

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN THE TECHNOLOGY INDUSTRY

The ‘making’ of inclusion in the everyday working of diverse teams

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Introduction

That technologies are socio-technical, produced and consumed within structures of ‘power, contestation, inequality and hierarchy, is illustrated by self-driving cars, more likely to drive into black people and voice assistants like Amazon’s Alexa. Applications powered by supposedly ‘value-free’ maths, perpetuate inequalities that are a result of the bias of technology’s human creators. Racism, sexism and capitalist values are thus written into flawed algorithms that technologies like AI, learn from and amplify.

‘Diversity, Equity and Inclusion’ (DEI) is a popular mainstream and tech industry discourse. The increasing gender imbalance in tech led to the publication of diversity reports by tech companies in 2014. Statistics have shown that the tech industry is run primarily by white followed by Asian, males. Black, Latinx and women employees formed a small percentage – working largely in non-tech, non-management roles.

A popular conclusion drawn from these observations is that diverse teams create better products i.e. diverse perspectives and knowledges lead to the creation of ‘inclusive’ products that better represent the needs of the consumer base. However, DEI policies, thus far, have only been marginally successful. I believe that a new strategy that explores the diversity-inclusion relationship is the key to change, one I will explore through this project.

Diversity is said to have a favourable impact on both the financial and non-financial (decision-making, problem-solving etc.) performance of companies. However, alone it is not enough. Diversity requires ‘management’ through inclusion. People need to ‘belong’ while also feeling comfortable with keeping their own unique characteristics.

The current DEI discourse, produced primarily by consultants, tech companies and the media, is narrow in scope i.e. statistics based. While diversity research in disciplines like management studies abound, interdisciplinary interrogations rooted in the social sciences, to understand the diversity-inclusion relationship, are conspicuous by their absence.

While it is often said that the ‘tone’ of work culture in an organisation is set by management, I submit that it is in the everyday interactions, negotiations and decisions of members of design teams, that inclusion is ‘made’. Speaking openly and being heard, feeling safe enough to propose ideas, empowering others to make decisions, taking advice and implementing feedback are some of the ways in which an inclusive work culture is built.

Tech industry happenings, especially since 2018, demonstrate the importance and timeliness of the proposed investigation. Tech workers in North America have begun to organise into unions (eg. Alphabet Workers Union) to protest among many things, the making of what they consider to be morally dubious tech products by their employers, retaliation against workers who dared to criticise work policies as well as the companies’ mishandling of sexual harassment and discrimination against employees from marginal groups. This upward trend in organisation and advocacy of tech labour demonstrates tech employees’ interest and commitment in producing inclusive, unharmed tech. The interest in unionising also demonstrates employee awareness that DEI among other ‘social good’ causes that large tech companies take up are often for positive PR impact and not much else.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

This project lies at the intersection of digital technology, social justice and gender inequality. It seeks to understand the process of ‘transformation’ of diverse hiring into inclusion among team members engaged in technology design. Understanding the everyday ‘doing’ of inclusion will provide more clarity as to the gap between the current industry discourse on DEI and its actual practice, thus offering valuable insights for the creation of robust, effective, future policy.

To this end, I ask the following research questions:

1. What is the technology industry’s understanding of ‘diversity’ ‘equity’ and ‘inclusion’ as constructed and presented in the literature that tech companies produce?
2. How is inclusion (diversity, operationalized), ‘made’ and ‘re-made’ in the daily working of diverse teams and what implications does this have on the team member’s comprehension of the design ‘process’?

Theoretical foundation

The theoretical foundations of this research project lie in sociology and gender studies as well as the interdisciplinary fields of Science and Technology Studies (STS), Feminist Technology Studies (FTS), Digital Humanities, Design Studies and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI).

Methodology, Method and Fieldwork

The focus on meaning and meaning-making practices of social actors within a given context, makes Interpretive Research Design a suitable choice for this project. To compliment the interpretivist ontological position, I have chosen a Feminist Methodology that begins in experience, is mindful of difference and has an interest in questions of power that favour an investigation into DEI. The concept of feminist reflexivity addresses issues of social background, individual personality and objectivity/subjectivity.

The qualitative intensive or in-depth interview reveals insights into human action, experience, values, beliefs and behaviors. The interviews with designers in tech teams will be semi-structured and in-person and the questions, open-ended with the primary goal of understanding how the respondents make meaning of their circumstances and experiences in diverse tech teams. Research Question 2 will be answered using the Qualitative intensive or in-depth interview method. Meanwhile, Research Question 1 will be researched using Discourse Analysis (DA) - a qualitative, interpretive method that looks for language patterns across texts while paying attention to the relationship between language itself and the socio-cultural, political, economic context of its production. Sources of data will be largely primary, but also include secondary sources; both qualitative and quantitative i.e. statistical information.

For this paper, I will interview women designers who form a part of tech design teams in Bangalore. By asking questions that encourage them to reflect on their lived experiences, I hope to better understand the impact of gender diversity (and its intersections) on tech teams and use these experiences to understand how inclusion is made and remade in these spaces.

I am interested in in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women designers who work in tech design teams. I plan to interview 4-5 women designers. The interviews will be detailed, encouraging the interviewee to reflect on their lived experience. For this project, I interpret the term ‘tech-design team’ quite broadly. The design team would be one in any company that develops a tech product for the open market with a broad potential consumer base. This would mean interviewing women designers that belong to big teams in large tech firms with an international presence as well as those who are part of relatively smaller teams in start-ups.