

**Signals of Support: Exploring the Influence of Peer Information on Organizational
Diversity Initiatives**

by

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ABSTRACT

As organizations increasingly invest in promoting diversity initiatives, understanding the factors that shape employees' support for these initiatives is essential. This research investigates the influence of peer support on individual attitudes toward diversity efforts. In a pilot study ($N = 508$), we assessed how providing information on peer support from White men versus women and racial minorities affects participants' support for a proposed diversity initiative, compared to a control condition. In a preregistered online experiment ($N = 1,022$), we analyzed the effect of providing consistent versus mixed peer signals on participants' support for the proposed diversity initiative. Results revealed that when faced with mixed peer signals, individuals prioritized the opinions of women and racial minorities over those of White men, challenging assumptions rooted in White men's traditional positions of authority. Furthermore, participants perceived diversity initiatives as more effective when they received consistent information regarding peer support from both groups, highlighting the need for congruent internal support in fostering effective diversity initiatives at an organization. These findings contribute to our understanding of organizational change strategies and point to an important mechanism through which diversity initiatives might achieve greater success.

Keywords: diversity, organizations, identity, support

PERCEPTIONS OF DIVERSITY INITIATIVES

In 2020, organizations spent an estimated \$7.5 billion on diversity-related efforts. By 2026, the global market is expected to double to \$15.4 billion (PR Newswire, 2021).

Organizations are increasingly making claims in support of diversity and investing in initiatives to help recruit and retain a diverse workforce (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2020). Yet, extant research has shown that many of the most popular diversity initiatives have attained limited success in terms of improving hiring, promotion, representation, and inclusion for traditionally marginalized group members (e.g., see Kalev et al., 2006). One reason for this lagging progress may be a lack of support from employees. Diversity programs often fail to be adopted because of a lack of internal support (Dobbin et al., 2011). If individuals in the organization are not receptive to diversity nor motivated to reduce bias, organizational attempts to address these issues will likely have minimal impact or even provoke resistance among employees (Dobbin et al., 2015).

What forces might shape employee support for diversity initiatives? One possibility presented by prior literature is conformity to organizational values or imperatives. When an organization clearly defines and prioritizes certain values, employees are motivated to internalize those values and conform to the larger culture of the organization they are a part of (Chatman & Cha, 2003). The presence of organizational-level initiatives and policies related to diversity may be sufficient to persuade employees that they should endorse such initiatives, thus reinforcing the perception that diversity is a priority within the organization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Dobbin et al., 2011). However, it may be that diversity initiatives do not provide a clear signal of organizational values. Organizations often feel pressured to create diversity initiatives to maintain a positive reputation (Chang et al., 2019). As a result, employees might be skeptical

about the underlying motives for the creation of an initiative, such that the potential for the initiative to be “cheap talk” undermines support for the initiative.

Instead, it may be the case that peer information – in other words, information about how others perceive the initiative – more powerfully sways employee support. Social norms are a powerful determining force for our own behavior: we use the attitudes and behavior of those around us to determine what is normative, acceptable, and desirable (Cialdini et al., 1991). People are highly motivated to fit in with other members of their social group, so they will alter their own behavior to align with what they perceive to be socially normative (Tankard & Paluck, 2016). By conforming to social norms, people gain social approval, improve their self-concept, and learn more accurate information in ambiguous situations (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Crandall et al., 2002; Sherif, 1936). Conversely, deviating from the norm can result in social sanctions such as ostracism and punishment (Crandall et al., 2002; Schachter, 1951). By leveraging the power of social norms, interventions that alter the norm (i.e., by updating our perceptions of the attitude and behavior of our peers) reliably shift our own attitudes and behavior (Goldstein et al., 2008; Murrar et al., 2020; Murrar & Brauer, 2023; Paluck & Shepherd, 2012).

In the present study, we investigate how providing information about peer support for a new diversity initiative affects participants’ own level of support for the initiative, and how people interpret consistent versus mixed signals of support. In particular, we examine how people react to either consistent or inconsistent information about support from majority and minority group members. We ask whether support from White men – the dominant majority group in the U.S. – will be weighed more or less than support from women and racial minorities based on historical differences in power and vested interests between these groups in the social

hierarchy (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). On the one hand, when faced with mixed signals, people may prioritize conformity to White men's opinions because White men have traditionally occupied positions of authority (DiTomaso et al., 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ridgeway, 2011). Alternatively, recent work suggests that for issues of social justice, women and racial minorities may exert more influence because of their perceived expertise (Saguy et al., 2020; Wallace et al., 2024). As a result, it is also possible that individuals will weigh the opinions of historically marginalized group members more heavily when faced with mixed signals.

To examine these competing perspectives, we conducted a two-part study where people were randomly assigned to see peer information on majority groups' and minority groups' support (or lack thereof) for a diversity initiative. In the pilot study ($N = 508$), participants' own ratings of support for the initiative after receiving information on peer support from the minority or majority group were compared to support ratings in a control condition where no information on peer support was provided. In the preregistered experiment ($N = 1,022$), participants received information on peer support for a diversity initiative from both minority and majority groups, either consistent or mixed in valence. In addition to the primary dependent variable of support ratings, we sought to explore other dimensions of reactions to diversity initiatives (i.e., perceived effectiveness, predicted favorability of outcomes for White men, predicted favorability of outcomes for women and racial minorities, anticipated backlash, and anticipated appreciation from job applicants) to better understand how support for diversity initiatives is shaped.

Signaling Through Diversity Initiatives

Since major social campaigns of the 1960s such as the civil rights and women's rights movements, the idea that organizations bear a social responsibility to embrace and maintain diversity has become increasingly popular (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). As well, research has

shown that diversity makes good business sense for the organization – a more diverse workforce has been found to improve productivity, benefit creativity, and increase profit margins for the organization (Cox & Blake, 1991; Edelman et al., 2001; Herring, 2009). Thus, there are many incentives for an organization to recruit and retain a diverse workforce, which has led to greater investment in organizational diversity initiatives globally (PR Newswire, 2021).

Diversity initiatives can fulfill an instrumental purpose of increasing diversity within the organization, but another function that has received less attention is the organizational norms they signal. The existence of a diversity initiative acts as a signal that the organization cares about diversity and endorses egalitarian values (Edelman et al., 2001). It is valuable for an organization to signal that they care about diversity not only because it attracts diverse talent to their organization, but is a symbol of social cooperation, which differentiates them from the less progressive organizations that do not espouse a commitment to diversity (Shin & Gulati, 2010). Indeed, leaders who use value-in-diversity rhetoric to communicate that diversity is beneficial for the organization (Leslie et al., 2023) have been found to invoke favorable reactions like increased support for diversity and engagement among minority groups (Apfelbaum et al., 2010).

However, there are also many unintended signals communicated by the presence of a diversity initiative, which can hinder the initiative from achieving its stated goals (Dover et al., 2020; Leslie, 2019). For instance, when diversity is described as wholly beneficial without also acknowledging its challenges, as it commonly is, it can be written off as “happy talk” (Leslie et al., 2023). Moreover, people are aware of the many extrinsic reasons mentioned earlier for an organization to establish diversity initiatives, and so the criticism of “cheap talk” has been associated with organizational diversity efforts, wherein they are seen as superficial attempts to signal a commitment to diversity that lack follow-through (Dickens, 2009). Organizations intend

to signal their commitment to progressive norms and reap the benefits of diversity through the creation of diversity initiatives, but that is not always the case (Dobbin & Kalev, 2012; Ely & Thomas, 2020). Given the mixed signals conveyed by diversity initiatives, we look toward the literature on social norms to theorize that a more reliable signal of support for diversity initiatives may be that of peer information.

Peer Information Communicates Social Norms

Social Norm Theory

Social norms consist of descriptive (what people *commonly* do) and prescriptive (what people *should* do) information that guides individuals' behavior and attitudes (Cialdini et al., 1991). The use of social norm messaging, where information about one's peers or relevant others is provided (Murrar et al., 2020; Murrar & Brauer, 2023), has proven to be a powerful way to intervene on individuals' behavior in several contexts, including reducing underage drinking among college students (Jones et al., 2017), increasing towel reuse in hotels (Goldstein et al., 2008), reducing harassment in the classroom (Paluck & Shepherd, 2012), and reducing prejudice across ethnic and racial divides (Corrington et al., 2023; Paluck, 2009). In one intervention study, Paluck and Shepherd (2012) identified widely known students with high social status at a public high school (i.e., popular students and clique leaders) as "social referents," and trained them to speak out against bullying behavior. Social referents provide normative cues regarding common and desirable behavior among the group (Sherif & Sherif, 1964). By shifting perceptions of the collective norm against bullying, Paluck and Shepherd (2012) found that students who came into contact with these social referents became less tolerant of bullying and teachers reported less bullying in classrooms.

More recently, Munger (2017) used social referents at a public university to communicate to marginalized students that their peers held pro-diversity attitudes, subsequently increasing feelings of belonging and bettering grades among marginalized students as well as improving sentiment from non-marginalized students toward diversity and their outgroups. Norms are often seen as a precondition of prejudice such that people express prejudice to the degree that it is deemed acceptable by their peers (Crandall et al., 2002; Munger, 2017; Pettigrew, 1991). Given the important social influence norms exert in situations involving diverse groups, we derived the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Participants will express increased support for a diversity initiative after being informed about peer support from any group, either White men or women and racial minorities, relative to when they do not have any information about peer support.

Hypothesis 2: Participants will express decreased support for a diversity initiative after being informed about a lack of peer support from any group, either White men or women and racial minorities, relative to when they do not have any information about peer support.

Hypothesis 3: Participants' support for a diversity initiative with mixed support from White men and non-White men will be lower than for an initiative with support from both peer groups but higher than for an initiative with no support from either peer group.

Social Dominance Theory

We look to our peers as social referents to understand the group norm, and adapt our behavior accordingly. However, it is not always clear who the social referents are – outside of popularity in a school context, what factors do we use to determine who holds high status in everyday life? One of the most fundamental characteristics that determines status in society is

group identity, particularly race and gender. Social dominance theory posits that humans are organized into systems of group-based social hierarchy, in which ideologies of racism, sexism, nationalism, and classism serve to reinforce and perpetuate the narrative that superior groups dominate over inferior groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In this social hierarchy, White men enjoy the most benefits. They hold a disproportionate share of power, resources, and status above that of women and racial minorities, who are known as minority group members. Integrating social norm theory and social dominance theory, we would predict that White men, by virtue of their high status, will act as the social referents that guide individuals' behavior in most situations. An underlying assumption of social dominance theory is that increases in racial equality are seen as threatening by White men (Sidanius et al., 1996; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Since many White Americans regard diversity initiatives as a threat to their access to resources (Brown et al., 2022; Iyer, 2009; Dover et al., 2016; Norton & Sommers, 2011), they are motivated to be disinterested or resistant to diversity initiatives in order to protect their dominant position (Brown & Jacoby-Senghor, 2022; Plaut et al., 2009).

Hypothesis 4a: Participants will prioritize White men's opinions when peer support for a diversity initiative is mixed, such that they will express more support for an initiative endorsed by White men (but not women and racial minorities) relative to an initiative endorsed by women and racial minorities (but not White men).

Identity and Persuasion

However, public opinion on diversity initiatives is not consistently negative, and in fact, many endorse diversity initiatives (Greenwood, 2023), which contradicts what we might expect if White men were the sole social referents for norms around diversity. A parallel line of work on persuasion shows that the social identity of a source can have conflicting signals, at times either

bolstering or undermining the persuasiveness of their message depending on the relevance of their identity (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Turner, 1991). For example, Black people are regarded as better sources of information than White people for deciding whether an act was discriminatory (Crosby & Monin, 2013), but a White confronter of racism is seen as a more effective advocate than Black confronters (Rasinski & Czopp, 2010). On the matter of diversity initiatives, minority group members might be trusted due to their perceived expertise (Petty et al., 1981; Saguy et al., 2020) or scrutinized because they are seen as biased beneficiaries (Petty et al., 1999; Wallace et al., 2020, 2024). Meanwhile, the identity of White men might detract from the persuasiveness of their message due to concerns that they are self-interested (DiTomaso, 2013; Kunda, 1990), or they are seen as high status peers who establish the social norm (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In short, the group identity of a social referent can be variably perceived, alternatively enhancing or diminishing their effect on the social norm.

Hypothesis 4b: Participants will prioritize women and racial minorities' opinions when peer support for a diversity initiative is mixed, such that they will express more support for an initiative endorsed by women and racial minorities (but not White men) relative to an initiative endorsed by White men (but not women and racial minorities).

Present Study

To distinguish between these hypotheses, we conducted a two-part study. In the pilot study ($N = 508$), we compared the effects of peer information on individuals' own support for an initiative to a control condition where no information regarding peer attitudes was provided. Specifically, participants were either told that there was high/low support among White men at the organization for the initiative, high/low support among women and racial minorities, or given no information on how much their peers support the initiative (i.e., the control condition). Next,

in a preregistered experiment ($N = 1,022$), we manipulated and examined the effects of mixed and convergent signals from peers on support ratings. Participants were told that two peer groups each had similar levels of support for the diversity initiative (high support from both White men and women and racial minorities at the organization or low support from both White men and minorities at the organization) or both peer groups had conflicting levels of support (high support from White men and low support from minorities or low support from White men and high support from minorities).

STUDY 1: PILOT STUDY

In this pilot study, we set out to investigate how people's own support for a diversity initiative differs from the baseline when presented with peer information on how much majority and minority racial groups support the initiative.

Method

Participants

We recruited 508 participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in a 3-minute study. Each participant received \$0.50 in compensation for their participation. Eight participants were excluded prior to randomization because they failed one or more of the attention check questions at the beginning of the study, resulting in a final sample of 500 participants. The sample included 222 men, 271 women, and 7 people who identified as non-binary/third gender. The sample was comprised of 75.4% White, 6.8% East Asian, 6.8% Black, 3.0% Latinx, and 8.0% multiracial people or another identity not listed.

Procedure

Participants were asked to imagine themselves as employees at a fictional company. They read about a new diversity initiative at their organization: "ABC Consulting is implementing a

new structured interview process intended to debias interviews and ensure all applicants for open roles and promotions experience a similar interview process. After the company-wide proposal meeting, employees were surveyed on their attitudes towards this new initiative.” Participants were then randomly assigned into one of five conditions: the control condition, the White men *high* condition, the White men *low* condition, the minority *high* condition, or the minority *low* condition. In the control condition, no information regarding peer support was provided. In the remaining four conditions, high support was expressed as 90% endorsing the initiative and low support as 10% endorsing.

Participants in the White men *high* condition read: “Overall, 90% of White male employees indicated high levels of support for this initiative.” Participants in the White men *low* condition read: “Overall, 10% of White male employees indicated high levels of support for this initiative.” Participants in the minority *high* condition read: “Overall, 90% of women and racial minority employees indicated high levels of support for this initiative.” Participants in the minority *low* condition read: “Overall, 10% of women and racial minority employees indicated high levels of support for this initiative.”

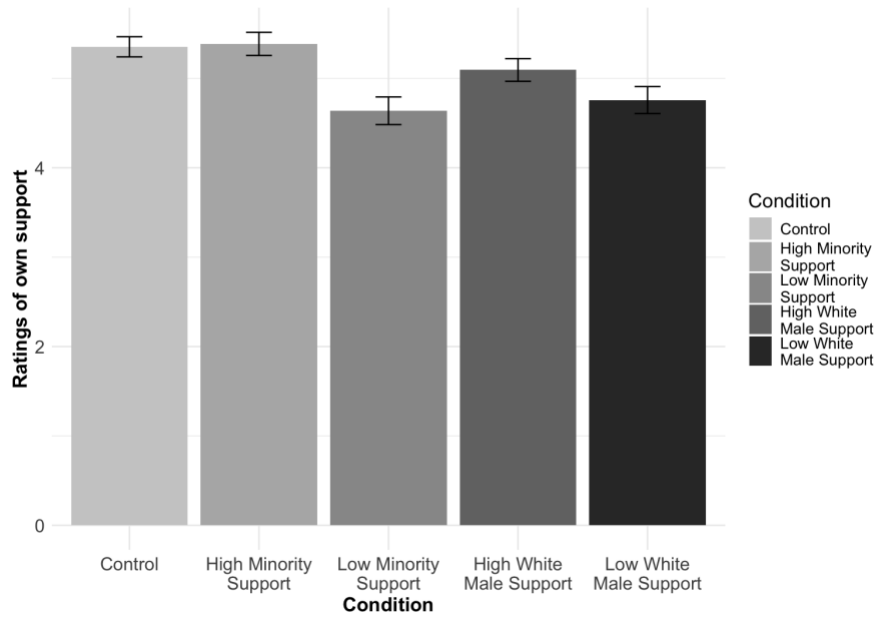
Dependent Variable. The primary dependent variable of interest was participants’ level of support towards the initiative, which was measured in two items, “Would you support this initiative?” and “Would you endorse this initiative?”, presented in random order and summed and averaged in analyses to provide a composite support score. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (“I definitely would not”) to 7 (“I definitely would”).

Results

To address our main research questions in Study 1, we conducted regression analyses with robust standard errors assessing participants' support for the diversity initiative. Our predictors included indicators for experimental condition, with the control condition as the omitted baseline. Participants showed a baseline support level of 5.35 ($SE = 0.14$, $t = 39.2$, $p < .001$) out of 7, which indicates that participants' support for the diversity initiative was generally high even without receiving any peer information. Counter to Hypothesis 1, there was no significant change in participants' level of support when women and racial minorities at the organization exhibited high support for the initiative ($b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .87$), nor when White men at the organization exhibited high support for the initiative ($b = -0.25$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .18$). However, consistent with Hypothesis 2, there was a significant decrease in participants' support for the initiative observed when women and racial minorities exhibited low support ($b = -0.72$, $SE = 0.19$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [-1.096, -0.336]). There was also a significant decrease in participants' support for the initiative when White men exhibited low support ($b = -0.60$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .002$, 95% CI: [-0.976, -0.216]). See Figure 1 for a visualization of the full pattern of results.

Figure 1

Participants' Support for the Diversity Initiative Across Conditions



Discussion

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, we found that informing participants about a lack of support from either White men or women and racial minorities led to a significant decrease in participants' support for the diversity initiative. We failed to find support for Hypothesis 1, such that being informed about support from White men or women and racial minorities for a diversity initiative had no significant effect on participants' own ratings of support for the initiative. Interestingly, it appears that participants have high levels of support for the initiative at baseline, appearing to hold a pre-existing belief that their peers support the initiative, which may suggest that in the absence of mixed signals – either from within the employee group or due to organizational policies that send divergent signals about diversity support – people assume that the presence of an initiative suggests internal support.

This begs the question: how do people interpret mixed signals that suggest that majority group members and minority group members diverge in their support of a diversity initiative? In practice, people may not learn about only one group's support for an initiative; rather, they may get feedback from many peers across identity groups. Moreover, that feedback may diverge in

valence. We hypothesize that one of two possibilities will be true. Given the dominant status of White men, participants may see them as the social referent, leading them to weigh White men's support more than minorities' support when judging an initiative (Hypothesis 4a). Conversely, given their perceived expertise in matters of social justice, support from women and racial minorities might be interpreted as a stronger signal of how they should be behaving. If that is the case, people will weigh minority group members' support more than White men's support when judging an initiative (Hypothesis 4b). In Study 2, we aim to assess these competing predictions.

STUDY 2: ONLINE STUDY

In this preregistered online study, we provided participants with information about how much majority *and* minority groups support the initiative and investigated how this information would affect participants' ratings of their own level of support for the diversity initiative.

Building on Study 1, in which participants were provided information about support from one peer group in isolation, Study 2 assessed reactions to information about support from two peer groups presented simultaneously, which was either consistent or mixed in valence. We also measured people's judgements of effectiveness, palatability, and expected outcomes for majority and minority groups regarding the diversity initiative.

Method

Participants

We recruited 1,022 participants on Amazon MTurk for a 4-minute study. Each participant received \$0.68 in compensation for their participation. Participants were excluded if they failed one or more of the attention check questions at the beginning of the study, resulting in a final sample of 996 participants. The sample included 486 men, 497 women, and 13 who identified as non-binary/third gender or another identity not listed. The sample was comprised of

75% White, 8.5% East Asian, 7.5% Black, 3.6% Latinx, and 5.5% multiracial people or another identity not listed. This study was preregistered at https://aspredicted.org/D2Z_2RL.

Procedure

We followed the same methods as in the pilot study. Participants were asked to imagine themselves as employees at a fictional company and read a statement about a new diversity initiative at their organization: “ABC Consulting is implementing a new structured interview process intended to debias interviews and ensure all applicants for open roles and promotions experience a similar interview process. After the company-wide proposal meeting, employees were surveyed on their attitudes towards this new initiative.” Subsequently, all participants were provided with information about the level of support that White men and women and racial minorities at their organization exhibited for the proposed initiative. Participants were assigned to one of four experimental conditions in this 2 by 2 between-subjects design, varying: support (high vs. low) and demographic group (White men vs. women and racial minorities). They saw that the two groups either exhibited consistent support (*high-high* or *low-low*) or mixed support (*high-low* or *low-high*) for the initiative. See Table 1 for a summary of conditions.

Table 1

Summary of Conditions in Study 2

Condition	Support Level	Demographic Group
1	Consistent (High-High)	White men (<i>High</i>) Women and racial minorities (<i>High</i>)
2	Consistent (Low-Low)	White men (<i>Low</i>) Women and racial minorities (<i>Low</i>)
3	Mixed (High-Low)	White men (<i>High</i>) Women and racial minorities (<i>Low</i>)
4	Mixed (Low-High)	White men (<i>Low</i>) Women and racial minorities (<i>High</i>)

Participants in the *high-high* condition read: “Overall, 90% of White male employees indicated high levels of support for this initiative. Similarly, 90% of women and racial minority employees indicated high levels of support for this initiative.” Participants in the *low-low* condition read: “Overall, 10% of White male employees indicated high levels of support for this initiative. Similarly, 10% of women and racial minority employees indicated high levels of support for this initiative.” Participants in the *high-low* condition read: “Overall, 90% of White male employees indicated high levels of support for this initiative. Meanwhile, 10% of women and racial minority employees indicated high levels of support for this initiative.” Participants in the *low-high* condition read: “Overall, 10% of White male employees indicated high levels of support for this initiative. Meanwhile, 90% of women and racial minority employees indicated high levels of support for this initiative.” After reading about the level of support expressed by other employees at the company, participants were asked to complete a short feedback survey about their own attitudes towards the proposed diversity initiative.

Primary Dependent Variable. The primary dependent variable of interest was participants’ level of support towards the initiative, measured using the same two items as in the pilot study.

Secondary Dependent Variables. We also collected four secondary dependent variables regarding judgments of the initiative's effectiveness, predictions of outcomes for minority and majority groups at the organization, and judgments of the initiative's palatability. Items were presented in randomized order.

Perceived Effectiveness. Perceived effectiveness was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (“Very ineffective”) to 7 (“Very effective”) in response to the question “How

effectively would you expect this initiative to achieve its goal of ensuring that all applicants for open roles and promotions experience a fair interview process?”

Predictions of Employee Outcomes. Predictions of employee outcomes were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (“Strong negative impact”) to 7 (“Strong positive impact”) with two items, presented in randomized order: “How would you expect this initiative to affect outcomes for women and racial minorities at the organization?” and “How would you expect this initiative to affect outcomes for White men at the organization?” Each item was treated as a separate measure of employee outcomes, either for minority or majority groups.

Perceived Palatability. Perceived palatability was measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Very unlikely”) to 7 (“Very likely”) via two items “How likely is it that this initiative will create backlash?” and “How likely is it that applicants will appreciate this initiative?” to reflect the negative and positive dimensions of palatability, respectively.

Results

Regression Analyses: Self-Support

Following our preregistered analysis plan, we conducted an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with robust standard errors predicting participants’ ratings of support for the diversity initiative with an indicator for White male employees’ level of support (0 = *low support*, 1 = *high support*) and an indicator for women and racial minority employees’ level of support (0 = *low support*, 1 = *high support*) as well as interactions between the two predictors. This model revealed that collapsing across all conditions, there was a significant negative effect of White male support, such that participants expressed significantly less support for the proposed diversity initiative when White men at the organization supported the initiative than when White men did not support the initiative ($b = -0.33$, $SE = 0.14$, $p = .02$, 95% CI: [-0.61, -0.05]; see

Table 2). Conversely, there was a significant positive effect of minority group support, such that when women and racial minorities at the organization supported the initiative, participants expressed significantly more support for the initiative than when minority groups did not support the initiative ($b = 0.71$, $SE = 0.14$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [0.43, 0.99]; see Table 2).¹

However, these effects were accounted for by a significant interaction between the two factors of knowing about peer support from White men (*high* or *low*) and knowing about peer support from minority groups for the initiative (*high* or *low*). See Table 2 for full regression results. To further understand the interactions between conditions, we conducted a series of two-sample *t*-tests to compare support between two conditions at a time. Specifically, we found that participants' support was a regression-estimated 1.40 points higher on average when they were told women and racial minorities supported the initiative, conditional on knowing White men also supported the initiative (comparing between the *high-low* [$M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.10$] and *high-high* conditions [$M = 5.56$, $SD = 0.10$; $t = -10.0$, $p < .001$]). As well, support was a regression-estimated 0.36 points higher on average when participants were told White men supported the initiative, conditional on having support from women and racial minorities (comparing between the *low-high* [$M = 5.21$, $SD = 0.004$] and *high-high* conditions [$M = 5.56$, $SD = 0.004$; $t = -2.74$, $p = .006$]). We also found that support was a regression-estimated 0.71 points higher on average after participants were told women and racial minorities supported the initiative when White men did not support the initiative (comparing between the *low-low* [$M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.003$] and *low-high* conditions [$M = 5.21$, $SD = 0.003$; $t = -4.94$, $p < .001$]). Meanwhile, support decreased by a regression-estimated 0.33 points on average after participants were told White men supported the

¹ As a robustness check, we ran an OLS regression with fixed effects controls for participant race and gender, which yielded similar results consistent with our preregistered analyses, suggesting that our results are not sensitive to the inclusion of our control variables.

initiative but women and racial minorities did not support the initiative (comparing between the *low-low* [$M = 4.50, SD = 0.006$] and *high-low* conditions [$M = 4.17, SD = 0.006; t = 2.17, p = .03$]). See Figure 2 for a visualization of the full pattern of results for the primary dependent variable of support.

Table 2

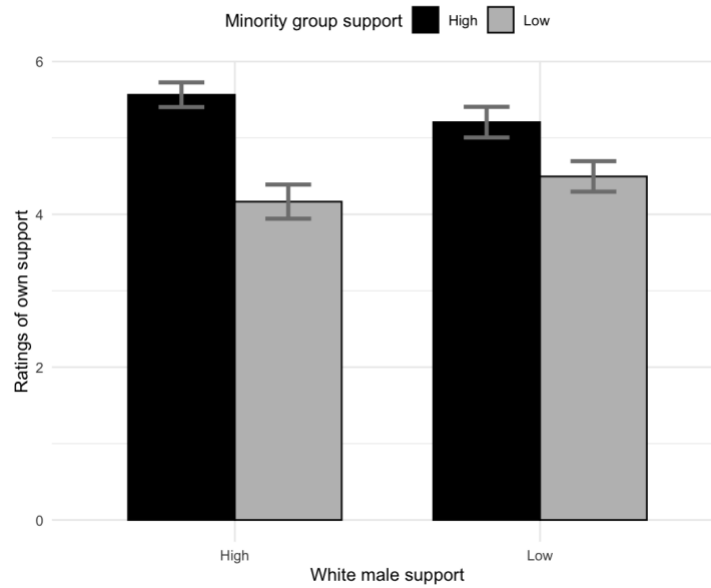
Regression-Estimated Effects of Knowing Other Groups' Support for an Initiative on Participants' Own Support

	Level of Support (1=High, 0=Low)		
	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i>
White Men Support	-0.33*	[-0.61, -0.05]	.02
Minority Group Support	0.71***	[0.42, 0.99]	<.001
White Men Support*Minority Group Support	0.69***	[0.29, 1.08]	<.001
Observations	996		
Adjusted R^2	0.107		

Note. This table reports the results of the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model predicting levels of self-reported support for a diversity initiative depending on whether employees were told other White men and minority groups employees had *high* and/or *low* support for the initiative. The main effect of knowing how much White men support an initiative, the main effect of knowing how much minority groups support an initiative, as well as the interaction between the factors is shown. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. *, **, and *** denote significance at the $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.01$, and $p < 0.001$ levels, respectively.

Figure 2

Participants' Support for the Diversity Initiative Across Conditions



Taken together, support from White men at the organization bolstered the amount of support participants felt towards an initiative when minority group members at the organization also supported the initiative, but when White male employees supported an initiative and minority groups did not, there was a negative effect on participants' own support, leading to a decrease in how much support participants felt towards an initiative, even below that of their support for an initiative where neither group supported the initiative. Contrary to Hypothesis 3, we did not find that mixed peer support led to consistently higher support for the diversity initiative compared to the condition where support from both peer groups was lacking. Instead, when White male support was high and minority support was low (*high-low*), participants' support ratings were the lowest, below that of support ratings in the *low-low* condition. In fact, the significant interaction between learning information about both identity groups' peer support demonstrates that the positive effect of White male support on support ratings is conditional on knowing minority groups also support the initiative. Therefore, it appears that mixed peer support does not have uniform effects on people's own support for the initiative – the identity of the peer group quantifies its influence on the social norm, such that people will choose to

prioritize the opinions of women and racial minorities over that of White men when they are in disagreement (Hypothesis 4b). Why might people be reacting to peer support from White men versus women and racial minorities in this way? To provide a more complete picture of perceptions of support for diversity initiatives, we also assessed four secondary dependent variables, described below.

Regression Analyses: Secondary Dependent Variables

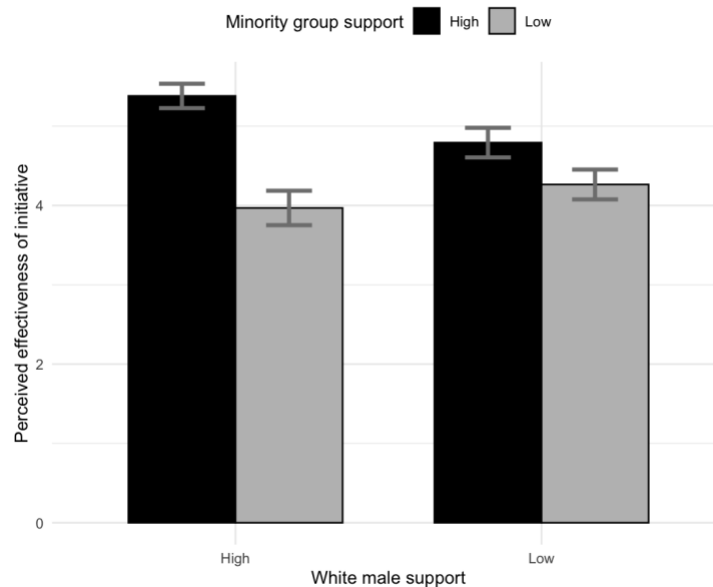
We preregistered ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses for the secondary dependent variables of perceived effectiveness, expected employee outcomes for White men, expected employee outcomes for minorities, as well as perceived palatability.

Perceived Effectiveness. A similar pattern of results was seen for participants' perceptions of the diversity initiative's effectiveness as in participants' support ratings. We found that collapsing across all conditions, there was a significant negative effect of White male support, such that participants perceived the proposed diversity initiative to be significantly less effective when White men at the organization supported the initiative than when White men did not support the initiative ($b = -0.30$, $SE = 0.13$, $p = .03$, 95% CI: [-0.56, -0.03]). Conversely, there was a significant positive effect of minority group support, such that when women and racial minorities at the organization supported the initiative, participants were significantly more supportive of the initiative than when minority groups did not support the initiative ($b = 0.53$, $SE = 0.14$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [0.26, 0.79]). There was a significant positive interaction between the two ($b = 0.88$, $SE = 0.19$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [0.51, 1.26]), such that when White men and minority groups supported the initiative, an individual perceived the initiative to be highly effective ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.23$), but when White men supported the initiative and minority groups did not, perceived effectiveness of the initiative was reduced ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.75$; $t = -$

10.46, $p < .001$). See Figure 3 for a visualization of the full pattern of results for perceived effectiveness.

Figure 3

Participants' Perceived Effectiveness of the Diversity Initiative Across Conditions

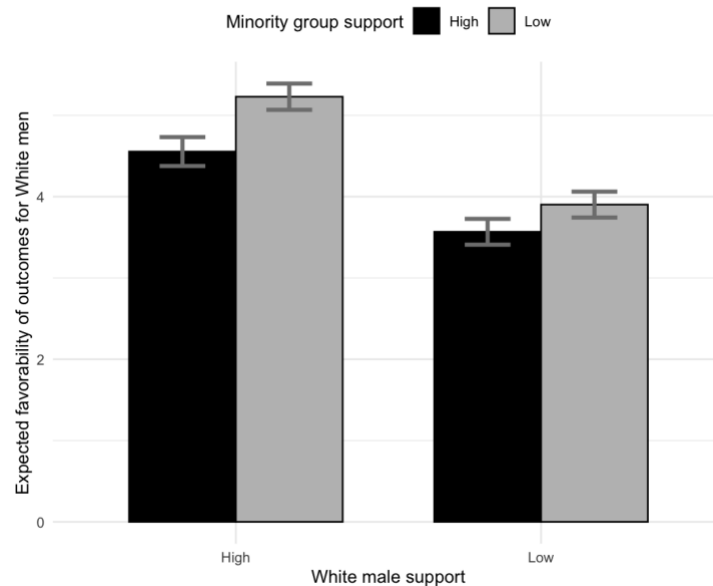


Favorability of Outcomes for White Men. For our variables assessing expectations of minority and majority group outcomes, we found that collapsing across all conditions, there was a significant positive effect of White male support, such that participants expected outcomes for White men to be significantly better when White men at the organization supported the initiative than when White men did not support the initiative ($b = 1.32$, $SE = 0.12$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [1.10, 1.56]). Conversely, there was a significant negative effect of minority group support, such that when women and racial minorities at the organization supported the initiative, participants expected outcomes for White men to be significantly worse than when minority groups did not support the initiative ($b = -0.33$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = .005$, 95% CI: [-0.57, -0.10]). There was a significant negative interaction between the two ($b = -0.34$, $SE = 0.17$, $p = .042$, 95% CI: [-0.67,

-0.01]), such that when White men supported the initiative but minority groups did not, an individual expected the initiative to lead to the best outcomes for White men ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.30$), and when White men did not support the initiative but minority groups did, outcomes for White men were expected to be worse ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.28$; $t = 14.44$, $p < .001$). See Figure 4 for a visualization of the full pattern of results for expected outcomes for White men at the organization.

Figure 4

Participants' Expected Favorability of Outcomes for White Men Across Conditions

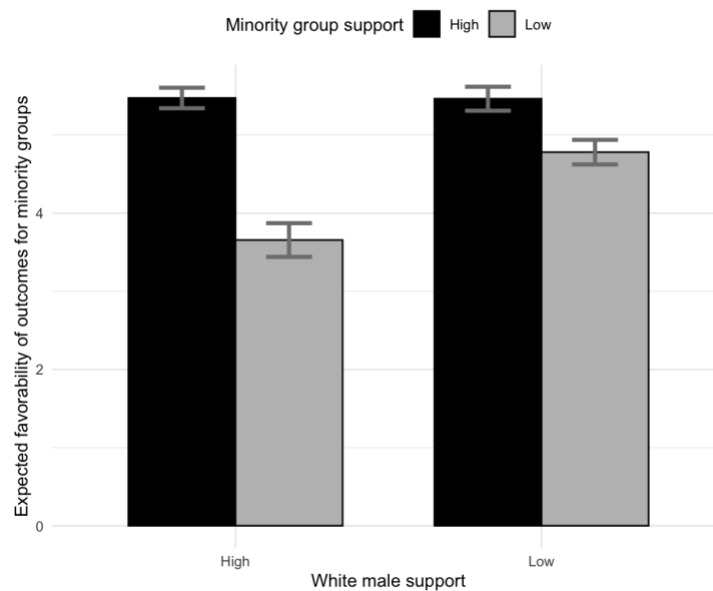


Favorability of Outcomes for Minorities. In terms of outcomes for minority group members, we found that collapsing across conditions, there was a significant negative effect of White male support, such that participants expected outcomes for women and racial minorities to be significantly worse when White men at the organization supported the initiative than when White men did not support the initiative ($b = -1.12$, $SE = 0.12$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [-1.36, -0.89]). Conversely, there was a significant positive effect of minority group support, such that when

women and racial minorities at the organization supported the initiative, participants expected outcomes for women and racial minorities to be significantly better than when they did not support the initiative ($b = 0.68$, $SE = 0.12$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [0.45, 0.92]). There was a significant positive interaction between the two ($b = 1.13$, $SE = 0.17$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [0.80, 1.47]), such that when women and racial minorities supported the initiative, an individual expected the initiative to lead to similarly good outcomes for women and racial minorities whether the White men supported the initiative or not (*high-high* $M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.05$; *low-high* $M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.23$), but when White men supported the initiative and minority groups did not, outcomes for women and racial minorities were expected to be worse ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.74$; $t = -14.18$, $p < .001$). See Figure 5 for a visualization of the full pattern of results for expected outcomes for women and racial minorities at the organization.

Figure 5

Participants' Expected Favorability of Outcomes for Women and Racial Minorities Across Conditions



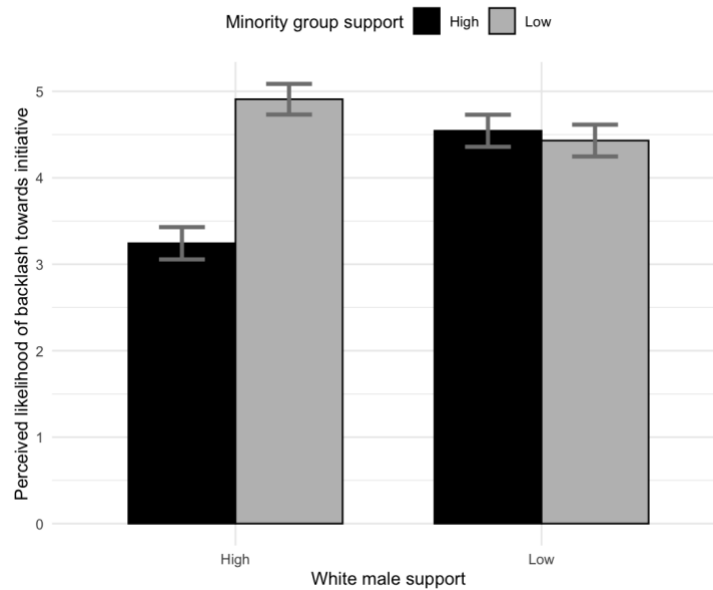
Perceived Palatability. We preregistered two items for perceived palatability, one for the likelihood of backlash reactions to the initiative and one for the likelihood of appreciation for the initiative by job applicants. Upon running a Pearson's correlation test for the two items, we found a moderate negative correlation ($r(994) = -0.52, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.47, 0.56]$).

Subsequently, we treated each item as its own variable for OLS regression analyses.

Palatability - Backlash Reactions. First, collapsing across conditions, there was a significant positive effect of White male support on the likelihood of backlash reactions, such that participants thought backlash was significantly more likely to happen when White men at the organization supported the initiative than when White men did not support the initiative ($b = 0.48, SE = 0.13, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI: } [0.22, 0.74]$). There was no significant effect of minority group support on participants' expectations of backlash ($b = 0.11, SE = 0.13, p = .39, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.15, 0.37]$). There was a significant positive interaction between the two, however ($b = -1.78, SE = 0.19, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-2.14, -1.41]$), such that when White men supported the initiative but women and racial minorities did not, an individual expected the initiative to be most likely to lead to backlash ($M = 4.91, SD = 1.43$), and when White men and minority groups supported the initiative, an individual expected less backlash ($M = 3.25, SD = 1.49; t = -12.75, p < .001$). See Figure 6 for a visualization of the full pattern of results for the perceived likelihood the initiative will lead to backlash.

Figure 6

Participants' Perceived Likelihood of Backlash Reactions Towards the Initiative Across Conditions

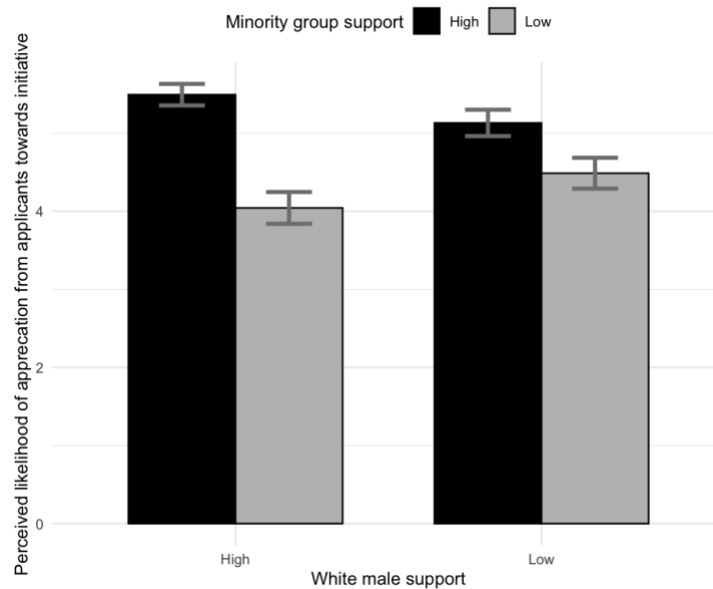


Palatability – Appreciation for Job Applications. For our second palatability item measuring the likelihood the initiative will be appreciated by job applicants, we found that across conditions, there was a significant negative effect of White male support, such that participants thought the initiative was significantly less likely to be appreciated by applicants when White men at the organization supported the initiative than when White men did not support the initiative ($b = -0.44$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [-0.70, -0.19]). Conversely, there was a significant positive effect of minority group support, such that when women and racial minorities at the organization supported the initiative, participants thought the initiative would be significantly more likely to be appreciated ($b = 0.64$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < .001$ CI: [0.39, 0.90]). There was a significant positive interaction between the two, ($b = 0.81$, $SE = 0.18$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: [0.45, 1.16]), such that when White men and women and racial minorities supported the initiative, an individual expected the initiative to be most likely to be appreciated by applicants ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 1.10$), and when White men but not minority groups supported the initiative, an individual expected it to be less likely to be appreciated ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.64$; $t = -11.62$, p

< .001). See Figure 7 for a visualization of the full pattern of results for the perceived likelihood the initiative will be appreciated by job applicants.

Figure 7

Participants' Perceived Likelihood of Appreciation by Applicants for the Initiative Across Conditions



Exploratory Mediation Analyses

The results from Study 2 thus far have demonstrated that individuals' own attitudes towards diversity initiatives are informed by their peers. However, the influence of peer support on individuals' attitudes seems to depend on the identity of peer groups when signals are inconsistent, such that support from White male employees exerts a positive effect on participants' support for an initiative only in the presence of support from women and racial minorities, whereas support from White male employees exerts a negative effect when support from minority groups is lacking. To better understand the dynamics of support for diversity initiatives, we conducted exploratory mediation analyses to determine how our secondary

dependent variables of effectiveness, outcomes for minority/majority groups, and palatability might mediate the relationship between conditions and the main dependent variable of support ratings. Specifically, we aimed to answer two key questions: What are the mechanisms through which support from White men affects self-support for diversity initiatives when there is a lack of concurrent support from women and racial minorities? Conversely, what are the mechanisms through which support from White men influences self-support for diversity initiatives when women and racial minorities also support the initiative?

To explain the negative effect White male support has on an individual's own support when there is no support from women and racial minorities at the organization, a 1,000-sample bootstrap mediation model found that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect of perceptions of anticipated backlash to the initiative excluded zero ($[-0.43, -0.12]$) and that perceptions of backlash mediated 82.7% of the negative impact of having White men support an initiative, conditional on there being no support from women and racial minorities ($b = 0.83, p = .024$). A 1,000-sample bootstrap mediation model found that expected favourability of outcomes for White men did not significantly mediate this effect ($b = -0.62, p = .074$). Therefore, we find evidence that backlash concerns – and not the expectation that outcomes for White men will be better – significantly mediate the negative effect that support from White male employees has on participants' support for the initiative.

To explain the positive effect White male support has on an individual's own support when there is also support from women and racial minorities, a 1,000-sample bootstrap mediation model found that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect of perceived effectiveness of the initiative excluded zero ($[0.29, 0.73]$) and that perceptions of effectiveness mediated 139% of the positive impact of having White men support an initiative,

conditional on there being support from women and racial minorities ($b = 1.39, p = .006$). A 1,000-sample bootstrap mediation model found that expected favourability of outcomes for women and racial minorities did not significantly mediate this effect ($b = 0.01, p = .91$).

Therefore, we find evidence that the perception that the initiative will be more effective – and not the expectation that outcomes for minority groups will be better – significantly mediate the positive effect that support from White male employees has on participants' support for the initiative.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Prior research suggests that diversity initiatives can signal an organization's commitment to egalitarian values, but also tend to lead to resistance among some members of the organization (Dobbin et al., 2015). Without support from employees, diversity initiatives are unlikely to succeed (Dobbin et al., 2011), making the question of what mechanisms underlie individuals' support for an initiative an important one. Overall, our research demonstrates that people use their peers as an important source of information when evaluating a new diversity initiative at their organization.

In Study 1, we found evidence of a broad base of support for diversity initiatives among participants. However, their support was significantly diminished when participants were informed that their peers exhibited low support for the initiative – a trend that persisted irrespective of the identity of their peers (Hypothesis 2). These results suggest that people are highly motivated to adapt to a social norm regarding diversity initiatives when established by their peers. When their peers exhibited high support for the initiative, individuals' beliefs aligned with the norm and their own ratings of support continued to be high relative to baseline ratings of

support in the control condition, but when their peers exhibited low support for the initiative, individuals were compelled to shift their own ratings of support downwards relative to the control condition, thus conforming to the norm. These findings are in line with social norm theory (Cialdini et al., 1991), which posits that people tend to conform to the normative behavior of those around them.

In reality, however, peer information can be mixed. Which source do we choose to trust when forming our perception of the social norm? An assumption of social norm theory is that peers who influence the social norm are social referents: those who are widely known and highly connected in their network (Sherif & Sherif, 1964). According to social dominance theory, White men hold a higher amount of status relative to women and racial minorities (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Despite their high status, White men are not automatically treated as social referents in every situation. Instead, the persuasion literature reveals that group identity has mixed effects when communicating messages about social justice (Wallace et al., 2024), leaving open the question of how we use peer identity to guide our understanding of the social norm in the case of organizational diversity initiatives, particularly when faced with mixed signals. To further explore this question, we conducted Study 2, where we presented peer information about two groups at a time (i.e., majority and minority groups) that was comprised of mixed or congruent peer support. First, consistent with findings in Study 1, we found that participants were actively referencing their peers' opinions in their evaluations of the diversity initiatives, as evidenced by a significant difference between the *high-high* (high peer support from both groups) and *low-low* condition (low peer support from both groups). Second, when examining conditions of mixed peer support, it appears that Hypothesis 3, in which we expected support ratings for the diversity initiative to be higher in the presence of mixed peer support than in the *low-low* condition where

support from both groups is lacking, was not supported. Participants expressed the least amount of support in the mixed *high-low* condition, below that of the *low-low* condition, contrary to our expected pattern of results. Instead, we find evidence of an interaction between the effect of learning information about peer support from both groups: White male support has a positive effect on participants' ratings of support conditional on support from minority groups; otherwise, White male support diminishes participants' support for the initiative. In fact, on its own (when White men supported an initiative and women and racial minorities did not), there was a negative effect of White male support on individuals' own support. These results indicate that people value the opinions of minority groups when forming their own opinion about the diversity initiative *above* that of White men, consistent with Hypothesis 4b as opposed to Hypothesis 4a. Similarly, people expected the diversity initiative to be most effective when White men and women and racial minorities supported it, but least effective when White men alone supported it.

It appears that people prioritize signals of support from women and racial minorities when faced with mixed signals, perhaps because of their perceived expertise on the matter of diversity initiatives (Saguy et al., 2020). Our mediation model provides evidence of another factor people may be taking into consideration when evaluating mixed signals, namely concerns of backlash. Given that expected backlash significantly mediated 82.7% of the negative impact of having White men support an initiative, conditional on there being low support from women and racial minorities, it seems that people are concerned that initiatives that White men support in spite of a lack of support from women and racial minorities may incite backlash. Therefore, it may be that people are motivated to trust women and racial minorities as the social referents for norms around diversity initiatives not only to benefit from their perceived expertise, but to avoid the negative consequence of backlash when minority group support is lacking. Indeed,

organizations value maintaining a positive reputation through diversity initiatives and avoiding threats to their reputation (Chang et al., 2019).

Furthermore, we found that perceptions of effectiveness significantly mediated 139% of the positive impact of having White men support an initiative, conditional on support from women and racial minorities. In fact, the experimental condition in Study 2 that led to the highest levels of overall support, perceived effectiveness, and perceived palatability for the diversity initiative was the one in which both White men and women and racial minorities supported the initiative. Taken together, although prior research has suggested that change efforts that lack support from employees at multiple levels of the organization are unlikely to succeed (Beer et al., 1990), our findings provide suggestive evidence that the inverse relationship may also be true: providing information about support across peer groups at the organization increases an individual's own support for the initiative, and potentially increases their perceptions of the effectiveness of the initiative.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our study is not without limitations. The use of a fictional scenario in a lab context and self-reported measures introduces potential biases, including social desirability bias that may skew participants towards rating the diversity initiative positively. Future experimental work conducted in the field is essential for validating the findings of the present study. Interventions that leverage the strong social influence of one's peers to change behaviors in diverse contexts are an increasingly popular means of combating prejudice (Murrar & Brauer, 2023; Stephens et al., 2020), and it would be valuable to test the effect of providing peer information about support for a diversity initiative on an individual's own attitudes in the field. Furthermore, field research can go beyond simply proposing a diversity initiative as in the current study, and measure the

impact of actually implementing a diversity initiative on tangible outcomes such as hiring and promotion rates for minority groups within an organization. If providing consistent information about support from peer groups boosts employee support and subsequently increases the effectiveness of the initiative, such an approach might prove to be a valuable pathway for organizations to maximize returns on their investment in diversity efforts.

CONCLUSION

Organizations are increasingly investing in diversity initiatives, yet many initiatives have had limited success in improving outcomes for traditionally marginalized groups. Diversity initiatives are not a consistently strong signal of organizational values. Furthermore, they are unlikely to succeed without support from members of the organization. To encourage support, we rely on extant theorizing that suggests peer information can be used to establish a pro-diversity social norm. Our findings indicate the powerful influence of peer support in motivating individuals' willingness to support diversity initiatives. Moreover, support from women and racial minorities is an especially valuable signal, leading individuals to prioritize their opinions over those of White men when confronted with mixed peer support information.

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