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The Inauthenticity of Organizational Diversity Initiatives:

Perspectives from the Tech Industry

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Abstract

Organizations often use diversity initiatives to craft an image of moral goodness while doing little to address workplace inequalities. This disconnect is intensified in the US technology industry, where companies attempt to claim identities as progressive diversity supporters despite obvious patterns of inequality and discrimination. How do tech employees make sense of this contradiction? This study combines the sociology of diversity, sociology of organizations, and organizational authenticity literatures to analyze, via 31 in-depth interviews, how employees of a large US tech company evaluate diversity initiatives in the US tech industry. Results show that tech workers question the authenticity of high-tech diversity programs: they frame technology companies as lacking commitment to diversity, overemphasizing conformity to diversity-related norms, and demonstrating dubious inconsistency in their approach to diversity. Nonetheless, they moderate their criticisms by noting that tech companies do "try" to take responsibility for diversity. Interviewees voiced these impressions similarly across race and gender. We therefore argue that the (in)authenticity of diversity initiatives can be a unifying concern amongst individuals with differing social identities. As diversity initiatives exist largely due to social pressures, they will need to overcome issues of inauthenticity in order to survive widespread sociopolitical critiques.

Keywords: diversity, authenticity, organizations, race, gender, technology

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Introduction

In 2025, the "War on Woke" achieved a new level of prominence as conservative forces across the US expanded their efforts to eliminate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) from US social institutions (Ng et al. 2025). Corporations immediately began rolling back their diversity initiatives to signal compliance (Wong and Lee 2025). Yet prior to recent political attacks on DEI, diversity initiatives enjoyed broad normalization (e.g. Dobbin, Schrage, and Kalev 2015). They widely served to convey an image of moral goodness and enhance corporate profits without systematically changing organizations (Berrey 2015; Collins 2011; Thomas 2019, 2020). The use of diversity initiatives to construct a façade of inclusivity has been especially obvious in the technology industry: high-tech companies have often attempted to claim identities as progressive diversity supporters (Dean and Bhuiyan 2020; Harrison 2019) despite clear documentation of their ongoing struggles with discrimination and inequality (Neely et al. 2023).

This article answers Roberson and colleagues' call for research aimed "to investigate firms' diversity actions from an impression management lens" and illuminate "stakeholder reactions" to firms' diversity initiatives (Roberson, Avery, and Leigh 2024:11-12). Specifically, it examines how tech employees make sense of conflicting claims regarding diversity in the technology industry. Diversity initiatives in high-tech have far-reaching implications given the industry's globally dominant position (Neely et al. 2023), yet only a handful of studies have examined employees' impressions of high-tech diversity. These studies have found that tech workers tend to overemphasize diversity in their industry (Alfrey 2022) and condone tech companies' inadequate diversity programs (Luhr 2023). Whether marginalized groups are more critical of high-tech diversity initiatives remains an unresolved question with conflicting possible answers (Alfrey 2022; Luhr 2023; Sharp et al. 2012). Furthering this line of inquiry, we ask a

previously unaddressed question: do tech employees see tech companies' diversity initiatives as *authentic*? Authenticity is a predominant concern in postindustrial society (Erickson 1995); centering authenticity therefore helps deepen understanding of how tech employees make sense of conflicting diversity narratives and whether this varies by race or gender.

To study tech employees' evaluations of high-tech diversity, we utilize the burgeoning framework of organizational authenticity. This framework suggests that perceived authenticity (i.e. the extent to which organizations seem "true" to themselves) informs individuals' impressions of organizations. Individuals evaluate organizations' authenticity based on factors such as commitment to claimed values and consistency between formal claims and informal practices (Lehman et al. 2019a, 2019b). Perceptions of organizational authenticity impact employees' productivity (Cording et al. 2014), organizational commitment (Marcinko 2020), and felt ability to be authentic at work (Wilton et al. 2020). However, organizational authenticity remains a relatively novel framework used primarily in management and related disciplines (Lehman et al. 2019a; Pamphile and Ruttan 2022). We note that this framework can serve the sociological diversity literature by facilitating analysis of the "myth and ceremony" (Meyer and Rowan 1977) that typifies neoliberal diversity programs (e.g. Thomas 2020) so researchers can better juggle organizations' claimed identities as "diversity supporters" with critiques of the same organizations' inequitable operations. The organizational authenticity framework additionally illuminates how individuals with differing social identities might evaluate diversity initiatives in similar ways, thereby helping identify common criticisms that might be addressed to increase present-day support.

In the following pages, we investigate employees' assessments of high-tech diversity by analyzing data collected via in-depth interviews with employees of one large, US-based tech

company from 2019 to 2020. We address the following research questions: (1) How do tech workers make sense of conflicting frames of diversity in high-tech? And (2) Do employees' impressions of the authenticity of high-tech diversity initiatives vary across race or gender? Sampling from one firm facilitates analysis of racial and gender variation by ensuring that differing evaluations between individuals are not due to differences between their employers.

Results show that employees questioned the authenticity of high-tech diversity initiatives based on companies' prioritization of profit, interest in managing impressions, and misalignment between formal claims and informal practices – yet were somewhat appeased by tech companies' "trying" to support diversity. Interviewees were generally more skeptical of high-tech diversity than prior research (e.g. Luhr 2023) would suggest, and voiced such skepticism similarly across race and gender. Accordingly, we argue that (in)authenticity can serve as a unifying concern that fosters similar evaluations of diversity initiatives across individuals with widely varying social identities. As social pressures not only prompt diversity initiatives (Collins 2011), but also challenge them and force their elimination (Garces et al. 2025; Ng et al. 2025; Schachle-Gordon, Coley, and Tetteh 2025), employee criticisms could lead tech companies to abandon diversity initiatives – especially considering broader political pressures emanating from the "War on Woke" (Bissell 2023; Ng et al. 2025). Actors hoping to preserve the DEI agenda moving forward will need to resolve issues of diversity program inauthenticity.

Background

Organizational Inequalities and Diversity Initiatives

Scholarship examining the reproduction of workplace inequalities notes that organizations themselves are gendered and racialized. Cultural schemas and material resources coconstitute one another, creating and maintaining workplace inequalities. Organizational cultures often

reflect beliefs, values, and norms created by and beneficial to Whites, men, and other privileged groups (Acker 2012; Ray 2019). Such shared cultural meanings contribute to and are perpetuated by inequitable workplace social practices and resource distributions (e.g. Alfrey and Twine 2017; Wingfield 2019).

Nonetheless, organizations typically maintain diversity initiatives (Dobbin et al. 2015). Diversity initiatives are often justified with the "business case," which frames diversity as a marketable business asset (Ahmed 2007; Berrey 2015; Thomas 2019). Yet in addition to overlooking issues of inequity (Collins 2011; Mayorga-Gallo 2019), this framing assumes that diversity initiatives address underrepresentation, which is not necessarily the case. While some diversity programs improve demographic representation (especially for White women), several popular programs, such as diversity training and mentorship programs, show a negligible or negative impact on the representation of people of color and women in management (Dobbin et al. 2015; Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006). Moreover, organizations typically push the thankless work of supporting diversity onto employees of color, which ratchets up their workload and emotional labor and further exacerbates racial hierarchies (Thomas 2020; Wingfield 2019).

The contradictions of diversity programs stem from their history and purpose. US business organizations adopted antidiscrimination programs in response to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Dobbin and Kalev 2013) to symbolize compliance with antidiscrimination law (Dobbin 2009). In the 1980s, Human Resource Professionals navigated a changing political environment by reframing antidiscrimination programs as diversity programs designed to support business success (Dobbin and Kalev 2013). This essentially equated "antidiscrimination" with "diversity," though these things are different: "diversity" does not center on fair treatment and representation for marginalized groups, but rather the need to value and respect differences (Edelman, Fuller,

and Mara-Drita 2001). In the 2010s, organizational diversity discourse progressively shifted towards emphasizing equity and inclusion in addition to diversity (Rajasekar, Gunderson, and Wilcox 2025), but this is now being challenged by the "War on Woke," which has succeeded in implementing policies that block and dismantle DEI initiatives (Garces et al. 2025; Ng et al. 2025).

Organizational diversity programs have operated primarily as performative attempts to manage stakeholders' impressions (Ahmed 2007; Berrey 2015; Collins 2011; Thomas 2020). Diversity has generally been seen as a "moral imperative" (Bell and Hartmann 2007:89) and an important goal for organizations (Bowman Williams and Cox 2022) – and diversity initiatives are a key way that companies market themselves nowadays. Organizations implement diversity initiatives to increase their appeal by signaling inclusivity, particularly through "the aesthetics of race and gender" (Kele and Cassell 2023:704). Audiences find this persuasive: the mere presence of diversity programs prompts people to perceive organizations as treating minoritized groups fairly (Dover, Kaiser, and Major 2020; Edelman et al. 2011). Nonetheless, research shows that diversity initiatives enable organizational leaders (who are often White men) to claim they are being socially conscious while doing little to address inequalities (Berrey 2015; Collins 2011; Thomas 2020). In other words, formal diversity structures are often "decoupled" (Meyer and Rowan 1977) from informal practices within organizations, such that inequitable practices endure despite formal diversity initiatives (e.g. Berrey 2015).

Inequalities and Diversity in the Tech Industry

Workplace inequalities and conflicting claims about diversity are particularly apparent in the technology industry. Tech companies "work broadly in the Internet economy [… and brand] themselves as 'flat' (antibureaucratic) organizations, informal and playful in work style, and

oriented toward a normative vision – making the world a better place" (Neely et al. 2023:321). High-tech culture centers the idea that new technology solves problems, resulting in progress and social benefits (Kunda 1995; Metcalf and Moss 2019; Zilber 2006). Despite this progressive outlook, other beliefs, values, and norms that dominate high-tech tend to reflect perspectives and perpetuate privileges of White men. "Ideal" tech workers are intensely committed to work, have a "geeky" personality, and exhibit high-level quantitative skills – attributes stereotypically associated with White men (Alfrey and Twine 2017; Cooper 2000; Wynn and Correll 2017). Resultingly, women – particularly Black or Latina women – often struggle with lower evaluations of competence, a felt lack of "fit" (Alfrey and Twine 2017; Wynn and Correll 2017), and exclusion from opportunities and social networks (Alfrey and Twine 2017; Mickey 2019). Tech culture masks these disparities by attributing success to hard work and rendering topics of inequality irrelevant to workplace considerations (Cech 2013). Accordingly, scholars typify tech companies as struggling with "chilly climates" (i.e. discriminatory cultures) that contribute to ongoing underrepresentation (Alfrey and Twine 2017; Neely et al. 2023): Blacks and Hispanics respectively make up about 7.5% and 8% of high-tech workers (versus Whites' 68.5%), while women make up about 36% (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2016). Women of color are particularly underrepresented; for example, Black women and Latina/Hispanic women each comprise only about 1% of software developers (Ashcraft, McLain, and Eger 2016).

Issues of underrepresentation and discrimination in high-tech have garnered frequent criticism from scholars and the news media. For instance, in August 2017, a White man who was a Google software engineer published a memo condemning Google's diversity programs as "discrimination" and arguing that women's underrepresentation in high-tech is due to biological differences (Conger 2017). High-tech diversity subsequently became a topic of public attention,

with news outlets repeatedly reporting on ongoing race and gender underrepresentation in the industry (e.g. Dean and Bhuiyan 2020; Harrison 2019; Kraus 2020).

Following this public attention, tech companies began publicly stating their support for diversity and DEI. For example, in response to the Google memo, Google fired the employee in question and claimed diversity as a key value (McGregor 2017). During summer 2020, following the murder of George Floyd and associated Black Lives Matter protests, companies like Microsoft, Apple, and Google pledged support for racial equity and justice (Dean and Bhuiyan 2020; Kraus 2020). Such statements reflect tech companies' longstanding attempts to claim progressivity (Metcalf and Moss 2019; Neely et al. 2023; Zilber 2006). However, high-tech diversity initiatives have had little impact, and scholars continue to call for research examining how to meaningfully address inequalities in the industry (Neely et al. 2023). Though tech companies are not alone in their attempts to claim identities as diversity supporters, such claims can be particularly jarring in high-tech given its intensified patterns of inequality and discrimination (Alfrey and Twine 2017), and high-tech inequalities have far-reaching implications due to the industry's powerful, dominant, and salient role in contemporary social life (Neely et al. 2025). Examining how employees make sense of these contradictions can help researchers better understand perceptions of diversity initiatives, which are increasingly politicized in US society.

Employee Impressions of High-Tech Diversity Initiatives

As critical scholarship highlights the insincerity of organizational diversity, one attendant line of research examines how individuals make sense of diversity initiatives. Studies show that people of color and women are more likely to support diversity initiatives, while Whites and men are more likely to oppose them. Minoritized groups tend to understand structural inequality and

portray diversity initiatives as a potential remedy, whereas privileged groups often frame diversity initiatives as offering unmerited benefits (Bowman Williams and Cox 2022; Rajasekar et al. 2024; Scarborough et al. 2019) in line with long-standing American narratives of meritocracy and individual achievement, which continue to dominate in high-tech (Cech 2013). Yet individuals also often carefully curate what they say about diversity to manage appearances. (For example, Whites often claim to support racial diversity to convey moral goodness yet also denounce policies that support it; Mayorga-Gallo 2019; Rajasekar et al. 2024). Individuals may be dishonest about their stance on workplace diversity because organizations establish "legitimate" and "illegitimate" diversity narratives and pressure employees to comply (Berrey 2015; Wilcox 2025; Wingfield and Alston 2014).

A smaller body of research examines how employees make sense of the disconnect between organizations' promises and actions regarding diversity. This work reveals concerns among some that diversity initiatives operate more as illusion than meaningful practice. For example, one study exposes employee concerns that diversity policies create a positive image for organizations but fail to address inequalities (Ahmed 2007). Another similarly highlights that employees appear critical of diversity initiatives despite lacking suitable language to articulate their critiques (Thomas 2020).

Only a handful of studies have examined employees' impressions of diversity in the technology industry specifically. These studies show that while tech workers construct themselves as progressive diversity supporters, they are largely permissive of tech companies' unsuccessful diversity initiatives (Alfrey 2022; Luhr 2023). Tech workers tend to overlook considerations of structural racism when discussing impressions of diversity in their organization and industry, rather highlighting their coworkers' brilliance and geographic diversity (Alfrey

2022). They also tend to construct their own companies as strong diversity supporters by highlighting ongoing issues at other companies and emphasizing the "effort" that their companies put into supporting diversity (Luhr 2023). These practices are encouraged by high-tech professional culture, which normalizes the "overwhelming Whiteness of organizations" (Alfrey 2022:13) while propagating ideologies of meritocracy and individualism (Metcalf and Moss 2019; Zilber 2006) and treating topics about inequality as "off limits" (Sharp et al. 2012; Wilcox 2025).

Are members of underrepresented groups more critical of tech companies' diversity initiatives? Existing research points to conflicting possibilities. Underrepresented workers of color may be more critical of high-tech diversity initiatives due to ongoing underrepresentation and racism in the industry (Alfrey 2022; Luhr 2023): for example, Black tech employees may be "less likely to describe their companies as diverse" (Luhr 2023:10) and more likely to note ongoing racism at work (Alfrey 2022). Similarly, women may question high-tech diversity initiatives given concerns that they exacerbate gender-related stigmatization (Sharp et al. 2012). These findings align with research examining perceptions of diversity initiatives in general, which suggests that individuals with marginalized identities are more supportive of equity-directed initiatives than White men (Bowman Wiliams and Cox 2022; Scarborough et al. 2019). Yet evidence also suggests that people of color and women may frame high-tech diversity in a manner similar to White men, minimizing patterns of systemic racism or sexism as encouraged by industry norms (Alfrey 2022; Luhr 2023; Sharp et al. 2012). Recent research in the finance industry finds that support for diversity policies and the type of diversity being pursued can reflect interviewees' own racial and gender identities (Wingfield and Roach 2025), but this remains under-explored in high-tech. Further exploration of how tech employees make sense of

competing narratives of high-tech diversity, and whether this varies by race and gender, will enhance understanding of support for and resistance to high-tech diversity initiatives.

We argue that examining how employees evaluate the *authenticity* of high-tech diversity initiatives furthers a more nuanced understanding of these considerations. First, this helps sociologists juggle organizations' claims of being "diversity supporters" with recognition of ongoing organizational inequalities. In the neoliberal era, organizations utilize diversity initiatives as marketing schemes to aid in capital accumulation (Thomas 2019); consequently, being able to account for the contradictions of organizational diversity initiatives while also studying audiences' impressions of them is necessary. Second, examining impressions of organizations' authenticity is particularly informative because authenticity has become a predominant concern in postindustrial society (Erickson 1995). When authenticity is a common interest or value, it can illuminate how individuals with widely varying social identities and lived experiences might express similar impressions of diversity initiatives.

The Authenticity of High-Tech Diversity Initiatives

Research examining evaluations of organizational diversity can benefit notably from utilizing the novel framework of organizational authenticity. "Organizational authenticity" is the extent to which an organization is seen as "true" to itself (Lehman et al. 2019a). Existing literature (Joo et al. 2019; Lehman et al. 2019a, 2019b; McShane and Cunningham 2012; Pamphile and Ruttan 2022; Shen and Kim 2012) suggests at least four dimensions of organizational authenticity:

1. *Commitment:* perceived sincerity of claimed values.
2. *Conformity:* perceived adherence to "the norms and expectations of [the organization's] social category" (Lehman et al. 2019a:13).

3. *Consistency:* perceived alignment between claimed values or beliefs and actual practices, and between internal and external practices.[1]
4. *Transparency:* perceived willingness to openly share information and take responsibility for actions.

So far, this framework has primarily been used in management and related fields to investigate consumer perceptions of businesses and brands. Research with employees has been much less common (Lehman et al. 2019a; Pamphile and Ruttan 2022). Yet prior work confirms the significance of employees' perceptions of organizational authenticity. Employees who perceive their organization as authentic demonstrate greater productivity (Cording et al. 2014), felt ability to be authentic at work (Wilton et al. 2020), and organizational commitment (Marcinko 2020).

Research applying the organizational authenticity framework to study employee's impressions of organizational diversity is in its early stages. Two prior studies in the field of management employ experimental methods to evaluate how company demographic data and public displays of diversity generally impact perceived authenticity (Apfelbaum and Suh 2024; Marcinko 2020). These studies demonstrate the relevance of perceived commitment, consistency (Marcinko 2020), and transparency to perceptions of organizational authenticity, calling for further attention to the perceived authenticity of diversity initiatives (Apfelbaum and Suh 2024; Marcinko 2020). To our knowledge, only one prior study uses an organizational authenticity lens to qualitatively examine how *employees* perceive diversity initiatives (Wilcox et al. 2026). This sociological case study examines a Hispanic-serving research university, finding that faculty perceive their institution as inconsistent in its approach to supporting (1) Hispanic students and

[1] In sociological terms, consistency can also be understood as the perceived absence of decoupling.

faculty and (2) faculty achievements. However, this study cannot address qualitative variation by race and gender and calls for future research on this topic (Wilcox et al. 2026).

The current study employs the organizational authenticity framework to examine how tech employees make sense of high-tech diversity efforts and whether this meaning-making varies by race and gender. This makes two key contributions to existing literature. First, it helps unravel how individuals weigh considerations of authenticity to evaluate conflicting messages about organizational diversity. This furthers understanding of "firms' diversity actions from an impression management lens" and employees' responses to image-motivated diversity efforts, a topic of investigation recently called for by organizational diversity researchers (Roberson et al. 2024:11). Second, this study further illuminates the grounds on which different groups of employees may support or criticize high-tech diversity initiatives. This helps explicate possible indifference towards diversity initiatives and how diversity initiatives in the most globally-powerful industry (Neely et al. 2023) might evolve moving forward.

Methods

We analyze data collected through 31 in-depth interviews conducted between June 2019 and March 2020 with employees and managers of a large US-based technology company. Focusing on one company enables greater familiarity with the context interviewees spoke from and controls for variation across firms (e.g. in organizational culture or demographic composition), ensuring that differences between interviewees are not due to their having different employers. This firm is viewed as a relatively strong supporter of diversity: it has been recognized in the business and popular media as a nice place to work and a good workplace for women. It also maintains various diversity initiatives (e.g. affinity groups; targeted recruitment; paid parental leave), which are regularly advertised on internal messaging boards and make prominent

appearances on its website to evince claims of having a diverse culture and supporting work/life balance. Interestingly, despite the firm's attention to diversity, many interviewees portrayed their employer as demographically comparable to other large tech companies, noting it's obvious underrepresentation of people of color and women.

The first author obtained permission to interview firm employees from a high-level executive. Following IRB approval, participants were sought via open calls for volunteers (which described the study as an examination of tech employees' perceptions of diversity in the workplace and tech industry) shared on the company's internal messaging boards and via email. No incentives were provided for participation. Though the majority of participants (27) were located via open calls for participants, as interested volunteers dwindled, snowball sampling was utilized to identify further participants until a point of data saturation was achieved. The final sample of 31 employees represents less than 1% of the company's US workforce. The majority of the sample 1) had a background and/or college degree in a STEM field and 2) were employed in technical positions (e.g. software developer, tester) or managed those who did technical work. However, five interviewees held sales-related roles and did not have STEM backgrounds. All interviewees held a bachelor's degree or higher. The sample was relatively diverse by gender and race. It was also relatively diverse by age – approximately half of interviewees were Millennials (up to 38 years old), and a quarter each Gen X and Baby Boomers (39-54 or 55 and older, respectively, at time of study). Sample descriptive statistics are documented in table 1.

- TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE -

Interviews were semi-structured, with questions concerning interviewees' perceptions of diversity, social dynamics and diversity initiatives in their workplace, and diversity in high-tech. Sample questions include: "Do you think the tech industry values diversity? What do you think

they see as valuable about it?" and "How do you think companies in the tech industry usually go about increasing diversity?" While interview questions provided space for discussing the authenticity of high-tech diversity, they did not ask directly about this – rather, interviewees' concerns about authenticity arose organically. Prior interview research has taken a similar approach (e.g. McShane and Cunningham 2012).

The first author conducted each interview. Most interviews took place in-person, in private on-site offices, though five interviews were completed via phone based on circumstance. Interviews lasted an average of 82 minutes (range: 53-112) and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Only four interviewees did not consent to audio-recording; in these situations, the interviewer took detailed written notes during the interview and transcribed it promptly afterwards.

The first author imported transcribed interviews into the qualitative analysis software NVivo. After re-familiarizing herself with the text, she coded the data via open and focused coding, utilizing an inductive approach informed by grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). During the open coding stage, she developed initial codes to capture what was going on in each line, particularly focusing on interviewees' impressions of diversity in high-tech. She then conducted focused coding to further explore initial codes, continuously comparing initial codes to each other and with the existing data (Charmaz 2014). Earlier rounds of coding, along with memoing to help make sense of emerging codes, led to the identification of themes including "caution about the level of progress made" (represented by codes such as "lack of change" and "companies value profit more") and "optimism about diversity initiatives" (represented by codes such as "companies are trying" and "it's getting better"). Through further comparison, coding,

and memoing, these codes were identified as representing evaluations of organizational authenticity, and the themes reframed accordingly.

As a qualitative researcher, the first author emphasized attention to positionality throughout the research process. When recruiting for interviews, she utilized open calls for volunteers so individuals would not feel pressured to participate. She offered those who volunteered the option of meeting outside their workplace for increased privacy (though none elected this option). While conducting interviews, she (a White woman) focused on actively listening to and empathizing with interviewees, and refrained from any verbal or nonverbal communications which could be interpreted as indicative of judgment or disrespect. During data analysis, she aimed to form an interpretive understanding of interviewees' statements; grounded theory practices such as recognizing one's role in the research process and grounding findings in the data helped to support this end (Charmaz 2014).

Results

While interviewees pointed to limited ways high-tech diversity initiatives appeared authentic, each also expressed skepticism and doubt about the authenticity of such initiatives. Interviewees' deliberations focused on four substantive considerations: diversity initiatives as (1) motivated by profit-seeking (authenticity dimension of commitment), (2) a form of organizational impression management (dimensions of conformity and commitment), (3) disconnected from reality (dimension of consistency), and (4) reflective of effort (dimension of transparency). While distinct, these considerations were in some ways intertwined. Interviewees' assessments reflect their conceptualization of organizational diversity as representational diversity: interviewees

depicted "diverse" tech companies as those who employ a representationally diverse workforce, particularly in terms of race and gender.[2]

Questionable Commitment: The Profit Motivation

Interviewees spoke to the authenticity of high-tech diversity initiatives first by examining their underlying motivations. Across race and gender, interviewees conveyed that tech companies' approach to diversity follows from their profit orientation. Given this prioritization of profit, some interviewees questioned companies' authentic commitment to diversity.

Interviewees suggested that tech companies seek representational diversity because it helps create better, more broadly appealing products, thereby supporting business outcomes and increasing profits. When asked what she thought tech companies see as valuable about diversity, a Black woman who we refer to as Tanya (a pseudonym)[3] reflected:

> You get a better product when you have more people who have different opinions providing it. When it's all just a bunch of people going, 'yeah that looks good,' and you get it out to the marketplace and people are like, 'that doesn't make sense, did you ask any people with disabilities about this? Did you ask any Black people? Did you ask any minorities? Did you ask any women?' And then it's like, 'no, we just took the word of the eight White men that were in the room when we created it.' […] Whatever your product is, I think it's just diversity of thought creates it.

Later, she elaborated: "I think they're slowly learning that that does contribute to a better product, better bottom lines for the company." Like other interviewees, Tanya constructs representational diversity as a means for tech companies to develop new ideas and better products, implicitly echoing the business case for diversity. Interviewees also indicated the prevalence of the business case at their own company, as illustrated by Barbara (a White woman):

> [Recently] there was a lot of emphasis on trying to […] hire in some interns that are on the Autism Spectrum. Cause they – some of these kids have such brilliant minds; their

[2] Some interviewees also noted ability, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, or religion.
[3] All interviewees are assigned pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

> behaviors may be such that it seems a little different from the rest of the workforce, but we want to be able to tap into those brains too, because they are great minds; they have great ideas.

Interviewees commonly framed representational diversity as a smart business choice and suggested that tech companies are "starting" to realize its business value, implying this was previously overlooked.

During these discussions, some interviewees suggested that a profit motive is morally suspect and indicates inauthentic commitment. Jordan (an Asian man) discussed:

> A tech company is a corporation and a corporation's number one like goal is profit. And profit comes from a workforce. Or whatever. You know. And I think like if you want to maximize profit, you have to [support diversity…]. I would say that they value – it's the monetary value of it; maybe that's just me being cynical about it, but I think that that's realistic. […]
>
> I think primarily, if most corporations were asked, like a board or whatever, it would definitely be [that they value diversity] from like a profit standpoint, no matter what other reason they told you. If they could make more money with every single person being a White dude, like that's – but. They can't do that obviously, no.

Jordan conveys dissatisfaction with the notion that tech companies only support diversity to increase profits. By noting that tech companies would maintain inequitable practices if they could get away with it, he suggests that high-tech treats diversity as a means to an end rather than exhibiting true commitment. Comparably indicating concerns about profit-based motivations, Troy (a White man) reflected:

> My cynical side is the companies that are profit-driven probably only care if it's going to help them reach our audience. The tech companies that, again, are there on a broader, bigger mission, probably do actually value it a bit more because they recognize the benefits of it on a lot of levels.

He frames companies who are value-driven as having a more authentic commitment to diversity, suggesting that diversity initiatives designed solely for business outcomes are morally dubious.

Some interviewees conversely suggested skepticism of tech companies' commitment by arguing that tech companies do not *actually* seek representational diversity. They explained that tech companies hire candidates who are most qualified, without regard for diversity. Chelsea (a Black woman) observed that tech companies prioritize finding "that person who can code," so:

> To go and look for specific, like diverse candidates, I don't think they're doing that. I just don't think they're doing it. I think if somebody that comes around, comes around, then it's like, oh, OK. But I don't think they're actively looking for, like, we need diversity in our company in order for us to succeed. That's not an initiative for them.

As Chelsea illustrates, these interviewees demonstrated the prevalence of meritocratic beliefs in high-tech, suggesting that such beliefs foster an emphasis on job candidates' skills and abilities (rather than diversity). Interviewees relatedly asserted that tech companies may overlook hiring for diversity due to prioritizing speed and quick profit maximization instead. Wesley (a White man) remarked that tech companies "may be optimizing for quickest time to value," reflecting:

> Sometimes I think people – diversity is not convenient in the minds of some of these people as far as aligning with their immediate goals. I mean, you could argue that's a very shortsighted way to look at things, because it is, but. I think that's some of it.

A few interviewees took this argument to an extreme, suggesting that tech companies might even *resist* hiring a representationally diverse workforce due to preference to speed up decision-making and product development. Though framing high-tech as valuing business outcomes over diversity seems distinct from framing high-tech as valuing diversity for its profitability, these perspectives share an assumption that profit is the top priority and commitment to diversity is lacking, helping to explain how some interviewees voiced both considerations.

Overall, interviewees across race and gender voiced mostly similar skepticism of the drive for profit in high-tech. While interviewees' reflections were sometimes self-contradictory, they consistently centered the idea that profit is the top priority, calling to question diversity initiatives' authenticity by invoking concerns about tech companies' commitment. This

contributes to the diversity literature by suggesting that the "business case" – the most common justification of diversity initiatives in the neoliberal era (Berrey 2015; Thomas 2019) – may foster critiques of diversity program inauthenticity.

Suspicious Conformity: Attempts to Manage Organizational Image

Despite questioning tech companies' pursuit of diversity, interviewees highlighted that tech companies *attempt to convey* support for diversity. This reflected a broader impression among interviewees – across race and gender – that tech companies use diversity initiatives to conform to social norms and manage their public image. This generated suspicion of diversity initiative authenticity in the dimensions of conformity and commitment.

Interviewees depicted social pressures as prompting the normalization of diversity initiatives in the US tech industry. For example, when asked how he thought the industry defined diversity, Troy (a White man) responded that "there are a variety of political pressures—and political in this case, not just 'being from Washington' type of political, but public opinion type political" that lead tech companies to indicate support for diversity. Amanda (a White woman) highlighted tech companies' attempts to claim "progressive" identities: "I think the tech industry definitely values being a progressive industry, and what is progressive now is being diverse." Interviewees suggested that tech companies construct identities as diversity supporters to help navigate contemporary social norms. Some framed such identity construction as a form of corporate "marketing" or "branding" – verbally (using these terms) and through their actions (for example, when asked how his employer defined diversity, Benjamin, a White man, retrieved their "brand book" from his desk drawer). Other interviewees described tech companies' claims to support diversity as a way of preempting discrimination accusations ("Oh, we're gonna get in trouble if we don't do something about this," said Katie, a White woman, summarizing her

perception of companies' approach). Interviewees realized that for organizations, constructing an image as a diversity supporter does not require deep commitment – it only requires *appearing* to support diversity. This means tech companies can adhere to norms of supporting diversity by simply claiming it as a value.

For interviewees across race and gender, noticing tech companies' conformity to norms of supporting diversity led to impressions of diversity initiatives as inauthentic. Veronica (a Black woman) clearly illustrated this:

> I think diversity has become a metric that people try to meet. And it's similar to how this company runs. You need your numbers to look a certain way so you can make a press release and say, 'look, we are diverse. We care.' […] My friend, she works at a different tech company, and she was saying that they have a diversity and inclusion person, but their job isn't really to do anything – it's just to be a head of a group to say, 'look, we're trying.' And I think if you looked at tech as a whole, you'll find the same thing.

Shortly thereafter, in discussing her employer's diversity initiatives (specifically their affinity groups), Veronica reflected:

> It's one of those things where you do the show to say you did it, but not necessarily because you want a particular end in result. Or even understand the value of the end results, more so [it's] an exercise because other companies are doing it.
>
> (Interviewer: OK. So there's pressure from other companies, so you have to fit in or something?)
>
> Yeah. Other companies, and when your numbers don't look good, people can point that out. It's much harder to point out the inner workings of something when you're not inside of it. So as long as you can make it look good to the outside world, you can kind of claim that you're doing right.

Veronica discusses the normalization of diversity initiatives and indicates skepticism of tech companies' support for representational diversity given awareness that companies can get by with superficial commitment. Susan (a White woman) voiced similar suspicion of seemingly performative high-tech diversity efforts:

> We are an industry who still seems to really want to tout that we are inclusive. It's kind of made a big deal of. It's, you know, everything from going and making sure that when you post a picture that there's somebody on there that is an ethnic minority, somebody in a wheelchair, somebody with glasses, somebody who is stereotypical of what those different categories are. An older person. I mean, it's very intentional. […] I don't know what's real and what is being championed because they think it's the right thing to do.

Susan appears dubious of high-tech diversity – given the normalization of "touting" inclusivity, she questions whether companies who do this have "real" commitment.

Interviewees especially evaluated corporate conformity to diversity-related norms as an inauthentic, image-focused effort when it coexisted with instances of organizational inequality. For example, William (a Black man) recounted that he had rarely seen Black job candidates hired during his time at this firm, concluding "it's not something that they value beyond just doing the bare minimum so that you don't get yourself in trouble." He went on to say of tech companies in general:

> I think if you put a lot of CEOs and executives […] if you put them in a room, and you really asked them, do you value this or are you just doing this because it's good for you, it keeps you out of the headlines and makes you look like a more socially responsible company. I'd say most of them will probably say it aloud: it's something they're doing just so they don't end up in the news.

William worries that tech companies value diversity not inherently, but as a means of managing their public perception – particularly given his experiences with his employer. Abby (a White woman) similarly came to see her employer's diversity efforts as image-focused after finding out that they treated one of her friends with a disability poorly: "After hearing his experiences and seeing everything they talk about, I am a little bit leery of like – is this just some big publicity, public relations thing?" Though the "true" intent underlying corporate diversity initiatives can be near impossible to discern, it becomes extremely suspect when companies maintain inequitable practices.

Interviewees' deliberations suggest that companies' attempts to create a pro-diversity image can be interpreted as *in*authentic when audiences see such conformity as performative. Specifically, seeing performative diversity efforts can prompt conclusions that companies are manipulative, unfair, and lacking true commitment to diversity. Considering prior research, which underscores that companies with a pro-diversity image can be seen as more "fair" and equitable (e.g. Dover et al. 2020; Edelman et al. 2011), and that conformity contributes to perceived authenticity (Lehman et al. 2019a; McShane and Cunningham 2012; Wilcox et al. 2026), we interpret these findings as evidence that audiences may be shifting towards more negative assessments of – and skepticism towards – corporate diversity. This is a possible result of changing social conversations regarding diversity initiatives, as left-leaning critiques have interrogated their ineffectiveness, while right-leaning critiques have condemned them as unnecessary or reverse discrimination. Together, such factors have likely contributed to changes in the perceived authenticity of diversity initiatives today, an idea that we elaborate on in the discussion.

Obvious Inconsistencies: Disconnects Between Claims and Reality

Interviewees across race and gender also suggested that diversity initiatives motivated by conformity can generate issues with inconsistency. When tech companies support diversity to manage their public image, this can lead to misalignment between companies' formal claims and reality, prompting skepticism of the consistency dimension of organizational authenticity.

Interviewees contemplated whether formal diversity claims translate into meaningful informal practices. Many described diversity initiatives as a "check box" or window-dressing for tech companies. Joseph (a White man) reflected:

> I think most big companies make a lot of noise about like, 'oh, we want to be a diverse workforce.' But, fairly clear that it's not. […] I think people will pay lip service to it? Or

> like, you know, a company will set a policy of like, 'oh, we're going to be diverse, we are an equal opportunity employer,' and that kind of thing. But then like, operationally, the individuals in charge of actually making the decisions like aren't going to prioritize having a diverse workforce, so they're going to consciously or unconsciously hire people who are like them.

He emphasizes an obvious disconnect between formal organizational claims and policies versus informal practices, implying that such inconsistencies make diversity initiatives seem artificial. Trina (a multiracial woman), when asked how her company defined diversity, conveyed similar concerns:

> A lot of people say that they understand diversity, and say that they support it – you know, like they know the right things to say in order to blend in – but when you look at their actual actions, they don't line up with what they're saying. They say they support diversity, but then they go and spend all their time with other people just like them, or hire other people just like them. Their words don't match up with how they're actually living their lives.

When asked next how she thought the industry overall approached diversity, she responded: "I think I'd say the same thing as I just did about the wider tech industry."

Interviewees translated such general sentiments into concrete observations via discussion of their employer's diversity efforts (or lack thereof). For example, Katie (a White woman) explained how her company treated diversity like a "check box":

> What I mean by a check box is I don't think they do enough awareness activities, or communications, or training [… they] have ramped up the manager [diversity] training. There never used to be any. […] But what are we really doing? Are we really listening to the employees that go to H.R. with complaints and concerns about this kind of stuff? Are we really, then, trying to support those employees, and try and train and educate the people around them? […] To me, the reason I say a check box is, how does [this company] define diversity, I think it's a – 'this is something we need to do to say we're addressing diversity.'

Katie went on to discuss numerous additional examples of her company treating diversity like a "check box," including offering diversity trainings that stifled marginalized employees' perspectives, allowing White men to continue dominating leadership positions, and building a

diversity task force via appointments by leadership. Chelsea (a Black woman) relatedly criticized the company's failure to initiate diversity-related conversations: "We don't have any courses [about diversity]. We don't have any trainings. We don't have any discussions about race." Noticing the company's lack of intentional and impactful diversity initiatives led interviewees to see its formal claims of supporting diversity as decoupled from informal practices.

Interviewees also noted inconsistency between companies' formal diversity claims and actual demographic representation. When discussing their employer, interviewees suggested the company's lack of racial diversity (particularly Black and Hispanic employees, and particularly in professional roles) and lack of gender diversity (particularly in developer roles) contributed to a sense of inconsistency between the company's claimed identity and internal reality. For example, Jordan (an Asian man) explained:

> Most of the people who are receptionists, or in like service roles are people of color. […] It seems pretty indicative of, you know, the roles that people who are hiring expect these people to be in. [This company] talks a lot about diversity and stuff, but I think that a lot of the diversity comes from people in service roles.

Charles (a Latinx man), when asked about the perceived success of diversity initiatives in the tech industry, similarly discussed a lack of change in the company's demographic representation:

> Too early to tell. I haven't seen a whole lot of changes in behaviors here. […] Now that I'm sort of counting, which I wasn't before – you just always assume there's a woman in the room, and you look around and you're like eh, no. […] I wasn't actually polling the room and, you know, doing the math until here in the last 3 or 4 years. And if the math is any indication, we aren't doing much good at all.

Interviewees identified a lack of representational diversity as an indicator of inconsistency, and therefore inauthenticity, among companies that claim to be diversity supporters.

Interviewees' discussions suggest that seeming disconnects between organizational appearance and reality can be central to authenticity evaluations. This finding supports recent research (Marcinko 2020; Wilcox et al. 2026) highlighting the decoupling of formal diversity

initiatives from informal practices – a major topic of interest in the sociological diversity literature – as contributing to the inconsistency dimension of organizational inauthenticity.

Moderating Inauthenticity? The Promise of Transparency

Despite criticizing tech companies' performative diversity initiatives, interviewees also highlighted that tech companies are "trying" to support diversity and improving in this arena. Here interviewees indicated a level of perceived transparency, which helped to curb concerns of inauthenticity.

Interviewees across race and gender stressed tech companies' efforts to support diversity – even when they elsewhere suggested such efforts are ineffective. A common statement from interviewees was "I think they're trying." For example, Susan (a White woman) reflected: "I think it's just one of those industries that's light years behind others." Yet shortly thereafter, she noted: "I think the tech industry is trying. […] They've gone the extra length to educate themselves on *how* to include. And I think that's a big step" (italics in original). This balance of critique and praise was common even in interviewees' discussions of their own company. Charles (a Latinx man) reflected when asked what he had seen tech companies do to increase diversity:

> [This company] definitely has done things lately to try to make [us] aware of the benefits of diversity, and they're trying to at least introduce us to the vocabulary of diversity. So yes, I would give [them] credit for coming into that recently.

That companies are "trying" is exactly what companies want employees to conclude, as Veronica noted above (mentioning that diversity and inclusion directors exist so companies can "say, 'look, we're trying'"). Companies benefit from convincing audiences of their "trying" to support diversity because this suggests that companies are engaged in ongoing work to live up to their claimed identities as diversity supporters.

Interviewees discussed (1) diversity initiatives and their improvements over time and (2) improving demographic representation as evidence of companies' "trying" to support diversity. Interviewees who discussed diversity initiatives centered those directed towards diversifying the "pipeline" of high-tech job candidates. Candace (a White woman), explained:

> I see companies like [this company] or [names of two other companies] working more closely with historically Black colleges on like tech programs and getting involved – or, you know, like a women in coding type event. You know, companies like [this one] and others will sponsor stuff, too.

She shortly thereafter mentioned, "there's going to be a lag in seeing the results, I think," suggesting she would prioritize possible future returns over concrete present-day outcomes. Interviewees relatedly considered improved demographic representation as proof of companies' efforts, noting changes in the gender and (to a lesser extent) racial composition of their current workplace over time, or comparing the composition of their current workplace to prior workplaces. Tanya (a Black woman), when asked if she thought lack of diversity in the industry was an issue, reflected:

> I think so. […] I don't feel like we're at a place where we can say 'yeah, diversity is celebrated, and it's done well, companies are getting it.' I think some places obviously seem to have a better handle on it than others. I was telling somebody the other day, here, I don't think I've ever really worked around as many women…

Tanya then emphasized that there were a good number of women at this company, and she had "worked other places where that obviously was not the case." While interviewees suggested that tech companies "still have a long ways to go" regarding diversity, they stressed that companies have begun changing their practices to address underrepresentation. Unfortunately, emphasizing this point insidiously distracts from the reality of ongoing, inequitable practices and outcomes.

Interviewees excused and minimized that high-tech has not effectively addressed underrepresentation and exclusion by highlighting the complexity and time-intensive nature of doing so. Amanda (a White woman) remarked:

> Companies like Google who, who saw themselves as very progressive and perhaps very diverse are now being directly confronted with ways in which they're not, and it's starting a conversation in the tech industry… and we've got some of that conversation going around here too, about, like, what does it actually mean, and how to we listen to, like – how can we better listen to people and figure out how people are actually feeling? And how do we make it inclusive instead of just checking the boxes off?

Despite awareness of ongoing issues (e.g. the problematic "Google memo"), Amanda lets tech companies off the hook based on their willingness to entertain conversations about complicated topics of diversity and inclusion. Veronica (a Black woman) similarly reflected, when asked the extent to which she thought high-tech diversity initiatives had been successful:

> I think they will be more successful as time goes on; it just takes time to figure out the right way to do it. I think as long as there's still like support from larger organizations, we'll get there. I don't think we're there yet, but I think we're at least on the right track to figuring out how to do it right.

Though the state of diversity in high-tech is not ideal, Veronica focuses on the promise of the future, noting that effectively advancing diversity "just takes time." As her quote illustrates, interviewees often made statements like "it's getting better" or "I think we're getting there" to highlight tech companies' recognition of and ongoing work to address underrepresentation. Interviewees were somewhat appeased by companies' alleged efforts to take responsibility for diversity, which seemed to indicate a level of organizational transparency. Yet "taking responsibility" is not an outcome. If companies are only expected to recognize underrepresentation and *try* to address it, their ineffectiveness in improving representation may be forgiven.

A few interviewees alternatively excused and minimized the ineffectiveness of high-tech diversity initiatives by questioning tech companies' accountability. These interviewees attributed the ineffectiveness of high-tech diversity initiatives to the educational "pipeline." Carolyn (a White woman), when asked if high-tech's diversity efforts had been successful, responded:

> Not to the level I would like, but. And that's not necessarily their problem […] when you look at what's coming from college, and who's majoring in computer science, you don't have as much diversity there. […] There isn't as much diversity on the college level, so you can't get as much diversity in the working level. I mean, there is a limitation there.

She suggests that tech companies have only limited control over the diversity of their workforce because the college majors that lead to high-tech jobs lack student body diversity. Wesley (a White man) likewise indicated that workforce diversity may be out of tech companies' hands:

> I've found it very hard in these very technical fields to get – to even get candidates that you can consider. And so sometimes I think diversity not – maybe not being represented well in the tech industry – sometimes it may not be for a lack of trying. […] It can be challenging to get diversity just in the pool of people that you're considering for some of these positions.

By proposing that tech companies are not responsible for ongoing underrepresentation, these interviewees portrayed the effectiveness of high-tech diversity initiatives as inconsequential to their authenticity.

Interviewees' emphases on tech companies' "trying" to support diversity – and excuses for ineffective initiatives – align with research finding that tech employees across race and gender tend to minimize structural inequalities in their industry (Alfrey 2022) and take their companies' diversity initiatives as "evidence of effort" (Luhr 2023:8). Likewise, interviewees' reasoning parallels research indicating that employees are more forgiving of decoupling when companies recognize their mistakes, change their approach, and emphasize their ongoing efforts to improve (Turco 2016). We add that highlighting companies' willingness to recognize issues and begin addressing them via diversity initiatives centers a level of perceived transparency that

helps temper perceptions of diversity inauthenticity. While interviewees' overall criticality of high-tech diversity points to a potential vulnerability of tech companies, this vulnerability is mitigated to the extent that employees are willing to accept "trying" as a stand-in for effective diversity initiatives.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined how tech employees make sense of the disconnect between high-tech's progressive, pro-diversity image and ongoing patterns of inequality – and whether this meaning-making varies by race or gender. Analyzing in-depth interviews, we found that tech employees focus on four key considerations when evaluating the industry's diversity initiatives. The first three considerations – the profit motivation for diversity, the impression management motivation for diversity, and the discrepancy between companies' claims and reality – indicated inauthenticity in the dimensions of commitment, conformity, and consistency. Meanwhile, the final consideration – tech companies as "trying" – tempered perceived inauthenticity by suggesting a level of transparency.

This study illustrates how the organizational authenticity framework can benefit sociological diversity research. The now-common neoliberal emphasis on shareholder value and profit maximization permeates organizational diversity initiatives, framing them as a means for maximizing capital rather than addressing social inequalities (Thomas 2019). The organizational authenticity framework helps researchers account for such contradictions created by neoliberal approaches to organizational diversity – and how people make sense of these contradictions – by reframing the "myth and ceremony" (Meyer and Rowan 1977) of diversity initiatives in terms of inauthenticity.

As authenticity is a shared value (Erickson 1995), it offers a shared language for making sense and discussing conflicting narratives of organizational diversity. Interviewees used the language of authenticity to voice somewhat more critical evaluations of high-tech diversity than seen in prior research (e.g. Luhr 2023). Additionally, while interviewees critiqued the motivations and impacts of diversity initiatives, they framed companies' "trying" as a short-term substitute for effective diversity efforts. We therefore argue that individuals who value or claim to value diversity may use the concept of authenticity to cognitively and discursively navigate the contradictions that are imbued in diversity discourse and initiatives. Research suggests that most people do not understand diversity in simple terms, as entirely "good" or "bad" (e.g. Bell and Hartmann 2007). In a similar sense, our study illustrates that people can struggle to interpret diversity initiatives as either "successful" or "unsuccessful"; rather, they may note potentially unethical motivations, possible decoupling between organizational claims and practices, and grapple with a sense that diversity initiatives constitute corporate manipulation – while also appreciating what they see as some level of progress towards diversity. When individuals struggle to make sense of seemingly interwoven pros and cons of diversity initiatives, they may pull on the connecting thread of (in)authenticity to help unravel their thoughts and voice them to others.

Another key contribution of this study stems from exploring whether employees' meaning-making about high-tech diversity varies by race or gender. As diversity programs threaten the privileges enjoyed by Whites and men, prior work suggests that Whites and men are more likely to criticize such programs as "unfair" (e.g. Mayorga-Gallo 2019; Scarborough et al. 2019). Yet in this study, White men voiced similar critiques of high-tech diversity initiatives as did people of color and women – an interesting and novel finding.

How do we make sense of this lack of racial and gender variation? We argue that when authenticity is a shared value, people with varying perspectives on diversity may couch their concerns in the shared language of authenticity, leading to similar-sounding assessments. Individuals who value social justice may use the language of authenticity to call attention to companies' offenses without directly accusing them of being discriminatory or inequitable, which may feel like an overstep (though such accusations can also be incorporated into authenticity assessments). They may likewise frame critiques in terms of inauthenticity to help navigate high-tech norms identifying inequality-related topics as "off limits." When individuals are speaking within their physical workplace, as was the case for most interviewees, couching one's critiques in more neutral language could seem quite practical. This is especially true in the context of highly precarious work in the tech industry (Neely et al. 2023), and particularly for employees of color, who encounter intense pressures to manage their self-presentation in racialized organizations (Wingfield and Alston 2014). [4]

Conversely, individuals who value diversity more superficially may use the language of authenticity to "try on" a more critical perspective when it seems socially appropriate. When public sentiment about diversity aligns with the political left (as was true at the time of this study), privileged individuals may voice critiques of corporate diversity to portray themselves as "good people." Extensive research documents that privileged individuals, particularly Whites, carefully frame their support for diversity to construct a positive identity (e.g. Bowman-Williams and Cox 2022; Mayorga-Gallo 2019). Privileged high-tech workers similarly fashion critiques of their work organization to build a sense of autonomy and control (Kunda 1995). Using the

[4] Importantly, a sense of organizational inauthenticity can disproportionately affect individuals with marginalized identities. For example, perceiving organizational diversity efforts as inauthentic can serve as a constant reminder of workplace racism and sexism (Wilcox et al. 2026) and lead marginalized groups to question their "fit" (Wilton et al. 2020).

language of authenticity may help privileged individuals voice such critiques by enabling them to avoid explicitly discussing inequality, which can make them uncomfortable (see also Bell and Hartmann 2007).

Read alongside prior research and recent events, this study indicates a shift towards more negative assessments of corporate diversity initiatives in the US. Prior research finds that companies with diversity initiatives can be seen as more "fair" and equitable (e.g. Dover et al. 2020; Edelman et al. 2011) – yet our interviewees suggested skepticism of corporate diversity, especially given companies' seemingly superficial initiatives. Interviewees' mistrust of diversity initiatives is likely related to the timing of data collection: during this period, high-tech companies were facing notable criticism for ongoing underrepresentation and ineffective diversity programs (e.g. Harrison 2019; Kraus 2020). Yet it was not until months *after* data collection concluded, in fall 2020, that the anti-DEI narrative of the "War on Woke" first emerged in public discourse (Bissell 2023). Since then, right-leaning frames of DEI as illegal discrimination have engulfed US politics and media, while left-leaning critiques of diversity initiatives' ineffectiveness have continued (e.g. Fayyad 2025). Considering our results within the context of these evolving public narratives and compared to prior research suggests the possibility of declining positive affect towards diversity initiatives – and increasing concerns about their inauthenticity – among those who otherwise claim to be diversity supporters. Future research should directly evaluate this possible longitudinal shift.

Interviewees' criticality of high-tech diversity could stem from study limitations. Recruitment materials, which described the study as examining perceptions of diversity in the workplace and technology industry, may have skewed the sample by appealing primarily to individuals who value or want to appear to value diversity. Indeed, people of color and women,

who tend to show greater support for diversity initiatives than White men (Scarborough et al. 2019), and millennials, who appear more supportive of diversity initiatives than older generations (Wingfield and Roach 2025), were overrepresented in this sample. Findings are therefore likely not relevant to individuals who vehemently oppose diversity and DEI. Relatedly, a shared value of diversity (or of appearing to value diversity) within the sample may have contributed to the lack of racial and gender variation. Future research should utilize quantitative methods and probability sampling to further assess racial and gender variation in evaluations of diversity initiative authenticity.

Nonetheless, this study suggests possible future directions for diversity in high-tech by indicating that in addition to extremist critiques of DEI as "illegal," tech companies must also contend with criticisms of diversity initiatives' inauthenticity. Employees who value equity may nonetheless criticize diversity programs for demonstrating inauthentic commitment, hollow conformity, or organizational inconsistencies. Recalling that diversity initiatives exist largely due to social pressures – to which organizations conform to manage impressions (Berrey 2015; Collins 2011; Thomas 2020) – employees' skepticism of high-tech diversity efforts does not bode well for the future of diversity in high-tech. If external criticisms from the "War on Woke" are compounded by employees' criticisms of (or simple lack of enthusiasm for) diversity initiatives, this could prompt tech companies to eliminate their diversity programming.

In fact, major tech companies including Google are *already* abandoning their diversity programming (Wong and Lee 2025). If the rest of the industry follows suit, workplace inequalities will continue unchecked: White men will continue dominating the high-paying tech job market, and marginalized individuals will continue facing unjust treatment while seeking and working in tech positions (see also Neely et al. 2023). Without high-tech diversity initiatives,

tech products will continue to uphold patterns of societal racism and sexism, as they have in recent history (Noble 2018; see also Neely et al. 2023). Moreover, complete elimination of high-tech diversity initiatives will have spillover effects, likely spawning cuts of diversity programs in other industries as organizations seek to maintain legitimacy (see also Meyer and Rowan 1977). In a moment where diversity and DEI are under Republican-led attack and facing backlash, the authenticity of diversity initiatives has become a highly salient consideration with potentially far-reaching consequences. Moving forward, those who hope to preserve diversity initiatives will need to contend with issues of inauthenticity to further their agenda, especially in order to bolster support within their own organizations for preserving and strengthening diversity initiatives.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability Statement

Due to ethics and privacy restrictions, the data used in this study are not publicly available.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Sample Descriptive Statistics (N=31)

Position Type	
Technical Positions	17
Manager of Technical Positions	8
Sales-Related Positions	6
STEM Background	
Yes	26
No	5
Level of Education	
Bachelor's Degree	18
Postgraduate Degree	13
Race/Ethnicity	
Non-Hispanic White	15
Black	5
Asian	4
Other Race or Multiracial	4
Latinx	3
Gender	
Women	17
Men	14
Generation	
Millennial	15
Gen X	9
Baby Boomers	7