

REPRESENTATION MATTERS: INCLUSIVE IMAGERY ON LEADERSHIP ORGANIZATIONS' SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the racial and ethnic representation of individuals featured on Chamber of Commerce subgroups' social media accounts as a pathway to understanding the extent to which these community organizations embedded cultural competency in their online communications. Drawing on Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Signaling Theory, this study identifies image sharing on social media as an informal, unregulated pathway to assuring stakeholders of an organization's commitment to diversity. Defining representation as the portrayal or depiction of individuals from various racial and ethnic groups in visual media posted on social media accounts, researchers examined individuals depicted in images posted on Chamber of Commerce-sponsored Civic Leadership and Young Professionals Facebook and Twitter accounts for a one-year period and compared the apparent ethnicity of individuals depicted (n=95,436) with the ethnicities present in the community represented by the organization. The researchers found organizations most frequently over-represented White individuals, consistently under-represented Black individuals, and most frequently under-represented non-white Hispanic individuals in social media images. Recognizing representation matters, particularly in light of 2025 federal policies designed to dismantle DEI frameworks, the study supports the development of intentionally inclusive social media communication designed to improve diversity of organizational membership and the local business community.

INTRODUCTION

Popular in the United States since the early 1900s, Chambers of Commerce offer paid memberships to businesses in a geographic area and exist to support the interests of their member organizations. Typically, American Chambers of Commerce elect leaders from current active members. Primary benefits for member businesses include networking opportunities, increased publicity, advocacy in decision-making, and a voice in shaping policies that affect local businesses (Clouse et al., 2022; Johnson, 2021). Research indicates Chamber of Commerce membership provides business owners with a feeling of instant credibility and evokes trustworthiness from their customers (Noel & Luckett, 2014).

In recent years, Chambers of Commerce have introduced formal efforts supporting and capitalizing on diversity and inclusion, with many popular programs focused on women-owned

and/or racial minority-owned businesses and attracting membership of young professionals in business. Since Chambers of Commerce are led independently, these efforts vary in both aim and scope across geographic areas (Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives, 2022).

Since the 1980s, Civic Leadership and Young Professionals groups have emerged and gained popularity as subgroups of Chambers of Commerce. Group members typically pay monthly dues and attend monthly gatherings. Civic Leadership groups often follow a cohort model, with programming offered in an academic year format. Members of each “class” are expected to attend monthly sessions during their year of participation to learn more about their community, expand and strengthen their local networks, build on regional strengths, and gain insights on how to collectively solve regional challenges. These programs are often named after their city (Leadership Miami, Leadership Dallas, etc.). Young Professionals groups tend to focus on networking, service opportunities, and recognition of emerging leaders for professionals under the age of 40. Both subgroups are common in American markets of various sizes, and programming varies based on prominent regional industries and issues. Each group typically maintains a presence separate from the Chamber of Commerce on social media platforms, posting subgroup-specific information and images concerning events for members and prospective members.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media and Community Representation

With the rise of digital communication and social media usage, organizations seek both economic and social visibility as they interact with their consumers via various media (Capriotti, 2009). Behm-Morawitz and Ortiz (2013) encourage the study of racial and ethnic representation in online spaces to explore virtual application of social norms. Since more than 70% of Americans of all races and ethnicities regularly engage in social media usage (Pew Research, 2021), racial and ethnic representation via those platforms is highly visible to consumers. Given the reach of social media, many entities utilized the tool when ceding to increased social pressure in the United States to make public statements supporting diversity in 2020, a year in which anti-Black racism gained national attention and corporations responded with urgent proclamations and donations meant to signal investment in remedying the issue (Grier & Poole, 2020). Termed “performative allyship”, this behavior occurs when organizations make statements about their commitment to support a diverse employee and/or customer base, but either do not follow through with actions at all or do not follow through effectively (Morris, 2020). For example, an organization may post photos in appreciation or celebration of their African-American employees/customers only during Black History Month, or photos of Latin-Americans only during Hispanic Heritage Month.

In 2021, 69% of adults in the U.S. reported regularly using Facebook and 23% used Twitter (known since July 2023 as “X”). Demographics for users on each site vary, with Facebook maintaining an audience that includes 67% of White American adults, 74% of Black American adults, and 72% of Hispanic American adults (Pew Research, 2021). At least 70% of Americans between ages 18 and 64 log into Facebook regularly, while Twitter is more popular with users aged 18-29 years (Pew Research, 2021).

Approximately one third of consumers prefer social media for learning about organizations, with younger consumers (Gen Z, Millennials) reporting greater affinity than older

consumers (Gen X, Baby Boomers) (Sprout Social, 2018). Research concerning the business value of using social channels indicates consumers want companies to use social media to foster interpersonal connection, are eager to learn about the people within the organization, and perceive social media can help them connect to people of different backgrounds and beliefs (Sprout Social, 2018). Equity, inclusion, and representation in corporations' external relations, to include promotions such as those on social media, offers firms a practical pathway to promote diversity (Leite & Batista, 2023).

As consumers view media online, including on social media, they subconsciously process race and ethnicity as implicit messages are shared via the inclusion, exclusion, or characterization of subjects representing specific races and ethnicities (Behm-Morawitz, 2020). Racial identity is not merely a function of outward appearance; however, it is the way most consumers detect and understand race (Brinkman & Jacobi, 2020). In the United States, those identifying as non-White are deemed racial and ethnic minorities (Charmaraman et al., 2022). Accordingly, it is important for inclusive organizations to consider the degree to which racial diversity is displayed within brand images, *and* how races are depicted within the images.

To better understand the importance of representation of minority membership in social media images as it pertains to member recruitment, one may look to Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) which explains humans are uncomfortable with uncertainty and look for information meant to help them predict the nature of an experience or interaction. As social media usage statistics would indicate, consumers use social networking sites to learn about people and brands as they decide whether and how they wish to engage (Wan-Ying et al., 2016). The majority of multicultural consumers rank race and ethnicity as the most important parts of their identity and are most willing to support brands that support people of their race or ethnicity (Evans, 2020). Therefore, organizations committed to increasing diverse membership should make clear via social media images the degree and type of involvement one could expect.

Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973) further evidences the importance of representation in social media images, as it explains the way an entity (with more information than those outside the organization) communicates via signals that diminish information asymmetry among those with less information (Connelly et al., 2011). This theory aids in understanding how an organization can communicate otherwise unobservable – or hard-to-observe – qualities such as commitment to diversity or presence of diverse people. Organizations that signal an instrumental value for diversity positively impact prospects' perceptions of organizational attractiveness (Olsen & Martins, 2016). Specifically, "activating signals" that show an organization's active embodiment of diversity and inclusion are more effective than "pointing signals" that merely tell others the organization values diversity and inclusion (Bradley et al., 2024). This finding is mirrored in research indicating inclusion of diversity statements on a website does not improve attraction among job applicants (Goldberg & Allen, 2008).

Research Question

The first research question addressed in this data analysis is as follows:

RQ1: How representative of the community's residents were photos posted on Twitter and Facebook by Chamber of Commerce-sponsored Civic Leadership organizations and Young Professionals groups?

H1: The researchers hypothesized that both Civic Leadership and Young Professionals organizations would over-represent White individuals and under-represent minorities in social media posts.

Diversity and Representation in Leadership

In 2019, only 18.7% of American businesses were owned by racial/ethnic minorities (Alonzo, 2021). While businesses owned by Black, non-white Hispanic, and Asian individuals are increasing, the overrepresentation of White-owned businesses is often attributed to family history of business ownership, access to capital and credit, and disparities in education (Entrepreneur, 2018). Although Black individuals account for 13% of the U.S. population, they account for just 8% of employees in professional roles, 3.2% of executive or senior leadership roles, and less than 1% of all Fortune 500 CEO positions (Roepe, 2021). Since 1955, only 19 out of 1800 Fortune 500 CEOs have been Black, a figure attributed to a lack of Black businesspeople embarking on a management track early in their careers (Wahba, 2021).

The business case for diversity has long shown diverse workforces are more innovative, productive, and profitable than homogenous groups (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2020; Phillips, 2014; Raymond, 2019; Richard et al., 2013; Stevens, 2020; Tulshyan, 2022). These benefits, paired with modern social awakenings, have led to highly publicized efforts to create more diverse, equitable, and inclusive work environments. Globally, many large companies have hired Diversity and Inclusion Specialists as they seek to change policies, structures, and practices historically associated with an overrepresentation of White men in leadership (Gilchrist, 2020).

Despite organizational efforts to improve diversity, challenges persist. In many countries, White males are still continually over-represented in corporate leadership and as small business owners. Advocating for change does not always yield positive results. Hekman et al. (2017) found non-White employees were reviewed more negatively than White employees if they advocated for valuing diversity in the workplace. In 2020, anti-Black racism moved to the forefront of national discourse following George Floyd's May 2020 death (Grier & Poole, 2020), and employee beliefs concerning the relationship between race and professional advancement worsened. In 2019, 68% of Black American adults reported they believe being Black is a barrier to advancement in the U.S. workforce, while being White helps workers get ahead, and that figure rose to 81% in 2020 (Horowitz et al., 2020). In the same study, approximately one-third of adults indicated they perceived a major shift in how Americans think about race in the aftermath of George Floyd's death, while 42% perceived a minor shift.

Organizational efforts to improve diversity were stalled, abandoned, and revised in 2025 as the Trump administration issued executive orders designed to curtail formal efforts to advance diversity in business. The January 20, 2025 Executive Order 14151 sought "to end diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs—which are sometimes referred to as diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) programs—throughout the federal government" (Riccard, 2025). The January 21, 2025 Executive Order 14173 rescinded the foundational affirmative action order EO 11246 ("Equal Employment Opportunity"), which established antidiscrimination requirements for federal contractors and subcontractors and in the administration of federally assisted construction contracts (Carpenter & Graber, 2025; University of New Mexico, n.d.). Positioned by the Trump administration as pathways to restoring merit-based hiring and

contracting practices, and framing DEI programs as discriminatory, the two executive orders eliminated government-affiliated organizations' capacity to engage in formal DEI strategies. Although private-sector businesses were not subject to the executive orders, legal experts cautioned all firms to assess their DEI and anti-discrimination policies and practices (Lopez et al., 2025). The larger chilling effect led firms such as Amazon, Google, Meta, and Salesforce to scale back or abandon DEI initiatives in response to heightened public scrutiny and political pressure (Business Insider, 2025) and was expected to produce a similar response from smaller organizations with far smaller budgets (Lopez et al., 2025). While entities such as Costco and Apple publicly chose to voluntarily continue formal DEI initiatives (Braun, 2025), Trump-era policy shifts made necessary the identification of opportunities – such as intentional depiction of diverse racial and ethnic groups in social media images – to informally signal a commitment to diversity.

Research Question

The second research question addressed in this data analysis is as follows:

RQ2: Are differences present in the accuracy of demographic representation in photos posted on Twitter and Facebook by Civic Leadership organizations and Young Professionals groups when the sponsoring Chamber of Commerce has proclaimed specifically to be committed to formal efforts in improving Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in the local business community?

H2: The researchers hypothesized that both Civic Leadership and Young Professionals organizations would more accurately represent area individuals in their social media posts when the sponsoring Chamber of Commerce has specifically committed to formal efforts in improving DEI in the local business community.

METHODS

In this content analysis, researchers studied the Chamber of Commerce-sponsored Civic Leadership organizations and Young Professionals groups in the 100 most populated U.S. cities, reviewing all available still images and photographs shared on their Twitter and Facebook pages from March 2022 to February 2023. For each image featuring a person's face, the researchers recorded perceived race/ethnicity (Black, White, non-white Hispanic, Asian, or Other) of individuals represented. Next, researchers compared percentages of demographic representation in photos shared on each account to the demographic makeup of the Chamber of Commerce service area, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau (2022). Since the sample began with the 100 most populated cities in the United States, area demographics varied widely by region/city. Comparing the demographics represented in the photos by city (rather than a nationwide average) allowed researchers to compare “apples to apples” in each area.

Beginning with a list of the 100 most populated cities in the United States as reported by the World Population Review (2022), researchers narrowed the sample in several ways. First, researchers identified regional Chambers of Commerce serving multiple “top 100” cities, such as Denver and Aurora, Colorado; Las Vegas, North Las Vegas, and Paradise, Nevada; and

Chesapeake, Norfolk, and Virginia Beach, Virginia. Next, researchers eliminated Chambers of Commerce for cities lacking an active, dedicated Twitter or Facebook account for the subgroups of study. Finally, the researchers eliminated pages depicting fewer than 50 individuals in total during the observation period.

Ultimately, data was analyzed for 52 Civic Leadership organization Facebook accounts, 26 Civic Leadership organization Twitter accounts, 45 Young Professionals Facebook accounts, and 14 Young Professionals Twitter accounts. This led to a detailed analysis of 95,436 photographed individuals. Subjects per account during this time frame ranged from 50 to 3,687 individuals.

Analysis included recorded demographic observations of individuals in the following categories of race/ethnicity: Black, White, non-white Hispanic, Asian, and Other. This coding scheme mirrors work in previous studies with similar methods (Pippert et al, 2013; Myers et al., 2019). Once coding categories were finalized, two coders worked independently to compile the data set. Intercoder reliability was calculated using data for Wichita, KS, New Orleans, LA, and Lincoln, NE Young Professionals accounts (Krippendorff's Alpha = 0.941). Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to interpret the data.

FINDINGS

Images represented a variety of organizational efforts, events, and activities in the various cities and regions. Several themes emerged. Civic Leadership program accounts frequently posted photos of opening or closing retreats, themed monthly sessions (centered around local education, local law enforcement, local industry, etc.), networking events, fundraising events, and annual awards ceremonies. Young Professionals accounts frequently posted photos of monthly happy hour networking gatherings, service activities, new member announcements, existing member "spotlights", outings to professional sports activities, holiday celebrations, and promotions for professional development sessions.

Overrepresentation

This content analysis included photos and still images posted to 137 unique social media accounts. For the purposes of this study, "overrepresentation" of an ethnicity in social media images is defined as depicting individuals of a particular ethnicity by more than 10% when compared to area demographics. For example, if a Chamber of Commerce serves a city with a White population of 50% but 75% of people depicted in photos shared by the related Young Professionals group are white, the page is overrepresenting White individuals by 25%.

Among them, 105 accounts (77%) overrepresented White individuals. This overrepresentation was present on social media accounts for 73% of Civic Leadership groups and 81% of Young Professionals Groups. The average percentage of overrepresentation for Civic Leadership groups was 24%, and the average percentage of overrepresentation for Young Professionals groups was 29%.

Overall, 15% of accounts overrepresented Black or Hispanic people, including 19% of Civic Leadership groups and 8% of Young Professionals groups. Black individuals were overrepresented on 19 social media accounts, while Hispanic individuals were overrepresented on just one account.

Among those social media accounts featuring overrepresentation of Black individuals, Civic Leadership groups overrepresented by 15%, while Young Professionals groups overrepresented by 28%. The lone Young Professionals account with an overrepresentation of Hispanic individuals overrepresented by 52%.

No accounts over-represented Asian or Other individuals by more than 10%. See Table 1 below.

Table 1 OVERREPRESENTATION FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE							
	Number of Accounts Over-Representing White Individuals by > 10% (Frequency)		Average % of Overrepresentation for Accounts that Over-represent White Individuals (Volume)	Number of Accounts Over-Representing Black or Hispanic Individuals by > 10 % (Frequency)		Average % of Overrepresentation for Accounts that Over-represent Black Individuals (Volume)	Average % of Overrepresentation for Accounts that Over-represent Hispanic Individuals (Volume)
	#	#	%	#	%	%	%
Civic Leadership Facebook (n=52)	38	73%	25%	8	15%	15%	-
Civic Leadership Twitter (n=26)	19	73%	24%	7	27%	14%	-
Total for Civic Leadership Groups	57	73%	24%	15	19%	15%	-
Young Professionals Facebook (n=45)	39	87%	32%	3	7%	20%	52%
Young Professionals Twitter (n=14)	9	64%	27%	2	14%	36%	-
Total for Young Professionals Groups	48	81%	29%	5	8%	28%	52%
Total	105			20			
Average		77%	27%		15%	21%	52%

The hypothesis for the first research question (RQ1) “how representative of the community’s residents were photos posted on Twitter and Facebook by Chamber of Commerce-sponsored Civic Leadership organizations and Young Professionals groups?” was confirmed, as

both Civic Leadership and Young Professionals organizations over-represent White individuals in social media posts.

Underrepresentation

Analysis was conducted to determine which racial/ethnic groups were most frequently underrepresented in the images posted on social media. For the purposes of this study, an ethnicity is “underrepresented” when images contain more than 10% fewer individuals of a particular ethnicity than are present in the surrounding community. For example, if a Chamber of Commerce serves a city with a Black population of 50% but only 25% of people depicted in photos shared by the related Young Professionals group are Black, the page is underrepresenting Black individuals by 25%.

Fifty-nine (43%) accounts underrepresented Hispanic people, while 31 (30%) accounts underrepresented Black individuals. Asian individuals were underrepresented on nine (9%) accounts. Three accounts underrepresented individuals of Other races/ethnicities, and only one account underrepresented White individuals. See Table 2 below.

	Black		White		Non-white Hispanic		Asian		Other	
	#	% of total	#	% of total	#	% of total	#	% of total	#	% of total
Civic Leadership Facebook (n=52)	8	15%	0	0%	24	46%	5	10%	0	0%
Civic Leadership Twitter (n=26)	6	23%	0	0%	10	38%	0	0%	0	0%
Total for Civic Leadership Groups	14	18%	0	0%	34	44%	5	6%	0	0%
Young Professionals Facebook (n=45)	14	31%	0	0%	20	44%	4	9%	2	4%
Young Professionals Twitter (n=14)	3	21%	1	7%	5	36%	0	0%	1	7%
Total for Young Professionals Groups	17	29%	1	2%	25	42%	4	7%	3	5%
Grand Total	31	23%	1	1%	59	43%	9	7%	3	2%

For accounts that underrepresented Black individuals, the average percentage of underrepresentation for Civic Leadership groups was 18%, and the average percentage of underrepresentation for Young Professionals groups was 22%. For accounts that underrepresented Hispanic individuals, the average percentage of underrepresentation for Civic Leadership groups was 23%, and the average percentage of underrepresentation for Young Professionals groups was 21%. For accounts that under-represented Asian individuals, the average percentage of underrepresentation for Civic Leadership groups was 15%, and the average percentage of underrepresentation for Young Professionals groups was 25%. For accounts that underrepresented individuals of Other races/ethnicities, the average percentage of underrepresentation for Young Professionals groups was 17%. For the single account that underrepresented White individuals by more than 10% when compared to area demographics, the percentage of underrepresentation for that Young Professionals group was 29%. See Table 3 below.

	Black	White	Non-white Hispanic	Asian	Other
Civic Leadership Facebook (n=52)	20%	-	20%	15%	-
Civic Leadership Twitter (n=26)	16%	-	25%	-	-
Average for Civic Leadership Groups	18%	-	23%	15%	-
Young Professionals Facebook (n=45)	19%	-	30%	25%	19%
Young Professionals Twitter (n=14)	26%	37%	13%	-	15%
Average for Young Professionals Groups	22%	37%	21%	25%	17%
Average	20%	9%	22%	13%	17%

The hypothesis for the first research question (RQ1) “how representative of the community’s residents were photos posted on Twitter and Facebook by Chamber of Commerce-sponsored Civic Leadership organizations and Young Professionals groups?” was confirmed, as both Civic Leadership and Young Professionals organizations under-represent individuals from minority groups in social media posts.

Reasonably Accurate Representation

Recognizing that perfectly accurate representations are unreasonable, organizations were considered reasonably accurate if photographic representations were within 10% of the mean of individuals in the community in the corresponding category. Nineteen accounts (about 14% of

the sample) posted images representing all individuals within 10 percentage points of all races/ethnicities of the population represented by the Chamber of Commerce. See Table 4 below.

	Number of Accounts Accurately Representing All Populations	
	#	%
Civic Leadership Facebook (n=52)	9	17%
Civic Leadership Twitter (n=26)	3	12%
Total for Civic Leadership Groups	12	15%
Young Professionals Facebook (n=45)	4	9%
Young Professionals Twitter (n=14)	3	21%
Total for Young Professionals Groups	7	12%
Grand Total	19	14%

Further analysis was conducted using one-sample chi-squared tests for each of the 137 accounts analyzed in order to further evaluate the reflection of community demographics in the images posted on each organization's social media accounts. Chi-squared tests are most appropriate when examining whether there is a significant association between two categorical variables or whether the distribution of categorical data differs from an expected distribution (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The results were statistically significant ($p < .05$ or less) for all accounts included in the analysis, meaning diversity of images posted did not proportionally mirror the racial and ethnic makeup of the communities represented by the sponsoring Chambers of Commerce.

Chi-squared test results were calculated for the 52 Civic Leadership Facebook accounts. Results ranged from ($\chi^2(4, N = 123) = 11.399, p < .05$) to ($\chi^2(4, N = 2015) = 945.417, p < .0001$). Results for 50 of the 52 accounts were significant at the .0001 level. For the 26 Civic Leadership Twitter accounts, results ranged from ($\chi^2(4, N = 69) = 17.681, p < .05$) to ($\chi^2(4, N = 890) = 439.389, p < .0001$). Results for 24 of the 26 accounts were significant at the .0001 level. For the 45 Young Professionals Facebook accounts, results ranged from ($\chi^2(4, N = 254) = 14.15, p < .05$) to ($\chi^2(4, N = 630) = 2163.453, p < .0001$). Results for 42 the 45 accounts were significant at the .0001 level. For the 14 Young Professionals Twitter accounts, results ranged from ($\chi^2(4, N = 123) = 17.475, p < .05$) to ($\chi^2(4, N = 1282) = 1236.726, p < .0001$). Results for 13 of the 14 accounts were significant at the .0001 level.

Formal Commitments to Diversity Effort

The researchers identified which sponsoring Chambers of Commerce had specifically proclaimed (via a statement posted on their website) a commitment to formal efforts in improving DEI in the local business community. The 137 unique Civic Leadership and Young Professionals Facebook and Twitter accounts analyzed are sponsored by 71 separate Chambers of Commerce. At the time of this analysis, 41 of the 71 Chambers of Commerce (about 58%)

posted a diversity statement and/or an outline of their programming designed to address DEI through the work of the Chamber of Commerce on their website.

As shown in Table 5, the 71 Chambers of Commerce with posted information concerning DEI efforts overrepresented White individuals on 72% of analyzed social media accounts. Accounts associated with Chambers lacking a formal, posted commitment to DEI overrepresented White individuals on 84% of the analyzed social media accounts.

	Black		White		Non-white Hispanic		Asian		Other	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Accounts run by subgroups of Chambers of Commerce that posted a formal commitment to diversity (n=82)	9	11%	59	72%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Accounts run by subgroups of Chambers of Commerce that did not post a formal commitment to diversity (n=55)	10	18%	46	84%	1	2%	0	0%	0	0%

As shown in Table 6, the group of 71 Chambers of Commerce that posted a formal commitment to DEI efforts underrepresented non-white Hispanic individuals in 37% of analyzed social media posts. The remaining accounts underrepresented non-white Hispanic individuals in 53% of analyzed social media posts.

	Black		White		Non-white Hispanic		Asian		Other	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Accounts run by subgroups of Chambers of Commerce that posted a formal commitment to diversity (n=82)	19	23%	1	1%	30	37%	4	5%	2	2%
Accounts run by subgroups of Chambers of Commerce that did not post a formal commitment to diversity (n=55)	12	22%	0	0%	29	53%	5	9%	1	2%

Lastly, as shown in Table 7 below, the group of 71 Chambers of Commerce who posted a formal commitment to DEI efforts most frequently accurately represented (within 10 percentage points) individuals of Other races/ethnicities (98% of accounts), followed by Asian (95%), Black (66%), Non-white Hispanic (63%), and White (27%) on their social media posts analyzed. The remaining accounts most frequently accurately represented individuals of Other races/ethnicities (98% of accounts), followed by Asian (91%), Black (62%), Non-white Hispanic (44%), and White (16%) on their accounts.

	Black		White		Non-white Hispanic		Asian		Other	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Accounts run by subgroups of Chambers of Commerce that posted a formal commitment to diversity (n=82)	54	66%	22	27%	52	63%	78	95%	80	98%
Accounts run by subgroups of Chambers of Commerce that did not post a formal commitment to diversity (n=55)	34	62%	9	16%	24	44%	50	91%	54	98%

The hypothesis for the second research question (RQ2) “are differences present in the accuracy of demographic representation in photos posted on Twitter and Facebook by Civic Leadership organizations and Young Professionals groups when the sponsoring Chamber of Commerce has proclaimed specifically to be committed to formal efforts in improving Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in the local business community?” was confirmed. Both Civic Leadership and Young Professionals organizations more accurately represent area individuals in their social media posts when the sponsoring Chamber of Commerce has specifically committed to formal efforts in improving DEI in the local business community.

DISCUSSION

Research Question 1

The researchers hypothesized that both Civic Leadership and Young Professionals organizations would most frequently overrepresent White individuals and under-represent minorities in their social media posts. This hypothesis is supported by the data. Seventy-seven percent of the social media accounts analyzed overrepresented White individuals by more than 10 percentage points. While the frequency of this overrepresentation was higher than expected, the volume of the overrepresentation was also surprising. Civic Leadership organizations that over-represented White individuals did so by an average of 24 percentage points, and the Young Professionals organizations did so by an average of 29 percentage points. The significant overrepresentation of White individuals is particularly concerning, as this signals to stakeholders and prospective members that the organizations are presenting information and holding events geared mostly toward and for White people.

By far, the most significantly underrepresented demographic group in these images was non-white Hispanic. Forty-three percent of the social media accounts analyzed underrepresented non-white Hispanic individuals by more than 10 percentage points. The Civic Leadership organizations that underrepresented non-white Hispanic individuals did so by an average of 23 percentage points, and the Young Professionals organizations did so by an average of 21 percentage points. Black individuals were the second-most underrepresented group. Twenty-three percent of the social media accounts analyzed under-represented Black individuals by more than 10 percentage points. The Civic Leadership organizations that under-represented Black

individuals did so by an average of 18 percentage points, and the Young Professionals organizations did so by an average of 22 percentage points. This finding was particularly concerning, considering the barriers to social and economic equality already faced by these groups in the United States.

Research Question 2

The researchers hypothesized that both Civic Leadership and Young Professionals organizations would more accurately represent area individuals in their social media posts when the sponsoring Chamber of Commerce has specifically committed to formal efforts in improving DEI in the local business community. This hypothesis was also supported by the data. However, the chi-squared tests conducted for Research Question 1 indicated that all accounts misrepresent at least one demographic group in the images analyzed (significant at the $p < .05$ level or less). Therefore, while it is worthwhile to note organizations with a formal commitment to DEI misrepresent groups less often, we must note that those organizations are still significantly misrepresenting their populations.

Most notably, for accounts that represented service area populations with reasonable accuracy (within 10 percentage points), the largest differences were identified for organizations sponsored by Chambers of Commerce that made a formal commitment to DEI efforts with regard to Hispanic individuals. This group was accurately represented by 63% of accounts for organizations sponsored by Chambers of Commerce with a formal commitment to DEI and 44% of those that did not. White individuals were accurately represented by 27% of accounts for organizations sponsored by Chambers of Commerce with a formal commitment to DEI and 16% of those that did not. The remaining groups of individuals (Black, Asian, and Other) showed only slight differences when comparing accounts (a difference of less than 5 percentage points), though in all instances, accounts representing organizations with a formal commitment to DEI were more frequently accurately represented than the organizations that did not post a formal commitment to those efforts. Additionally, accounts for organizations sponsored by Chambers of Commerce with a formal commitment to DEI over-represented Black, White, and Hispanic individuals less frequently (no difference for Asian, Other), and underrepresented Black and White individuals less frequently (no difference for individuals of Other races/ethnicities).

The only data that did not support this hypothesis concerns accounts that underrepresented Asian individuals and Hispanic individuals. These groups were more frequently underrepresented by the accounts representing organizations sponsored by Chambers of Commerce with a formal commitment to DEI. While the groups differed for Asians by only 4 percentage points, the difference for Hispanic individuals was 16 percentage points.

Additional Observations

Some additional observations about community representation emerged during the data analysis. Analysis also revealed 14% of accounts ($n=19$) analyzed represented all demographic groups served by their Chamber of Commerce with reasonable accuracy, within 10 percentage points for each race/ethnicity. Four of these accounts were for organizations run by Chambers of Commerce that did not post a diversity statement, and fifteen were for organizations run by Chambers of Commerce that did post a diversity statement.

The authors also noted Young Professionals organizations more frequently overrepresented White individuals (81% of accounts) than Civic Leadership organizations (73% of accounts), though both percentages were very high. Young Professionals organizations also more frequently underrepresented Black individuals (29% of accounts) when compared to Civic Leadership organizations (18% of accounts).

Overall, our findings align with research indicating White people are often overrepresented – and people of color are underrepresented or portrayed stereotypically – in American marketing promotions (Merskin, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2022). For example, a recent study of fashion magazines found 86% of covers featured White individuals (Mitchell et al., 2022). In the same vein, a study of bank websites found 75% included no Latino models and 30% included no African American models, but payday lenders disproportionately featured people of color in their advertising (Hawkins & Penner, 2021). Marketing to children also reflects inaccuracy in representation, as Merskin (2008) found children's television commercials overrepresented White and African American children and rarely featured children of other races or ethnicities. Accordingly, the issue of accuracy in representation is not unique to Chamber of Commerce entities, and the findings of this study should not be construed as a “blame and shame” attempt. Rather, in finding these community-building organizations struggle with a promotional strategy problem seen in American organizations, big and small, we aim to highlight opportunities to continue legally promoting diversity and inclusion during this time of uncertain policy shifts, improve community representation, and cultivate awareness of social visibility issues.

Limitations

While this analysis included only images posted on Twitter and Facebook, Civic Leadership and Young Professionals organizations likely use various social media platforms with varying degrees of frequency. This analysis excluded video and moving image (GIFs, etc.) and focused only on photos and still images. Some Chambers of Commerce employ a specific communications professional who is familiar with social media strategies to capture images for these subgroups, while others do not.

This data was collected by two individuals making observations. We recognize that race and ethnicity cannot always be determined at a glance, and impressions are subject to researchers' personal biases in perception that could be influenced by our own race, ethnicity, relationships, and experience (or lack of experience) in a diverse network of people. A high coefficient of inter-coder reliability was obtained at the beginning of the process to create a dataset worthy of a publishable analysis.

Finally, due to the ongoing global pandemic at the time of this analysis, some events depicted people wearing masks, which sometimes made determining the perceived race/ethnicity of the individual more challenging.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study support several legally implementable recommendations aligned with the goal of intentional and aware social media communication to improve community representation. These recommendations, outlined below, may generally be implemented as internal communication practices and policies and are not specific to Twitter

(now “X”), which lost 23% of its U.S. user base between November 2022 and March 2024 (Ingram, 2024).

Understand and accurately present community demographics. Our results indicated both Civic Leadership and Young Professionals organizations most frequently over-represented White individuals in social media posts. Through cultivation of an intentional awareness of community demographics and mindful curation of social media content accurately depicting community demographics, these organizations can reduce uncertainty concerning the nature of the membership experience and utilize activating signals that effectively show users how the group actively embodies diversity and inclusion. Understanding Chambers of Commerce often serve as the “front porch” of local business communities for both employees and employers, and recognizing consumer reliance on digital media as a primary source of information, we assert that accurate representation of community and membership diversity is critical on all digital platforms, including websites.

Integrate diversity into promotional strategy. Findings indicated organizations with a formal commitment to DEI misrepresented groups less often than those without a formal commitment to DEI. However, all organizations misrepresented at least one demographic group. Regardless of the organization’s capacity or willingness to maintain a formal commitment to DEI, this research evidences a need to integrate diversity into promotional strategy as a function of information accuracy. Recognizing digital media is part of the promotional toolkit and committing to ethical practices in promotion, organizations have an obligation to accurately portray the nature of the “product”. Through this lens, accurate representation of community demographics becomes a matter of ethical promotional practice, not a scrutiny- or penalty-inducing DEI initiative. As a result, both employees and employers will possess an accurate understanding of membership diversity.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could broaden the scope of inquiry beyond Chamber-sponsored Civic Leadership and Young Professionals groups to determine whether similar racial and ethnic representation patterns appear in other community-based leadership entities, such as Rotary Clubs, professional associations, and nonprofit boards. Comparative analyses across sectors and organizational types would help identify whether the overrepresentation of White individuals and underrepresentation of certain minority groups is unique to the Chamber context or indicative of a wider representational trend in local leadership imagery. In addition, expanding the range of media examined—beyond still photographs on Facebook and Twitter—to include video content, GIFs, and posts on other widely used platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn could reveal important differences in representation patterns tied to platform affordances, audience demographics, and content format.

Further studies could also integrate intersectional analyses, examining how race and ethnicity interact with other identity markers such as gender, age, or disability status in visual depictions of leadership. Building on Signaling Theory and Uncertainty Reduction Theory, researchers might explore how variations in imagery influence prospective members’ perceptions of organizational inclusivity, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, using experimental or survey-based designs to measure audience reactions. Longitudinal research tracking imagery over multiple years could help determine whether representation changes in response to broader

social, political, and legal developments, such as shifts in DEI policy or high-profile diversity-related events. Finally, future research could examine whether more accurate demographic representation in social media content is associated with tangible organizational outcomes—such as increased diversity in membership, higher retention rates, or greater engagement—providing evidence for the practical value of inclusive imagery as both an ethical and strategic communication practice.

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