

Face of the firm: aesthetic diversity

Dr Juliet Kele

The problem with viewing diversity as purely aesthetic

Diversity is most commonly viewed in terms of aesthetics and observable demographics.

Organisations tend to display images of a visually diverse workforce, to encourage the idea that their ethos is one of inclusivity and equality. These images are appealing to prospective employees and clients.

Research demonstrates there is a strong business case for a diverse workforce. A diverse team is more likely to appeal to a wider proportion of the population, who may feel their needs will be better understood if they feel represented.

However, evaluating diversity based on instantly recognisable traits, such as gender and ethnicity, ignores the less visible traits of diversity of character, personality, attitudes and values. These ignored traits are often those which would allow a business to do well. Wider knowledge of differing backgrounds and experiences allows businesses to better navigate the challenges of a global marketplace.

Juliet's research into aesthetic diversity was based on interviews with small and medium sized UK law firms. Smaller legal practices were chosen due to their economic importance (law firms contribute around £26 billion to the UK economy), and were under-represented in previous research.

As well as interviews, her research also draws evidence from both the webpages and hard-copy marketing brochures from the firms.

Her research builds on key findings from the likes of Ozbilgin and Tatli (2011) and Martin et al., (2011) and Dickens (1999).



About the author

Dr Juliet Kele is an early-career researcher; having joined Birmingham Business School following completion of her PhD at the University of Leeds. She is based in both the Department of Management (Organisation, Work and Employment) and the Centre for Responsible Business. Juliet is researching equality, diversity and inclusion in the workplace; with a key interest in intersectionality.



The concept of 'aesthetic diversity'

The findings of Juliet's research suggest that while increased diversity in the workplace is still viewed as greatly important on both economic and social grounds, the representation of diversity relied on instantly recognisable visible differences. Many participants mentioned skin colour and gender, but age was notably absent. Diversity was also conceptualised as a 'tick box' list by a few interviewees, who listed the demographics of those in their office as if quoting from a catalogue.

This aesthetic diversity is then converted into imagery which is shared across marketing brochures and webpages.

However, although the business case for diversity was thoroughly advocated by all, there were minimal processes for applying formal policies around diversity to human resource management. There was a distinct hollowness in some of the companies' claims to champion diversity.

For more information about Dr Kele's research and findings, please get in touch via the details below.

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