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The moderating role of diversity management in the relationship between absorptive capacity and innovation: a quantitative study

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to measure the effect of diversity management on the relationships between potential and realized absorptive capacity and between realized absorptive capacity and innovation capacity.

Theoretical framework – This research is based on studies that consider absorptive capacity as an essential factor for innovation (Camisón & Forés, 2010; Flatten et al., 2011) and on the literature addressing the positive impact of diversity on creativity and innovation (Cox & Blake, 1991; Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015; Mor Barak et al., 2016).

Design/methodology/approach – We developed and validated an instrument to measure the relationship between the constructs, then collected data and obtained 405 valid responses. We tested the hypotheses using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM).

Findings – The results indicate that diversity management has a direct effect on innovation capacity and positively moderates the relationship between absorptive capacity and innovation, reinforcing its strategic role in organizational performance.

Practical & social implications of research – In a context of weakening diversity and inclusion policies, this study supports valuing them as relevant organizational practices. The findings suggest that diversity not only promotes inclusion but also enhances innovation potential by fostering collaborative and knowledge-sharing environments.

Originality/value – The main contribution of this research lies in empirically demonstrating how diversity management moderates the conversion of knowledge into innovation, addressing an important gap in the literature (Yadav & Lenka, 2020) and providing practical guidelines for managers.

Keywords: Diversity management, absorptive capacity, innovation capability, structural equation modeling, PLS-SEM.

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1 Introduction

Historically, companies were structured in a monolithic manner, marked by hierarchical rigidity and cultural homogeneity, with a predominance of social groups that marginalized diverse identities (Cox & Blake, 1991). This configuration not only limited the innovative potential of companies, but also neglected the unique contributions that come from a plurality of experiences and perspectives (Cox & Blake, 1991). However, the socioeconomic transformations of the late 20th century, driven by globalization and changes in consumer behavior, imposed new demands on companies and fostered debate about the effects of diversity on organizational performance (Bassett-Jones, 2005; McKinsey, 2023).

In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated historical social inequalities, dramatically exposing the vulnerabilities of marginalized populations and exacerbating a chronic problem in the Global South (Araújo et al., 2023). Coupled with the mobilizations led by the Black Lives Matter movement in response to the murders of George Floyd in the United States and Beto Freitas in Porto Alegre, these events have increased pressure from civil society for social justice. This pressure has pushed companies and institutions to rethink their organizational practices and commitments to equity and inclusion (Bowles & Carlin, 2021; Redação, 2020; Stott, 2021). This succession of events has highlighted the need for a new organizational model integrating social justice and sustainability into management practices (Bowles & Carlin, 2021). In this scenario, companies have been called upon to go beyond engaging in symbolic discourse and implement concrete actions aimed at representing historically marginalized groups. As a result, diversity management has come to be recognized not only as an ethical imperative, but also as a competitive advantage (McKinsey, 2023).

Studies indicate that diverse groups are more creative and innovative, especially in contexts that value knowledge sharing and transformation (Hewlett et al., 2013). The literature on absorptive capacity – defined as an organization's ability to acquire, assimilate, transform, and apply external knowledge (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Zahra & George, 2002) – suggests that such competencies are essential for the development of innovative solutions in complex, dynamic environments (Camisón & Forés, 2010; Chen, 2009).

Despite this theoretical advancement, few empirical studies have investigated the relationship between diversity and organizational outcomes (Yadav & Lenka, 2020), especially in the Brazilian context, which is marked by a history of racial exclusion and deep social inequality (Araújo et al., 2023). Thus, this study aims to understand how implementing diversity and inclusion (D&I) programs influences absorptive and innovative capacities in Brazilian companies.

Thus, the objective of this study is to investigate the effects of implementing D&I programs on absorptive capacity and innovation capacity. To achieve this objective, we plan to: (i) test the moderating effect of diversity management on the relationships between potential and realized absorptive capacity, (ii) test the moderating effect of diversity management on the relationship between absorptive and innovation capacities, and (iii) assess the influence of diversity management on the development of innovation capacity.

To achieve these objectives, a quantitative survey was conducted with 405 professionals from companies operating in Brazil. The data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The main contribution of the article lies in its empirical evidence showing that diversity management positively moderates the relationship between absorptive and innovation capacities. It also demonstrates that diversity management positively affects innovation capacity development, reinforcing the importance of diversity as a strategic element for organizations seeking competitive advantage in a post-pandemic world that is more turbulent and competitive while also being more aware of its inequalities.

The article is structured as follows: First, we present the theoretical framework and hypotheses. Next, we describe the adopted methodology. Then, we analyze and discuss the results. Finally, we present the theoretical and practical contributions.

2 Theoretical framework

This chapter presents the theoretical concepts related to the three main constructs on which this research is based: diversity management, absorptive capacity, and innovation capacity.

2.1 Diversity management

Diversity management (DM) involves managing differences between individuals within an organization, including those related to race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, skills, and cultural characteristics. The goal of DM is to promote an inclusive and innovative environment in which

diverse perspectives contribute to solving complex problems and improving organizational performance (Cox & Blake, 1991; Bassett-Jones, 2005). When managed effectively, diversity can become a significant competitive advantage by facilitating adaptation, fostering creativity, and promoting superior organizational performance (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015; Kossek & Lobel, 1996; Triana et al., 2021).

However, inadequate diversity management can lead to conflicts and decreased performance, underscoring the importance of an effective approach (Bassett-Jones, 2005; Martinez et al., 2017). The literature also suggests that diversity can impact an organization's absorptive capacity and innovative performance, contributing to the development of new products, services, and solutions (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015; Triana et al., 2021). Additionally, recent studies emphasize the need for a more reflective and critical approach to DM, noting that organizations have struggled to effectively implement D&I policies and programs (Instituto Ethos, 2024; Triana et al., 2021).

2.2 Absorptive capacity

Absorptive capacity (AC) is a key factor in organizational development and innovation. It is defined as an organization's ability to acquire, assimilate, transform, and exploit external knowledge (Zahra & George, 2002). AC is divided into four dimensions: acquisition, assimilation, transformation, and exploitation (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Zahra & George, 2002). Potential absorptive capacity (PAC) encompasses acquisition and assimilation, which are related to the ability to identify and assimilate knowledge. Realized absorptive capacity (RAC), on the other hand, involves the dimensions of transformation and exploitation. These dimensions deal with applying acquired knowledge to process and product innovation (Flatten et al., 2011; Zahra & George, 2002). Organizations with high AC can create more value from external knowledge, which positions them more favorably to gain a competitive advantage (Camisón & Forés, 2010; Ferreira & Ferreira, 2020; Flatten et al., 2011; Oliveira, 2016).

2.3 Innovation capacity

Innovation is crucial for organizational competitiveness, encompassing the introduction of new technologies as well as changes to products, services, processes, and organizational structures (Damanpour, 1996; Organização para a Cooperação e Desenvolvimento Econômico, 2005). Innovation capacity (IC) is the organizational ability to create solutions and adapt products and processes to remain competitive in the market (Chen, 2009). Organizations with high IC can develop products and processes that position them as market leaders and are more responsive to change (Panayides, 2006; Santos-Vijande et al., 2013). An organizational structure that favors creativity and continuous adaptation facilitates innovation (Hurley & Hult, 1998). Furthermore, developing intellectual capital strengthens the ability to create better work processes, develop innovative solutions, and generate more value for customers (Hogan et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2015).

2.4 Formulation of hypotheses

Formal learning practices, such as training and collaborative projects, encourage social interactions that promote informal learning and knowledge sharing (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Schmidt, 2010). Effective DM can enhance these processes by promoting an inclusive, collaborative, and open environment with multiple perspectives (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015; Mor Barak et al., 2016). Diverse groups are more likely to develop innovative solutions and transform shared knowledge into concrete actions (Bassett-Jones, 2005; Cox & Blake, 1991), thereby amplifying the impact of PAC on RAC.

Based on this evidence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_1: Diversity management positively moderates the relationship between potential and realized absorptive capacity.

When diversity is well managed, employees tend to feel more valued, engaged, and motivated to apply their individual skills to organizational goals (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015; Cox & Blake, 1991; Mor Barak et al., 2016). This integration strengthens involvement and a sense of belonging, both of which are essential factors in the development of creativity (Araújo et al., 2017). By expanding the cognitive repertoire of teams, diversity also promotes greater openness to criticism, reduces risk aversion, and improves the ability to solve complex problems (Bassett-Jones, 2005). Thus, effective DM contributes to an environment more conducive to generating innovations based on previously absorbed knowledge. Based on this evidence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H_2: Diversity management positively moderates the relationship between absorptive and innovation capacities.

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In addition, the literature indicates that DM fosters an inclusive environment that stimulates creativity and the generation of new ideas (Curtis & Dreachslin, 2008; Mor Barak et al., 2016). Therefore, it can be assumed that DM directly affects the organization's innovative capacity.

Furthermore, companies that adopt structured DM processes tend to leverage the contributions of diverse groups, extracting strategic value from differences in culture, ethnicity, gender, and education (Dennissen et al., 2020; Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015). These processes foster a creative organizational environment where new ideas are easily accepted, refined, and implemented. At the same time, systematic innovation development policies and processes combined with diversity incentives help align innovative solutions with market demands (Organização para a Cooperação e Desenvolvimento Econômico, 2005; Mor Barak et al., 2016).

Based on this evidence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_3: Diversity management positively affects the development of innovation capacity.

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed conceptual model integrating the relationships between the constructs analyzed in this study.

3 Method

The main objective of the research was to identify the relationship between knowledge absorptive capacity, diversity management, and innovation capacity. To achieve this, we developed a new instrument according to Churchill's (1979) recommendations. First, we defined the scope of the research constructs through a literature review (Supplementary Material, Supplementary Data 2 – Codebook). During this review, we found scales for knowledge absorptive capacity, diversity management, and innovation capacity. Next, we defined the items of the instrument based on the scales identified in the previous step (Supplementary Data 4 – Questionnaire). We adjusted the wording of the sentences to improve clarity and update them to the current context. Since the original scales were developed in English, except for Oliveira (2016), we performed a back-translation procedure conducted by a professional translator who is a native English speaker and fluent in Portuguese. This procedure ensured the conceptual meaning of the original version and the cross-cultural equivalence of the scale (Beaton et al., 2000; Slavec & Drnovšek, 2012).

As recommended by Churchill (1979), Beaton et al. (2000), and DeVellis (2003), we then refined the items by conducting a pre-test with a smaller sample of respondents. As in the final version of the questionnaire, we used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and implemented it on the SurveyMonkey website, distributing the items on pages according to their respective constructs. At the beginning of each page, we included the following sentence: "Considering the company you work for, please indicate your level of agreement with the statements below." During the pretest phase, we included comment boxes on all items so respondents could provide feedback. To collect responses, we sent out email invitations and shared the survey link on LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. In total, we received 45 responses.
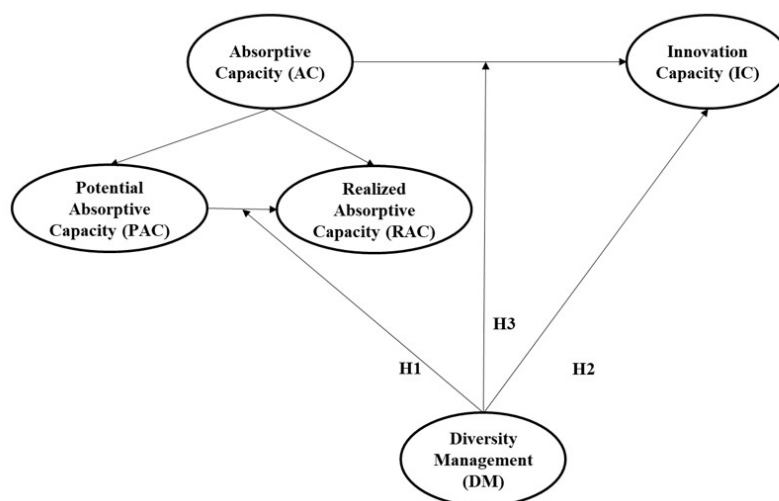

Figure 1. Conceptual model

We modified the questionnaire according to the comments received. For instance, we replaced "people with disabilities" with "PwD," removed "professionals over 45 years of age" from questions about the existence of D&I programs to improve clarity, and replaced "units" with "departments" in questions about knowledge exchange practices. The appendix at the end of the article describes the questionnaire items and their respective sources.

Next, we proceeded with **data collection** between October and November 2021 (Supplementary Data 1 – Database; Supplementary Data 3 – Appendix). To ensure the statistical power necessary to detect real moderating effects (McClelland & Judd, 1993) in our sample of 80%, we used G*Power 3.1.9.7 software following the recommendations of Dawson (2014) and McClelland & Judd (1993). According to this procedure, the minimum number of respondents was 77.

To **assess the reliability and validity of the measurement instrument**, we performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (Bido & Silva, 2019; Churchill, 1979; DeVellis, 2003; Hair et al., 2017b). The reflective model assumes that the indicators (items) are consequences of latent variables (LVs). Since this study aims to empirically confirm or reject a theoretical model, we adopted the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) approach recommended by Hair et al. (2017a, 2019) for such situations. At this stage, we evaluated the measurement model, a process called confirmatory component analysis. Then, we evaluated the structural model (Hair et al., 2019).

Before performing the CFA, we checked for common method bias (CMB) by conducting Harman's one-factor test with principal component analysis (PCA) using all the items from the questionnaire, without rotation, in IBM SPSS Statistics 22. According to Hair et al. (2019), an acceptable Harman's one-factor test value is less than 40%.

The CFA was performed using SmartPLS 4 software. SmartPLS 4 uses a two-stage approach to calculate the moderation effect (Fassott et al., 2016; Becker et al., 2018; Ringle et al., 2024).

Figure 2 illustrates the research design.

4 Analysis of Results

This chapter presents a descriptive analysis of the data and the results of the CFA.

4.1 Descriptive analysis

Table 1 shows the composition of the research sample and highlights the gender, race, and age group variables of the respondents. Male participants predominate (56.79%), and most of them self-identified as white (78.52%). Most participants are between 40 and 56 years old (64.69%), and only four respondents (0.99% of the sample) self-identified as people with disabilities (PwD). Additionally, 34.07% of the respondents said they work in companies with D&I programs or policies.

For the purposes of descriptive analysis, the segments reported by the respondents were organized according to the
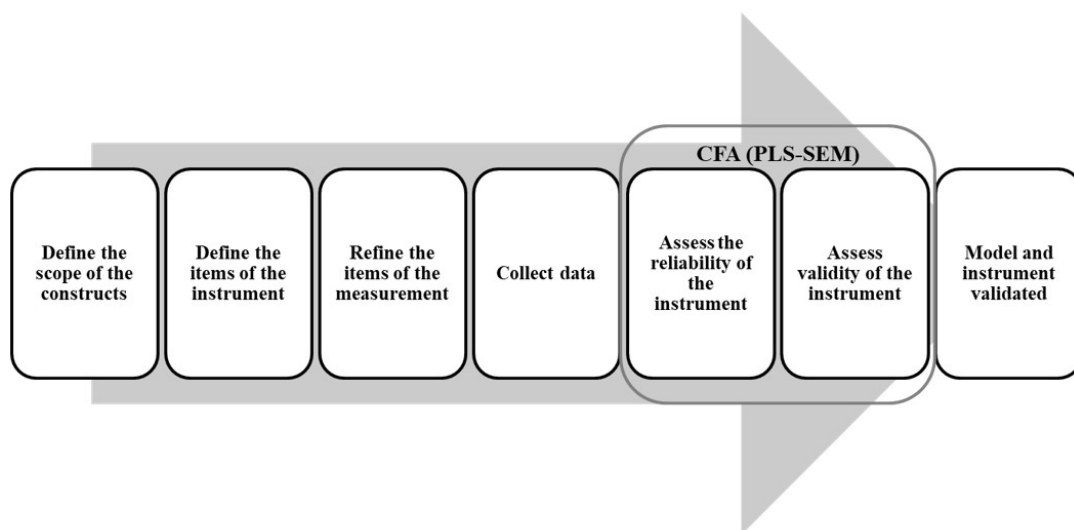

Figure 2. Research design
Source: Adapted from Churchill (1979)

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sections of the National Classification of Economic Activities (CNAE 2.0), which was developed by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2023a). This classification system categorizes economic activities into 21 main sections, as shown in Table 1. Most companies are located in the Southeast (78.27%), are in the private sector (92.84%), are large (with more than 500 employees) (58.52%), and operate in the manufacturing industry (45.93%).

For analytical purposes, the positions reported by the participants were organized into hierarchical levels based on classic references in the organizational structure literature (Mintzberg, 1979; Daft, 2013). Following a logic of rising authority and decision-making, the categorization resulted in seven groups: (1) Senior leadership (President, Director, Superintendent), (2) Senior management/ ownership (Owner, Partner, Family Member Advisor),

Table 1
Sample distribution

Variable	Category	Absolute frequency (n)	Relative frequency (%)
Gender	Male	230	5
	Female	175	43.21
Race/Color	White	318	78.52
	Black	3	7.65
	Brown	43	10.62
	Yellow	11	2.72
	Indigenous	2	0.49
Age group	Over 76 years old	3	0.74
	Up to 27 years old	3	0.74
	Between 28 and 39 years old	81	20
	Between 40 and 56 years old	262	64
	Between 57 and 76 years old	56	13
Economic activity	Public Administration, Defense, and Social Security	2	0
	Water, Sewage, Waste Management, and Decontamination Activities	1	0
	Accommodation and Food	2	0.49
	Arts, Culture, Sports, and Recreation	1	0
	Administrative Activities and Complementary Services	3	0.74
	Research and Development Activities	1	0
	Financial, Insurance, and Related Services	1	2
	Professional, Scientific, and Technical Activities	2	5
	Commerce; Repair of Motor Vehicles and Motorcycles	5	1
	Construction	1	3
	Education	3	8
	Electricity and Gas	6	1
	Manufacturing	186	45.9
	Extractive Industries	1	2
	Information and Communication	11	2.7
	Other Service Activities	2	0.49
	Human Health and Social Services	34	8
	Transportation, Storage, and Mail	10	2

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(3) Management (Manager, Coordinator, Supervisor), (4) Operational leadership (Team Leader), (5) Specialists (Consultants, Researchers, Teachers, Experts), (6) Technical professionals (Analysts, Technicians), and (7) Administrative support (Assistants). This systematization allowed for more consistent comparative analyses, particularly at the intersection of gender, race, and position in the organizational structure.

Tables 2 and 3 show how the sample is distributed by gender and race at different hierarchical levels. In both tables, the percentages are indicated by row and column. The **percentages by row** represent the gender or race composition within each hierarchical level. The **percentages by column** indicate the proportion of each hierarchical level within the total for each group (gender or race).

As Table 2 shows, the proportion of women and men in the overall sample is relatively balanced, but female representation declines at the highest hierarchical levels. In the senior leadership group, for instance, most respondents are male. Similarly, Table 3 shows that black and brown people are considerably underrepresented in positions of greater authority.

Of the group of PwD, two hold management positions, one is in a senior leadership position, and one works at the technical professional level.

To measure the respondents' perceptions of diversity and inclusion in the workplaces, a diversity management index was created based on exploratory factor analysis, following the procedure of Pestana & Gageiro (1998). Varimax rotation was used to create this index to facilitate the interpretation of the factors and ensure the

clarity of the factor loadings. The resulting single-factor index was then crossed with a dummy variable indicating whether or not the company has formal D&I programs or policies. The chi-square test revealed that the formal presence of these programs does not significantly impact respondents' perceptions of D&I within the organizational environment.

The means of the central variables of the study indicate a greater presence of AQC (M = 3.80, SD = 1.24) and ASC (M = 3.52, SD = 1.31) practices compared to TRC (M = 3.40, SD = 1.32) and EXPC (M = 3.34, SD = 1.30) practices. This suggests more significant performance in potential absorptive capacity capabilities. The average IC score was 3.39 (SD = 1.23), while the average DM score was lower (M = 2.74; SD = 1.36), indicating a lower perception of consolidated diversity management practices in the companies analyzed.

4.2 Validation of the measurement model

As previously mentioned, we first conducted a Harman one-factor test, which produced a result of 24.43%. Next, we assessed convergent validity using average variance extracted (AVE) (Bido & Silva, 2019; Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2017a, 2019). As shown in Table 4, the AC (AVE = 0.511), IC (AVE = 0.500), and DM (AVE = 0.521) constructs met the minimum criterion of 0.50. Additionally, we observed that most items have factor loadings greater than 0.70 in their respective latent variables (LVs) (see Table 4). These data demonstrate the correlation between items within each LV and the representativeness of items within the respective constructs (see Table 5).

Table 2
Representation by Gender in Hierarchical Levels

Hierarchical Level	Gender						
	Male	Female	Total	%Male_C	%Fem_C	%Male_L	%Fem_L
Senior Management / Ownership	1	2	3	0	1.14	33.33	66.67
Senior Leadership	92	49	1	40	28	65.25	34.75
Administrative Support	0	1	1	0	0	0	100
Specialists	1	5	6	0.43	2.86	16.67	83.33
Management	91	76	16	39.57	43.43	54.49	45.51
Operational Leadership	5		5	2.17	0	100	0
Technical Professionals	4	42	82	17	24	48.78	51.22
Total	230	175	405			56.79	43.21

Note: %Male_L: percentage of men in the hierarchical level; %Male_C: percentage of men in each hierarchical level in relation to the total number of men in the sample; %Fem_L: percentage of women in the hierarchical level; %Fem_C: percentage of women in each hierarchical level in relation to the total number of women in the sample.

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Table 3
Representation by Race in Hierarchical Levels

Hierarchical Level	Whi	Bro	Bla	Yel	Ind	Tot	%Whi_L	%Bro_L	%Bla_L	%Yel_L	%Ind_L	%Whi_C	%Bro_C	%Bla_C	%Yel_C	%Ind_C
Senior Management / Ownership	3	0	0	0	0	3	100.00	0	0	0	0	0.94	0	0	0	0
Senior Management	1	7	9	2	0	141	87.23	4.96	6.38	1.42	0	0.31	16.28	29.03	18.18	0
Administrative Support	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	100	0	0	0	0	3.23	0	0
Specialists	4	1	1	0	0	6	66.67	16	16	0	0	1.26	2.33	3.23	0	0
Management	123	25	13	5	1	167	73.65	14.97	7.78	2.99	0.60	38.68	58.14	41.94	45.45	50.00
Operational Leadership	4	1	0	0	0	5	80.00	20	0	0	0	1.26	2.33	0	0	0
Technical Professionals	61	9	7	4	1	82	74.39	10.98	8.54	4.88	1.22	19.18	20.93	22.58	36.36	50.00
Total	318	43	31	11	2	405	78.52	10.62	7.65	2.72	0.49	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Note 1: Whi = White; Bro=Brown; Bla=Black; Yel=Asian; Ind=Indigenous; Tot=Total.

Note 2: %Whi_L: percentage of whites in the hierarchical level; %Bro_L: percentage of brown people in the hierarchical level; %Bla_L: percentage of black people in the hierarchical level; %Yel_L: percentage of Asian people in the hierarchical level; %Ind_L: percentage of indigenous people in the hierarchical level; %Whi_C: percentage of whites by category in relation to the total race; %Bro_C: percentage of brown people by category in relation to the total race; %Bla_C: percentage of blacks by category in relation to the total race; %Yel_C: percentage of Asian people by category in relation to the total race; %Ind_C: percentage of indigenous people by category in relation to the total race.

Table 4
Correlation matrix between latent variables

LVs	Standard Deviation	Mean	1	2	3
1 **AC**	0.009	0.714	0.715		
2 **IC**	0.050	0.706	0.464	0.708	
3 **DM**	0.058	0.720	0.301	0.509	0.722
Cronbach's alpha			0.763	0.799	0.897
rho_A			0.765	0	0.901
Composite reliability			0.839	0.857	0.915
AVE			0.511	0.501	0.521

Note 1: The values on the diagonal are the square root of the AVE.
Note 2: All correlations are significant at the 1% level.

Table 5
Cross-loading matrix

Items	AC	IC	DM
AQCO3	**0.714**	0.337	0.302
AQCO4	**0.714**	0	0.203
AQCO5	**0.705**	0.267	0.16
AQCO7	**0.710**	0.358	0.135
ASSCO5	**0.729**	0.376	0.263
IC10	0.289	**0.752**	0.421
IC11	0.281	**0.731**	0.393
IC2	0.331	**0.726**	0.374
IC3	0.399	**0.633**	0.268
IC6	0.377	**0.652**	0.311
IC9	0.297	**0.742**	0.384
DM1	0.259	0.384	**0.687**
DM10	0.187	0.324	**0.668**
DM11	0.206	0.314	**0.638**
DM2	0.244	0.355	**0.723**
DM3	0.238	0.433	**0.813**
DM4	0.26	0.342	**0.65**
DM5	0.203	0.39	**0.755**
DM6	0.172	0.401	**0.777**
DM7	0.225	0.372	**0.719**
DM8	0.182	0	**0.765**

Note: All factor loadings are significant at 1%.

The composite reliability is solid (CR = 0.839, 0.857, and 0.915), and the internal consistency reliability is good (Cronbach's alpha = 0.736, 0.799, and 0.897). Although some DM items are slightly below 0.70, they were retained because they are close to 0.70 and excluding them did not significantly alter the already high composite reliability of DM (Hair et al., 2019).

To assess the discriminant validity of the LVs, we analyzed the cross-loadings described in Table 5. We observed that the loadings of the items are stronger within their own construct than within the others (Hair et al., 2019, 2017a).

4.3 Validation of the structural model

As shown in Table 6, the model explains 37.0% of the variance of the endogenous variable, IC (adjusted $R^2 = 0.370$). In the social sciences, an R^2 value of at least 26% is considered indicative of strong explanatory power (Ringle et al., 2014). Thus, this result demonstrates that the proposed model largely explains the LV IC. Additionally, the VIF values ranged from 1.078 to 1.174, indicating low multicollinearity and reinforcing the robustness of the estimates obtained (Hair et al., 2017a).

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Furthermore, two of the three proposed hypotheses were confirmed (p < 0.05). The DM variable had a positive and significant effect on IC (H2: structural coefficient = 0.379, t = 8.167, p = 0.000, f² = 0.196), and the moderating effect of DM on the relationship between AC and IC was significant as well, thus confirming H3 (coefficient = 0.095, t = 2.492, p = 0.013, f² = 0.015).

However, hypothesis H1, which tested the moderating effect of DM on the relationship between PAC and RAC, was not confirmed since after adjustments, the LVs PAC and RAC were grouped into the LV AC.

Finally, Figure 3 shows the adjusted and validated model after CFA.

4.4 Validation of the moderating effect

As proposed in the research, we measured the moderating effect to verify whether DM modifies the strength or direction of the relationship between the LVs AC and IC (Gardner et al., 2017; Hair et al., 2017a;

Henseler & Fassott, 2010). We analyzed the size of the moderating effect based on the f² value shown in Table 6. According to Cohen (1988), effect sizes can be classified as small (f² = 0.02), medium (f² = 0.15), or large (f² = 0.35). However, Hair et al. (2017b) propose using Kenny's (2018) classification system, which categorizes f² values as small (f² = 0.005), medium (f² = 0.010), or large (f² = 0.025). This classification system is supported by Aguinis et al. (2005) study, which found that the average moderating effect in administration and psychology studies is 0.009. In light of this evidence, we conclude that the moderating effect of DM is significant (p = 0.013) and medium (f² = 0.015).

Another way to assess the moderating effect is through a simple slope analysis graph containing three lines: one for the moderator's mean value and two others with standard deviations above and below the mean (Gardner et al., 2017; Dawson, 2014). Figure 4 shows that the relationship between AC and IC is stronger

Table 6
Results of the structural model

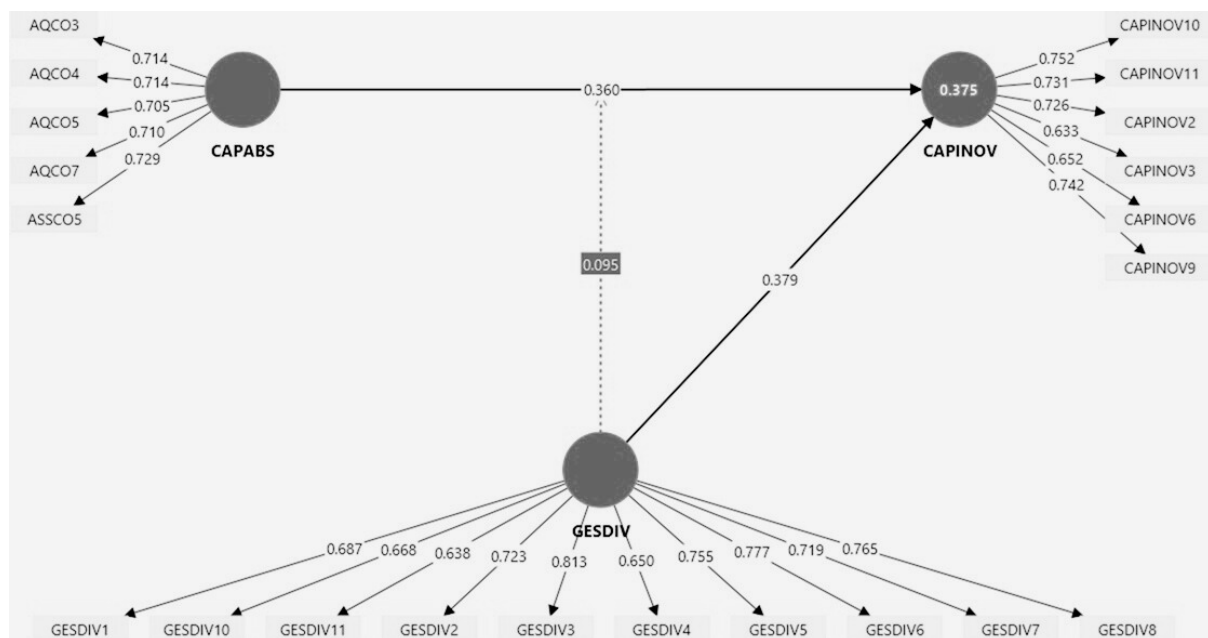| Structural relationships	Hypotheses	VIF	f²	Structural coefficient	Standard error	t-value	p-value	Adjusted R²
AC -> IC		1.135	0.183	0.360	0.044	8.184	0.000	
DM -> IC	H2	1.174	0.196	0	0	8.167	0	0.370
DM x AC -> IC	H3	1.078	0	0	0	2.492	0.013	

Note: P-values estimated by bootstrapping with 5000 repetitions.

Figure 3. Validated structural model. *Note. CAPABS = AC; CAPINOV = IC; GESDIV = DM*
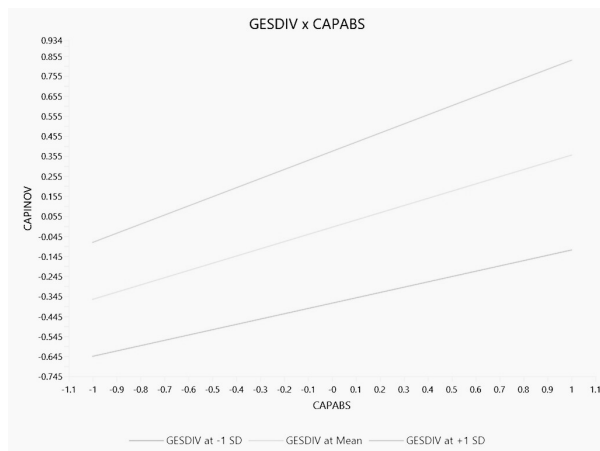Source: Graph generated in SmartPLS4

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Figure 4. Graph of the moderating effect of DM on the AC-IC relationship. *Note. CAPABS* = AC; *CAPINOV* = IC; *GESDIV* = DM
Source: Graph generated in SmartPLS4

when DM is higher (green line) and weaker when DM is lower (red line). This pattern indicates a strengthening moderating effect (Gardner et al., 2017, p. 5).

5 Discussion

Based on the respondents' perceptions, there is a discrepancy in how the various dimensions of AC are developed within the companies analyzed, particularly in regard to transformation and exploitation. This finding underscores the challenge of translating external knowledge into effective applications within an organizational context (Oliveira, 2016; Zahra & George, 2002). The low consolidation of RAC may be associated with the difficulty of reconciling the different requirements of each dimension. While PAC demands openness and flexibility, RAC requires control and standardization (Ferreira & Ferreira, 2020).

The exclusion of several PAC items indicates weaknesses in practices for technology-based coordinated information sharing and in structures that encourage team interaction (Camisón & Forés, 2010), as well as the absence of knowledge multipliers (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Camisón & Forés, 2010), internal knowledge transfer policies, and collaborative spaces, such as quality circles (Schmidt, 2010). Cultural elements such as encouraging learning from mistakes and allowing freedom to express doubts or criticism also appear to be lacking (Cepeda-Carrion et al., 2012).

As for RAC, the exclusion of items indicates limitations in the formalization of procedures (Jansen et al., 2005), in the valuation of risks as a source of learning,

and in the creation of spaces for problem solving (Camisón & Forés, 2010). Items related to translating customer needs into new products or processes, as well as launching patents, were also not sustained. This suggests challenges in consolidating innovation-oriented practices (Flatten et al., 2011).

Furthermore, hypothesis H1 was not validated. After adjusting the model, the decision was made to consolidate all items into a single variable (AC), thus eliminating the second-order structure of absorptive capacity. This prevented distinguishing between the potential and realized dimensions, thus making it impossible to analyze the moderating effect of diversity management between them. This result contradicts established theoretical approaches that treat absorptive capacity as a multidimensional construct with critical transitions between potential and realization (Zahra & George, 2002) and empirical evidence that confirms this structure and the role of moderating factors in this process (Flatten et al., 2011; Camisón & Forés, 2010; Ferreira & Ferreira, 2020).

The data reveal weaknesses in innovation capacity processes, as indicated by the exclusion of items related to offering differentiated products/services, customer participation in the creative process, and placing value on experimentation and digital innovation. These results suggest that companies struggle to develop an innovative, customer-centric culture (Chen, 2009; Hogan et al., 2011).

Regarding findings on D&I policies and practices, the data reveal a clear concentration of men and white people in positions of greater authority, particularly in executive and presidential roles. This contrasts with Brazil's demographic composition: women represent 52.2% of the population (Gandra, 2021), yet they only made up 57% of the survey sample. Furthermore, black and brown people are the majority in Brazil – they represent 55.5% of the population, according to the latest census (IBGE, 2023c). Nevertheless, both groups are underrepresented in leadership positions, with the bottleneck effect being even more pronounced for black individuals. The exclusion of item DM 9, which addresses the presence of diverse leaders, reflects this reality. The low visibility of groups that are the majority of the population but are structurally marginalized prevents recognition of concrete advances in D&I. This corroborates recent research (Boehm, 2017; Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socioeconômicos, 2024; Instituto Ethos, 2024; Schuck, 2024). Additionally, only 34% of the respondents said

their companies have diversity policies or programs, which reinforces the incipient nature of these initiatives in Brazilian companies (Magri, 2016; Instituto Ethos, 2024).

Another relevant finding is that 99% of the respondents did not identify as people with disabilities. This finding corroborates studies that point to the low inclusion of PwD in Brazil's formal labor market (IBGE, 2023b).

One respondent summed up this scenario succinctly, expressing frustration with the gap between organizational discourse and practice:

It even made me depressed. If there are any "agree" answers on any form, tell me which company it is, so I can send them my resume right now! Either I'm being very pessimistic, and I'd like to be, or companies really don't care about diversity, information sharing, recognition... like compliance. Those who report it suffer the consequences. It may even lead to something, but both parties get screwed.

5.1 Effects of diversity management

The confirmation of hypothesis H3 indicates that diversity management directly strengthens innovation capacity. Diverse environments offer a broader range of experiences and perspectives, favoring the generation of creative ideas and solutions (Jansen & Searle, 2021). These results reinforce the idea that, when managed well, diversity enhances companies' innovative potential, contrary to the idea that it is neutral or limiting (Brunetta et al., 2020; Tshetshema & Chan, 2020). Hypothesis H2 reveals that diversity positively moderates the relationship between absorptive capacity and innovation as well. Although the identified effect is of medium magnitude, studies indicate that even small interactions can have practical relevance when they generate significant changes in results (Chin et al., 2003; Henseler & Fassott, 2010). Thus, diversity management is relevant as both a direct driver of innovation and a factor that enhances the application of absorbed external knowledge.

6 Final considerations

6.1 Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the existing literature by empirically demonstrating the moderating effect of diversity management on the relationship between absorptive capacity and innovation (Yadav & Lenka, 2020; Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015). Integrating these three constructs into a single model helps clarify how inclusive practices strengthen knowledge application and expand the innovative

potential of organizations (Zahra & George, 2002; Camisón & Forés, 2010). Additionally, regarding studies on knowledge management and innovation, by highlighting the coexistence of weaknesses in the dimensions of absorptive capacity and innovation capacity, this study reinforces the theoretical understanding that effectively converting external knowledge into innovative results requires not only structured processes of acquisition and assimilation, but also organizational environments that favor the transformation and exploitation of knowledge (Zahra & George, 2002; Camisón & Forés, 2010; Flatten et al., 2011).

Furthermore, this study addresses theoretical and methodological gaps in the D&I literature, which is still characterized by a lack of robust, objective empirical studies measuring organizational impact (Curtis & Dreachslin, 2008; Otaye-Ebede, 2018; Yadav & Lenka, 2020). It also contributes to the field by analyzing Brazilian companies, responding to the predominance of diversity studies based on Global North contexts, especially the United States (Fitzsimmons et al., 2023). By focusing on Brazil, one of the largest emerging economies and a country historically marked by chronic social and racial inequalities (Araújo et al., 2023), the study broadens our understanding of the effects of diversity management in exclusionary social and institutional contexts (Nkomo et al., 2015).

6.2 Practical contributions

The findings suggest incorporating structured diversity policies and programs into innovation strategies because they enhance the effectiveness of knowledge absorption and application (Araújo et al., 2017). Additionally, the study provides input for developing organizational diagnostics and climate surveys focused on diversity (Araújo & Carneiro Jr., 2020; Otaye-Ebede, 2018). This reinforces the role of companies in promoting inclusive environments that align with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2015).

This debate becomes even more urgent in light of recent signs of setbacks in corporate diversity initiatives. Examples include the closure of internal D&I programs at Meta (G1, 2025) and the perception that diversity is not a priority in Brazilian companies (Capirazi, 2023). These cases reveal the institutional fragility of diversity initiatives. Thus, this study provides valuable evidence that reinforces the strategic importance of diversity in organizations, particularly in environments where there is pressure to produce results and investments in D&I must be rationalized.

6.3 Limitations of the study

Despite the contributions, the respondents' perceptions may not fully reflect the actual implementation of diversity management practices, which could affect the accuracy of the findings. With this in mind, future studies using public data and ESG reports to assess the impact of D&I best practices would be worthwhile. Exploring different sectors and geographic regions would also be useful for validating the generalization of the results. Finally, we recommend that future research employ mixed methodologies combining quantitative and qualitative data to achieve a more comprehensive understanding.

Acknowledgements

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary material accompanies this paper.

Supplementary Data 1 - Database

Supplementary Data 2 - Codebook

Supplementary Data 3 - Appendix

Supplementary Data 4 - Questionnaire

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/BTD2VD

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