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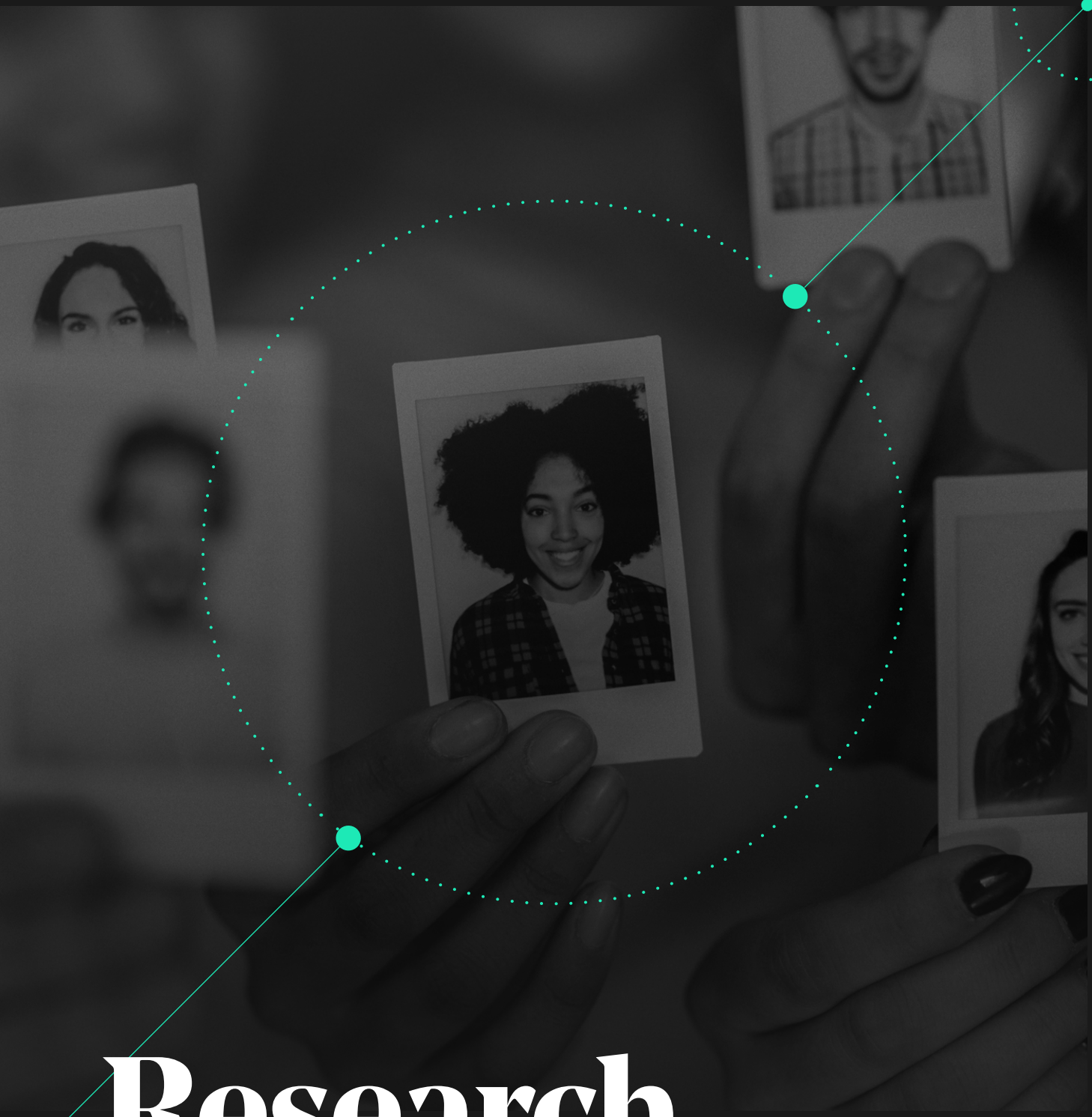


RESEARCH

Research Briefing:

Gender Bias in UK & IE Job Ads.

March 2021

@SiaPartners

Table of Contents.

4 **Summary**

5 **Context and Literature Basis**

7 **Our Approach / Findings**

7 Analysis 1

7 Analysis 2

9 **Conclusion**

10 **Implications**

11 **Appendices**

Summary.

In 2020, Sia Partners developed a solution to allow us to assess gender bias in job adverts. Using data from job adverts posted to public job boards in the UK and Ireland between September 2020 and January 2021, we conducted a limited empirical study to understand trends in the use of gender-coded language. We found that, while 1) evidence suggests companies are taking efforts to use more inclusive language overall, 2) senior roles were consistently advertised using less inclusive language than junior roles.

We undertook this effort to support our consultants, clients, and partners in addressing the complex issue of building and sustaining an inclusive workforce. Sia Partners will continue to provide data-driven research on inclusion, equality, and diversity as part of our overarching commitment to “Consulting for Good” (Sia Partners, 2020). We also offer a range of transformation and HR solutions that can help business, not-for-profit, and governmental leaders address these complex challenges.

Context and Literature Basis.

The use of language to describe specific roles can sometimes be automatic or unconscious. Although companies and HR professionals are not explicitly targeting a particular gender in the development of a job ad, they may be positioning the job advertisement in a way that biases towards a specific gender.

Academic research over the past 10 years has provided a robust evidence base, showing that the use of masculine-coded words in job adverts deters applications from individuals that do not identify as masculine (Gaucher et al, 2011). Despite the longevity of this evidence base, the use of gender-coded language in job adverts remains a persistent problem today. In June 2020, The World Economic Forum (WEF) highlighted the use of gendered language in job ads as a contributor to trends in gender inequality in the workplace (World Economic Forum, 2020). WEF has urged companies and government to use tech-enabled solutions, including AI-powered text analysis, to address this challenge.

Previous studies provide a useful benchmark on past trends which helps to contextualise the results of this analysis. A 2017 study (Totaljobs, 2017) conducted by TotalJobs, a job board, reviewed 77,000 job ads posted in the U.K. Among their findings, researchers reported that social care, secretarial, and assistant roles showed a bias towards feminine-coded language. Roles in science and management showed a bias towards the use of masculine-coded language.

A small-scale analysis conducted by Sia Partners Netherlands in 2020 found that male-coded language was predominantly used in insurance, travel and booking, and accountancy, among others (Sia Partners, Netherlands 2020).

Our Approach.

Our analysis used a list of gender coded words from Gaucher et al., 2011 that are proven to influence who applies for specific roles. Using this word list, Sia Partners developed a methodology to assess gender bias in job ads. We examined job ads posted to public websites. We created a database of job adverts across 12 sectors in the United Kingdom and Ireland between September 2020 – January 2021. In total, this constituted 99,000 job ads, from 2,900 companies across 12 sectors.

We then undertook a range of descriptive analysis to generate findings and insights detailed below.

Findings.

ANALYSIS 1: First, we assessed the degree of gender bias in across all job ads in each sector in the UK and Ireland. We aggregated inclusivity scores from each job ad, and normalised results to a 100-point scale, with 0 being the use of only masculine-coded language and 100 being the use of only feminine-coded language. For example, a score of 50 would indicate an even ratio of masculine-coded to feminine-coded words within the job ads examined.

We found that most sectors indicated a slight tendency towards the use of feminine-coded language overall.

While differences – sometimes significant – existed between individual companies and sectors, these results indicate that feminine-coded language was used at a higher rate than masculine-coded language in the UK and Ireland during the study's time window. This may indicate that British and Irish companies are making efforts to remove masculine-coded language from job adverts overall, a positive step forward.

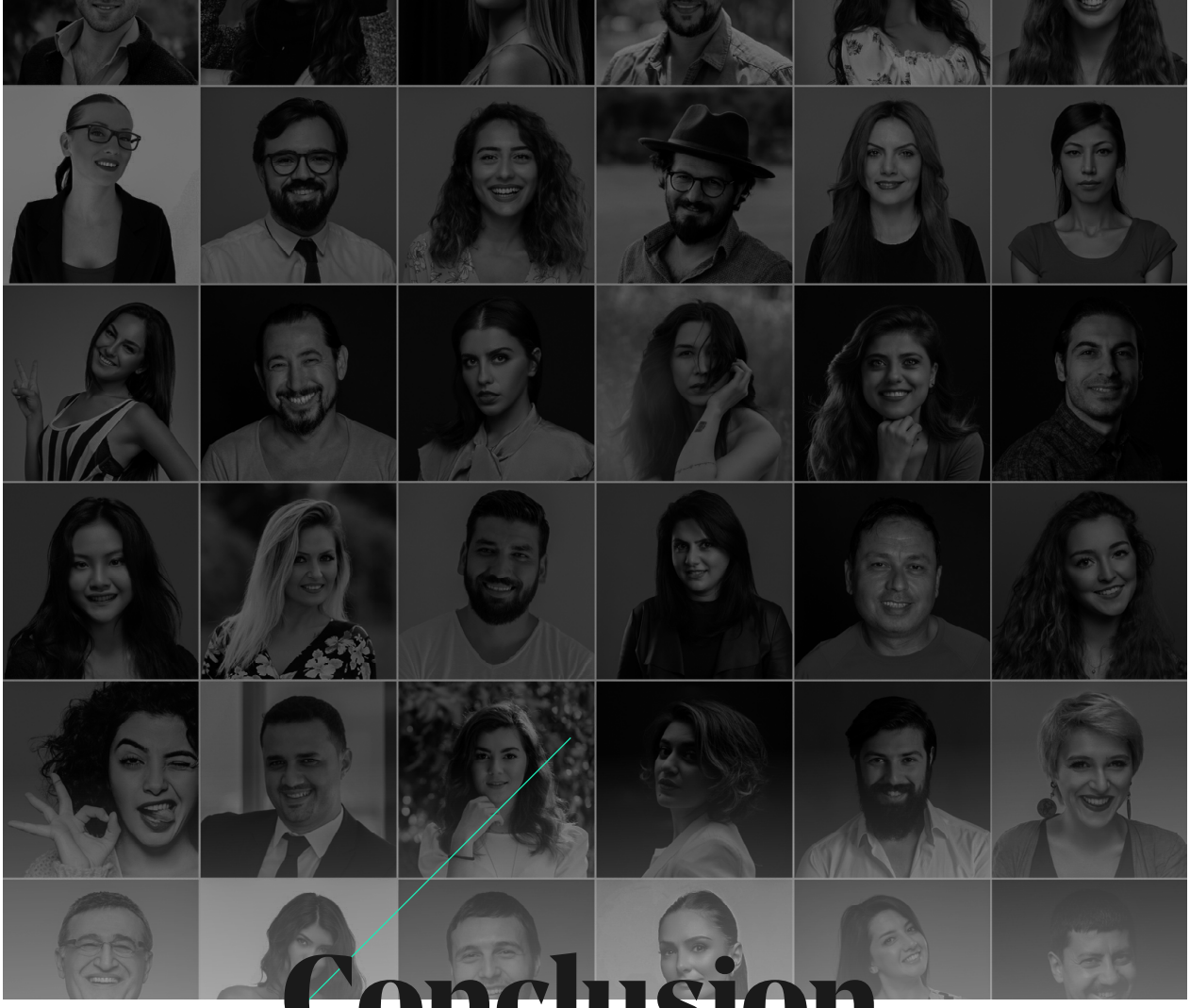
ANALYSIS 2: We then narrowed the subset of data by including only job advertisements that contained information on the seniority of the vacancy. This led to a smaller but more substantiated dataset with 26,000 job ads, from 1,400 companies in the UK and Ireland. While this smaller dataset enabled us to assess seniority of roles, it also reduced the number of job ads in some sectors to relatively small numbers. Future analyses will seek to replicate these findings from a larger dataset. Results from study 2 are show below.

• Main Findings •

In an effort to quantify and measure inclusivity in workplaces throughout the UK and Ireland, we at Sia Partners built a gender-coded language tracker tool. By analyzing online job descriptions for gender-coded language, we were able to generate some **country-wide insights.**

FIGURE 1
FINDINGS FROM ANALYSIS 2.

Using this dataset, we found that, except in real estate and energy sectors, senior roles were advertised using more masculine-coded language than junior roles. This may indicate that senior roles continue to be associated with masculine stereotypes and may be artificially constraining applications from more female candidates.



Conclusion.

The use of gender-coded language in job adverts has been shown to influence applications from diverse candidates. Sia Partners conducted a series of limited and exploratory studies on the use of gender-coded language in job adverts posted between September 2020 and January 2021 for British and Irish companies. In total, we assessed 99,000 job ads, from 2,900 companies across 12 sectors.

Our results indicate that British and Irish companies may be taking steps to reduce the use of masculine-coded language in job adverts overall. However, we also found that senior roles appear to be advertised using more masculine-coded language than junior roles across most sectors. This finding shows that gender-coded language may be a contributing factor to larger inclusion and equality issues at senior levels of organisations.

The use of gender-coded language in job adverts is a challenge that HR professionals and organisational leadership must be aware of to address and remediate. We hope this analysis can help highlight this issue and bring attention to the use of language at different levels of seniority. We are happy to discuss these findings in more detail. We additionally offer a range of offerings that can help leaders address these complex issues systematically.

Implications.

A strong gender mix in top management teams translates into financial benefits. A burgeoning research literature is clarifying the impacts diversity and inclusivity on business outcomes like financial performance, risk-taking, and employee compensation.

PERFORMANCE:

Diversity at leadership and managerial levels of an organisation helps introduce new ideas, alternative perspectives, and guard against groupthink. The benefits of gender diversity translate into positive financial outcomes. A 2004 study demonstrated that first in the top quartile for female membership on top management teams saw as much as a 35% increase on return on equity (Catalyst, 2004). However, a more recent study in the Netherlands indicates these types of impacts are only obtainable if organisational pre-requisites, like an open and collaborative culture, are in place (Opstrup &we didn Villadsen, 2014).

RISK-TAKING:

Evidence suggests that gender diversity in top management helps to reign in risk-taking (Barber & Odean, 2001). This research finds that men appear to take be more frequently victims of the overconfidence bias, overweighting their own abilities to predict or control outcomes, relative to a control group. This predilection has been shown to result in lower returns to capital during trading (Barber & Odean, 2001).

BEHAVIOURS:

Lastly, a 2015 study used photographs of CEOs faces to obtain an indicator of testosterone in their bodies (Kim & Kamiya, 2015). Researchers found that companies with high-testosterone CEOs not only tended to take on higher levels of leverage, pursue more acquisitive strategies, and take on greater levels of financial risks. CEO pay also positively correlated with the level of testosterone (Kim & Kamiya, 2015).

Appendix 1.

Detail from Gaucher et al., (2011)

List of coded words

Male-coded words are those associated with societal ideas of male stereotypes. Female-coded words are those associated with female stereotypes. It is important to be aware of the cumulative effect the use of "coded" language may have on applicants within society at large.

Note. The asterisk denotes the acceptance of all letters, hyphens, or numbers following its appearance.

Masculine Words

Active; Adventurous; Aggress*; Ambitio*; Analy*; Athlet*; Autonom*; Boast*; Challen*; Compet*; Confident; Courag*; Decide; Decisive; Determine*; Dominant; Domain*; Force*; Greedy; Headstrong; Hierarch*; Hostil*; Impulsive; Independen*; Individual*; Intellect; Lead*; Logic; Masculine; Logic; Objective; Opinion; Outspoken; Persist; Principle*; Reckless; Stubborn; Superior; Self-confiden*; Self-sufficien*; Self-relian*

Feminine Words

Affectionate; Child*; Cheer*; Commit*; Communal; Compassion*; Connect*; Considerate; Depend*; Emotion*; Empath*; Feminine; Flatterable; Gentle; Honest; Interpersonal; Interdependen*; Interpersona*; Kind; Kinship; Loyal*; Modesty; Nag; Nurtur*; Pleasan*; Polite; Quiet*; Respon*; Sensitiv*; Submissive; Support*; Sympath*; Tender*; Together*; Trust*; Understand*; Warm*; Whin*; Yield*

Appendix 2.

List of words indicating seniority

Senior Indicators	Junior Indicators
senior	junior
lead*	assistant
head	support
chief	entry
manager	trainee
director	employee
partner	starter
expert	associate

Most frequent gender-coded words in job adverts in UK and Ireland, September 2020 – January 2021.

Most frequent masculine coded words:	Most frequent feminine coded words:
Lead*	Respon*
Active	Commit*
Individual*	Children
Challeng*	Understand
Compet*	Trust

Appendix 3.

Gender-coded words in context (notional examples)

Examples of male-coded phrases:

"You are results driven..."

"Must be successful in a competitive atmosphere"...

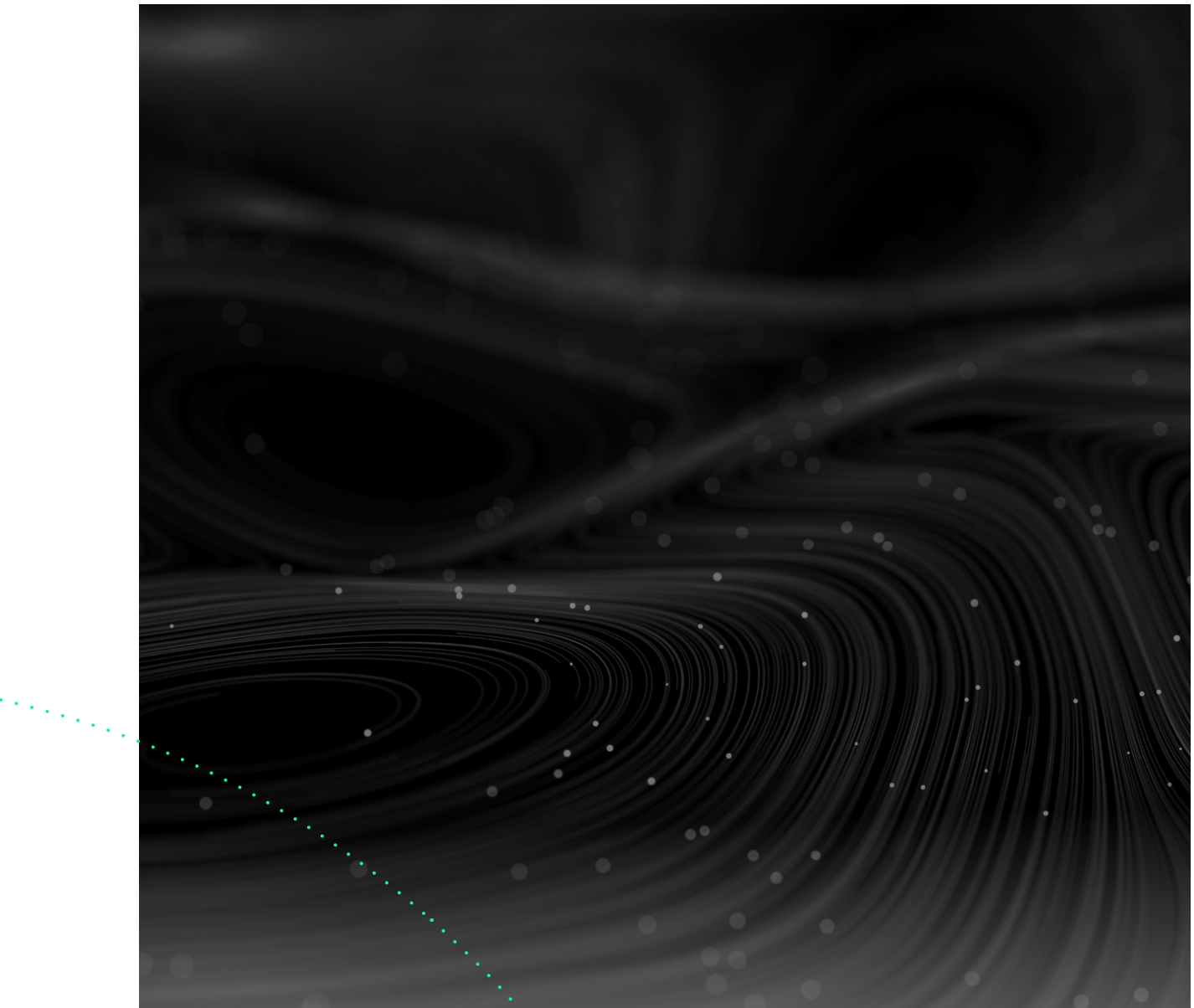
"You are assertive..."

Examples of female-coded phrases:

"You are able to achieve results ... "

"You are a team player ... "

"Able to nurture and connect with customers ..."



Appendix 4.

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• Sector classifications: Global Industry Classification Standard (GICS) – full listing available here.

  - Ex: Consumer discretionary category: automobiles & components, consumer durables & apparel, consumer services (hotels, diversified services, distributors, internet and direct marketing retail, multiline retail, speciality retail).

  - Ex: Consumer staples category: food and staples retail, beverages, food products, tobacco, household products, personal products

• Murray-Nevill, Joshua (2017) "How UK job ad bias applicants by gender", Totaljobs.com. Accessed 4/2/2021. Available at [https://www.totaljobs.com/media-centre/how-uk-job-ads-bias-applicants-by-gender].

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About Sia Partners.

Sia Partners is a next generation management consulting firm and *pioneer of Consulting 4.0*. We offer a unique blend of AI and design capabilities, augmenting traditional consulting to deliver superior value to our clients. Counting 1,800 consultants in 18 countries, we expect to achieve USD 300 million in turnover for the current fiscal year. With a global footprint and expertise in more than 30 sectors and services, we optimize client projects worldwide. Through our *Consulting for Good* approach, we strive for next-level impact by developing innovative CSR solutions for our clients, making sustainability a lever for profitable transformation.

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