aim of our research is to understand how an organizational valuing of, and commitment to, diversity is depicted via their employer branding. We pose the following research question: *How is an organization's commitment to diversity portrayed through employer branding strategies?* In addressing this

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question, we highlight how an employer branding lens takes us beyond merely identifying value gaps to a position where we can investigate the process by which diversity becomes undermined.

## Methodology

### *Research context*

The legal profession forms an important part of the UK economy (KPMG, 2020). Our study focuses on four small and medium-sized law firms. We chose to focus on this distinctive form of professional service firm for several reasons. First, the legal profession has been noted as a particular sector where inequality is a challenge, in that the social construction of the (elite) legal profession reproduces inequalities, maintains social exclusion (Ashley and Empson, 2013, 2017) and privileges a certain aesthetic image (Haynes, 2012). While becoming increasingly representative of the wider population, with more female and minority-ethnic trainees, such diversity is lacking at senior and partner levels (Sommerlad, 2016), with the legal profession remaining largely comprised of white, middle-class men (Ashley and Empson, 2013, 2017). The latest demographic data on the legal profession in England and Wales shows that 48% of all lawyers are women, employed mostly in the mid-tiers of the profession (representing 59% of solicitors, yet only 33% of partners), with the proportion of all minority-ethnic lawyers increasing to 21% from 15% in 2014 (SRA, 2018). Second, although small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) comprise 98% of the UK legal sector (Aulakh and Kirkpatrick, 2016), existing literature on workforce diversity in the legal profession mostly focuses on large firms (e.g. Sommerlad, 2016). As smaller law firms form much of the sector and typically provide services such as family law, personal injury, wills and probate (LSB, 2011), there may be a stronger business case for diversity in some local SMEs as a more diverse workforce would better meet the needs of their potentially diverse clientele.

Third, we are interested in SMEs because firm size substantially influences the adoption and application of diversity management: in a CIPD (2014) survey, only 290 of 578 UK SMEs employed human resource (HR) professionals, of which 145 were medium-sized firms (50–249 employees). This has interesting implications for recruitment. The preferred strategy for SME law firms is to hold irregular recruitment cycles, using informal methods, such as hiring students after work placements, and disclosing information to other local firms about paralegals seeking training contracts (Rolfe and Anderson, 2003). This reproduces inequalities and reduces the potential hiring of students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Ashley, 2010; Sullivan, 2010), which is detrimental to social inclusion (Ashley and Empson, 2017).

Finally, alongside structural changes, the intensification of work and the increasingly competitive nature of law over the last three decades, the power of the client has increased, shifting the function of legal professionals to service the client (Sommerlad, 2016). The legal profession therefore provides a valuable research context to investigate employer branding and diversity due to the necessity to appeal to prospective applicants and clients through their unique value proposition (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004).

### *Data collection*

Research access was granted to four SME law firms, employing fewer than 25 partners (Law Society, 2012). Our approach to both data collection and analysis was sequential: we wanted to build a rich and holistic picture of how diversity works in these firms. As staff are employer brand ambassadors (Cascio and Graham, 2016), the first stage of data collection involved 44 one-hour long, semi-structured qualitative interviews with participants across the four firms. Participants were asked to define diversity and their thoughts on the advantages and disadvantages of workforce diversity. Tables 1 and 2 outline the firms and research participants.

As employer branding emerges from the collaborative efforts of marketing and HR (Cascio and Graham, 2016), the next data collection stage comprised reviewing the online webpages and hard-copy marketing brochures of each firm to investigate how workforce diversity was represented. Following study of these marketing approaches, the firms were again contacted and individuals responsible for marketing at two firms participated in 30-minute telephone interviews. An overview of the data collection process is in Table 3.

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*Table 1. Description of the law firms*

| Law firm | Total no. employees | Services provided | Key specialism/USP | Organizational culture | Offices and location |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Firm 1 | 70–80 | Multiple legal services | Personal injury (PI) | Left-wing; trade union supporter | 4 offices: city centre and suburbs |
| Firm 2 | 25–30 | Commercial law specialisms | Small firm, rapid response to clients. Senior staff with large law firm experience | Sought to attract young, talented law graduates | City centre, high-rise office block since recent office relocation |
| Firm 3 | 170–180 | Services for both commercial and private clients | Sports and music law. Recently hired HR manager | Conveyancing is largest department: 80–90 staff | 2 city-centre offices |
| Firm 4 | Over 120 | Various types of legal advice and services | Specialized in PI and stress-related claims using a 'no win no fee' basis | Majority female workforce and managing partner | 4 offices, due to be merged into one via rebranding strategy |

*Data analysis*

Given the vast quantity of qualitative textual data, template analysis (King, Brooks and Tabari, 2018) was chosen to facilitate the organizing and analysis of data according to themes. This rich and thick interview data was analysed using the computer analysis software NVivo. An initial template was inductively created through parent nodes, with themes revealing participant opinions on workforce and societal diversity, and the consequences of this diversity for the business and associated organizational practices and policies: conceptualizations of diversity; using diversity in external employer branding; HR internal employer branding efforts. The first author created and populated the first thematic template, but at each stage of the analysis, there were reflexive discussions about the thematic coding between the first and second author, with the aim of creating an internally reflexive audit trail (Johnson *et al.*, 2006).

After this first stage of the analysis, it became clear that the dominant driver for increasing workforce diversity was the business case, with participants acknowledging that organizational commitment for diversity needed to be portrayed visibly to various stakeholders through external communications and marketing. While the aim of our deeper secondary analysis was to explore the extent to which the nature of the relationship between diversity and marketing in the SMEs was interdependent, from this initial investigation it became apparent that diversity was predominantly defined as demographic in each firm. Relatedly, we could see that how the firms portrayed themselves via visual images was an important component of how interviewees understood diversity. At this point, similar to the study by El-Sawad, Arnold and Cohen (2004), of methodological interest, we noticed how diversity fell victim to 'doublethink': attempts to reconcile contradictory discourses to present a coherent narrative.

In the next stage of the analysis, to explore these contradictions in more detail, we focused upon company marketing documents to identify how diversity was represented through organizational communications, to better understand the interdependence and alignment of the external and internal diversity–marketing relationship. The analysis of company documents followed the procedures of ethnographic content analysis, as outlined by Lee (2012). The documents included marketing brochures on law specialisms; information on equality and diversity policies; and information from each of the law firm's websites. Following this stage, the responses given by the two marketing managers in relation to their firm's brand image and branding strategy were analysed. This demonstrated how demographic diversity was used in an aesthetic and commercialized way: the marketing of inclusive workforce images. Considering this analysis, the websites of the UK Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) and the UK lawyers' professional body, the Law Society, were reviewed, as well as their respective equality and diversity policies – the SRA 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy' (SRA, 2016) and the Law Society's 'Diversity and Inclusion Charter' (Law Society, 2021). To corroborate the communications and HR

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*Table 2. Demographics of study participants*

| Firm | Code | M/F | Age | Ethnic group | Role | Department | Years at firm |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Firm 1 | MMP1-1 | M | 50 | White British | Managing Partner | Employment | 27y |
| | FA1-1 | F | 40s | White British | Associate | Property and Conveyancing | 4y |
| | MA1-1 | M | 30s | White British | Associate | Employment | 10y |
| | MA2-1 | M | 40s | White British | Associate | PI | 13y |
| | FS1-1 | F | 30s | White British | Solicitor | PI | Oct-13 |
| | MS1-1 | M | 20s | British Asian | Solicitor | Property and Conveyancing | 3y |
| | FT1-1 | F | 20s | White British | Trainee | PI | 4y |
| | Fpl1-1 | F | 20s | British Asian | Paralegal | PI | Jul-14 |
| | FLA1-1 | F | 20s | White British | Legal Assistant | PI | 2y |
| | FC1-1 | F | 20s | White British | Capture | PI | Nov-14 |
| | FSc1-1 | F | 50+ | White British | Secretary | Employment | 13y |
| | FSc2-1 | F | 40s | White British | Secretary | PI | 20y |
| Firm 2 | MEP1-2 | M | 38/39 | White British | Equity Partner | Corporate Commercial | 6y |
| | MP1-2 | M | 38 | White British | Partner | Commercial Property | 10m |
| | MP2-2 | M | 44 | White British | Partner | Commercial Property | 2y 4m, Mar-13 |
| | FNL1-2 | F | 30s | White British | Practice Manager | N/A | 7y |
| | FNL2-2 | F | 40s | White British | Business Development Manager | N/A | 9m |
| | FS1-2 | F | 20s | White British | Solicitor | Employment | 3y |
| | FS2-2 | F | 28/29 | White British | Solicitor | Wills and Probate | 5.5y |
| | FT1-2 | F | 20s | White British | Trainee | Commercial Property | 1.5y, Feb-14 |
| | Fpl1-2 | F | 24 | White British | Paralegal | PI | Apr-15 |
| | Mpl1-2 | M | 25 | White British | Paralegal | Commercial Litigation | Jun-15 |
| Firm 3 | MMP1-3 | M | 48 | White British | Managing Partner | Employment | 21 |
| | FEP1-3 | F | 50 | White British | Equity Partner | Wills and Probate | 21 |
| | MP1-3 | M | 30s | White British | Partner | Employment | 2002 |
| | MA1-3 | M | 30s | White British | Associate | Employment | 9y |
| | FS1-3 | F | 30s | White British | Solicitor | Property | Jan-14 |
| | MS1-3 | M | 20s | White British | Solicitor | Employment | 4y |
| | FNL1-3 | F | 55 | White British | Ops Manager | Conveyancing | 2y |
| | FNL2-3 | F | 50s | White British | HR Manager | N/A | 7m |
| | FNL3-3 | F | 40s | White British | IT Manager | IT | 23y (few years away) |
| | FC2-3 | F | 36 | White British | Senior Conveyancer | Conveyancing | 1y |
| | MC1-3 | M | 26 | British Asian | Paralegal | Conveyancing | Jul-14 |
| | MC2-3 | M | 20s | British Asian | Paralegal | Conveyancing | Jan-15 |
| | FC1-3 | F | 30s | White British | Paralegal | Conveyancing | Jul-15 |
| | Mpl1-3 | M | 20s | White British | Paralegal | Employment | 2y in Aug |
| | Mpl2-3 | M | 24 | White British | Paralegal | Family | 2.5m |
| Firm 4 | FS1-4 | F | 20s | White British | Solicitor (Head of Stress at Work) | Employment (Stress at Work) | 5y |
| | FS2-4 | F | 20s | White British | Solicitor | Employment (Stress at Work) | 5y |
| | FV1-4 | F | 30s | White British | Head of Vetting | RTA/CRCA | 1.5y |
| | FNL1-4 | F | 36 | White British | Deputy Office and Admin Manager | Employment | 2y |
| | Fpl1-4 | F | 20s | White British | Paralegal | RTA/CRCA | Feb-15 |
| | Fpl2-4 | F | 37 | White British | Paralegal | PI | 4y |
| | Fpl3-4 | F | 28 | Mixed | Paralegal | RTA/CRCA | 3y |

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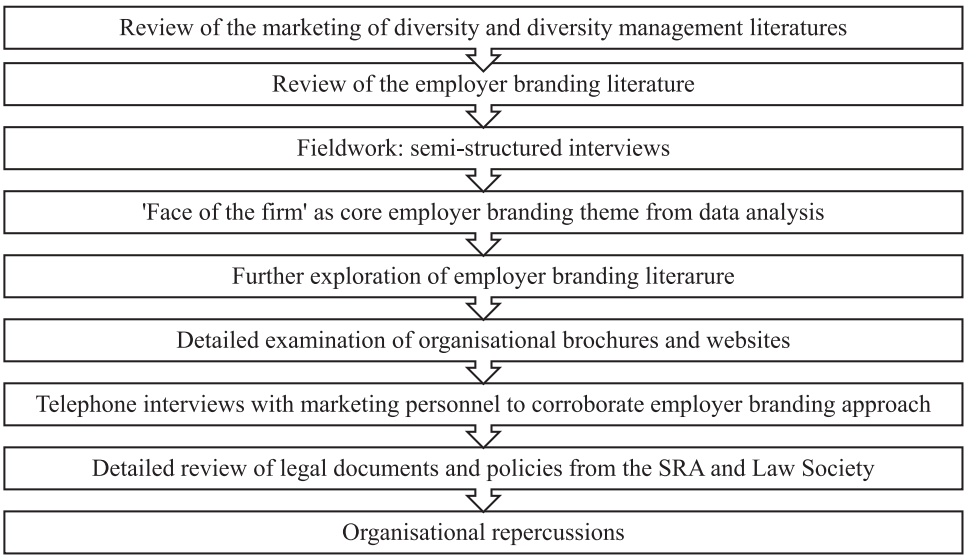
*Table 3. Diagram of the data collection process*




aspects of employer branding, these were compared to the websites and documentation of each firm, as well as the interview transcripts. It was evident that there were contradictory discourses and a light-touch approach to EO and diversity management practices in these firms.

In summary, from the data analytic process, it was apparent that there was an organizational emphasis upon marketing demographic diversity externally for impression management and commercial purposes, while negating internal diversity efforts. The external branding strategy superseded internal EO and inclusive HR practices. An overview of the template themes and sub-themes, together with data excerpts, is provided in Table 4.

In addressing our research question of how an organization's commitment to diversity is portrayed through employer branding strategies, we identified that there were contradictions between the external and internal employer branding strategies in relation to diversity. In creating and maintaining a coherent brand and message, we found a misalignment between how diversity was portrayed externally and the actual experience of diversity internally at the four firms. We now discuss this in detail.

## Findings

*External branding and marketing*

There was clear evidence of a business imperative across all firms through their branding and marketing of demographic diversity, particularly based on gender and ethnicity. Changing societal demographics were viewed by firms as advantageous in enabling the recruitment of people who were the right organizational fit from a wider base. Most importantly for the firms, these diverse staff equated to increased competitive advantage through shared demographic characteristics with new clients and prospective employees: 'people maybe just feel more comfortable talking to their own as it were' (WB female solicitor, 2-2). Displaying such pictorial (ethnic) diversity on marketing materials enhances the attractiveness of the brand image. In an example of shared demographic attributes, when conducting business with Asian clients, a British-Asian (BA) male conveyancer revealed that he felt his ethnicity was beneficial. From his experience, customers with a comparable cultural background to him believed that they could better connect and receive a superior service: 'they had somebody who was

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*Table 4. Analytic template coding structure*

| Theme | Sub-theme | Example data excerpt |
|---|---|---|
| Conceptualizations of diversity | Definitions as visible demographic attributes | 'Yellow, black, pink, blue, person to me is just the normal … I was brought up with it … it's just normal' (Female Paralegal, 1-4). |
| | | 'From a personal point of view, I tried, I'm surprised sometimes how difficult that can be, I try just not to judge people on their face value, so to speak' (Male Partner, 2-2). |
| | Organizational awareness | 'Yesterday was Diwali, so no-one at work knew actually, that's probably like a small thing, there's only one other Indian girl that works here, but she's in a different office, so I think if she were still here, maybe people might have noticed' (Female Paralegal, 1-1). |
| | | 'Different races, cultures and religions, is quite a new thing, so, I think they've kind of got over the, well hopefully, the sexist … I think we're probably kind of over that with gender, but maybe not quite so much with race and culture and things yet' (WB female solicitor, 1-1). |
| Using diversity in external employer branding | Attractive to potential recruits | 'I suppose from a marketing-the-firm perspective as well, it is helpful … obviously we want to be as diverse as possible … because you want to be inclusive and appeal to as many people as possible. So there is that, in terms of the external face of the firm' (WB male associate, 1-3). |
| | Attractive to new clients | 'It's just a homogenous block of one type of person, which I don't think is really very sensible for the team dynamic, giving better service to clients, or for being more appealing to clients' (Male Associate, 1-3). |
| | | 'One of the guys across town, he's a Sikh and I put something on Twitter about him being on the radio … and there was an explosion of Tweets about him from the Sikh community. And actually, I'd be lying to you if I didn't think to myself, "ooh, be nice to tap into that!"' (WB male managing partner, 1-3). |
| HR: internal employer branding efforts | Recruitment practices and policies | 'We avoid paying fees to recruitment agencies if we can avoid it, basically' (WB male partner, 1-2). |
| | | 'They don't go externally, which I like. I think if you're investing in people, invest in people' (WB female solicitor, 2-4). |
| | | 'We do get a lot of loyalty to … the institution, if you like … There's a kind of … loyalty to the firm first, which is useful' (WB male managing partner, 1-1). |
| | Diversity in the recruitment process | 'The fact that it tends to be more men up there, so they're interviewing for a type of person – I'm not sure if women always fit … I suppose it's a subconscious view on what they want' (WB female solicitor, 1-2). |
| | | 'We've got to do that benchmark of "have we got the best people here?" … some of the people aren't the best, and we need to make them better or bring in new people' (WB female HR manager, 2-3). |
| | | 'From a business perspective, you don't care who you have … they're not disruptive in the office … regardless if they're, you know, tall or short or thin or fat, as long as that person does their job and what they're asked efficiently … that's all you want isn't it?' (WB female practice manager, 1-2). |

a bit more of a recognizable face to them, or a voice to them' (BA male conveyancer, 2-3). Although law is a standardized profession, as the management and production of diversity is vital for a company's value proposition (Pasztor, 2019), constructing this individualized experience, based on shared cultural identity, led to client-perceived superior quality. Leveraging pressures to service the client (Sommerlad, 2016), managing client impressions in this strategic way helps build an identifiable and unique employer identity (Ambler and Barrow, 1996; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004).

This is again witnessed in the usefulness of language skills of minority ethnic staff: 'This is going to sound horrible – a Chinese person that works for us – which is great for us because she speaks

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Mandarin! … that's an extra skill that we've got – and we do advertise that … we will say if you have a Punjabi-speaking client, we can do it … it adds benefit I think to the services that we provide' (WB female operations manager, 1-3). By equating visible cultural diversity to language ability, these skills transform into commercial value. Portraying targeted group members in their marketing allows the firm to differentiate itself from competitors, attracting new customers (Burgess, Wilkie and Dolan, 2021) and projecting a more inclusive and accommodating culture to underrepresented applicants (Avery and McKay, 2006), both of which are beneficial to the organizational image, brand and reputation (Highhouse, Brooks and Gregarus, 2009; Lievens and Slaughter, 2016).

This strategic use of commercialized demographic diversity for new client acquisition was also noted by a WB male associate who said that if a minority-ethnic client wished to bring a discrimination case forward and saw a 'predominantly white British firm', they may wonder whether the firm would truly fight for their case. This suggests that the associate realizes the lack of workplace diversity and the need to portray this for both commercial and ethical purposes (Avery and McKay, 2006; Byrd, 2018; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al*., 2015) – a clear example of the market-driven access-and-legitimacy paradigm (Ely and Thomas, 2001).

Linked to this is the belief that a workforce should reflect the diversity in wider society, to send a marketing signal of inclusivity. This external face is associated with both the most observable demographic aspects and more symbolically; aspiring to project an outward image of solidarity as an inclusive employer. For example, a male associate at the largest business, Firm 3, said: 'I suppose from a marketing-the-firm perspective as well, it is helpful … obviously we want to be as diverse as possible … because you want to be inclusive and appeal to as many people as possible. So there is that, in terms of the external face of the firm' (WB male associate, 1-3). This is a clear example of using an employer branding rationale to sell diversity to remain competitive (Long, Doerer and Stewart, 2015).

Given the importance of communications in successful employer branding, message consistency is paramount. Through the document analysis, we could see commercialized demographic diversity: workforce images, displaying gender and ethnic diversity (and occasionally age and disabilities), were disseminated through brochures and organizational websites to exhibit a visible presence; communicating externally to audiences that the firms value diversity (Burgess, Wilkie and Dolan, 2021). This is responding to the economic and wider societal need for diversity, transcending into the workplace: 'different faces kind of invite different business' (BA male conveyancer, 2-3). However, when analysing the websites of each firm, to corroborate HR and communications diversity messaging, only two of the four firms stated their equality and diversity policies, using traditional EO language (Ashley, 2010); reflecting the 'discrimination-and-fairness' paradigm (Ely and Thomas, 2001).

### *Internal branding contradictions*

The external brand, however, did not match the internal diversity position of the firms, leading to some obvious contradictions. The identification of these was enabled by our analysis taking an employee branding approach: the employer image did not correspond to the organization's identity (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016). Following these initial analyses, what became apparent was the importance of the consistent portrayal of the benefits of workforce diversity internally within the firm, as well as externally. As mentioned, this was showcased via an emphasis on demographic diversity attributes, specifically mainly via gender and race. However, upon deeper examination, two discrepancies were identified. The first contradiction is in how diversity fell victim to doublethink (El-Sawad, Arnold and Cohen, 2004) in attempting to reconcile the incongruence between the diversity-is-important-to-us discourse, yet not improving the representation of diverse groups in the firms. For instance, when remarking upon a photograph of his staff within the department, one male partner suggested that the portrayal of the company vis-à-vis society: 'did not look right'. When questioned about this, he maintained that this workforce structure had naturally occurred: 'I don't think there's any plan or design, but I'm very conscious that we need to be getting sort of more – because if you look at my team, it's just stale, male and pale'. The partner seemed rather anxious about this depiction: 'I think, it gives a false image of the firm, it doesn't … Doesn't show the diversity that we do have and try to promote, sort of you've got eight blokes sitting there!' (WB male partner,

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1-3). These comments highlight an attempt to bridge the gap between the lack of (visible demographic) workforce diversity with the moral case narrative and perceptions of the socially aware public. This is a common strategy for organizations attempting to sell diversity: to persuade others of, and demonstrate their commitment to, diversity to meet social expectations (Long, Doerer and Stewart, 2015), which commercializes or commodifies diversity (Janssens and Zanoni, 2005). Nevertheless, in another breath, he admits that in most law firms: 'you'll find it's just a tier of very senior old men; for want of a better description' (WB male partner, 1-3). Indeed, across all the four firms, men filled most senior positions: comprising six of all seven partners.

Conversely, in Firm 3, impression management related to physical masculine attributes to categorize a successful lawyer: 'he's brilliant in terms of gravitas, he looks the part … he's a former rugby union professional, he's massive. Big, strong, strapping, handsome boy' (WB male managing partner, 1-3). The body thus becomes a central part of what it means to be a lawyer, shaped by the professional socialization processes (Haynes, 2012) of the legal context. Although appearance has no bearing on a lawyer's performance, credibility or skilfulness, the importance of looking the part features heavily in a firm's brand image; especially in the legal profession 'where knowledge is most ambiguous' (Ashley and Empson, 2013: 221). The prizing of this certain white British aesthetic image is inconsistent with the external branded message of valuing diversity and an inclusive organization.

The second contradiction was the inconsistency between external messaging and organizational practice: the incompatibility between employer branding and diversity management (Edwards and Kelan, 2011). Of interest here is the extent to which the firms had instituted policies and practices in line with their employer branding strategies to indicate their commitment to diversity. Notwithstanding the pictorial diversity portrayed via the external employer branding of the firms, internally, these inclusive images were false signals: the approach that the firms took towards EO, diversity management and HR had traditionally been in a disjointed and sporadic fashion. Our analysis of the organizations' identities misaligned with their external employer image, with a lack of organizational policies, practices and initiatives underpinning a commitment to equality and diversity, mirroring Hoque and Noon's (2004) 'empty shells'. We categorize this as a light-touch or superficial approach to diversity management. Although the business case for diversity was thoroughly advocated, minimal processes existed in all the companies in applying formal equality and diversity policies. This mismatch between how diversity was portrayed externally and the organizational commitment to diversity internally at the four firms, without organizational accountability for discriminatory attitudes and behaviours, does those group members it targets via their marketing a disservice (Burgess, Wilkie and Dolan, 2021; Byrd, 2018). The recruitment process was the only point at which EO policies were used, and these were informal procedures, implemented solely to comply with equality law. The strong employer brand of the firms, outwardly perceived to signal a valuing of diversity, was not communicated at recruitment, as required to win the war for talent (Martin, Gollan and Grigg, 2011). Moreover, of the few EO practices available, such as part-time working, which was looked upon unfavourably, this was accessible only to a minority above a certain organizational hierarchical position. This lack of provisioning also implies a more superficial approach, contradicting the espoused diversity discourse of each firm.

Respondents stated that no measures existed to stop discrimination in any of the firms: it was the responsibility of the minimal EO policy, which lacked reinforcing, formalized underlying mechanisms. 'Is there anything to protect or any prejudice coming in? No, just a few of us looking at CVs and just making sure it doesn't creep in really … hoping that people are sensible enough and not biased to do that, so, but nothing other than an equal opps policy' (WB female HR manager, 2-3). Across the four firms, the EO policy appeared to be nothing more than a visual signal to demonstrate legal compliance. With organizations prioritizing external employer branding through the demographic face of the firm, the internal marketing failed the diverse employees depicted in the marketing images, breaking the 'brand promise' (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004) of valuing diversity. Regardless of any idealistic thinking, (often incentivized) word-of-mouth recruitment was considered preferable, as the new recruit had to match the organizational culture and attitudes of existing staff: 'You have less room to carry any passengers or any problems … if you can go to someone

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you know, then you always will' (WB male partner, 2-2). This could be construed as a type of homophily should this male partner recruit applicants he believes to possess the right image of professionalism (Ashley and Empson, 2013), and contradicts the widely espoused diversity-is-important-to-us discourse of the four firms. Such informal strategies preferred by SME law firms (Rolfe and Anderson, 2003) preserve inequalities, diminishing the likelihood of recruiting applicants from diverse groups – detrimental to inclusion (Ashley and Empson, 2017). The candid admission that 'most of us often work for people more than organizations, don't we?' (WB male managing partner, 1-1) calls into question the objective and standardized recruitment policies, given the very personable and subjective nature of working relationships, with unconscious bias potentially affecting the fairness of this process (Noon *et al.*, 2013). Using an employer branding lens, what is particularly interesting here is that while purporting a resource-based view, that employees are their most important asset, the organizations adopt a marketing perspective, viewing their employees as a means to an end (Edwards and Kelan, 2011): organization–person fit.

Investigating this further, three law firms justified the absence of a structured HR approach, indeed, lack of HR manager, in that the function is covered by the skills of their employment lawyers. This is an example of what Healy, Bradley and Forson (2011: 1) describe as '"talking the talk" of diversity which tends not to challenge the factors that reproduce inequalities in the workplace and society'. An additional issue is the packaging of employment law as HR: conceiving EO as synonymous with diversity management and HR practices, only used at the recruitment stage and when offering flexible working practices. While the employment lawyers prided themselves on their HR expertise and offered Employment and HR Support Services to clients, as depicted in brochures from Firm 2 and Firm 4, this consists largely of drafting and preparing employment contracts and staff handbooks, or employment law training and helping with settlement agreements. Essentially, the firms view the role of the HR function as increasing business performance, which aligns with the marketing-oriented employer branding perspective (Edwards and Kelan, 2011).

Such attitudes were mirrored in our document analysis. The opening line of the executive summary of 'The business case for diversity and inclusion' report by the Law Society (2017b) at the time – and website from which this was available – was not conducive to social justice arguments; asking the question 'why should you bother about diversity and inclusion?' The report then cites legal compliance and the vast spending power of culturally diverse groups – forming potential clients – as the main rationale for firms to implement these policies (Law Society, 2017b: 2). While the Law Society (2021) have since updated their equality and diversity webpages, and recently started a review of their Diversity and Inclusion Charter, there is no clear guidance about how law firms can 'promote the values of diversity and inclusion'. Most notably, this Charter is voluntary, with only 60 small law firms in England and Wales completing the self-assessment in 2017 (Law Society, 2017a). Given the likelihood that the employment lawyers, taking on HR tasks, would read these documents, the language used to promote diversity though scaremongering implies that diversity polices are based upon legal compliance, not moral grounds. This apparent apathy to substantive EO and diversity practices internally in the law firms runs contrary to their external employer branding and is mirrored through policies which are, in essence, 'empty shells' (Hoque and Noon, 2004).

In our document analysis of the 'SRA principles' (SRA, 2018) and their most comprehensive diversity policy: 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy' (SRA, 2016), we found that although the SRA appear to be more proactive in their equality, diversity and inclusion messaging, admitting that 'a lack of diversity is an on-going risk to our regulatory objectives' (SRA, 2016), this regulation asks lawyers to act 'in a way that encourages equality, diversity and inclusion' (SRA, 2018) without offering much guidance, and asks law firms to monitor, report and publish their workforce diversity data every 2 years (SRA, 2016). A contradiction here is that while providing a toolkit to 'encourage' equality, diversity and inclusion, their 2018 report, 'The business case for diversity', is found under the 'Risks' section of the SRA website, which focuses on the 'risks and the challenges faced by solicitors and law firms'. This negative labelling is mirrored in the attitudes of our participants.

Indeed, employees more generally seemed unconcerned and indifferent as to the usefulness of the formal implementation of HR and diversity management. A male associate at Firm 1 thought

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that some companies could 'potentially pay lip service' to diversity and EO via 'drafting in lots of policies and procedures'. He admitted it is 'a way that employers are just making sure that they tick the boxes'. What this associate was unaware of is the misalignment between the pictorial diversity branding strategy of his firm and how their internal processes generated a lack of diversity, with under-representation of particular groups at senior levels, and they were taking no steps to address this. The EO policies and procedures he was criticizing, if implemented correctly, would demonstrate social justice accountability and show that the firm values its diverse workforce (Burgess, Wilkie and Dolan, 2021; Byrd, 2018).

Rather, EO was perceived as representing the perhaps outdated 'discrimination-and-fairness' paradigm (Ely and Thomas, 2001). The EO policies seemed to endure merely to establish compliance and demonstrate to potential recruits that all applications were welcomed: 'I'm not sure they do help, to be honest! … From my experience in the interviews … every person is taken completely on their merits … whether there's a policy in place or not, the best person at the interview will get the job' (WB female solicitor, 1-2). Hence, there was minimal commitment to diversity management practices, rather than a strategically implemented organizational approach. One solicitor in Firm 2 felt strongly that such policies were needed to ensure businesses remained compliant and fulfilled their HR responsibilities: 'It's better for everybody if there is a bit of diversity, but I don't know how you could do it without forcing it and it shouldn't have to be forced!' (WB female solicitor, 2-2).

Moreover, the light-touch approach to diversity management appeared in other areas; yet perhaps was not seen as such by those in charge. For instance, Firm 1's managing partner disclosed that although the organization was 'terribly, terribly white Anglo-Saxon, male, 20 years ago', he felt that workplace diversity was 'achieved': 'we now have well over 10% of staff from black and minority-ethnic backgrounds, we have our first female partner, more than 50% of lawyers are women, so all good, really' (WB male managing partner, 1-1). While somewhat matching their online diversity communications, this recruitment mindset is comparable to quota-based processes: reaching the demographic target reduces pressure to adhere to this self-imposed objective. Again, this is akin to the market-oriented access-and-legitimacy approach to diversity (Ely and Thomas, 2001), yet contradicts the organization's commitment to diversity as portrayed through external employer branding. Furthermore, there appeared to be two recruitment avenues: more diversity at the entry to the profession may exist as applicants tend to undergo a standardized application process, whereas partners tended to be recruited by word of mouth. Such recruitment criteria reproduce inequalities, traditionally privileging those already at the apex of the profession: middle-class, white men (Ashley and Empson, 2013). In sum, the external branding of diversity did not fit with what was happening in relation to diversity inside the organizations, as evidenced by the contradictions highlighted.

## Discussion

In exploring organizational commitment to diversity portrayed through employer branding, we find that diversity is understood as the most visible, demographic characteristics, primarily gender and race, akin to traditional diversity scholarship (e.g. Janssens and Zanoni, 2005) and is used for aesthetic and impression management objectives for employer branding success. In understanding how diversity is conceived in this way and the implications of doing so, we now discuss the contradictions found during data analysis: firstly, the incongruence between the brand-highlighted discourse that diversity was important and the positioning of diverse groups within the firms; and secondly, the inconsistency between external policy and internal practice.

Given that law is an oversubscribed profession, operating in an intensely competitive environment, any differentiating factor from the standardized service is crucial to sustain competitive advantage. Evaluating the marketing, branding and communications of the firms in detail, we find, building on previous scholarship, that these SMEs commodify their diverse workforce to produce aesthetic labour, which forms part of the *aesthetics of organization* – distinctive value-adding symbols and artefacts (Witz, Warhurst and Nickson, 2003). Diversity, manufactured into an organizational product (Janssens and Zanoni, 2005; Swan, 2010), is used on corporate websites through inclusive workforce images, which act as persuasive impression management tools (Long, Doerer and

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Stewart, 2015; Windscheid *et al*., 2018), advantageous for a firm's image (Byrd, 2018). This organizational focus on aesthetics, seen in the prominence assigned to marketing visible demographic diversity, may be particularly important for SME law firms, in needing to portray an inclusive organizational culture as part of their value proposition (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Meanings are derived from images, which help form our social constructions of the world (Swan, 2010): displaying pictorial diversity of their staff represents a visual signal of valuing diversity. Expressed through their employer image (Edwards, 2010; Lievens and Slaughter, 2016), this can be central to attracting the best diverse talent, and visibly portraying how they may be better able to cater to diverse clientele in their locality.

It is important to note that organizations' websites are 'electronic storefronts' that strategically house socially and politically constructed diversity artefacts to demonstrate an appropriate CSR approach towards the wider societal issues of diversity and inclusion (Long, Doerer and Stewart, 2015: 176). Such diversity communications are used as an organizational legitimizing function, promoting firms as diversity leaders (Pasztor, 2019). Hence, perhaps it is unsurprising that there is a contradiction between the firm image and what happens internally: external branding is prioritized due to the importance of attracting new clients.

However, the contradiction that we highlight has other implications. First, a diversity branding strategy intended solely for impression management may undermine organizational authenticity and legitimacy (Byrd, 2018; Jonsen *et al*., 2019). Such discrepancies portrayed via candid communications on far-reaching social media platforms affects the firm's reputation (Cascio and Graham, 2016) and function as an exclusionary practice by discouraging prospective applicants from diverse groups. Furthermore, diversity statements based on the business case may desensitize the majority population to potential instances of workplace discrimination (Heres and Benschop, 2010; Singh and Point, 2006). If we believe the external image to be authentic, the diversity becomes unproblematic as the organization has clearly achieved a representation of diverse groups.

Second, while the external marketing of the employer brand is successful for all four firms, the internal marketing of the employer brand has failed the diverse employees depicted in the organizational marketing images in breaking the value-in-diversity brand promise made to recruits before and when joining the firm (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Employees from diverse groups are still in less powerful positions in the firms, despite their apparent aesthetic labour power, demonstrating an access-and-legitimacy approach (Ely and Thomas, 2001).

Third, we would argue that through this process, diversity becomes primarily focused on the aesthetics of ethnicity and gender, with employees valued based on the commercial attractiveness of their demographic characteristics. As such, this external employer branding approach leans more towards diversity based on access and legitimacy, with a discrimination-and-fairness approach often taking place internally in practice (Ely and Thomas, 2001). There is only a minimal, or light-touch, dedication to EO and diversity practices across the firms. Regrettably, it is at the pre-recruitment stage, where messaging conveying EO and diversity commitments would be most effective in stimulating applications from diverse groups (Avery and McKay, 2006). Equating diversity management to EO policies mirrors the SRA's (2016) regulatory requirements on this matter: the bi-annual monitoring, reporting and publishing of workforce diversity data. As such, only Firm 3 had recently hired a HR manager, and this was due to the growing organizational size. Although informal diversity procedures were implemented at the recruitment stage to comply with equality law, indicating a discrimination-and-fairness approach (Ely and Thomas, 2001), each firm favoured employee referrals. This reliance upon a largely homogenous group may be detrimental to the diversity practices these law firms set out to achieve (Noon *et al*., 2013). For example, we find that the employment of minority-ethnic staff across the four firms was based upon their control of critical resources necessary for organizational success and increased competitive advantage, notably language skills and market access (Ortlieb and Sieben, 2013). This rationale is demonstrative of the access-and-legitimacy perspective (Ely and Thomas, 2001), supported by wider literature (Dickens, 1999; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al*., 2015; Özbilgin and Tatli, 2011; Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010).

Pictorial diversity displayed on corporate websites, without the supporting internal organizational EO and diversity practices, demonstrates

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that these SMEs assign value to employees based upon the commercial aesthetic attractiveness of their race and gender and the affiliated skills and resources (Ortlieb and Sieben, 2013) for successful employer branding and impression management. Such diversity branding strategies, which attract diverse talent yet are not linked with wider strategies to create an inclusive workplace and culture where all employees can thrive, are ineffective (Köllen, 2019) and potentially disrespectful to those diverse groups averred to be of great value (Byrd, 2018). Our argument also highlights a further contradiction. Where organizations have responded to the pressures of globalization by hiring diverse employees, we could predict that this would, to some extent, erode the commercial power of the majority population. The onus placed upon the marketing of a diverse workforce for business gain could reduce the commercial value of the majority group typically employed in the legal profession – white male lawyers (Ashley and Empson, 2017) – insofar as their potential attractiveness to new business and applicants. However, the irony is that employees who historically fit the profile of the legal profession, such as the trainee lawyer with gravitas in Firm 3, is also considered a 'resource' in embodying the appropriate aesthetic labour (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007; Witz, Warhurst and Nickson, 2003) valued by the legal profession (Ashley and Empson, 2013, 2017) and will profit from their aesthetic advantage via professional empowerment and entitlement (Haynes, 2012), despite external branding. Upon deeper examination of the employer branding of each firm, we see how diversity management, in word and deed, falls victim to doublethink (El-Sawad, Arnold and Cohen, 2004). A key function of doublethink, according to El-Sawad, Arnold and Cohen (2004), is that contradictions are not experienced as uncomfortable and, therefore, rarely addressed.

In sum, in adopting an employer branding lens to analyse how an organization's commitment to diversity is portrayed through their branding, we argue that these firms demonstrate a continued access-and-legitimacy approach to diversity (Ely and Thomas, 2001), given their desire for successful employer branding and impression management. This supersedes organizational commitment to EO and diversity management in practice. The internal and external employer branding is inconsistent: with minimal HR interventions and superficial diversity management policies and practices to support and promote the inclusion of disadvantaged groups, together with continually favouring the white, middle-class male lawyer irrespective of aptitude (Ashley and Empson, 2013), this does little, if anything, to dismantle the structural disadvantage embedded in the legal profession.

So, what are the consequences of this? While employer branding may produce homogenization to create a coherent brand (Edwards and Kelan, 2011), we find that the ingrained professional archetype of the legal profession acts as the homogenizing force; contradictory to the values of diversity management and the outwardly projected diversity discourse and employer branding narrative of our four seemingly inclusive law firms. As such, we have highlighted that HR is viewed by the law firms as increasing business performance. This aligns with the marketing-oriented employer branding perspective (Edwards and Kelan, 2011), meaning that the integration-and-learning approach to diversity (Ely and Thomas, 2001) the law firms endorse is not followed, producing a diversity value gap (Long, Doerer and Stewart, 2015). While diversity is inclusively portrayed through employer branding strategies, the organizations' true commitment to diversity internally is minimal and does little to erode white male power in the context of career success. Our analysis highlighting the visual enables attention to be drawn to other significant diversity characteristics that may be overlooked, such as sexual orientation and mental health, because of their lack of visibility and/or challenging discourse (Singh and Point, 2006). Furthermore, it also reminds us that doublethink can be the norm in organizations and part of the veneer of a coherent organizational narrative (El-Sawad, Arnold and Cohen, 2004). This is through presenting logically contradictory arguments: supporting diverse workforce hiring for business benefit and favourable CSR, yet not ensuring that disadvantaged groups are truly included. Finally, it enables us to see the advantage of applying concepts from the marketing literature to illuminate what has traditionally been seen as an HR issue.

## Conclusions

Adopting an employer branding lens to analyse how organizational commitment to diversity is portrayed through their branding, we highlight the

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contradictions of four law firms as to their use and management of workforce diversity. Our findings highlight external and internal employer branding contradictions in relation to diversity, by linking aesthetics with the marketing of the brand. Rather, a value-added HR approach is needed: focusing on organizational social justice, inclusivity and culture, ensuring a diversity-valuing philosophy, as opposed to diversity for box-ticking and legal compliance. Through enacting leadership social responsibility and engaging leaders in conversations to raise awareness of social injustices for under-represented groups (Byrd, 2018), this will create more inclusive employer brands, which benefits employee engagement (Edwards and Kelan, 2011).

This leads to a consideration of the implications of our analysis for HR and what practitioners can do. Given that the contradictions we have identified will have a negative impact upon diverse employees, it is important that strategic HR works simultaneously with marketing specialists to ensure cohesion between both internal and external employer branding (Casio and Graham, 2016). Regarding diversity and inclusion, this safeguards the employer brand promise and does not break the psychological benefits of its employment offering (Ambler and Barrow, 1996). With the understanding of an organization's diversity and inclusion climate and greater cultural awareness that HR possesses, people practitioners can work more closely with marketers to help them adapt their socially responsible branding and messages to the market, striving for an integration-and-learning approach (Ely and Thomas, 2001), rather than attempting to adapt the market to their message.

We anticipate that our work could be transferable to other SME professional service sector firms. However, future research could focus upon the extent to which our analysis may resonate with other types of companies and in larger organizations. We expect that there are some potential similarities here; given extensive previous research on diversity statements on the websites of multinationals across the world (Heres and Benschop, 2010; Jonsen *et al*., 2019; Singh and Point, 2006). Many firms, across all sectors, view reputation and a strong brand as a vital business strategy, investing greatly in image and brand development (Highhouse, Brooks and Gregarus, 2009). However, relegating diversity to aesthetics, skills and resources means organizations will not surpass the access-and-legitimacy approach to diversity (Ely and Thomas, 2001), even with the majority population, while employees are viewed as context-appropriate aesthetic labourers (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007; Witz, Warhurst and Nickson, 2003). Our analysis offers a way to critique the contradictions in diversity management thinking and practice as we continue in the quest of attempting to improving diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

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