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Organizational Crisis in Spotlight Increases Preference for Female but not Ethnic Minority Leaders: The Role of Signaling Theory for Glass Cliff Appointments

Ruri Takizawa[1,2], Vincenzo Iacoviello[1], and Clara Kulich[1]

Abstract

In times of crisis, decision-makers often appoint atypical candidates (i.e., women or ethnic minorities) as leaders, a phenomenon known as the "glass cliff." Two online experiments (N = 607) with employees in Switzerland and France investigated whether media and stakeholder (i.e., third-party) attention toward the organization drives these preferences given that atypical appointments may be used to signal change. As expected, we found that atypical candidates were more likely appointed during a high third-party attention crisis compared to a low third-party attention crisis and a no-crisis situation. Third-party attention, however, had varying effects on female and ethnic minority candidates, illuminating the complexities of atypical leadership selections during crises. Against expectations, candidate choice was unrelated to the perceived importance of signaling change. Although this research provides causal evidence of the impact of third-party attention on atypical leadership selection, the underlying psychological mechanisms postulated by signaling theory need to be further explored.

Keywords

crisis, gender, glass cliff, leadership, minority, signaling change

Crises can trigger a demand for change and challenge preferences for prototypical leaders (Brown, Diekman, and Schneider 2011), typically embodied by White men in Western countries (Koenig et al. 2011; Rosette, Leonardelli, and Phillips 2008). In response to crises, organizations often appoint women to executive roles, a pattern that the media tends to portray as emblematic of change (Reinwald, Zaia, and Kunze 2023). Although similar trends are observed for ethnic minorities (Cook and Glass 2014), their leadership appointments in crises remain underexplored. Drawing on insights

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from the "glass cliff" phenomenon (Morgenroth et al. 2020) and signaling theory (Connelly et al. 2011), this article experimentally examines whether third-party attention, comprising media coverage and stakeholder interest, increases female and ethnic minority leadership preferences in crisis. Our efforts to shed light on the circumstances under which members from underrepresented groups reach leadership positions respond to the call for more nuanced research that extends beyond their numerical representation and delves into the quality of their roles (Ryan 2022). The mere presence of women and other underrepresented group members in leadership does not guarantee systemic transformation (Manzi and Heilman 2021). Hiring and promotion practices must go hand in hand with an awareness of how organizations can cultivate diverse workplaces.

THE GLASS CLIFF PHENOMENON

Evaluators hold implicit beliefs about leadership roles (Lord et al. 2001) and their fit with candidates based on their social group memberships (Junker and Van Dick 2014). Research has revealed that male and ethnic majority leaders are perceived to be prototypical leaders (Schein 1973, 2001), resulting in more favorable evaluations when compared to female or ethnic minority leaders (Gündemir et al. 2014; Koenig et al. 2011; Petsko and Rosette 2023). Despite collective efforts to break systemic barriers that impede career progressions of female and ethnic minority leaders, also known as the "glass ceiling," the career trajectories of underrepresented candidates and the motives behind their hiring or promotion diverge from those associated with prototypical candidates (Cook and Glass 2014; Manzi and Heilman 2021).

One example that highlights these group-specific dynamics is the glass cliff. It refers to the heightened likelihood for women and ethnic minorities to be appointed to leadership roles during precarious times, such as a crisis (Ryan et al. 2016; Ryan and Haslam 2007). Such appointments entail disproportionately challenging tasks (Hall and Donaghue 2013; Szucko 2022), shorter durations in office (Main and Gregory-Smith 2018), and ultimately, a higher likelihood of being replaced by more prototypical leaders (Cook and Glass 2014). These patterns can perpetuate negative perceptions of female or ethnic minority leaders.

Over the past decades, researchers have documented instances of the glass cliff in various domains, including management, politics, sports, and education (for a meta-analysis, see Morgenroth et al. 2020). It is crucial to note, however, that the glass cliff phenomenon is not universally observed (e.g., Bechtoldt, Bannier, and Rock 2019) but manifests under specific conditions (Ryan et al. 2016). For example, the preference for atypical leadership is contingent on the prior leadership having been prototypical (i.e., male-dominated; Bruckmüller and Branscombe 2010) and the crisis being attributed to that prior leader's failure (Kulich et al. 2015). Moreover, social norms surrounding the appointments of underrepresented group members seem crucial because the phenomenon is more prevalent in countries with greater gender inequality (Morgenroth et al. 2020).

Given this context, the present work focuses on the investigation of why underrepresented candidates are more likely to be appointed to leadership roles in crises. Social psychological research has unveiled two main categories of motives: setting candidates up for failure versus perceiving them as crisis managers based on stereotypes. In the first category, the appointment of female leaders in crisis may be driven by prejudice,

such as hostile sexism (Acar and Sümer 2018). The extent to which ethnic minority leaders are selected in crises based on prejudice, however, remains unknown. In the second category, decision-makers view underrepresented candidates as well suited to endure a crisis (Ryan et al. 2011) or effectively navigate and resolve crises (Aelenei et al. 2020). These judgments are based on associations of underrepresented candidates with stereotypical traits deemed advantageous in managing organizational crises. For example, women may be preferred as leaders during crises, which are often seen as requiring people-oriented qualities, which are stereotypically linked to women rather than men ("Think Crisis–Think Female"; Ryan et al. 2011). In a similar vein, Asian American candidates may be favored in crises demanding self-sacrificial leadership because they are perceived to embody these traits (Gündemir et al. 2019).

The literature offers mixed support for these motives (Kulich, Iacoviello, and Lorenzi-Cioldi 2018; Morgenroth et al. 2020). As such, it does not provide a comprehensive picture of decision-makers' potential motives yet (Kulich et al. 2021). In the present research, we introduce a mechanism that has received limited attention until now (Reinwald et al. 2023). It involves decision-makers' metaperceptions of how third parties may perceive atypical appointments.

SIGNALING CHANGE THROUGH LEADERSHIP APPOINTMENTS

Organizations in crisis experience increased pressure from stakeholders and the media (Carmeli and Schaubroeck 2008). One way they can reestablish rapport is through CEO turnover. The act of replacing a CEO signals that the organization is actively addressing problems (Gangloff, Connelly, and Shook 2016) and conveys a commitment to change (Agrawal, Jaffe, and Karpoff 1999). The critical question in this process is how CEO turnover can most effectively serve as a signal of change (Coombs 2007). Signaling theory from economics suggests three key aspects of how organizations communicate information as signals and how these signals are interpreted by observers (Connelly et al. 2011; Gomulya and Mishina 2017):

First, CEO turnover in a crisis proves a credible signal of change when it involves outside hires given their heightened visibility, costliness, and irreversibility (Connelly et al. 2011; Gangloff et al. 2016). Second, the gender of the new CEO can be a signal (Reinwald et al. 2023). The theory acknowledges the crucial role played by symbolic values in conveying information (Spence 2002). An employee who represents a unique or rare group within a specific rank of the organization (e.g., management) is known as a token (Kanter 1977). Tokens stand out, are measured against stereotypical expectations, and hold a symbolic value to observers of the organization, that is, third parties (Helland and Sykuta 2004). Thus, when atypical candidates get appointed to highly visible positions during a crisis, it can signal change to outsiders irrespective of whether they possess a leadership advantage (theorized in Ryan and Haslam 2007). Indeed, Kulich et al. (2015) found that the higher likelihood of a female candidate's appointment in a crisis was accounted for by the belief that the female candidate possessed a high potential to signal change rather than her leadership qualities. And third, a signal is most relevant when the level of attention toward the company is high. Analyzing data from U.S. public firms (2000–2016), Reinwald et al. (2023) found that companies in a crisis were more likely to

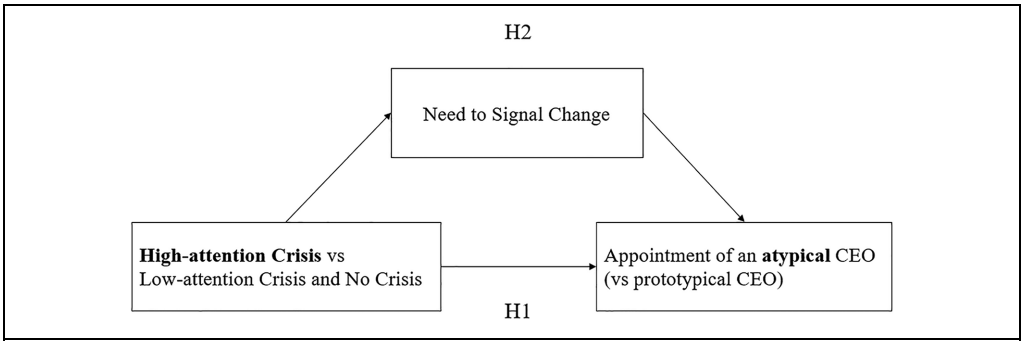

Figure 1. Visualization of Hypotheses 1 and 2

appoint women to top management roles when there was a high level of investor attention directed toward the firm.

Taken together, signaling theory offers a framework to study the signaling hypothesis of the glass cliff by pointing out potential boundary conditions and introducing novel motives, that is, the need to appease third parties amid a crisis by communicating change. To date, the question of whether third-party attention causes the glass cliff remains unanswered because existing evidence is of a correlational nature. Moreover, seemingly disparate findings have also been documented: a study on UK-based firms (2001–2005) by Ihmels et al. (2023) reported that glass cliffs for women were more prevalent in companies receiving low media attention.

Archival evidence cannot control potential confounding variables and measure psychological concepts in the decision-making process. We propose an experimental design to test the relationship between third-party attention during crises and atypical candidate selection and to dive into the psychological mechanisms proposed by signaling theory while keeping other contextual factors constant, such as the prototypical history of leadership (Bruckmüller and Branscombe 2010) and controllability of a crisis (Kulich et al. 2015).

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Past research on the glass cliff in management has concentrated on female leaders (Morgenroth et al. 2020). A notable gap exists in the literature concerning whether the signaling hypothesis of the glass cliff applies to both women and ethnic minorities. Gender and ethnicity are salient categories relevant to the signaling hypothesis because they represent more visible social categories in the workplace than others, such as sexual orientation (Beatty and Kirby 2006). In addition, there is a scarcity of studies that explore appointments involving candidates from multiple social categories. Previous research has primarily compared male and female candidates from the ethnic majority group (e.g., Kulich et al. 2021) or male ethnic majority and minority candidates (Aelenei et al. 2020). This leaves us with an incomplete understanding of how the presence of multiple atypical candidates influences decision-making processes. Understanding individual preferences when selecting from a diverse pool of candidates is essential because it mirrors the scenario prevalent in many organizations.

Overall, we test two sets of hypotheses (Figure 1):

Overall Hypothesis 1: Atypical candidates (i.e., women and ethnic minorities) are more likely to be appointed to executive positions if a company experiences high third-party attention in a crisis compared to a company with low third-party attention in a crisis or without a crisis.

Overall Hypothesis 2: The higher need to signal change to observers explains the increased preference for atypical candidates in a high-attention crisis.

We conducted a pilot study followed by two subsequent studies.[1] In the pilot, we tested a new experimental manipulation of different company situations, which we employed in our subsequent studies. Initially, we concentrated on candidate gender and piloted our dependent variable measure, which did not work as intended.[2] As a consequence, in Studies 1 and 2, we implemented a new measure for the dependent variable (candidate choice) and expanded our focus to include both candidate gender and ethnic group membership. By incorporating candidates representing various visible social categories, we aimed to mitigate suspicions regarding the study's objective and enhance the ecological validity of the candidate pool.

Participants were presented with four equally qualified leadership candidates with distinct social group memberships: two men from the ethnic majority, one woman from the ethnic majority, and one man from an ethnic minority. The ethnic background of the candidates varied across the studies to ensure that the observed effects were not specific to one context or social category. Moreover, we adapted the background to the demographic structure of the country of data collection. Because our hypothesis is not based on stereotypes but rather on the propensity for a social category to signal change, it should be supported as long as the candidate's ethnic minority membership is visible.

STUDY 1

Because the study was conducted in Switzerland, we included a Swiss candidate of Turkish origin as our ethnic minority candidate. Turkish immigrants constitute one of the largest non-EU origin immigration groups in Switzerland (Federal Statistical Office 2023). Although Turkish immigrants are visible by their names and encounter hiring discrimination, it is not as pronounced as experienced by certain other immigrant groups (Fibbi et al. 2022; Zschirnt 2020). These factors rendered them legitimate leadership candidates while still capable of signaling change.

To focus on third-party attention, Study 1 exclusively examined scenarios involving companies in crisis. Our hypotheses were as follows:

Study 1 Hypothesis 1: Atypical (vs. prototypical) candidates are more likely to be chosen as new CEOs if third-party attention is high (vs. low).

Study 1 Hypothesis 2: Atypical (vs. prototypical) candidates are preferred as new CEOs if third-party attention is high (vs. low) because it is deemed important for the new CEO to signal change.

With atypical candidates, we referred to the female and the ethnic minority

[1]The University Commission for Ethical Research at the University of Geneva approved all studies. We fully report all performed studies, data exclusions, determination of sample size, experimental conditions, and measures in the article, consistent with reporting standards for quantitative research. All data, study materials, supplementary materials, and preregistrations (Pilot Study and Study 2) can be accessed via this link: https://osf.io/tng8w/?view_only=7ada46d3b8074d2192bd804e8fc9db80. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26 and Hayes's (2018) PROCESS macro.

[2]See SM1 and SM2 in the Supplemental Material available with the online version of the article.

candidates. In addition, we aimed to explore the pattern individually for the female and ethnic minority candidates (vs. all the other candidates).

Method

Participants. A student recruited French-speaking Swiss participants using social media and snowball sampling over a period of four weeks for a master's thesis in social psychology, with the program's guidelines requiring a sample size of 200 participants. Participants had to be employed and have at least three years of work experience. We introduced the latter criterium to ensure that participants had an optimal understanding of the described company situation. We excluded participants who did not consent to data processing (n = 1) or who failed the comprehension (n = 32) or the attention check (n = 25). Moreover, we excluded nonbinary participants (n = 3) and those who did not disclose their gender (n = 11) because participant gender was controlled in the main analyses. Finally, our sample consisted of 160 participants (58.8 percent women) with an average age of 34.65 years (SD = 11.23, range = 20–67 years). A sensitivity analysis for our logistic regression revealed that the sample size could detect a medium effect of odds ratio (OR) = 2.51 (Faul et al. 2009).

Procedure. The study consisted of a third-party attention (high vs. low) between-participant design. Participants were presented with a fictional vignette depicting a Swiss food company facing a crisis due to prior CEO mismanagement, resulting in decreased profits and sales and damaged human relations within the organization (the order in which the negative impact was mentioned was randomized). Third-party attention (high or low) was operationalized through media coverage and the interest of shareholders, customers, and observers in company decisions. In addition, participants were provided with the information that the company's public relations team was concerned (vs. relieved) that the company received high (vs. low) attention during the crisis, respectively. Following this, participants completed comprehension checks and rated the importance of the new executive's role in signaling and implementing change. Then, they read short biographies of the shortlisted candidates: Pierre Bernard (Swiss man), Olivier Müller (Swiss man), Beatrice Dubois (Swiss woman), and Marc Akin Widmer (Swiss man born in Turkey). The description stated that the candidates had equal qualifications and experiences. The order of candidates and the candidate biography combinations were randomized. Finally, participants were asked to imagine that they were part of the public relations team and had to recommend the most suitable candidate for the executive position. In the presented situations, decision-makers, such as board members, would consider the public image of the company, including stakeholders' opinions, when they choose a new executive (Agrawal et al. 1999; Gangloff et al. 2016)—a perspective our participants needed to be made aware of. Therefore, we decided to immerse them into the public relations team to emphasize the significance of the company's image.

Measures. For the comprehension check, participants chose one out of three options indicating that the company situation "attracted considerable media attention," "did not really attract media attention," or "no mention is made of whether the company attracted media attention."

Participants indicated perceived severity of the company crisis (1 = not at all severe to 7 = extremely severe, M = 5.18, SD = 1.06).

Table 1. Means (Standard Deviations) of Ratings to Which Extent Various Reasons Were Used for the Candidate Choice in the High- and Low-Attention Conditions

Items	High Attention	Low Attention
Improve the candidate's carrier prospects	3.00 (2.06)	3.06 (2.14)
Improve the company's performance	5.37 (1.63)	5.45 (1.78)
Receive positive evaluations from shareholders and clients	4.56 (1.91)	4.46 (2.04)
Receive positive evaluations from employees	4.98 (1.84)	5.09 (2.05)
Increase diversity representation in top leadership positions	5.31 (2.09)	4.54 (2.32)
Candidate gender	5.10 (2.28)	3.89 (2.50)
Candidate's cultural background	2.41 (1.89)	2.59 (2.07)
High/low media attention (condition-dependent)	3.85 (2.33)	2.42 (1.81)

Participants indicated to which extent it was important for the new executive to signal change (e.g., "the appointment of the CEO signals the beginning of a new era"; four items; α = .69, M = 5.72, SD = .97) and implement actual change (e.g., "the person can increase profit, sales, and orders"; six items; α = .58, M = 5.61, SD = .72) on a Likert scale from 1 = not at all important to 7 = very important (Kulich et al. 2021).

After participants made their candidate choice, they indicated on a Likert scale from 1 = not at all to 7 = completely to which degree their decision was influenced by eight items that we created reflecting different motives from the glass cliff literature (see Table 1).[3]

Participants indicated whether they considered themselves to belong to an ethnic or immigrant minority in Switzerland based on their skin color, religion, ethnicity, or immigration background on a single item (1 = not at all, 7 = completely; M = 2.57, SD = 2.25; Aelenei et al. 2020). Overall, 60 percent of the participants did not identify as belonging to an ethnic or immigrant minority group (those who chose 1). The remaining participants indicated belonging to one to some extent (M = 4.92, SD = 1.86, those who chose 2–7).

Participants' political leaning was measured by an 11-point scale from 1 = left to 11 = right, indicating a tendency to the left (M = 3.38, SD = 2.34).

Results

Perceived crisis severity. An independent samples t test, $t(158) = -2.03$, p = .044, 95% confidence interval [CI] = [−.67, −.01], showed that the crisis was perceived as more severe in the high-attention condition (M = 5.35, SD = .97) compared to the low-attention condition (M = 5.01, SD = 1.13). Moreover, exploratory analyses indicated that the higher perceived crisis severity was linked to a higher importance placed on signaling change.[4]

Atypical candidate choices (Study 1 Hypothesis 1). To test whether the atypical (woman and ethnic minority) candidates were more likely chosen than the prototypical (male ethnic majority) candidates in a high-attention (vs. low-attention) crisis, we conducted a logistic regression with third-party attention

[3]For exploratory analyses with this measure, see SM 6 in the Supplemental Material available with the online version of the article.

[4]For mediation analysis, see SM7 in the Supplemental Material available with the online version of the article.

(−1 = low, 1 = high) on the candidate choice (0 = prototypical, 1 = atypical) while controlling for participant gender (−1 men, 1 = women) and Attention × Gender interaction. Participant gender was systematically addressed for two primary reasons: to account for potential inequal gender distribution across experimental conditions and for the tendency for women to generally exhibit a stronger preference for both women and candidates from minority groups in a crisis (Takizawa et al. 2022).[5]

In line with Study 1 Hypothesis 1, we found a main effect of third-party attention such that atypical candidates were more likely chosen in a high-attention crisis, b = .75, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 5.53, p = .019, e^b = 2.12, 95% CI = [1.13, 3.96]. Moreover, female participants were more likely to choose an atypical candidate, b = .65, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 4.11, p = .043, e^b = 1.91, 95% CI = [1.02, 3.57], but no Attention × Gender interaction was found, b = .36, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 1.30, p = .254, e^b = 1.44, 95% CI = [.77, 2.69]. The effect of third-party attention remains if participant gender is not in the model, b = .66, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 5.99, p = .014, e^b = 1.94, 95% CI = [1.14, 3.29].

Considering that perceived crisis severity differed between the conditions, we also ran the analysis while controlling for it (continuous, centered) and the Attention × Severity interaction. Although the effect of attention remained, b = .83, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 6.01, p = .014, e^b = 2.29, 95% CI = [1.18, 4.43], no severity effect, b = –.31, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 1.24, p = .265, e^b = .73, 95% CI = [.42, 1.27], or interaction was found, b = −.45, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 2.52, p = .112, e^b = .64, 95% CI = [.37, 1.11].

[5]SM 3 in the Supplemental Material available with the online version of the article details further analyses when controlling for participant political leaning and minority group membership.

Female and ethnic minority candidate choices (exploratory analyses for Study 1 Hypothesis 1). We explored the Study 1 Hypothesis 1 pattern individually for the female and ethnic minority candidates (vs. all the other candidates) and ran additional logistic regressions on the choice between the female candidate and the three male candidates and on the choice between the ethnic minority candidate and the three ethnic majority candidates. Figure 2 illustrates the probabilities of selecting the candidates of interest.

We repeated the logistic regression analysis on candidate choice (0 = men, 1 = woman). The female candidate was more likely chosen if third-party attention was high, b = .36, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 4.33, p = .038, e^b = 1.44, 95% CI = [1.02, 2.00]. Moreover, she was more likely chosen by female participants, b = .34, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 3.88, p = .049, e^b = 1.40, 95% CI = [1.00, 1.96]. No Attention × Gender interaction was found, b = .15, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = .80, p = .371, e^b = 1.72, 95% CI = [.83, 1.63].

Finally, we ran the analysis on candidate choice (0 = ethnic majority, 1 = ethnic minority). At odds with Study 1 Hypothesis 1, third-party attention did not affect ethnic minority choice, b = −.08, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = .19, p = .663, e^b = .92, 95% CI = [.64, 1.34]. Participant gender, b = −.13, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = .44, p = .506, e^b = .88, 95% CI = [.61, 1.28], and the interaction, b = −.13, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = .44, p = .506, e^b = .88, 95% CI = [.61, 1.28], had no effects either.

Mediation (Study 1 Hypothesis 2). We ran a mediation analysis (Hayes's [2018] PROCESS macro, Model 4, with 10,000 biased bootstrap samples) to test whether the higher likelihood to choose an atypical candidate in a high-attention crisis was mediated by a higher importance placed on signaling change (Study 1 Hypothesis 2). Participant gender and

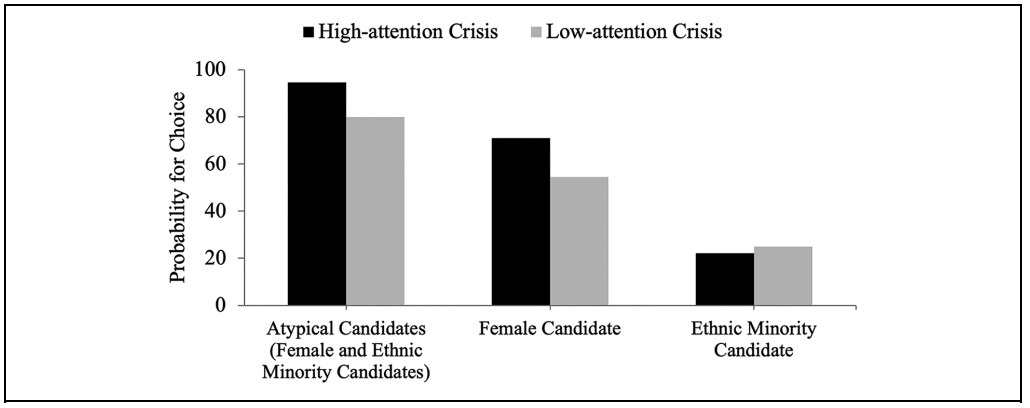

Figure 2. Probabilities for the Atypical Candidates, Female Candidate, and Ethnic Minority Candidate to Be Chosen for the Leadership Role Depending on the Company Situation (High-Attention Crisis vs. Low-Attention Crisis)

the Attention × Gender interaction were added as covariates. As expected, signaling change, $b = .18$, $p = .029$, 95% CI = [.02, .33], was deemed more important in the high-attention (vs. low-attention) condition. Its perceived importance, however, was not linked to atypical candidate choice, $b = -.45$, $p = .094$, 95% CI = [−.98, 0,08]. The mediation (indirect effect) was not significant, $b = -.08$, 95% CI = [−.25, .01]. We also explored the model with actual change as mediator, but found no effects.[6] In an exploratory manner, the analysis was repeated with the choice of the female candidate and the choice of the ethnic minority candidate as dependent variables, but no mediation or links between signaling change and candidate choice were found.[7]

Discussion

Study 1 manipulated third-party attention (high vs. low) directed toward a company in crisis and presented participants with four candidates varying in gender and ethnic background. Study 1 Hypothesis 1 was supported because atypical candidates were more likely chosen in a high-attention crisis compared to a low-attention crisis. This pattern held when we specifically examined the preference for the female candidate. Moreover, the crisis was perceived to be more severe when third-party attention was high (vs. low), mirroring a glass cliff scenario. Third-party attention, however, did not impact the likelihood of selecting the ethnic minority candidate.

Study 1 Hypothesis 2 was not supported because the perceived importance of the new CEO to signal change did not predict atypical candidate choice. Considering that the signaling change measures were presented to participants before they were introduced to the candidate profiles, they could not incorporate social category information into their responses to the signaling items. In the absence of knowledge of the candidate profiles, it remains uncertain what associations participants made with a candidate signaling change.

A limitation of this study is that participants were recruited by a student using snowball sampling, relying on her

[6]See SM 5 in the Supplemental Material available with the online version of the article.

[7]See SM 4 in the Supplemental Material available with the online version of the article.

personal network. This approach led to a rather politically left-leaning sample, which may have contributed to a relatively high baseline preference for atypical candidates, especially for the female candidate. Nevertheless, it should be highlighted that our new dependent variable allowed participants' choices to be influenced by motives beyond social desirability, notably, their motivation to signal change.

STUDY 2

Study 2 aimed to replicate the findings of Study 1 in a different country using a larger and less politically skewed sample. In addition, we adjusted the study materials. First, we added a no-crisis condition to examine whether the low-attention crisis and no-crisis conditions were perceived differently. Second, in response to the limitation of Study 1, which pertained to the order of presenting the signaling change items, we presented candidate names and profiles before participants were asked to rate the importance of change potentials. This change in the sequence allowed participants to form an initial impression of the candidates before assessing the importance of signaling and implementing actual change. Third, because the study was conducted in France, we chose an Algerian background for the ethnic minority candidate. Algerian immigrants represent one of the largest immigration cohorts in France (Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques 2023). Given their significance, previous experiments on the glass cliff phenomenon have featured French-Algerian candidates, who also represent visible social categories that could signal change (Aelenei et al. 2020).

The study retained the same hypotheses from Figure 1.

Study 2 Hypothesis 1a: Atypical candidates (vs. prototypical candidates) are more likely to be selected in a high-attention crisis relative to the other two conditions.

Study 2 Hypothesis 1b: A female candidate (vs. male candidates) is more likely to be selected in a high-attention crisis relative to the other two conditions.

Study 2 Hypothesis 1c: An ethnic minority candidate (vs. ethnic majority candidates) is more likely to be selected in a high-attention crisis relative to the other two conditions.

Given that other motives could drive a preference for atypical candidates in a crisis in parallel (e.g., their perceived suitability as crisis managers; Kulich et al. 2021), this preference might still exist in a low-attention crisis compared to a no-crisis situation. Thus, we preregistered an alternative hypothesis:

Alternative Study 2 Hypothesis 1: Atypical candidates are most likely chosen in the high-attention crisis, followed by the low-attention crisis, and least likely in the no-crisis condition.

Consistent with Study 1, *Study 2 Hypothesis 2* posits that Study 2 Hypotheses 1a through 1c will be explained by the perceived importance of signaling change.

Method

Participants. In Study 1, the effects found for the preference of atypical candidates was OR = 2.12, and for the female candidate, it was OR = 1.44. Considering the smaller effect size for the female candidate, the required sample size was 993, according to an a priori power analysis for logistic regression with G*Power (80 percent power, $\alpha = .05$). Considering the larger effect for the atypical candidates,

the required sample size was 234. Our financial resources allowed for a collection of 400 participants using the French recruitment platform Crowdpanel (https://crowdpanel.io/).

In total, 413 participants completed the questionnaire, but 4 participants did not consent to data processing, and 24 participants did not meet the inclusion criteria of being currently employed and having at least three years of work experience. We also excluded participants who did not specify their gender (n = 1), failed the attention check (n = 11), or failed the first comprehension check (n = 9). Thus, our sample consisted of 364 participants (52.5 percent women, 47.5 percent men) with an average age of 41.30 years (SD = 9.86, range = 18–65 years). Almost all participants were French residents (99.2 percent) and nationals (99.7 percent). A sensitivity analysis for the logistic regression analysis revealed that the sample size could detect a small to medium effect of OR = 1.82 (Faul et al. 2009).

Procedure. The study had a company situation (high-attention crisis vs. low-attention crisis vs. no crisis) between-participant design. We used the same questionnaire as in the previous studies with the adaptation to the French context. Thus, participants read vignettes about a French food company with either strong or poor performance (no crisis vs. crisis conditions). In the crisis conditions, participants either read that media and stakeholder attention was high or low. Before rating the importance of the new executive's role in signaling and implementing change, participants read the names of the shortlisted candidates. The subsequent biographies belonged to Pierre Bernard (French man), Olivier Martin (French man), Beatrice Dubois (French woman), and Abdel Benzekri (French-Algerian man born in Algeria; biography used in Aelenei et al. 2020). Like in Study 1, participants recommended a candidate for the executive position as if they were part of the company's public relations team.

Measures. For the comprehension check, participants indicated whether the company situation was "rather good," "rather bad," or "not indicated." Participants who failed this question were excluded. In the crisis conditions, they also answered whether the company situation attracted "a lot" or "little" media and stakeholder interest or "it was not indicated." Overall, 96 percent of participants responded correctly to the second comprehension check, which was not used as an exclusion criterion.

The same measures as in previous studies were used for the rest of the questionnaire. Participants in the crisis conditions indicated the severity of the crisis (low-attention crisis: M = 5.03, SD = 1.02; high-attention crisis: M = 5.49, SD = .78). All participants rated the importance of the new CEO to signal change (α = .94, M = 5.18, SD = 1.72) and implement change (α = .72, M = 5.53, SD = .92), their ethnic or immigrant minority group membership (M = 1.85, SD = 1.73; 25.3 percent self-categorized as belonging to a minority group), and their political leaning (M = 5.90, SD = 2.66).

Like in Study 1, participants indicated on a Likert scale from 1 = not at all to 7 = completely to which degree their candidate choice was influenced by the items outlined in Table 2.[8]

Results

Candidate choices (Study 2 Hypothesis 1). Figure 3 depicts the probabilities for the candidates of interest to be selected. The

[8]Exploratory analyses with this measure can be found in SM 9 in the Supplemental Material available with the online version of the article.

Table 2. Means (Standard Deviations) of Ratings to Which Extent Various Reasons Were Used for the Candidate Choice in the Different Conditions

Items	High-attention crisis	Low-attention crisis	No crisis
Improve the candidate's carrier prospects	4.26 (2.19)	3.89 (1.88)	4.13 (1.83)
Improve the company's performance	5.86 (1.36)	5.65 (1.36)	5.18 (1.58)
Receive positive evaluations from shareholders and clients	5.40 (1.54)	5.02 (1.67)	4.66 (1.80)
Receive positive evaluations from employees	5.54 (1.46)	5.24 (1.61)	4.92 (1.68)
Increase diversity representation in top leadership positions	4.61 (2.23)	4.51 (2.08)	4.15 (2.10)
Candidate gender	4.03 (2.40)	3.70 (2.19)	3.72 (2.26)
Candidate's cultural background	2.74 (2.07)	2.74 (1.92)	2.48 (1.80)
Low media attention		3.45 (1.74)	
High media attention	4.98 (1.70)		
Good company situation			5.45 (1.53)

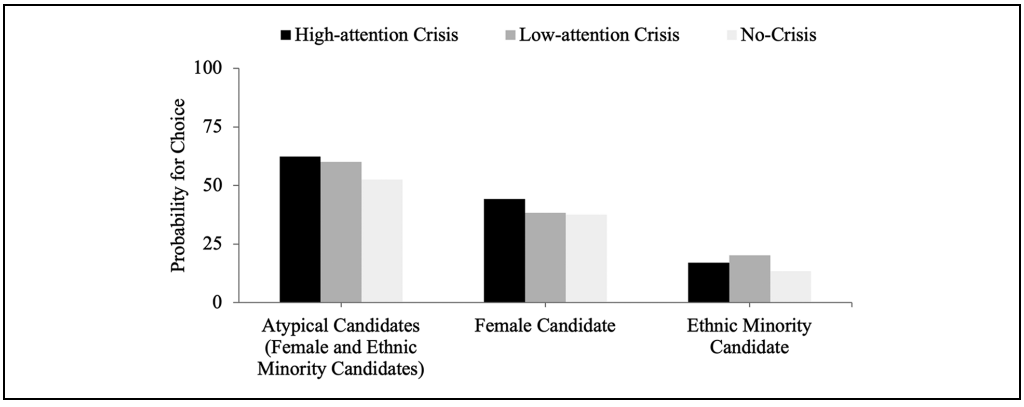

Figure 3. Probabilities for the Atypical Candidates, Female Candidate, and Ethnic Minority Candidate to Be Chosen for the Leadership Role Depending on the Company Situation (High-Attention Crisis, Low-Attention Crisis, No Crisis)

hypothesis posits that atypical (vs. prototypical) candidates are more likely chosen in a high-attention crisis compared to the low-attention crisis and no crisis. The comparison between the high-attention crisis and the other two conditions allowed for a direct test of the signaling hypothesis. If the preference for atypical candidates over prototypical candidates in a crisis is driven by the desire to signal change to observers, then this preference should only be evident in a crisis that calls for such signaling.

To test whether the atypical (woman and ethnic minority) candidates were more likely chosen in a high-attention crisis (vs. low-attention crisis and no crisis), we computed orthogonal contrasts (Study 2 Hypothesis 1a). C1 opposed the high-attention crisis (coded 2) to the other

two conditions (both coded −1). The residual contrast C2 was coded high-attention crisis = 0, low-attention crisis = 1, and no crisis = −1. We conducted a logistic regression on candidate choice (0 = prototypical, 1 = atypical) with the contrasts while controlling for participant gender (−1 man, 1 = woman), C1 × Gender, and C2 × Gender interactions. As predicted, atypical candidates were more likely to be chosen in the high-attention crisis compared to the low-attention crisis and no crisis; C1: b = .17, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 4.47, p = .034, e^b = 1.18, 95% CI = [1.01, 1.37]. The low-attention crisis, however, also led to a higher preference for atypical candidates compared to no crisis; C2: b = .31, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 5.37, p = .020, e^b = 1.36, 95% CI = [1.05, 1.77].

We thus tested for the effect outlined in the Study 2 alternative hypothesis using a contrast GC1, where the low-attention crisis is situated between the high-attention crisis and no crisis (high-attention crisis = 1, low-attention crisis = 0, no crisis = −1) and its residual contrast GC2 (high-attention crisis = −1, low-attention crisis = 2, no crisis = −1). The model consisted of participant gender and interactions with the contrasts. As predicted, the high-attention crisis led to a higher atypical candidate preference compared to the no-crisis condition; GC1: b = .40, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 8.93, p = .003, e^b = 1.50, 95% CI = [1.15, 1.95]. The preference in the low-attention crisis was situated in between because the residual GC2 was not significant, b = .07, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = .87, p = .351, e^b = 1.08, 95% CI = [.92, 1.25]. Participant gender was also significant, b = .29, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 6.80, p = .009, e^b = 1.33, 95% CI = [1.07, 1.65]. Interactions were nonsignificant; GC1 × Gender: b = –.21, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 2.50, p = .114, e^b = .81, 95% CI = [.62, 1.05], and GC2 × Gender: b = .05, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = .37, p = .541, e^b = 1.05, 95% CI = [.90, 1.22].

To test Study 2 Hypothesis 1b, we conducted the logistic regression analysis with company situation (C1 and C2) on candidate choice (0 = men, 1 = woman). As hypothesized, the female candidate was more likely chosen in a high-attention crisis compared to the low-attention crisis and no crisis; C1: b = .18, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 5.31, p = .021, e^b = 1.19, 95% CI = [1.03, 1.38]. She was not more likely chosen in a low-attention crisis compared to no crisis; C2: b = .04, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = .07, p = .799, e^b = 1.04, 95% CI = [.79, 1.35]. Furthermore, the female candidate was more likely chosen by female participants, b = .27, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 6.10, p = .014, e^b = 1.31, 95% CI = [1.06, 1.62]. No interactions were found; C1 × Gender: b = –.06, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = .61, p = .435, e^b = .94, 95% CI = [.81, 1.09], C2 × Gender: b = .03, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = .05, p = .833, e^b = 1.03, 95% CI = [.79, 1.34].

We also ran the logistic regression with the alternative contrasts. The high-attention crisis led to stronger female candidate preference compared to no crisis; GC1: b = .28, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 4.40, p = .036, e^b = 1.32, 95% CI = [1.02, 1.72]. Low attention was situated in between because GC2 was not significant, b = –.07, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = .82, p = .366, e^b = .93, 95% CI = [.80, 1.09]. Women preferred the female candidate more than men, b = .27, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 6.10, p = .014, e^b = 1.31, 95% CI = [1.06, 1.62]. Interactions were nonsignificant; GC1 × Gender: b = –.08, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = .31, p = .576, e^b = .93, 95% CI = [.72, 1.21]; GC2 × Gender: b = .04, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = .32, p = .570, e^b = 1.05, 95% CI = [.90, 1.22]).

To test Study 2 Hypothesis 1c, we ran a final logistic regression on candidate choice (0 = ethnic majority, 1 = ethnic minority). The ethnic minority candidate was not more likely chosen in the high-attention crisis (vs. low-attention crisis and no crisis); C1: b =

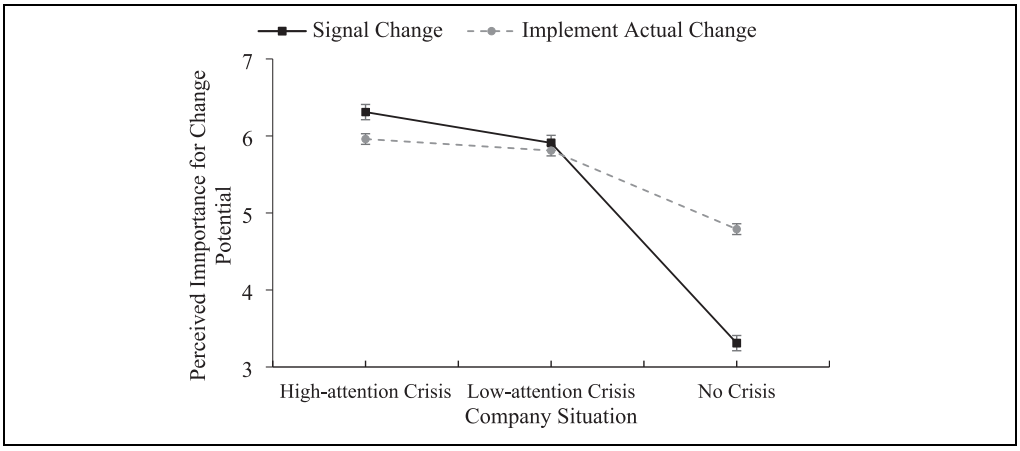

Figure 4. Means and Standard Errors of Perceived Importance of the New Executive Director Signaling or Implementing Actual Change Depending on Company Situation
Note: Error bars indicate standard errors.

.02, Wald $\chi^2(1) = .04$, $p = .841$, $e^b = 1.02$, 95% CI = [.84, 1.25]. Against expectations, he was more likely chosen in the low-attention crisis compared to no crisis; C2: $b = .50$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 6.98$, $p = .008$, $e^b = 1.64$, 95% CI = [1.14, 2.37].

The logistic regression with the alternative contrasts uncovered no effect of GC1, where the low-attention crisis is situated between the high-attention crisis and no crisis, $b = .27$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 2.00$, $p = .157$, $e^b = 1.32$, 95% CI = [.90, 1.95]. We found, however, that the ethnic minority candidate was more likely chosen in the low-attention crisis compared to the other two conditions; GC2: $b = .24$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 6.12$, $p = .013$, $e^b = 1.27$, 95% CI = [1.05, 1.53]. Participant gender had no effect, $b = .08$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = .31$, $p = .576$, $e^b = 1.09$, 95% CI = [.81, 1.46]. Interactions were nonsignificant; GC1 × Gender: $b = -.33$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 2.83$, $p = .093$, $e^b = .72$, 95% CI = [.49, 1.06], GC2 × Gender $b = -.02$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = .06$, $p = .800$, $e^b = .98$, 95% CI = [.81, 1.18]).

Mediation (Study 2 Hypothesis 2). Like in the previous studies, we used mediations to test whether the higher likelihood of choosing an atypical/female/ethnic minority candidate in a high-attention crisis was mediated by a higher importance placed on signaling change or actual change, resulting in six mediation analyses.[9] The following summary of results is complemented by the outcomes from the mediation analysis for the choice of an atypical candidate. We generally found that both signaling (e.g., $b = .87$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [.79, .96]) and actual change (e.g., $b = .63$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [.52, .75]) were perceived to be most important in the high-attention crisis, followed by the low-attention crisis, and least in the no-crisis situation (Figure 4). No significant associations, however, were found between the perceived importance of signaling (e.g., $b = .15$, $SE = .17$, $p = .374$, 95% CI = [−.18, .49]) and actual change (e.g., $b = -.04$, $SE = .13$, $p = .747$, 95% CI = [−.30, .22]) and candidate choice. None of the indirect effects was

[9]Described in SM 8 in the Supplemental Material available with the online version of the article.

significant (e.g., signal: $b = .13$, $SE = .16$, 95% CI = [−.17, .46]; actual: $b = -.03$, $SE = .09$, 95% CI = [−.19, .14]).

Discussion

Study 2 investigated the appointment of female and ethnic minority candidates in a pool with male ethnic majority candidates depending on company situation, which was described as a high-attention crisis, low-attention crisis, or no crisis. We found that atypical candidates were most likely appointed in a high-attention crisis, followed by the low-attention crisis, and least in the no-crisis condition. The patterns were distinct when we individually analyzed the preference for the female (vs. male) and the ethnic minority (vs. ethnic majority) candidates. The ethnic majority woman was more likely appointed in a high-attention crisis than the other two conditions. This underscores the importance of heightened third-party attention in her selection during a crisis, supporting the notion that signaling change is most crucial when there is high attention directed toward the company, as posited by signaling theory. In contrast, the ethnic-minority man was generally least preferred but most likely appointed in the low-attention crisis compared to the other two conditions. This unexpected pattern shows that the signaling hypothesis does not seem to apply to the choice of an ethnic-minority man.

Moreover, our results support the proposition that the perceived importance of signaling change aligns with the level of third-party attention directed toward the company. The means of signaling change differed significantly between the company situations such that signaling change was deemed most important in the high-attention crisis. Our mediation analyses (Study 2 Hypothesis 2), however, did not reveal a link between the perceived importance of the CEO to signal change and candidate choice (see General Discussion).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Three studies tested whether third-party interest in a company's crisis increases top-level leadership appointments of atypical candidates (women and ethnic minorities) in a context where prototypical leadership consisted of ethnic majority men. Our research was based on signaling theory (e.g., Connelly et al. 2011) to better understand the motives underlying the glass cliff (Morgenroth et al. 2020; Ryan et al. 2016).

Previous archival studies have produced mixed results when examining the appointment of women to positions in situations that attracted media and investor attention (Ihmels et al. 2023; Reinwald et al. 2023). Our experiments aimed to show causal evidence for the signaling hypothesis, focusing not only on women but also on ethnic minority candidates. We presented participants with vignettes depicting a company's situation as either stable or a crisis characterized by declining performance and employee relations, as typically done in glass cliff studies. The novelty consisted of the additional manipulation of the varying degree of third-party attention surrounding the crises.

We advanced the hypothesis that decision-makers would perceive a need to signal change in a situation of high third-party attention. One way to signal change would be to appoint a new and atypical leader. Two studies employed an experimental design that offered participants choices involving two prototypical candidates (ethnic-majority men) and two atypical candidates (an ethnic-majority woman and an ethnic-minority man).

Our findings indicated that atypical candidates were most likely selected in

a high-attention crisis compared to a low-attention crisis or a no-crisis scenario. These results align with signaling theory, according to which high third-party attention should be linked to atypical leader choices. Notably, the preference for atypical candidates also increased in the crisis with low third-party attention, revealing an effect where the low-attention crisis was situated between the high-attention crisis and no crisis. Additional analyses suggested that the higher likelihood of choosing atypical candidates during high-attention crises was driven by a preference for female candidates, whereas the increase in selection of atypical candidates in low-attention crises was partially due to a preference for ethnic minority candidates (Study 2). This implies that the type of atypical group category and various other factors, such as perceived suitability as crisis managers (Kulich et al. 2021), may concurrently explain the choice of atypical candidates.

It should be noted that the appointment pattern for the ethnic-minority man was inconsistent across studies. Although in Study 1, the level of third-party attention did not affect choosing the ethnic-minority candidate, in Study 2, he was more likely chosen in a low-attention crisis than a high-attention crisis and no crisis. Various underlying factors could explain these outcomes. For example, participants may have believed that the candidate could handle the crisis and implement actual change (Aelenei et al. 2020). At the same time, they may have been concerned about how stakeholders would perceive such an appointment, influenced by notions of third-party prejudice (Vial, Brescoll, and Dovidio 2019). Thus, they may have been more hesitant in choosing a French-Algerian man in the context where third-party attention was high. Although women constitute a group protected by social norms of anti-discrimination in many workplace contexts, racism is less addressed (Franco and Maass 1999). Workplace racism in France, where Study 2 was conducted, remains prevalent (Quillian et al. 2019), and the awareness of inequalities concerning ethnic minorities is relatively low (Brinbaum, Safi, and Simon 2018). Alternatively, participants themselves could have held stereotypes about the candidate, perceiving him as less adept at communicating with third parties, including the media. Such perception could stem from lower associations with warmth and competence (Kil et al. 2019).

Another unexpected finding pertains to the absence of mediation effects. The perceived importance of signaling change potential did not mediate the effect of the company's situation on candidate choice. When our findings are viewed in the broader context of our outcomes, they align with the signaling hypothesis. The null results, however, prevent us from offering direct evidence that signaling change underlies our effects. It is important to note the cautious interpretation required for mediation analyses in general (Bullock and Green 2021) and when delving into underlying psychological processes because it is possible that our participants were not aware of their motives when selecting candidates (Spencer, Zanna, and Fong 2005). This is why we experimentally manipulated the level of third-party attention: to complement prior correlational evidence of the signaling hypothesis (e.g., Kulich et al. 2015) with insights into causality. In addition, the null results may be attributed to measurement issues because the items we used lacked validation and exhibited low internal consistency (Clark and Watson 2019). The latter limitation may stem from the various aspects of signaling change encompassed in the different items of the scale, such as the type of third-party observers, the nature of the

signal, and the type of change. For a clearer understanding of the underlying effect, we invite future studies to measure the perception of each candidate's ability for signaling change or to use validated scales for evaluating the importance of signaling change.

In summary, our research contributes to the experimental evidence of the glass cliff phenomenon by demonstrating that women and ethnic minority candidates are more likely to be selected in a company crisis compared to a stable situation. Furthermore, our findings suggest that different mechanisms underlie the choice of a female or ethnic minority leader in a crisis, highlighting the need for empirical investigation on contextual factors, such as normative climates surrounding specific social categories and the consequences of signaling change by hiring certain minority group members.[10]

Limitations and Future Directions

We encourage future studies to consider the combination of multiple atypical candidates and delve into the processes that underlie candidate selections when individuals from diverse social categories coexist within a candidate pool. In the next step, researchers could incorporate intersectionality, particularly concerning gender and ethnic minority status (Bowleg 2017). The perceived effects of multiple minoritized identities are multifaceted, with various social psychological models predicting different processes and outcomes (Hudson, Myer, and Berney 2024). Specific questions that studies could explore include whether ethnic minority women serve as stronger indicators of change compared to ethnic majority women and whether the appointment of an ethnic minority woman signals something different from that of an ethnic minority man. Understanding how multiple identities influence decision-making is crucial for a nuanced theorization of the glass cliff phenomenon (see Ellis 2022).

Although our findings in Studies 1 and 2 indicate that women were more likely to be appointed in high-attention crises, supporting our signaling hypothesis, we should consider alternative interpretations. The preference for a female executive during a high-attention crisis might be driven by another mechanism linked to stereotypes (Kulich et al. 2021), possibly aligning with the "Think Crisis–Think Female" concept (Ryan et al. 2011). For instance, female executives may be perceived as particularly skilled in communicating with the press during a crisis through their perceived person orientation (Grebelsky-Lichtman and Katz 2020) or as suitable figures to improve a company's image during a crisis to appease potentially angry stakeholders (because women are perceived as more compliant than men; Nett et al. 2022). Future studies could aim to disentangle the signaling and "Think Crisis–Think Female" hypotheses.

In addition, it is plausible that participants might have acted following prevailing societal norms, such as valuing diversity in the workplace (Chang et al. 2019). Individuals may feel more compelled to adhere to these norms when conscious of third-party observation. This alternative hypothesis does not contradict the signaling hypothesis but introduces nuance. It prompts us to question whether female candidates would generally be preferred in situations with high third-party attention, even without a crisis. A study could introduce conditions without a crisis and varying levels of attention to gain

[10]Practical implications, such as contextualizing leadership roles for candidates from underrepresented groups and emphasizing accountability for decision-makers, are discussed in depth in SM 10 in the Supplemental Material available with the online version of the article.

a profound understanding of the role of third parties.

Finally, in our experimental manipulations of third-party attention, we indicated that the company was either concerned or relieved, aligning with insights from crisis communication literature (e.g., Coombs 2007). Given the potential implications for organizational reputation, high-attention crises would evoke concern within the company, whereas low-attention crises might lead to a sense of relief. Because we did not include a measure of concern versus relief felt by the participants, we cannot determine if they influenced the perceived need for signaling change, which could have provided deeper insights into the underlying factors of signaling change. Nevertheless, the inclusion of concern or relief did not appear to directly impact perceptions of the importance of signaling change. In our pilot study, where we did not mention concern or relief, the patterns of signaling change were the same as those observed in Study 2.[11]

CONCLUSION

We provide valuable insights into the complex processes underlying the glass cliff phenomenon. Decision-makers' preferences for atypical candidates in crises are likely influenced by multiple factors depending on several contextual cues. This research provides evidence for the hypothesis that atypical leaders are preferred as crisis leaders to signal change. More specifically, we show that the preference for atypical candidates appears to be influenced by third-party interest. This effect was limited, however, to the choice of female leaders and did not extend to the appointment of ethnic minority leaders. Further research is warranted to elucidate the multifaceted factors that drive the glass cliff and the roles they play in candidate selection processes.

[11]See SM2 in the Supplemental Material available with the online version of the article.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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