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Pop Culture Depictions of Diversity in Business – Mad Men, Super Store, and Barbie

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POP CULTURE DEPICTIONS OF DIVERSITY IN BUSINESS - MAD MEN, SUPER STORE, AND BARBIE

*Akshaya Kamalnath**

ABSTRACT

We have come a long way from only having women in the secretarial pool (as depicted in *Mad Men*), to having women and racial minorities in the workforce (as depicted in *Super Store*), to a company that creates a fictional world where women hold all the top positions (*Barbie*). Both *Mad Men* and *Super Store* are American TV shows – *Mad Men* was made in the present-day to depict life in the world of advertising agencies in New York in the 60s. *Super Store* is a series on Netflix about the issues workers face in a big company in the present day. *Barbie* is a big-budget film funded by Mattel, the company that created the doll called Barbie. In this article, I will argue that both shows and the movie have interesting things to tell us about present-day conversations and policy fixes to address diversity issues in corporations. While we have come a long way, problems persist. This article also seeks to make three broader points. First, pop culture has an indirect impact on policy-making in corporate law and on corporate behaviour. Second, most pop culture narratives paint corporations, big business, and entrepreneurs as the villains. However, there are exceptions to this narrative and the three shows/movies I have chosen to study here are, in some ways, exceptions to this trope. Third, contrary to the narrative of business always representing evil, corporations have, in many instances, been able to contribute positively to society, including diversity. This last point is particularly apparent when we compare the past (*Mad Men*) to the present (*Super Store* and *Barbie*).

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INTRODUCTION

Companies want to be seen as champions of diversity. Just like they want to be seen as champions of other social issues.¹ Whether they genuinely want to be champions of social issues or whether they are merely responding to expectations foisted on them in this regard and, consequently, the fear of regulations, is an open question.² Either way, there are calls to introduce laws that would mandate how companies must operate to achieve socially desirable outcomes, and on the issue of diversity, to increase the diversity (particularly gender diversity) on the boards of companies.³ These ‘calls’ can be gleaned from social media posts, news reporting, opinion pieces, and perhaps even TV shows, films, literature, music, and eventually result in corporate buzzwords.⁴

The influence of pop culture on corporate law and business practice is fascinating and provides useful insight. Yet, this aspect is often overlooked. Pop culture is defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary as ‘music, TV, cinema, books, etc. that are popular and enjoyed by ordinary people, rather than experts or very educated people.’⁵ Essentially, pop culture is anything that represents the ‘culture of the people.’⁶ It will not come as a surprise to anyone

1. There are several academic articles cataloguing, explaining, assessing, and making proposals about the concept of corporate purpose. *See e.g.* Saura Masconale and Simone M Sepe, *Citizen Corp. - Corporate Activism and Democracy* 100(2), WASH U. L. REV. 257-326 (2022).

2. Professor Cheffins has argued that business leaders inspire more trust than politicians and that ‘companies are increasingly thought of as influential agents of social change’. Brian Cheffins, *The Past, Present, and Future of Corporate Purpose*, DEL. J. CORP. L. (2023), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4420800.

3. For a discussion of diversity related laws already in force, see Akshaya Kamalnath, *Legal and Market Initiatives to Increase Diversity in Corporations - A Cross-Jurisdictional Analysis*, 46 SEATTLE U. L. REV. 115 (2022).

4. For a discussion of how social media impacts corporate behaviour and even law, particularly in the context of diversity issues, see Akshaya Kamalnath, *Social Movements, Diversity, and Corporate Short-Termism*, 23 Geo J. Gender & L. 449 (2022). On media’s impact on societal perceptions of diversity in companies and the diverse business leaders in question, see Akshaya Kamalnath, *The Corporate Diversity Jigsaw* 208, 209 (Cambridge University Press, 2022). [“...media reports about a new CEO often emphasise the gender and race of a CEO when they are a woman or from a minority group. Even if this attention to demographic aspects is with a view to celebrate the diverse appointment, it can take away from the merit of the candidate in question.” Footnotes omitted.]

5. *Pop culture*, DICTIONARY.CAMBRIDGE.ORG, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/pop-culture>.

6. Tim Delaney, *Pop Culture: An Overview*, PHILOSOPHY NOW (2007), https://philosophynow.org/issues/64/Pop_Culture_An_Overview.

exposed to pop culture, media, and social media that in all these dimensions, corporations are depicted in a bad light. There is a focus on corporate wrongdoing, greedy business people, and the harms that corporate behemoths can wreak on the little guy (the individual).

In an era of populism (political parties claiming to speak exclusively for the will of the people⁷), which can arise from both the left and the right⁸, it is important to pay attention to messages in pop culture because they both influence and represent popular sentiment. Professor Alison Young notes that “populism homogenises the will of ‘the people’ and uses emotion as opposed to rationality when conducting political debates.”⁹ Further, she notes that populism fails to build consensus between divergent groups.¹⁰ This, in turn, gives rise to political polarisation.¹¹ Similarly, in the context of regulation of corporations, particularly on the issue of diversity, while social media activism, media narratives, and other pop culture might suggest that strong diversity measures and regulations are required, there is a lack of rational consideration of costs and benefits of such measures. Nuanced views are difficult to fit into an X post (formerly Tweet) or an engaging TikTok video. As a result, you are either ‘for’ or ‘against’ diversity. It is no wonder diversity regulations for corporations have proved to be extremely divisive. Despite the influence of social media, another type of pop culture – tv shows, web series, movies – tend to or at least have the capacity to depict issues with more nuance than social media.

This article, focusing on the specific issue of diversity in corporations, will use two web series and one movie – *Mad Men*, *Super Store*, and *Barbie* – to show that corporations can address diversity issues better if they pay attention to the nuances. Although these shows and movie are not set out to be pro-business, they all have moments that show us that regulations resulting from populist calls have both costs and benefits and that companies can create social good if they rationally assess issues and introduce considered solutions. Thus, this article tells a story that contradicts the evil corporation/business person trope. In telling this story, I argue that if it is possible, even within the anti-

7. Christopher A. Hartwell and Timothy M. Devinney, *The demands of populism on business: Introducing corporate political responsibility*, INT’L BUS. REV. (2022), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0969593122001032>.

8. Populism is on the rise on both sides of the Atlantic and even beyond. While public law scholars have raised rule of law and other related concerns as a result of this, populism has also impacted business particularly in the context of the debate about the purpose of corporations and diversity measures in corporations. For an examples of scholarship on populism, see Alison L. Young, *Populism and the UK Constitution*, 71(1) CURRENT LEGAL PROBLEMS (2018) 17; and Stephen M. Bainbridge, *Corporate Purpose in a Populist Era*, 98 NEB. L. REV. 543 (2020).

9. Young, *supra* note 8, at 34.

10. *Id.* at 35.

11. Timur Naushirvanov, Dina Rosenberg, Patrick Sawyer, and Didem Seyis, *How populists fuel polarization and fail their response to COVID-19: An empirical analysis*, FRONTIERSIN (2022), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2022.948137/full>; Young, *supra* note 8 [“charismatic leaders of populist movements can harness the media, particularly social media, to polarise debate, turning political debate into strong outbursts of emotion.”].

business zeitgeist of movies and TV/streaming platform series, to pick moments that show us that corporations can be a force for good, then it means that well-thought-out and considered policy making is required to incentivize good behaviour from corporations.

By eschewing traditional disciplinary boundaries, this article contributes to our thinking on (1) diversity in corporations and how, if at all it should be regulated; and (2) the influence of pop culture on corporate behaviour and corporate law in a populist era.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Part 1 will detail the methodology and choices made while curating the data set. Part 2 will discuss the trope of the evil corporation or business person or entrepreneur in pop culture, and the impact of this on public policy and corporate behaviour. Part 3 will examine the two Netflix shows and the lessons for diversity regulation from these shows. Part 4 will analyse the movie, *Barbie*, and discuss takeaways from it, not only for diversity regulation but also more generally for corporate purpose. Part 4 will conclude.

METHODOLOGY

It is necessary to explain the choice of films/ TV series discussed here. The primary consideration was that the films and TV shows in the data set should be able to offer content whose analysis can appropriately respond to the aim of this article. The aim was to study how diversity and diversity measures are depicted in popular culture, particularly in films and TV shows.

Next, it was important that the films and TV shows (units of pop culture) that are studied are extremely well-received – both by critics and the masses. The data set chosen meets both of the above criteria. *Mad Men* has won numerous awards and even prompted the launch of a limited-edition suit that is modelled after the show's lead character.¹² *Superstore* became popular as 'TV's most subversive workplace comedy'¹³ and received/was nominated for a series of awards, although not as many as *Mad Men*.¹⁴ Both shows have more than 5 seasons, which indicates that they were able to capture consumer appetite over a long period of time.¹⁵ The movie *Barbie* was met with huge critical and commercial success.¹⁶ Apart from winning numerous awards, it is also worth noting that there are at least twenty articles with 'Barbie' in the title

12. Matt Golberg, *Wear this – Brooks Brothers Official MAD MEN Suit*, COLLIDER (Oct. 28, 2009), <https://collider.com/wear-this-brooks-brothers-official-mad-men-suit/>.

13. Ammar Kalia, 'A David and Goliath battle': how *Superstore* became TV's most subversive workplace comedy, THE GUARDIAN (May 3, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/may/03/a-david-and-goliath-battle-how-superstore-became-tvs-most-subversive-workplace-comedy>.

14. IMDB, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4477976/awards/> (last visited Mar. 19, 2024).

15. *Mad Men* went into 7 seasons and *Super Store* went into 6 seasons.

16. Sam Warner, *Barbie movie beats Harry Potter box office record*, DIGITAL SPY (Aug. 12, 2023), <https://www.digitalspy.com/movies/a44793502/barbie-harry-potter-box-office-record/>. *Mad Men* went into 7 seasons and *Super Store* went into 6 seasons.

published in the *Financial Times* alone.¹⁷ Thus, the three selected works can appeal to both elite groups and masses. This means that we can assume that they not only appeal to the popular sentiment but are also well-crafted works that consider nuances of the issues being dealt with.

Some other shows and movies that were considered as candidates for this study are listed below:

- (i) the series, *Lessons in Chemistry* (on Apple TV) which focuses on the life of a female chemist in the 1960s and is based on a bestselling book of the same title, authored by Bonnie Garmus; (ii) the series, *The Law According to Lidia Poët* (on Netflix) which is based on the life of an Italian lawyer, Lydia Poët (1855 - 1949); and
- (iii) *On the Basis of Sex*, a movie about the life of Ruth Bader Ginsberg (1933 - 2020), who was the second woman to be appointed on the Supreme Court of the United States.

While *Lessons in Chemistry* is a fictional story,¹⁸ the series about Lidia Poët is a dramatized version of a true story¹⁹ and so is the movie about Ginsberg. The latter two would offer an interesting contrast with Ginsberg being a well-known figure and Poët being almost unknown outside of Italy. Both of these would have helped show the plight of women in the legal world in the respective time periods being depicted, and *Lessons in Chemistry* would have shown the plight of women in workplaces (a research lab, a television studio, and a university are discussed in the book). Having considered the usefulness, I decided to discard them and only retain the series/ movie that focused on a company environment (although in *Mad Men* it is a partnership, which is a close cousin of the corporate form).

Despite the fact that these series and movie did not make it to the final data set, it is significant to note that these were all released in recent years. The series, *Lessons in Chemistry*, was released in 2023, and the book it is based on was published in 2022. *The Law According to Lidia Poët* was released in 2023, and *On the Basis of Sex* was released in 2018. Amongst the series and movie that did make it into the final data set, *Barbie* was released in 2023, *Super Store* in 2015, and *Mad Men* in 2007 and ran until 2015. This shows that diversity has been a topic of interest in recent times. How pop culture engages with the topic over time also shows how the conversation around diversity has evolved. Table 1 in the Appendix provides a quick snapshot of how the time of release and the time period being depicted in the show

17. Carola Long, *Kudos to Ken, the real style star of Barbie*, FINANCIAL TIMES (July 12, 2023), <https://www.ft.com/content/5e441e-31e0-40a8-ab5e-98325a808121>; Katie Martin, *It's Barbie time – the golden age of doing nothing*, FINANCIAL TIMES (July 29, 2023), <https://www.ft.com/content/40535316-fc22-478a-963b-7208a4e5e86c>.

18. Brianna McNeal, *Is Lessons in Chemistry Based on a True Story?*, ESQUIRE (Oct. 23, 2023), <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a45613547/lessons-in-chemistry-true-story/>.

19. Susanna Menis, *The untold story of the first Italian-Turinese female lawyer: Netflix's The Law According to Lidia Poët*, Taylor & Francis Online (2023) 17(2) LAW AND HUMANITIES 320.

influences what issues around diversity are depicted and how they are depicted.

Finally, a note about why books have not been included in this study. As is obvious from the discussion above, even when a series was based on a book (*Lessons in Chemistry*), the series was considered for this study rather than the book. This is simply a reflection of the fact that films and TV series are consumed more than books, particularly amongst younger generations.²⁰

THE EVIL CORPORATION/ BUSINESS MAN (IN A FEW CASES WOMEN)/ENTREPRENEUR TROPE AND WHY IT MATTERS.

In the corporate context, Bainbridge notes that a recurring theme of populism has been a ‘deep suspicion of corporate power’.²¹ This second part will discuss how pop culture reflects this suspicion of business.

Corporations or business in general (whatever business form they use) are the villains in almost every movie, TV/streaming series, and in literature. I’m not the first person to have noticed this.

Kessler wrote in the context of Netflix series²²:

The agenda list is too long, so I’ll focus on the current rash of shows about entrepreneurs: Showtime’s “Super Pumped” on Travis Kalanick and Uber; Apple TV’s “WeCrashed” on Adam and Rebekah Neumann and WeWork; and Hulu’s “The Dropout” on Elizabeth Holmes and Theranos. Their debuts curiously coincided with the Netflix’s “Inventing Anna” about the con artist Anna Sorokin. Hollywood seems to equate entrepreneurs with scammers, almost as if filmmakers have a vendetta against success.

Literature is not much different. Webb, a columnist and commentator on economics, financial markets and personal finance, cites a number of British classics and then summarized that ‘we haven’t much good to say about businessmen, capitalism or even entrepreneurs, for that matter’.²³

Bainbridge made this point, in the context of fantasy fiction and movies²⁴:

20. Dimitrije Curcic, *Reading vs. Watching TV*, WORDSRATED (May 23, 2023), <https://wordsrated.com/reading-vs-watching-tv/#:~:text=Time%20spent%20reading%20vs.,in%20from%20of%20the%20book.>

21. Stephen M. Bainbridge, *Corporate Purpose in a Populist Era*, *supra* note 7, 552.

22. Andy Kessler, *Why Does Hollywood Hate Silicon Valley?*, WALL ST. J. (Apr. 24, 2022), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/hollywood-hates-silicon-valley-theranos-uber-wework-neumann-kalaniick-television-holmes-11650817560>.

23. Merryn Somerset Webb, *Business: always the villain, never the hero*, MONEYWEEK (Feb. 26, 2013), <https://moneyweek.com/merryns-blog/business-always-the-villain-never-the-hero-62800>.

24. Stephen M. Bainbridge, *Science versus magic in fantasy*, PROFESSORBAINBRIDGE.COM (May 31, 2011), <https://www.professorbainbridge.com/professorbainbridgecom/2011/05/>.

One of the recurring tropes in fantasy is that of the good ecomentalists fighting impossible odds to defeat the evil capitalists. Don't believe me? The Hobbits of the Shire coming home to scour the Shire clean of the deprivations of proto-industrialist Lotho Sackville-Baggins. The Ewoks beating the Empire's best troops. Avatar. The Dark Tower. The Stand. Erin Brockovich.

Ribstein explained this phenomenon by noting that there is a basic antagonism between artists and business people.²⁵ While this is mostly true, the anti-business sentiment in pop culture might be explained more simply by remembering that art reflects popular sentiments and beliefs. Interestingly, although 'populist critiques of the corporation generally target abuses of the form rather than the corporate form itself,'²⁶ it is rare to see pop culture focusing on the good that corporations can do and have done.

Film and TV series depictions of diversity within business have mostly featured this theme of the evil corporation/business person. However, as foreshadowed, I aim to pick the smaller stories within these films/shows to draw out the nuances that may sometimes even counter the evil corporation theme.

FROM MAD MEN TO SUPER STORE

Since diversity is the foil that this article uses to understand the impact of pop culture's depiction of issues, particularly business-related issues, in a populist era, it is useful to provide a summary of where we stand with regard to diversity in corporations. As I have said in a recent book²⁷:

there is more to the diversity puzzle than meets the eye, and even after we find many of the missing pieces and interactions within each of these pieces, there is no easy solution that can be introduced through the law.

Yet media articles and social media debates often reduce the issue into a simple matter of introducing (hard or soft) regulation to ensure that companies have a certain percentage of diverse leaders. Further, diversity is usually simplified to mean gender diversity. But diversity is a far more complex issue. From the stories below I draw out some of the nuances including mentoring as a tool to improve diversity in top positions, and the costs of regulation and activism on the issue of diversity.

A. Mad Men

In *Mad Men*, a show that depicts the advertising world in the U.S. from the early 1960s to the 1970s, any diversity in the workplace is about gender diversity. However, the show also has something to tell us about another kind

25. Larry E. Ribstein, *How Movies Created the Financial Crisis*, MICH. ST. L. REV. 1171 (2009).

26. Bainbridge, *supra* note 7, at 558.

27. Kamalnath, *supra* note 4, at 2.

of diversity in the workplace – immigrants and racial minorities.²⁸ This section will first deal with the issue of women in the workplace and then that of immigrants and racial minorities.

Women in the show are secretaries or housewives, and men are the ‘ad men’ on Madison Avenue. It is a world where it was okay for the male boss to have sexual relationships with their secretaries.

Yet, even in that world, we see the story of a young girl, Peggy, who starts as a secretary but breaks into the ‘ad man’ world to become an ad woman. This was possible because the lead character in the show, Don Draper, the famed ‘ad man’, takes her under his wing and mentors her. Towards the end of the show, Draper leaves Penny with one last piece of wisdom²⁹:

Don tells Peggy that in order to be the boss, she has to believe in her idea even though there’s no way she can know there’s not a better one. “That’s just the job,” he says. “What’s the job?” “Living in the not knowing.”

There are such nuggets of wisdom or just tricks of the trade that Draper shares with Penny throughout the show – from when she becomes an ‘ad woman’ anyway. Draper is not required to mentor Penny under a mentoring program like we see today. Quite the contrary. He mentors her despite it being unacceptable for women to be ‘ad men’. He does it because he sees merit in Penny – in some ways, he might have seen himself in her.

There is a message in Peggy’s story that is worth listening to, even today. Diversity advocates argue that mentoring programs help women (and we can extend that to minority candidates as well) progress up the corporate pipeline. Most of these programs tend to assign women mentors to women because it is believed that another woman can understand the unique challenges of the more junior woman. Unfortunately, this practice creates divisions across genders, and if the mentoring is based on race, then it is across races.³⁰ Having mentors across these categories rather than within will build bridges.³¹ It also helps a woman or a candidate from a racial minority group to have a mentor from the majority race/ gender so that when the candidate is being championed for a position, it will not be perceived as someone trying to promote another person from their own group irrespective of merit. Of

28. The show has also spoken to the Jewish American experience. This article restricts itself to issues of diversity within the workplace. Lisa Lednicer, ‘Q&A: ‘Mad Men’ creator Matthew Weiner talks ‘otherness’ and Jewish identity on eve of finale’, WASH. POST (May 14, 2015), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2015/05/14/matthew-weiner-on-jewish-identity-in-mad-men/>.

29. James Poniewozik, ‘How Mad Men Rode the Carousel of the Past into Television History’, TIME (Mar. 28, 2024), <https://time.com/mad-men-history/>.

30. Kamalnath, *supra* note 4, at 76 – 81.

31. Cindy A. Schipani & Terry Morehead Dworkin, *The Need for Mentors in Promoting Gender Diverse Leadership in the #MeToo Era*, 87 GEO. WASH. L. REV. 1272, 1295, 1296 (2019). They suggest that senior women should mentor junior men. They make this suggestion in the context of #MeToo creating an atmosphere of fear and consequently men not wanting to mentor junior women.

course, white men champion white men all the time, but this is not likely to be viewed with suspicion.

Draper's relationship with Penny also highlights the mentoring relationship. At one point, Draper takes Penny to watch a movie when they are stuck for ideas and eventually explains that it helps to stop pressing one's brain for ideas and relax by watching a movie. In other words, he told her how he deals with difficult moments in a creative job. Mentors tend to share personal fixes to problems with their proteges in every industry, but only when the relationship is genuine. Mentoring programs seek to artificially create these relationships which may not always pan out. In the current day, when many companies have started allotting credit for senior people who mentor their juniors, it may be useful to allow the junior to nominate someone if they already have a mentor-protegee relationship with that person.

I should note here that Draper's character in the show is a complex one. By selectively picking the stories about mentoring, I might be creating a false impression of a good and upstanding senior 'ad man.' The reality is far from it, but presenting this particular story is enough for present purposes.

Now, turning to the issue of immigrants and racial diversity in the workplace, *Mad Men* again remains true to the period it is based in. It shows us how outsiders start to make it in the workplace. Lednicer, in an article in the *Washington Post*, explained it as follows³²:

[*Mad Men*] traces the United States' transition from the staid, tradition-bound Eisenhower years to the freewheeling exuberance and social upheaval of the 1960s. It's about the rise of meritocracy in the workplace and the decline of the WASP establishment. It's about outsiders seeking a way in, grasping for a gauzy version of the American Dream while blotting out their grimy pasts.

The rise of meritocracy meant that Jewish Americans made it into the big firms and companies, including the world of advertising. The fact that *Mad Men* depicts the moment in time when Jews start breaking through and coming in is relevant to the current diversity debate not only from the standpoint of how one negotiates one's outsider status, but also from the perspective of diverse people eventually breaking in based on their merit.

Michael Ginsberg, someone who is hiding his Jewishness at the ad agency, also speaks to the general immigrant experience that is relevant even today. The creator of the show, Weiner, explained the motivation for the character of Ginsberg:

He's a reflection of the movement to have Jews behind the scenes in the creative department. And then what kind of Jew he was, what kind of person he is, was just me trying to represent the kind of people that went into this field at that time. Most of the people who are in advertising are Ivy League

32. Lednicer, *supra* note 28.

people. Even in 1968. With big beards and Army jackets, whether Jewish or not, they're coming out of Columbia, Harvard, and Dartmouth. I mean, so much of the story is about class, too.

...

Some of it involves not being part of the ruling class. And being a C student. Being someone who is not conventionally an achiever. So, he is cut from that cloth.

Here, Weiner is pointing out an important issue that the current diversity conversation tends to miss – one of class. In the UK context, Eleanore Hickman has written about most of the C-Suite members having studied in elite institutions including Oxbridge and of course the US equivalent of that is the Ivy League.³³ The current focus on gender and race as the main indicators of diversity fails to account for how people of a certain class, irrespective of race and gender, may find it easier to obtain prestigious positions because of their connections and social background.

Towards the end, the show also shows the advertising firm hiring two black women – Dawn and Shirley – as a result of a mistaken ad. Once hired, the two back secretaries are not seen as distinct individuals. Instead, people often call one woman by the other's name. Peggy, the show's female lead, is also shown behaving badly with Shirley.³⁴ Clearly, those at the receiving end of some form of discrimination are not necessarily sensitive to their behaviour towards others.

Finally, *Mad Men* is not a show with a normative message about business or business people.³⁵ It is a historical show that tries to depict the workplace of a certain time in one sector – advertising. So, there is no overriding message about the evil corporation or the evil business person. (In fact, the ad agency in question is not organized as a corporation. It is a partnership firm like most ad agencies tend to be.) However, there still is something of the usual evil business person/big business stereotype. For one thing, the star performer in the firm, Don Draper, gets away with a lot of conduct that would be unacceptable. For another, the obvious theme is women being seen as second-class citizens in the workplace.

B. Super Store

In *Super Store*, the focus is on employees of a large Walmart-esq supermarket. To begin with, the group of workers we are shown belong to

33. ELEANORE HICKMAN, DIVERSITY, MERIT AND POWER IN THE C-SUITE, 97-98 (2023).

34. Jonathan A. Segal, *'Hi Dawn/Hi Shirley: Maddening Racism on Mad Men'*, JOHNATHAN HR LAW (Apr. 21, 2014), <https://www.jonathanhrlaw.com/2014/04/21/hi-dawnhi-shirley-maddening-racism-on-mad-men/>.

35. The creator of the show, Matthew Weiner was quoted say that a part of his intention when he pitched the show was "Wouldn't it be amazing to do 10 or 12 years of these people's lives, have the actors age that amount? And immediately, no matter how many bad things happen that first season, you will see Peggy and have nostalgia for her first day at work because you knew her then...". Poniewozik, *supra* note 29.

different races, age brackets, ethnicities, and backgrounds and includes disabled and queer workers.³⁶ Since these are workers at the store front, it is quite realistic to have such a wide array of people. Still, it could serve as a wake-up call for us when we talk about diversity in corporations, whether on the board of directors or at other levels, we tend to focus mostly on women, and in recent times, racial minorities. As I have argued in previous work, diversity has many facets, and it is important to remember them while considering diversity measures.³⁷

Class diversity is also brought out in this series. One of the employees, Jonah, is from an upper middle-class background, and this is often made fun of because it is rare to see this background amongst employees on the shop front.³⁸ However, picturing the opposite situation – a person at the management level who is not from the same upper-class background as their peers – would have more negative implications. The dynamic when class and gender intersect is also brought out nicely in initial interactions between Jonah and his female colleague and lead character, Amy Sosa. Jonah seems surprised to learn that Amy is his supervisor and tries to go around her and complain to her boss.³⁹ Instances of female bosses being undermined by male members of their team are not uncommon, and *Super Store* depicts this in a realistic and engaging manner.

Super Store also brings out the impact of regulations and exhortations about diversity in corporations. The emphasis has been on quotas (mostly in European countries) or disclosure rules (although California has now legislated a quota legislation, the series predates this legislation⁴⁰) about the percentage of women and racial and ethnic minorities on the board and other senior management positions. This has resulted in an obsession with ticking the box to find people from each category.

In one scene, Amy Sosa, who has become a retail store manager by this time in the series, is called by the management of the company that runs the stores, including the one that is the focus of the series. Management asked her to apply for an executive role and Amy applies for the role. While waiting for the interview, Amy finds that all the interviewees happen to be Latinas. One candidate tells her that management probably realised they were missing a colour in the crayon box while another says that she was not above rolling her ‘R’s to get the job. During the interview, Amy is shown answering the interviewer intelligently only to be nudged towards her ideas regarding ‘customers of colour.’ Amy quickly realizes what is happening and improvises. She throws in phrases like “as a Latina..” and “cultura” with a pronounced

36. Zeid Abughazaleh, *Superstore's Diversity Is Its Greatest Strength*, CBR (Jan. 19, 2021), <https://www.cbr.com/superstore-diversity-greatest-strength/#:~:text=The%20characters%20pay%20respect%20to,way%20to%20drive%20the%20story.>

37. Kamalnath, the corporate diversity jigsaw, *supra* note 4, at 9–33.

38. Mimi Wong, *Superstore - Seasons 1-3*, MEDIAVERSTY (Nov. 15, 2017), <https://www.mediaiversityreviews.com/tv-reviews/2017/11/5/superstore.>

39. *Id.*

40. KAMALNATH, THE CORPORATE DIVERSITY JIGSAW, *supra* note 4, at 110–114.

accent and the interviewers immediately sound impressed.⁴¹ This scene brings out the ridiculousness with which diversity hiring is done and perceived in most companies. Unfortunately, the regulatory focus on numbers and metrics has lead to this.

C. Learnings from pop-culture depictions

How can we solve this? In my book, *The Corporate Diversity Jigsaw*, I argue that changing the culture of the firm is key to ensuring that diverse candidates (across different facets of diversity) will be recruited and retained in the company.⁴² *Super Store* is a good example of how shallow diversity efforts look. In contrast with such formal structures, we witness informal mentoring practices helping Peggy in *Mad Men*. Incentivising a culture where employees help each other would be key.

In my book, I advocate for a nuanced approach, recognizing that each company is unique and must identify its diverse employees' challenges. While general best practices exist, companies must develop innovative, tailored solutions. This sort of thing may be harder to push for on social media because of the simplified narratives needed for short posts that do not exceed the attention span of online crowds. However, it can come through in little stories depicted in workplace dramas on tv, web series, and films, and then fans of these shows and films can use the shorthand of the story to discuss how positive company culture helps diverse candidates. These conversations ultimately become a shared understanding that society holds and can feed into policy discussions.

Another point to consider is employee retention. While the two series discussed here did not involve key employees joining other companies when they were dissatisfied with their current circumstances, this is often on the cards. We could expect that Amy Sosa, in real life, might have been offered a job in another company and she could well have taken it. Diverse employees who are under-valued tend to move up by changing jobs. A long series has to keep its lead character in the world that it has built and so depicting exits to other companies might go against that.

BARBIE – THE 2023 BLOCKBUSTER

Barbie is a different beast. It was commissioned by the company Mattel, and the storyline involves Mattel's product – the toy, Barbie. So, in a sense, the movie is not something that is merely a representation of the popular zeitgeist. Yet, because Mattel commissioned a director who is known for her feminist films, to direct the movie, one can also argue that the mood of the

41. Akshaya Kamalnath, *Shop at Super Store to Buy an Insight Into Workplace Issues*, THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO CORPORATE GOVERNANCE (Feb. 14, 2021), <https://corporatelawacademic.wordpress.com/2021/02/14/shop-at-superstore-to-buy-an-insight-into-workplace-issues/>.

42. Kamalnath, the corporate diversity jigsaw, *supra* note 4, at 143–180.

people has been channelled into the movie.⁴³ Since diversity is one the biggest issues of the day, there is mention of this in the film. There is a joke about the fictional Mattel (as against the real life company, Mattel) having a board full of white male directors. Mattel could make this joke because, in reality, Mattel's board does have women directors.⁴⁴ The movie's use of this joke was bound to draw in laughs – it is a very commonly made joke in the present day.

There is also some gentle humor about our current efforts to increase diversity in boards and across the workforce. When Ken (representing another Mattel product, the Ken doll) going from Barbie land to the real world newly discovers patriarchy and asks an executive if there is no patriarchy in that place because the executive has just refused him a job, the executive's reply is something along the lines of, 'oh it exists but we have to carefully pretend that it doesn't'.⁴⁵ Again, like we saw with Super Store, this is a joke about how current legislative and public push for diversity has meant that what companies say about diversity is not always sincere.

Running through the movie is also a narrative about how Mattel made Barbie so that little girls can dream of being judges, doctors, and lawyers (i.e., 'to inspire the limitless potential in every girl').⁴⁶ At least, this is true for later versions of Barbie.⁴⁷ While this can be seen as an effort to launder the earlier perception that the Barbie doll was setting impossible standards for women in terms of how they should look, it can also be seen as an indication of how far the feminist efforts and diversity conversation in society has pushed companies to change.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to understand pop culture depictions of diversity and diversity measures. Using three units of pop culture (Mad Men, Super Store, and Barbie), the article has shown that existing legal and regulatory measures, alongside popular calls for pro-diversity actions from companies, might sometimes incentivise companies to make insincere efforts to address diversity and that employees perceive this insincerity. The article has also shown through the stories in these TV series and film that small efforts within companies might have positive outcomes. When the company management pays attention to this and puts measures that incentivise the cultivation of good company culture, there can be more substantial benefits. Finally, although corporations are often painted in a bad light, one can find positive stories within companies, and highlighting these helps reinforce a positive message that companies are part of the solution.

43. I delve more into this in a forthcoming book chapter.

44. Akshaya Kamalnath, *Barbie for Corporate Lawyers*, THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO CORPORATE GOVERNANCE (July 21, 2023), <https://corporatelawacademic.wordpress.com/2023/07/21/barbie-for-corporate-lawyers/>.

45. *Id.*

46. Mattel, Barbie, <https://corporate.mattel.com/brand-portfolio/barbie> (last visited Mar. 28, 2024).

47. Kamalnath, *Barbie for Corporate Lawyers*, *supra* note 44.

Beyond the key findings, this article has also noted that while social media has begun to play a significant role in people's meaning-making and shared understanding of issues, longer forms of pop culture such as films and television can consider issues more carefully and slowly. The short-hand language that fans of these shows and films will share can then be used to have quick social media conversations. Thus, films and TV shows can influence the popular ethos in a less hurried but meaningful way. This will be important than ever to pay attention to because we are now in an era of populism when the heady mix of populist leaders and social media microcosms can eschew nuanced discussions on important issues.

Now, a quick note about what this article did not address. This article, at the outset, made note of social media calls to ensure that corporations address diversity issues.⁴⁸ However, it did not focus on the specific social media movements. The depictions of diversity and diversity measures in the films and TV shows studied in this article were focused on general diversity issues and laws around this rather than specific issues like sexual assault, harassment, discrimination, and racial discrimination, which were the main themes of #MeToo⁴⁹ and #BLM, the significant social movements.

48. Kamalnath, *Social Movements, Diversity, and Corporate Short-Termism*, *supra* note 4.

49. For an analysis of the depiction of pop culture depictions of #MeToo, see Brenda Cossman, *#MeToo and the Corporation in Popular Culture*, 46 SEATTLE U. L. REV. 607 (2023).

APPENDIX

<i>Table 1</i>	
Series/ Movie, it's time of release and time period being depicted	Depiction of diversity
Mad Men, 2007 - 2015 (but depicting 1960s America)	Women in the workplace Some discussion of race Discussion about Jewish immigrants Class diversity is subtly conveyed as well
Super Store 2015 - 2021	The diversity conversations in the workplace are more than about women. There are depictions of queerness, of racial diversity, disability, and immigrants as well. Management is very conscious about how sensitive conversations around diversity are. There is also a suggestion that some behaviour of corporate management is responsive to the regulatory environment. More overt discussion of class diversity
Barbie 2023	There is a throwaway line about board diversity almost as if it is passe to only have white men on a company board.

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