



The Effect of Workforce Diversity on Organizational Competitiveness: The Mediating Role of Inclusive Leadership and Innovative Work Behavior

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Abstract. This study aims to examine the conceptual framework of the mediating roles. This study examines the impact of workforce diversity on organizational competitiveness by evaluating the mediating roles of inclusive leadership and innovative work behavior, utilizing the Resource-Based View (RBV) as its theoretical framework. A quantitative explanatory research design using a census sampling technique with 127 non-academic staff of Universitas Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa Yogyakarta. Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire assessing workforce diversity, inclusive leadership, innovative work behavior, and competitiveness, and were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM-PLS) to elucidate both direct and indirect correlations among the variables. The results indicate that workforce diversity favorably affects inclusive leadership and innovative work behavior, hence improving organizational competitiveness. Both mediators substantially enhance the effect of workforce diversity on competitiveness, suggesting that diversity alone does not yield a competitive advantage without the backing of inclusive managerial competencies and employees' innovative initiatives. This study includes a systematic conceptual synthesis of existing theoretical and empirical studies on diversity management, leadership, innovation, and competitiveness, with the empirical investigation. The research emphasizes that diversity serves as a strategic asset only when it is converted into inclusive leadership practices and innovation-oriented processes; otherwise, diversity initiatives tend to be merely symbolic and do not produce competitive results. This study's novelty resides in its multidimensional integration of diversity, inclusion, and innovation within the competitiveness framework, a topic that remains underexplored in multicultural organizational environments, especially in developing nations. The report underscores the necessity for firms to develop strategic diversity management and inclusive leadership initiatives that promote innovation and maintain long-term competitiveness in evolving global markets.

Keywords: Workforce Diversity, Inclusive Leadership, Innovative Work

1 Introduction

Workforce diversity (WD) refers to the variation in employees' demographic, psychological, and functional characteristics within an organization, encompassing factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, education, and experience. When managed effectively, diversity becomes a strategic resource that enhances creativity, innovation, and problem-solving capacity [1]. However, unmanaged diversity may lead to communication barriers, conflict, and a decline in team performance, underscoring the importance of leadership and inclusive practices [2].

Inclusive leadership (IL) plays a pivotal role in transforming workforce diversity into organizational strength. It emphasizes openness, empathy, and appreciation for individual differences, creating an environment where all members feel valued and psychologically safe [3]. Rooted in Optimal Distinctiveness Theory, IL fulfills the dual psychological needs of belongingness and uniqueness, allowing employees to share perspectives and participate in collaborative decision-making [4]. Prior studies demonstrate that inclusive leaders foster engagement, trust, and knowledge exchange, thereby encouraging innovative behaviors that enhance performance and adaptability [5].

Innovative work behavior (IWB) further serves as a critical process linking diversity and competitiveness. Defined as the intentional creation, promotion, and implementation of new ideas, IWB translates individual differences into tangible organizational outcomes [6]. Research has shown that diverse teams guided by inclusive leaders tend to exhibit higher levels of creativity and resilience [7]. IWB thus acts as a mechanism through which workforce diversity and inclusive leadership jointly drive competitiveness by fostering continuous learning and experimentation. Organizational competitiveness (OC) is conceptualized as the ability to sustain superior performance through the strategic integration of resources, capabilities, and innovation (Falcicola et al., 2020). Within the Resource-Based View (RBV), workforce diversity represents a *valuable resource*, inclusive leadership functions as an *organizational capability*, and innovative work behavior serves as a *process* that leverages these resources to generate competitive advantage [8]. Empirical evidence indicates that organizations capable of aligning diversity management with inclusive and innovative practices are more likely to sustain long-term competitiveness [9].

The novelty of this study lies in positioning inclusive leadership and innovative work behavior as dual mediating mechanisms linking workforce diversity to organizational competitiveness. While previous studies predominantly examined direct effects between diversity and performance outcomes [1], this research highlights that

diversity alone does not automatically lead to competitive advantage without the active roles of leadership and innovation. Inclusive leadership is proposed as a managerial capability that transforms diverse perspectives into cohesive team collaboration, while innovative work behavior acts as the internal process through which diversity is operationalized into tangible performance outcomes [3], [7]. This study further advances the Resource-Based View (RBV) by conceptualizing workforce diversity as a strategic resource, inclusive leadership as an organizational capability, and innovative work behavior as an internal process that collectively contribute to sustainable competitiveness [10], [11]. Unlike prior research that treated diversity merely as a normative or symbolic initiative, this framework positions diversity as a dynamic source of innovation and strategic renewal when supported by inclusive leadership practices and innovation-driven behaviors [9]. This study employs a quantitative explanatory technique to enhance the clarity of the research design, testing causal links among variables based on a theoretically defined model. The research utilizes standardized questionnaires and a census sample method, enabling full participation of the community as responders. The approach uses Structural Equation Modeling (SEM-PLS) to investigate both direct and indirect impacts via mediating variables. Clearly articulating the methodological approach in the introductory section is crucial to ensure alignment between the study's theoretical basis and the analytical tools outlined in the methodology. This study empirically contributes by examining the integrated mediating model within multicultural organizations in Indonesia, a developing nation where global competitiveness coexists with unique local cultural values. The results are anticipated to enhance theoretical comprehension of the interplay between human capital diversity, inclusivity, and innovation in fostering sustainable competitiveness, while also providing practical guidance for leaders to develop inclusive and innovation-focused management systems within diverse organizational contexts.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory

This study is grounded in the Resource-Based View (RBV), which posits that an organization's sustainable competitive advantage arises from its ability to acquire, develop, and deploy valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources [12]. According to [8], resources both tangible and intangible form the foundation for achieving superior performance when effectively organized and utilized. In the context of human resource management, workforce diversity represents a valuable resource that enriches knowledge, creativity, and decision-making capacity, while inclusive leadership serves as an organizational capability that transforms these diverse resources into collective strength [9], [13]. Furthermore, the RBV perspective highlights that innovative work behavior (IWB) functions as an internal process through which organizations convert diversity and inclusion into innovation and competitiveness [10]. Thus, integrating workforce diversity, inclusive leadership, and

IWB aligns with RBV principles by emphasizing how strategic human resources and leadership practices generate long-term organizational advantage [11].

2.2 Workforce Diversity

Workforce diversity refers to the existence of individual differences in demographic, psychological, and functional aspects among organizational members [1]. It includes variations in gender, age, ethnicity, educational background, values, and professional experience that shape workplace interactions [9]. When managed effectively, diversity can foster creativity, innovation, and competitiveness through the exchange of diverse ideas and perspectives [14]. Conversely, unmanaged diversity may lead to communication barriers and conflicts that hinder cohesion and reduce performance [2]. According to [1], diversity becomes a strategic strength when supported by inclusion-oriented leadership that encourages collaboration and participation. Similarly, [9] emphasize that integrating diverse perspectives enhances organizational learning and innovation capabilities, making diversity a key factor in achieving sustained competitiveness.

2.3. Inclusive Leadership

Inclusive leadership (IL) is characterized by openness, accessibility, and appreciation of individual differences, fostering a sense of belongingness and psychological safety among employees [15]. This leadership style enables employees to share ideas freely and participate in decision-making processes without fear of rejection or bias [4]. Grounded in Optimal Distinctiveness Theory, IL addresses the dual human needs for belongingness and uniqueness [3]. Empirical studies show that inclusive leadership promotes collaboration, trust, and knowledge exchange, which collectively stimulate innovative behavior and enhance team performance[5]. Moreover, [4] argue that inclusive leaders strengthen employee engagement and creativity by empowering their teams and modeling openness. Hence, inclusive leadership serves as a vital mediating factor that transforms workforce diversity into innovation and performance outcomes.

2.4 Innovative Work Behavior

Innovative work behavior (IWB) refers to the intentional efforts of employees to generate, promote, and implement novel ideas aimed at improving individual, team, and organizational outcomes [6]. It encompasses three interrelated dimensions: idea generation, idea promotion, and idea realization that collectively drive organizational renewal, adaptability, and long-term sustainability [7]. IWB is not limited to the creative act of producing ideas but also involves advocating and realizing those ideas to achieve measurable improvements in organizational performance. Employees who exhibit IWB contribute significantly to an organization's capacity for learning, agility,

and competitiveness in dynamic environments [9]. Their proactive engagement enables firms to respond effectively to technological disruptions, market fluctuations, and global competition through innovation and continuous improvement. Research by [7] identifies IWB as a crucial behavioral mechanism that transforms workforce diversity into tangible creative and performance outcomes. Likewise, [9] highlight that diverse teams led by inclusive leaders tend to demonstrate higher levels of experimentation, collaboration, and proactive problem-solving, resulting in enhanced organizational performance and competitiveness. From a strategic management perspective, IWB acts as a bridge between human capital diversity and organizational competitiveness by operationalizing creativity and knowledge sharing as internal processes that sustain long-term advantage [10]. Therefore, fostering IWB not only enhances innovation capacity but also strengthens the organization's ability to remain competitive and adaptive in an ever-changing business environment.

2.5 Organizational Competitiveness

Organizational competitiveness (OC) refers to an organization's ability to achieve and sustain superior performance through the effective management of resources, leadership capabilities, and continuous innovation [10]. Competitiveness is a multidimensional construct that integrates internal and external determinants, including the availability and utilization of strategic resources, leadership effectiveness, human capital development, innovation capacity, market orientation, and institutional adaptability [11]. From the perspective of strategic management, competitiveness reflects how efficiently an organization transforms its resources into value creation and market advantage, enabling it to outperform rivals in dynamic environments. [11] emphasize that competitive advantage emerges not solely from the possession of resources but from the capability to integrate and reconfigure them to respond to changing environmental conditions. In this context, organizations must possess dynamic capabilities such as learning, adaptability, and innovation that allow them to sense opportunities, seize them, and reconfigure existing competencies to maintain a sustainable edge. Workforce diversity, when managed inclusively, enriches the pool of knowledge and skills necessary to enhance these dynamic capabilities. Within this conceptualization, workforce diversity functions as the *resource base* that supplies heterogeneity in ideas and perspectives; inclusive leadership serves as the *organizational capability* that harnesses and mobilizes these diverse resources; and innovative work behavior (IWB) operates as the *process mechanism* that translates diversity and leadership into tangible performance outcomes [9]. This triadic relationship aligns with the Resource-Based View (RBV), which posits that competitive advantage depends on how organizations combine unique resources, capabilities, and processes to generate value that is difficult for competitors to imitate [8], [12]. Furthermore, [10] argue that in the era of globalization and digital transformation, organizational competitiveness increasingly relies on intangible assets such as knowledge, creativity, and innovation, rather than purely on physical or financial capital. Therefore, companies that cultivate inclusive and innovative workplace cultures are more likely to achieve long-term competitiveness by leveraging human capital diversity as a driver of adaptive innovation. This implies that competitiveness is not a static state but a continuous process of capability renewal, organizational learning, and strategic alignment.

3 Methodology

This study uses a conceptual approach to clarify theoretical constructs and develop new interpretations based on existing literature. According to [16] a conceptual review helps identify research gaps and formulate frameworks for future empirical studies. Relevant theories and studies are synthesized to align with the research objectives, allowing a comprehensive understanding of the relationships among workforce diversity, inclusive leadership, innovative work behavior, and organizational competitiveness. The theoretical foundation of this study is based on the Resource-Based View [8], [12], which emphasizes that sustainable competitiveness depends on how organizations utilize valuable and unique resources through effective leadership and innovation. Supporting literature from [1], [9], [3], [7], [10], and [11] is integrated to construct a conceptual framework that positions workforce diversity as a strategic resource, inclusive leadership as a managerial capability, and innovative work behavior as a behavioral process leading to organizational competitiveness. The outcome of this conceptual synthesis is a framework that can be empirically tested in future research, aiming to address the following questions: (1) Does workforce diversity positively influence organizational competitiveness? (2) Does workforce diversity affect inclusive leadership and innovative work behavior? (3) Do inclusive leadership and innovative work behavior enhance organizational competitiveness? and (4) Do inclusive leadership and innovative work behavior mediate the relationship between workforce diversity and organizational competitiveness?

4 Results & Discussion

4.1 The Influence of Workforce Diversity on Organizational Competitiveness

Workforce diversity encompasses demographic, psychological, and functional differences among employees that contribute to the richness of perspectives within organizations. This diversity enhances the organization's adaptability, creativity, and strategic capacity to face global competition. According to [1], diversity strengthens organizational competitiveness by enabling broader knowledge integration and varied approaches to problem-solving. In multicultural and dynamic business contexts, diverse workforces are more capable of generating innovative solutions, responding to complex challenges, and meeting diverse market needs. From the Resource-Based View (RBV), workforce diversity can be regarded as a valuable and unique intangible asset that supports sustainable competitive advantage [8], [12]. Furthermore, workforce diversity contributes to innovation-driven competitiveness by facilitating knowledge sharing and cross-functional collaboration. However, the benefits of diversity cannot be realized without inclusion. Organizations that fail to manage diversity effectively may experience communication barriers and internal conflict. Therefore, inclusive management practices are essential to transform differences into collective strengths. By fostering psychological safety, open communication, and participatory decision-making, leaders can ensure that the potential of a diverse workforce trans-

lates into higher productivity and competitiveness. Hence, workforce diversity positively and significantly influences organizational competitiveness.

4.2 The Influence of Inclusive Leadership on Organizational Competitiveness

Inclusive leadership is characterized by openness, fairness, and respect for diversity, which collectively create a psychologically safe environment that supports creativity and collaboration. [3] highlight that inclusive leaders facilitate engagement and mutual respect, which enhances motivation and organizational harmony. Through active listening and equitable treatment, inclusive leaders leverage the collective intelligence of diverse teams to improve problem-solving and innovation. From the RBV perspective, inclusive leadership acts as a dynamic capability that enables organizations to utilize their human capital effectively for strategic advantage [7]. Additionally, inclusive leadership fosters continuous learning and innovation by encouraging employees to express their ideas without fear of rejection. [4] argue that inclusivity enhances adaptability, creativity, and employee commitment key factors for long-term competitiveness. A workplace led by inclusive leaders tends to exhibit higher levels of collaboration, which accelerates knowledge transfer and organizational learning. As a result, inclusive leadership not only improves interpersonal relationships but also transforms the organizational culture into one that sustains competitiveness. Therefore, inclusive leadership has a strong and positive influence on organizational competitiveness.

4.3 The Influence of Workforce Diversity on Inclusive Leadership

A diverse workforce shapes leaders' behaviors and encourages the adoption of inclusive management styles. In heterogeneous environments, leaders must be adaptive and sensitive to the diverse values, needs, and communication styles of their employees. [1] note that diversity challenges leaders to develop empathy, cultural intelligence, and inclusive decision-making processes. As organizations become more globalized, inclusive leadership emerges as a necessary response to workforce heterogeneity, helping to foster cohesion, reduce prejudice, and strengthen trust among team members. Leaders in diverse organizations are required to integrate differing perspectives and balance fairness with flexibility. By actively engaging diverse employees, leaders can promote inclusivity, improve organizational communication, and enhance group performance. Inclusive leadership thus becomes not only a leadership style but also a strategic response to managing complexity in diverse work settings. When workforce diversity is well-managed, it stimulates leaders to develop higher levels of openness, fairness, and participatory management, which in turn strengthens organizational harmony and innovation. Hence, workforce diversity positively influences the development of inclusive leadership.

4.4 The Influence of Workforce Diversity on Innovative Work Behavior

Innovative Work Behavior (IWB) represents employees' deliberate efforts to generate, promote, and implement new ideas to improve organizational outcomes [6].

Diverse workforces serve as a rich source of creativity because they combine unique experiences, cognitive styles, and professional insights. [7] found that teams composed of members from diverse backgrounds exhibit higher levels of creativity and problem-solving due to broader perspectives. This dynamic exchange of ideas enhances the generation and realization of innovations that strengthen competitiveness and organizational resilience. [9] further explain that workforce diversity contributes to experimentation and proactive problem-solving when guided by inclusive leadership. The variety of perspectives fosters flexibility, adaptability, and open-mindedness traits essential for innovation. When employees feel included and supported, they are more willing to take risks and contribute novel ideas. Thus, diversity acts as the foundation, and inclusive leadership as the catalyst, for enhancing innovative work behavior. The conclusion is that workforce diversity positively influences innovative work behavior, particularly when supported by inclusive managerial practices.

4.5 The Influence of Innovative Work Behavior on Organizational Competitiveness

Innovative work behavior is one of the primary mechanisms through which organizations maintain long-term competitiveness. [10] emphasize that continuous innovation arising from employees' creative actions enables organizations to adapt quickly to environmental and technological changes. When employees are empowered to propose and implement new ideas, the organization gains unique competencies that are difficult for competitors to replicate, reinforcing its market position and reputation for excellence. Moreover, innovative work behavior drives organizational learning and operational efficiency. Employees who engage in innovation help optimize workflows, improve customer satisfaction, and identify new market opportunities. This aligns with the RBV perspective, which views innovation as the process through which valuable resources are transformed into strategic advantages. Therefore, organizations that encourage innovative work behavior are more likely to achieve sustainable competitiveness and performance excellence. Beyond enhancing performance, IWB also fosters an organizational culture of agility and resilience. [7] argue that innovation-oriented employees contribute to a proactive climate where change is embraced rather than resisted. Such a culture supports the continuous improvement of products, services, and internal systems, thereby increasing adaptability to fluctuating market conditions. When innovative behavior is consistently supported by inclusive leadership and adequate resources, it becomes institutionalized as part of the organization's identity. This institutionalization of innovation ensures that the company can sustain competitive advantage through ongoing renewal and responsiveness to technological disruption. In this regard, IWB is not merely an individual competency but a collective organizational capability that drives transformation and strategic renewal. Furthermore, [9] highlight that innovative work behavior also enhances social and psychological well-being among employees by increasing their sense of ownership, purpose, and contribution to organizational success. Employees who are involved in creative problem-solving feel more valued and intrinsically motivated, which fosters stronger commitment and engagement. This positive psychological state further reinforces innovation because motivated employees are more willing to share ideas, take calculated risks, and collaborate across departments. Consequent-

ly, a virtuous cycle emerges innovation boosts competitiveness, which in turn nurtures employee motivation and engagement, creating sustained organizational growth. In conclusion, innovative work behavior serves as both the driver and the outcome of competitiveness, establishing a dynamic process where creativity, adaptability, and performance continuously reinforce one another.

4.6 The Influence of Inclusive Leadership on Organizational Competitiveness through Innovative Work Behavior as a Mediating Variable

Inclusive leadership not only directly strengthens organizational competitiveness but also exerts an indirect influence through innovative work behavior. Leaders who demonstrate inclusivity create a supportive climate that encourages experimentation, open communication, and creative problem-solving [3]. This environment fosters trust and psychological safety, allowing employees to express ideas freely without fear of criticism or failure. As a result, employees are more willing to take initiative, engage in knowledge sharing, and collaborate effectively, which enhances innovation capacity and adaptability. [9] emphasize that inclusive leaders increase innovation by ensuring that employees' contributions are valued and integrated into strategic decision-making. Consequently, innovative work behavior becomes a behavioral bridge that links inclusive leadership with organizational competitiveness, reinforcing the interdependence of leadership, creativity, and performance outcomes. Furthermore, inclusive leadership promotes a culture of empowerment and continuous learning that sustains innovation over time. When leaders provide autonomy, recognition, and constructive feedback, they fulfill employees' psychological needs for competence and belonging transforming human capital into a strategic capability consistent with the Resource-Based View (RBV). [4] argue that inclusive leaders enhance interdepartmental collaboration and knowledge exchange, which improves organizational intelligence and responsiveness to environmental changes. Through these mechanisms, inclusive leadership embeds innovation as a core organizational value rather than a sporadic activity. Therefore, innovative work behavior mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and competitiveness, illustrating how inclusive managerial practices transform creativity into sustainable strategic advantage.

4.7 The Influence of Workforce Diversity on Organizational Competitiveness through Inclusive Leadership as a Mediating Variable

Workforce diversity serves as a strategic resource that enhances organizational competitiveness, yet its effectiveness largely depends on how it is managed through leadership practices. According to the Resource-Based View (RBV), diversity represents a valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resource that can strengthen competitive advantage when properly utilized [12]. However, diversity alone does not guarantee superior performance; it requires inclusive leadership to harness and channel its potential into productive outcomes. Inclusive leaders play a crucial role in integrating diverse perspectives, fostering collaboration, and minimiz-

ing conflicts that often arise from heterogeneity [3]. By promoting openness, equity, and participation, inclusive leadership creates a psychologically safe climate where all employees regardless of background feel respected and valued. This inclusive environment enhances communication, stimulates idea sharing, and encourages creativity, which in turn reinforces organizational innovation and competitiveness [1], [9]. Furthermore, inclusive leadership acts as a mediating mechanism that translates workforce diversity into tangible performance advantages. [4] highlight that inclusive leaders transform demographic and cognitive diversity into collective learning and organizational adaptability, which are essential for sustained competitive advantage. When employees perceive their differences as strengths rather than barriers, engagement and commitment increase, leading to improved collaboration and strategic alignment. This transformation occurs because inclusive leaders bridge cultural and interpersonal gaps, ensuring that diverse viewpoints contribute constructively to organizational goals. As a result, inclusive leadership not only maximizes the benefits of diversity but also institutionalizes inclusivity as a core organizational capability. Therefore, it is hypothesized that workforce diversity positively influences organizational competitiveness through the mediating role of inclusive leadership, as this leadership style effectively integrates diverse human capital into a unified source of strategic advantage.

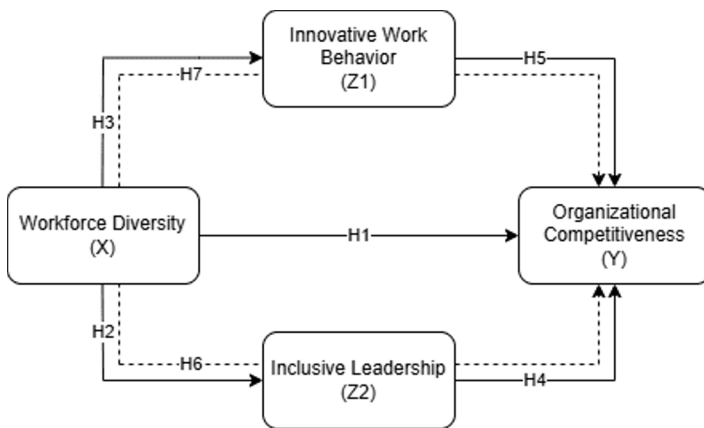


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework

Figure 1. The conceptual framework was obtained from discussions and the integration of previous research. This study proposes that workforce diversity (X) positively influences organizational competitiveness (Y) both directly and indirectly through inclusive leadership (Z2) and innovative work behavior (Z1). Grounded in the Resource-Based View (RBV) theory [8], [12], the framework emphasizes that organizations achieve sustainable competitiveness by effectively managing valuable and unique resources. Workforce diversity serves as a strategic asset that enhances creativity, collaboration, and adaptability, while inclusive leadership acts as a managerial capability that unites diverse perspectives within a fair and supportive environment [3], [4]. This inclusive atmosphere fosters trust and psychological safety,

encouraging employees to engage in innovative work behavior generating and implementing new ideas that improve efficiency and [7], [9]. Together, these elements illustrate that the synergy between diversity, inclusion, and innovation forms a strategic pathway for transforming human capital diversity into sustainable organizational competitiveness.

5 Conclusion

This conceptual study provides a comprehensive overview of the interconnected roles of workforce diversity, inclusive leadership, innovative work behavior, and organizational competitiveness. Drawing upon the Resource-Based View (RBV) theory [8], [12] the framework argues that lasting competitiveness can be achieved when organizations successfully manage diversity as a strategic resource, cultivate inclusive leadership as a managerial capability, and encourage innovative work behavior as a process that translates potential into performance. The conceptual synthesis suggests that workforce diversity has a direct impact on organizational competitiveness, while also exerting an indirect effect through the mediating functions of inclusive leadership and innovative work behavior. Inclusive leadership fosters an environment of fairness, openness, and support, ensuring that employees from diverse backgrounds feel recognized and empowered to share ideas. In turn, innovative work behavior becomes a crucial behavioral mechanism through which creativity and collaboration are transformed into improved performance and adaptability. Collectively, these dynamics strengthen the resource–capability–process–performance continuum, where diversity acts as the foundation, leadership provides direction, and innovation drives success. Theoretically, this study enriches the understanding of how human capital diversity can be harnessed to build sustainable organizational competitiveness through leadership and innovation. Practically, it offers valuable insights for organizations to craft inclusive strategies, foster creativity, and effectively manage workforce diversity to maintain long-term excellence. Future research is recommended to empirically test this framework using quantitative approaches such as PLS-SEM across various organizational contexts.

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