A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS:  
THE INFLUENCE OF SIGNALING, ORGANIZATIONAL  
REPUTATION, AND APPLICANT RACE 
ON ATTRACTION TO SPORT ORGANIZATIONS

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There has been a marked shift in the demography of the United States over the past several decades, and with it has come a growing interest in diversity issues. In response to this, many sport organizations are facing mounting pressure to increase diversity within their infrastructure in different ways (Cunningham, 2011). In addition to the social pressures for inclusive workplaces, there is evidence that diversity and inclusion contribute to better organizational processes and outcomes. A diverse workforce contains a wide variety of knowledge, values, and preferences, thereby allowing for greater problem-solving skills and better decision-making than does a homogeneous workforce (Page, 2007; Richard & Shelor, 2002). Performance should increase because of these process gains, and various studies have illustrated as much. For example, Andresen and Altmann (2006) found a positive influence of age and race diversity in a team’s sporting success in the German soccer league. Later, Nüesch (2009) also suggested relationships between age and tenure diversity and team performance, using extensive match-level data of professional soccer teams. More recently, Cunningham observed a positive association between both sexual orientation diversity (Cunningham, 2011) and racial diversity (Cunningham, 2009), and department performance, particularly when the culture was one characterized by inclusion. These reports coincide with other work showing that diversity is associated with increased interest among potential employees and stakeholders, as organizational diversity is seen as socially responsible (Cunningham & Melton, 2011; Robinson & Dechant, 1997; Suazo, Martinez, & Sandoval, 2009).

Recognizing the benefits, many sport organizations have sought to attract a diverse employee base through their recruitment process. This is achieved in a number of ways, including intentional recruitment and retention of employees
who differ from the typical majority. Many times, sport organizations seek to attract a diverse pool of applicants by conveying a culture of diversity and inclusion—particularly through their external communications (Avery, 2003; Bebbington, Larrinaga, & Moneva, 2008; Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011; Miller & Triana, 2009). From this perspective, when persons seek to learn more about potential employers, they will be attracted to those sport organizations that promote diversity on their websites, brochures, and advertisements, among other communication forms. For instance, Walker et al. (2012) found that individuals spent more time viewing recruitment websites and better recalled website information when the sites included images illustrating diversity-related signals, such as photos depicting racially diverse individuals. Cunningham and Melton (2014) observed that when a fitness club’s advertisements included LGBT-inclusive language, individuals’ attitudes toward the fitness club were positively affected and potential clients considered the fitness club as being more diverse. These results suggest sport organizations can convey a diversity-related signal to the public (i.e., portray themselves as diverse) in order to attract potential employees and consumers. Moreover, people tend to consider the organization sending the diversity-related signal as more diverse and inclusive organization (Cunningham & Melton, 2014).

While the link between diversity-related signals and perceptions of the workplace have been established in various settings, several questions still remain. This is particularly the case with important mediating and moderating processes (Connelly et al., 2011). Specifically, as a diverse workplace is desired and sending diversity-related signals can help achieve this end, many sport organizations—including ones that are truly inclusive and those that are not but that wish to falsely convey as much—engage in these recruitment practices. If this is the case, then how do consumers and job seekers interpret these signals, and do perceptions of authenticity affect their attitudes toward the organization. As an illustrative example, the New York Knicks had several high-profile cases of sexual harassment in the early 2000s (for an overview, see Pedersen, Osborne, Whisenant, & Lim, 2009). Given these activities, how would external constituents interpret diversity-related signals conveying a valuing of women and gender equality by the sport organization? These are otherwise unexplored possibilities.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to examine the relationship among diversity signals, perceptions of the authenticity of those signals, and attitudes toward the sport organization. We draw from signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973) to predict that people will be more attracted to organizations sending diversity-related signals than those not sending such messages. Then, in drawing from the research related to organizational reputation, we predict that the relationship between a diversity signal and positive attitudes toward the organization will be moder-
ated by organizational history of diversity, such that the benefits will be stronger for sport organizations known for their diversity and inclusion efforts. We also consider the role of applicant race, predicting that racial minorities will be more attracted to organizations conveying a culture of diversity and inclusion than will Whites. These hypotheses were tested via an experimental design.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Signaling Theory

Signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973) helps explain ways in which organizations convey diversity-related information to others. An organization creates signals comprised of bits of information that the organization wants to make known. These signals are available to the general public to influence the views and feelings of fans, investors, employees, and other stakeholders. In turn, signal receivers use this information to evaluate the sender’s capabilities (Ferrier, 1997; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Mahon, 2002). More specifically, because of information asymmetries, the public often processes both actions and symbols internally to create an opinion of an organization’s reputation and quality (Ferrier, 1997; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Spence, 1973). Illustrative of these dynamics, Preuss and Alfs (2011) observed that China implemented the 2008 Olympics to signal positive messages related to business and tourism in the country.

Signaling theory is also useful to help understand the relationship between diversity and organizational recruitment. Conceptually, sport organizations can send a diversity-related signal, and receivers would evaluate and re-evaluate the organizations based on the signal when it comes to its diversity-related reputation. In fact, diversity researchers have paid more attention to the signaling theory, and they have explained how organizations convey a diversity-related signal to their potential stakeholders. For example, Miller and Triana (2009) explained how some firms use images of heterogeneous boards of directors to show their strong adherence to social values to organizational stakeholders. Furthermore, Walker et al. (2012) found that racial diversity cues on recruitment websites affect a potential job seeker’s attitude toward the organization. Tuten, in a series of studies, suggested that consumers pay close attention to diversity cues (Tuten, 2006) and are willing to pay a premium price to support inclusive companies (Tuten, 2005). Finally, Cunningham and Melton (2014) found that when a fitness club used an advertisement which contains LGBT-inclusive language, individuals and potential clients considered the fitness club as being more diverse.

These examples suggest that diversity-related signals can have an impact on receivers’ perceptions. Along with Cunningham and Melton’s (2014) study, it is also possible that if a sport organization uses a recruitment poster containing pictures of racially diverse employees, potential job recruits may consider the
organization as more diverse organization than other organizations using posters without such images. As individuals perceive the organization as a more diverse organization than their counterparts, it is also possible that potential employees would be more attracted by the sport organization that sends a diversity-related signal (see also Robinson & Dechant, 1997).

Organizational Reputation for Diversity

People do not interpret signals in a vacuum, but rather couple these cues with their own experiences and interpretations of the environment. This perspective is consistent with a social constructivist perspective, which suggests people use multiple sources of information—both from their current and previous experiences—to develop interpretations of their work environment (Burke, Borucki, & Kaufman, 2002). An organization’s reputation for diversity represents one such environmental cue. That is, people are likely to draw different inferences when interpreting cues from sport organizations known to value diversity and inclusion relative to those without such reputations. Diversity signals from the former group might align with and reinforce previously held impressions of the organization’s valuing and commitment to diversity. On the other hand, diversity signals from sport organizations not otherwise known for their diversity and inclusion might come across as fake, contrived, or lacking authenticity. In this case, the sport organization is likely to be viewed as monolithic in nature, and evaluations of the organizations are likely to be negative (see also Avery & McKay, 2006; Smith, Morgan, King, Hebl, & Peddie, 2012).

While we were not able to identify research explicitly examining these relationships, there is related research to support this position. For instance, Chalmers and Price (2009) found that when a consumer considers a brand or business authentic, this will lead to favorable outcomes such as brand identification, loyalty, and sales. Within the diversity context, Smith et al. (2012) conducted an experiment in which they varied organizational reputation for diversity and the authenticity of their diversity management practices. Participants believed that organizations with a reputation of diversity and inclusion and that engaged in authentic diversity management had the highest commitment to diversity. This work also informs our research, as job seekers’ attitudes are likely to be most positive when diversity signals come from organizations with a reputation for diversity and inclusion.

Applicant Race

Applicant race might also affect the role that diversity signals have on job seekers’ attitudes toward the organization. From a social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) perspective, people develop their social identities based, at least in part, on their demographic characteristics. This process is important be-
cause people will seek to be around others and in environments that offer affirmation of their identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Thus, within the current context, racial minority job seekers, more so than their White counterparts, might prefer to be in sport organizations they perceive to be diverse and inclusive. Similarly, job seeker race might also influence the importance of diversity cues in informing subsequent organizational attraction (Avery et al., 2013).

While relatively few scholars have examined the role of demographics in the interpretations of signals, there is some empirical evidence for these relationships. For example, Martins and Parsons (2007) conducted an experimental study to examine the influence of gender diversity, job seeker gender, and gender identity on organizational attractiveness. They found that among women whose gender was central to their identity, organizational diversity was positively associated with organizational attractiveness. In a similar way, Avery and colleagues (2013) found that participants intended to pursue employment in what they believed to be diverse organizations because those workplaces allowed them to express their social identity. Finally, in a study of the effects of signals on recruiting websites, Walker et al. (2012) observed that African Americans, relative to Whites, spent more time reviewing the websites and were better able to recall the website information when the site contained racial diversity cues than when it lacked such information. These findings are consistent with research among athletic administrators, showing that women, racial minorities, and sexual minorities all express a greater commitment to diversity than do their counterparts (Cunningham, 2008). We suspect this commitment would also manifest in their job search behaviors and attitudes.

**Current Study**

In the current study, we examined the influence of the diversity-related signals on job seekers’ probability they would apply for a job at the sport organization. Based on pilot work (described in more detail in the following section), we developed recruiting posters for a sport organization with a reputation for diversity (Major League Baseball) and a one without (National Hockey League). Following Walker et al. (2012), we then varied our photographs on the poster to signal racial diversity and inclusion (i.e., a mix of racial minorities) or the absence thereof (i.e., all White individuals). The poster also included other recruiting information. Participants were asked to review the recruiting poster and then respond to a questionnaire measuring their perspectives toward the organization.

In drawing from signaling theory and the diversity literature we previously reviewed, we suspected that participants would express a greater probability of applying to the sport organization sending diversity signals through the recruiting poster than their counterparts who viewed a poster without diversity signals (Hypothesis 1). However, in
drawing from the organizational reputation literature, we suspected that a reputation for diversity would moderate this relationship, such that probability of applying to the sport organization would be strongest when sport organizations with a reputation for diversity and inclusion also signaled diversity through the recruiting poster (Hypothesis 2). Finally, Walker et al. (2012) discovered racial minorities are more interested in diversity signals. Drawing from this research, we predicted that the relationship between the diversity-related signal and probability of applying to the sport organization would be moderated by the race of the applicant (Hypothesis 3).

**METHOD**

**Pilot Study**

We first conducted a pilot test to determine the diversity reputation of various sport organizations. We sought to understand what sport organizations had reputations for diversity and inclusion, as well as those that did not. To do so, we collected data from 20 students enrolled at a large, public university in the Southwest United States. They were provided a list of North American-based sport organizations (see Table 1) and asked to provide a diversity reputation rating for each using a scale from 1 (not very diverse) to 7 (very diverse). We limited the list to sport organizations in North America to match the location of the study participants.

As seen in Table 1, participants perceived Major League Baseball (MLB) to have the strongest reputation for diversity ($M = 4.95, SD = 1.50$), while the National Hockey League (NHL) had the lowest diversity reputation score ($M = 2.20, SD = 1.00$). Thus, for our primary study, we developed recruiting posters for these two entities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sport Organization</th>
<th>Diversity Reputation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major League Baseball (MLB)</td>
<td>4.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>Major League Soccer (MLS)</td>
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<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA)</td>
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<td>National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)</td>
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<td>1.64</td>
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<td>Professional Golf Association (PGA)</td>
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<td>National Football League (NFL)</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Hockey League (NHL)</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Participants

Data were collected from 205 students enrolled at a major public university in the United States. The sample included 72 women (35.1%) and 133 men (64.9%). With respect to the racial composition, there were 15 African Americans (7.3%), 22 Asians (10.7%), 34 Hispanics (16.6%), 133 Whites (64.9%), and 1 person who listed “other” (.5%). The year in school varied, as the sample included 55 first year students (26.8%), 37 sophomores (18.0%), 30 juniors (14.6%), 67 seniors (32.7%), and 16 graduate students (7.8%). The mean age was 20.75 years (SD = 1.78).

Procedure

We designed a 2 (signal: diverse or not diverse) × 2 (diversity reputation: diverse or not diverse) × 2 (job seeker race: racial minority or White) between subjects experiment to test the study hypotheses. Questionnaire packets (i.e., a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, the recruiting materials, and a questionnaire) were randomly distributed at the end of the class period to students enrolled in kinesiology classes in a major public university in the United States. Based on the pilot study, MLB was chosen as a more diverse organization and NHL was selected as a less diverse organization. Following Walker et al. (2012), photographs were employed to create diversity signals. For the diverse signal condition, a racially heterogeneous group was shown in one poster. On the other hand, a racially homogeneous (mostly Whites) group was used for the not diverse signal condition. Also, the MLB logo was used for the most diverse organization condition and the NHL logo was used for the least diverse organization condition. These photos were represented as recruiting posters for the purpose of this study. We asked participants to review the recruitment materials and then respond to a questionnaire.

Measures

Participants completed a questionnaire in which they provided their demographic information and responded to items designed to measure the efficacy of the experimental manipulations and the probability they would apply for a job at the sport organization.

We included two items as manipulation checks. The first item was used to assess the degree to which the poster provided diversity signals: “The content of the characteristics of the poster demonstrates diversity.” The second item represented a check on the organizational reputation for diversity: “The organization values diversity.” Responses were made on a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

We measured the intention to apply to the organization, asking participants to provide the probability that they would apply to the organization in question. The item read: “If you were looking for a job, what is the probability that you would apply to this organization?” Response options ranged from 0 (0%) to 10
(90-100%). Others have also successfully used single-item measures to measure one-dimensional constructs (e.g., Wanous, Reichers, & Hudy, 1997; Kwon & Trail, 2005).

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

We first examined the efficacy of the experimental manipulations. Results indicate that participants believed the posters with a racially diverse group reflected diversity more so than the poster with the more homogeneous group (M = 6.08, SD = 1.11, and M = 2.67, SD = 1.63, respectively), F (1, 203) = 307.71, p < .001. Thus, the diversity signal manipulation was successful. In addition, participants believed MLB valued diversity more so than the NHL (M = 5.05, SD = 1.90, and M = 4.50, SD = 2.00, respectively), F (1, 203) = 4.09, p = .04. Thus, the reputation for diversity manipulation was also successful.

Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations are presented in Table 2. Results indicate that race, sex, and age did not have significant main effects on the probability of applying for a job at the organization. On the other hand, diversity signal held a positive association with application probability, but reputation for diversity did not.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses 1-3 predicted participants would express a greater probability of applying to a sport organization that sent diverse signals than one that did not (H1) and that this relationship would be moderated by the sport organization’s reputation for diversity (H2) and applicant race (H3). We tested these hypotheses through a 3-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), with diversity signal, diversity reputation, and applicant race serving as the independ-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>M (%)</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>4</th>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>---</td>
<td>-.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>20.75</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diverse signal</td>
<td>.50</td>
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<td>.03</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diverse reputation</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apply</td>
<td>5.94</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.36*</td>
<td>.10</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. *p < .05. Race coded as 0 = White, 1 = racial minority. Gender coded as 0 = female, 1 = male. Diverse signal coded as 0 = not diverse, 1 = diverse. Diverse reputation coded as 0 = not diverse, 1 = diverse.
ent variables, sex and age serving as the covariates, and probability of applying for a job serving as the dependent variable. Inclusion of the covariate was based on the research showing that participant demographics can influence their attraction to diverse workplaces (Avery et al., 2013; Martins & Parsons, 2007). In presenting the results, we report means and standard errors, thereby accounting for the effects of the covariates.

In support of Hypothesis 1, results of the ANCOVA demonstrated significant main effects for diversity signal, $F(1, 195) = 43.51, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .18$. Participants expressed a greater probability of applying to the sport organization with a diverse signal in the recruiting poster ($M = 7.00, SE = .23$) than the sport organization with a homogenous recruiting poster ($M = 4.84, SE = .23$).

Hypothesis 2 was not supported, as the diversity signal $\times$ diversity reputation interaction term was not significant, $F(1, 195) = .01, p = .95$.

Hypothesis 3, which predicted that race would moderate the relationship between diversity signal and probability of applying to the sport organization, was supported, $F(1, 195) = 13.42, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$. As seen in Figure 1, the draw of working for a workplace sending diverse signals was stronger for racial minorities than it was for Whites.
Finally, the three-way interaction among diversity signal, diversity reputation, and applicant race was not significant, $F(1, 195) = 2.91, p = .09$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$.

**DISCUSSION**

Because employee diversity is associated with improved organizational processes and outcomes (Cunningham, 2009, 2011; Page, 2007; Richard & Shelor, 2002), organizations routinely seek ways to attract diverse job applicants. Increasingly, they have sought to do so through their recruitment materials, with attempts to send signals depicting the organization as one that values diversity and inclusion (Avery et al., 2013; Bebbington et al., 2008). Despite the prevalence of this recruitment tactic, little is known about the intervening processes influencing how people perceive those diversity signals (Connelly et al., 2011). Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the influence of diversity signals, the sport organization's reputation for diversity, and applicant race on intentions to apply for a job at the sport organization.

Consistent with our first hypothesis, diversity signals were associated greater intentions to apply for a position in the sport organization. These findings are consistent with the associated literature in applied psychology (Walker et al., 2012) and sport (Cunningham & Melton, 2014), showing that people value organizations that are perceived to value diversity and inclusion. The results were qualified, however, by applicant race: for racial minorities, application intentions were higher when the recruitment poster contained diversity signals compared to when it did not, but for Whites, diversity signals did not impact their application intentions. Consistent with our previous arguments, we suggest these effects can be explained from a social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). That is, people seek to be in environments where they feel valued and where they can freely express identities important to them (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Within the context of this study, diverse and inclusive workplaces provide such opportunities for racial minorities. Among Whites, however, such an environment might have been less important in their decision making process. In addition, it is possible that because Whites are the social and numerical majority in most organizational contexts, they would be unaffected by the presence of dissimilar others.

Finally, we did not observe effects based on sport organization's reputation for diversity. This is contrary to our hypothesis and suggests that, regardless of the reputation for diversity, sport organizations sending diversity signals will be viewed more positively than their counterparts. These findings could be due to the strength of the manipulation, or lack thereof. As noted in the description of the pilot work and in the manipulation check, participants did perceive MLB as more diverse than the NHL; thus, the manipulation was successful. However, overall ratings of the NHL were not necessarily low, with a
mean score of 4.50. It is possible that reputational effects will only be observed when the sport organization has a long history of discrimination. Future researchers should consider this possibility.

Contributions, Limitations, and Future Directions

This study makes several contributions to the literature. First, although signaling and its effects have been examined in many different contexts (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973), few researchers have examined the influence of signals from sport organizations (for exceptions, see Cunningham & Melton, 2014; Preuss & Alfs, 2011). Given the importance of determining boundary conditions in the theory building process (Bacharach, 1989), such investigations are important. In addition, we responded to Connelly et al.’s (2011) call for more research investigating key intervening processes to better understand how people interpret signals. Inclusion of potential moderators proved instructive given that the main effects of diversity signals were moderated by applicant race.

While the study contributed to the extant literature, there are also potential limitations. First, given the small number of persons from different racial groups, we combined the data from all persons who were racial minority. This is consistent with a number of past studies, but implicitly suggests that racial minorities perceive workplace attributes consistently. This is unlikely the case, and future research is needed with larger samples to further explore potential differences among racial minority job applicants. Second, we drew from a student sample, which some might see as a limitation. However, students are among the most likely to seek new employment in the near future, and researchers have shown students and professionals in the field make similar judgments of organizations (Jawahar & Mattson, 2005).

Finally, we see several opportunities for future research. We previously identified two areas of future inquiry: the need to examine (a) attitudes toward diversity signals among sport organizations with a history of discrimination, and (b) potential differences in attitudes toward diversity signals among racial minority groups. In addition, future researchers could examine whether or not using diversity-related signal influences organizational performance. Many researchers have found having diverse individuals in sport organizations or teams is positively associated with performance (Andresen & Altmann, 2006; Cunningham, 2009, 2011; Nüesch, 2009). Thus, as using diversity-related signal attracted more diverse individuals, it is also plausible that the organization that sent diversity-related signals can become more diverse and a diversity-inclusive organization. As a result, the organizational performance would be positively associated with the diversity-related signaling.
REFERENCES


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