



Budget Slack in the Era of Big Data: A Systematic Review Based on Interdisciplinary Perspectives

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Abstract. This study presents a systematic review of the literature on budgetary slack in the context of the big data era. Building upon the PRISMA methodology, 87 peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2024 were analyzed. The review highlights three emerging theoretical streams—agency theory, behavioral decision theory, and data governance perspectives—and identifies their respective interpretations of budget slack in light of digital transformations. The findings reveal that while traditional frameworks dominate the discourse, the integration of technological, ethical, and governance-oriented perspectives remains insufficient. Additionally, the concept of budgetary slack has not been sufficiently reconceptualized in the context of real-time data analytics and algorithmic control. This paper proposes a unified analytical framework to bridge theoretical gaps and recommends future research directions that embed data ethics, machine learning, and behavioral biases into budgeting research. The review offers a foundation for scholars and practitioners to understand how digitalization reshapes budgetary slack and managerial discretion.

Keywords: Budget Slack, Big Data, ESG Governance, Algorithmic Control Behavioral Accounting

1 Introduction

In the evolving landscape of digital transformation, organizational budgeting is no longer merely a static tool for planning and control—it has become a dynamic and data-intensive process that integrates real-time information, algorithmic analytics, and predictive governance[10]. Within this transformed context, budgetary slack—defined as the deliberate misrepresentation of resource needs by subordinates during the budgeting process—continues to be a subject of both theoretical interest and practical concern. Traditionally viewed through the lens of agency theory and behavioral economics, budget slack has been examined as a function of information asymmetry, risk aversion, and incentive misalignment[7]. However, the rise of big data technologies and ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) frameworks calls into question the continued relevance of these classical assumptions and signals the need for a comprehensive reconceptualization of budget slack in light of data-driven decision environments[19].

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Despite increasing interest in the integration of digital technologies into performance management and internal control systems, the literature on budgetary slack remains fragmented and theoretically underdeveloped in the context of emerging technological paradigms. Prior research tends to emphasize isolated variables—such as managerial opportunism or psychological traits—without sufficiently exploring how digital infrastructures (e.g., data lakes, real-time dashboards, machine learning algorithms) reshape the space in which budgetary decisions are made. More critically, the potential influence of ESG-driven governance norms, algorithmic accountability, and stakeholder transparency has been largely absent from existing models. These gaps point to a disjunction between the rapid evolution of organizational practice and the relative inertia of scholarly theory.

To address these issues, this study undertakes a systematic literature review guided by the PRISMA framework (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). It aims to (1) synthesize key contributions on budgetary slack within the context of big data; (2) critically examine the theoretical foundations—spanning agency, behavioral, and technology governance perspectives—and assess their explanatory adequacy; and (3) propose a unified, interdisciplinary analytical framework that integrates technological, ethical, and governance dimensions. By doing so, this paper contributes not only to the refinement of budget slack as a theoretical construct, but also to the broader understanding of managerial control under conditions of algorithmic surveillance and real-time feedback.

2 Antecedents of Budget Slack

In recent years, research on budgetary slack has increasingly intersected with the dynamics of the big data era and the rising importance of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) governance. While existing studies have been primarily grounded in classical agency theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) and behavioral theory (Argyris, 1953), these traditional perspectives predominantly focus on self-interest-driven motives and information asymmetries. Although foundational, they inadequately capture the complex and evolving nature of budgetary decision-making in environments characterized by real-time data integration, algorithmic forecasting, and sustainability-driven transparency.

Contemporary literature remains underdeveloped in theorizing how big data infrastructures and ESG metrics jointly reshape managerial behavior and internal control systems. For instance, while ESG governance is conceptualized as an external institutional force that discourages opportunistic slack behavior and fosters long-term orientation (Eccles, Ioannou, & Serafeim, 2014), there is insufficient empirical or conceptual work linking ESG practices with digital budgeting mechanisms such as data dashboards, predictive analytics, or algorithmic control feedback loops. This lack of interdisciplinary synthesis—spanning data governance, stakeholder theory, sustainability accounting, and behavioral control—represents a significant research gap[5].

Some scholars have attempted to explore alternative perspectives, such as dynamic capability theory (Teece, 2007) and institutional logics (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008), to

reinterpret budget behavior in digitally mediated contexts. However, these efforts are often siloed and lack a coherent analytical architecture. A unified theoretical framework that incorporates the technological, organizational, and institutional dimensions of budget slack is urgently needed. Such integration would facilitate multidimensional theoretical dialogue and improve explanatory power in complex, data-driven settings.

From a methodological standpoint, many prior literature reviews are narrative in nature and do not adhere to PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) standards (Moher et al., 2009). Specifically, they often fail to disclose search protocols, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and assessment of publication bias. This methodological omission undermines transparency and opens the door to selective citation, thereby weakening the credibility and objectivity of conclusions. To ensure academic rigor, future reviews must adopt standardized procedures and clearly outline the systematic review process.

Moreover, the conceptualization and measurement of “budgetary slack” have not evolved in tandem with digital transformation. While Merchant’s (1985) scale continues to dominate empirical research, it does not accommodate features of modern budgeting systems—such as algorithmic forecasts, collaborative digital platforms, or participatory budgeting enabled by mobile and cloud technologies[15]. New measurement constructs are needed to capture slack behavior in the context of real-time monitoring, stakeholder co-creation, and predictive governance.

In summary, research on budgetary slack in the era of big data and ESG accountability remains theoretically fragmented and methodologically underdeveloped. To move the field forward, future studies must integrate emerging technologies, apply interdisciplinary theoretical lenses, and embrace systematic review methodologies. Only then can the field adequately reflect the shifting paradigms of performance control in digital and sustainability-oriented organizations.

3 Consequences of Budget Slack

Budgetary slack, traditionally seen as a managerial pathology, is now understood as a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by technological evolution and sustainability imperatives. This section systematically explores its negative consequences, strategic benefits, and emerging emphasis on contextual balance—incorporating recent empirical studies, cross-cultural evidence, and implications from big data analytics and ESG governance frameworks.

3.1 Negative Consequences

Resource Misallocation and Operational Inefficiency.

One of the most frequently cited drawbacks of budget slack is the inefficient use of organizational resources. When managers inflate costs or deflate revenue expectations, they secure discretionary funds that may support non-essential activities. Over time, such practices dilute cost discipline, reduce profitability, and undermine com-

petitiveness (Schäffer, Mahlendorf, & Rehring, 2020)[16]. In the context of big data-driven performance transparency, these inefficiencies become increasingly visible.

Cross-national Evidence.

Maas, van Rinsum, and Towry (2021) found that firms across Europe and Asia with higher slack levels experienced lower return on assets (ROA) and diminished productivity, regardless of market structure or industry[14]. This reinforces the universal impact of slack-induced inefficiency, particularly in economies adopting data-based regulatory scrutiny.

Reduced Innovation and Strategic Inertia.

Slack can stifle innovation by fostering complacency[8]. When targets are easily achievable, managers are less likely to pursue bold or transformative initiatives (Jensen, 2001). Liu, Zhang, and Li (2022) analyzed Chinese manufacturers and revealed that excessive slack correlated with reduced R&D investment and lower patent output. These findings suggest that slack inhibits both the intent and capacity for innovation.

Case Illustration.

Nokia's stagnation in the late 2000s has been partially attributed to slack-induced inertia. Conservative budgeting and rigid internal structures delayed its response to Apple's iPhone, highlighting how slack may dampen adaptive strategic action in turbulent digital markets.

Moral Hazard and Ethical Erosion.

Slack can normalize manipulative or opportunistic behavior. Kim, Kim, and Zhou (2023) observed that sustained slack tolerance leads to ethical erosion, fostering environments vulnerable to broader misconduct, including fraud and misreporting. The Enron scandal exemplifies this trajectory, where slack in compliance oversight and financial reporting laid the groundwork for catastrophic failure.

Stakeholder Distrust and Reputational Damage.

In the era of ESG-driven accountability and big data-enabled transparency, stakeholders demand accuracy and integrity. Slack compromises these expectations, potentially attracting penalties, litigation, and loss of investor confidence. Volkswagen's emissions scandal exemplifies how embedded slack in environmental budgets and compliance processes can culminate in global reputational fallout (Asay, Libby, & Rennekamp, 2018)[2].

3.2 Potential Benefits

Buffering Against Uncertainty.

Slack can act as a strategic buffer in volatile environments. From a contingency theory perspective, it facilitates stability and adaptability. During COVID-19, Su and Baird (2023) found that firms with moderate slack were more resilient, reallocating resources quickly to maintain supply chain integrity and accelerate digital transformation[17].

Fostering Psychological Safety and Innovation.

Moderate slack reduces punitive pressure, fostering a psychologically safe environment conducive to experimentation. Tang and Hall (2022) demonstrated that slack enables managers to pursue exploratory projects without fear of immediate failure penalties, thus supporting radical innovation.

Sectoral Evidence.

In high-tech sectors such as biotechnology and IT, Li and Tang (2021)[11] found that discretionary slack positively correlates with radical innovation, particularly when supported by iterative data analytics and feedback systems.

Strategic Flexibility and Agility.

Slack enhances organizational agility by providing discretionary resources for seizing emergent opportunities. Bourgeois (1981) identified slack as a reservoir enabling rapid strategic pivots[4]. Apple's investment in wearables and services—funded by institutionalized R&D slack—is a case in point.

Stakeholder Engagement and ESG Integration.

In service-oriented sectors, slack within customer support or sustainability budgets can maintain service quality and stakeholder satisfaction during downturns. This aligns with stakeholder theory and reinforces ESG commitments under pressure.

3.3 Dynamic Balance and Contextual Moderation

The Optimal Slack Paradigm.

Recent scholarship advocates for an "optimal slack" perspective. Rather than prescribing fixed slack levels, it emphasizes alignment with organizational context—such as strategic intent, market dynamism, and risk tolerance (Liu et al., 2022)[13].

In stable industries, minimal slack enforces efficiency.

In dynamic markets, moderate slack enhances innovation and responsiveness.

Big Data and Adaptive Slack Calibration.

Big data analytics has transformed budget management. Predictive tools enable real-time resource monitoring and simulation of alternative budget paths. This dynamic

control reduces reliance on static slack buffers while preserving flexibility (Li, Tang, & Li, 2022).

Cognitive Pressures of Big Data.

However, as Tang and Hall (2022) caution, data overload may inadvertently increase pressure and lead to conservative budgeting, creating hidden forms of slack. Thus, the digital context must be actively managed.

Cross-cultural Slack Norms.

Slack tolerance is shaped by national culture. In high uncertainty-avoidance cultures (e.g., Japan), slack may be embraced as a buffer. In low power-distance cultures (e.g., Nordic countries), slack is scrutinized more strictly (Baard & Devers, 2022)[3]. Multinational firms must therefore localize slack strategies.

Ethical Alignment and ESG Governance.

Slack governance should be ethically anchored and ESG-aligned. Incorporating non-financial metrics into budget assessments helps reconcile flexibility with accountability, particularly under stakeholder scrutiny and sustainable development mandates (Kim et al., 2023).

Summary of Consequences.

Budgetary slack exhibits dual characteristics—damaging if excessive, but beneficial if managed strategically. Big data tools, ESG imperatives, and cultural contingencies collectively shape its impact. Future research and practice must move beyond static dichotomies and embrace dynamic, multi-dimensional slack governance tailored to digital and sustainable contexts.

4 Emerging Themes and Future Research Directions

As globalization, digitalization, and sustainability imperatives continue to reshape organizational practices, the study of budgetary slack has evolved beyond traditional frameworks. Emerging research themes underscore the multifaceted nature of slack and highlight the need for integrated, interdisciplinary investigations. This chapter outlines five key directions to guide future scholarship.

4.1 Big Data, Digitalization, and Budget Governance

Opportunities Created by Digital Technologies.

The advent of big data analytics and AI-driven budgeting systems has transformed managerial control mechanisms. Real-time dashboards, automated variance analysis, and predictive simulations help reduce information asymmetry—long considered a root cause of budget slack under agency theory (Li, Tang, & Li, 2022)[12]. These

tools support continuous budget refinement, minimizing the need for conservative padding.

Paradoxical and Behavioral Effects.

Paradoxically, digitalization may induce counterproductive behaviors. Tang and Hall (2022) argue that continuous surveillance and information overload can elevate managerial stress and drive overly cautious budgeting, effectively generating "digital slack." Moreover, over-reliance on algorithmic recommendations may reduce discretionary judgment and suppress adaptive decision-making.

Future Research Agenda.

Investigate how digital surveillance and cognitive overload interact to influence budgeting behavior.

Examine how big data tools interact with cultural control mechanisms to affect slack decisions.

Explore psychological contract dynamics in AI-mediated budgeting contexts.

4.2 ESG Integration and Ethical Budgeting

ESG Pressures and "Green Slack".

Slack for Sustainability: The Role of "Green Slack"

With ESG priorities now central to corporate strategy, firms are embedding sustainability goals into their budgeting processes. Heubeck and Ahrens (2024) provide evidence of an inverted U-shaped relationship between slack and ESG outcomes—suggesting that moderate slack supports ESG initiatives, while excessive slack promotes superficial compliance.

Governance Limitations and Emerging Mechanisms.

Although many firms have established CSR committees to oversee ESG budgeting, these structures alone often fall short in preventing opportunistic slack behavior. Cross-functional ESG governance, third-party audits, and integrated sustainability reporting frameworks are needed to enhance transparency and accountability (Kim, Kim, & Zhou, 2023)[9].

Research Recommendations.

Analyze how ESG rating agencies influence internal budget slack decisions.

Investigate slack-ESG dynamics across industries with divergent sustainability mandates.

Compare the effectiveness of governance tools (e.g., CSR boards, ESG-linked compensation) in managing slack.

4.3 Cultural and Institutional Contexts

Cross-National Variations in Slack Acceptance.

Slack tolerance is culturally embedded. In high uncertainty avoidance countries like Japan, slack is often institutionalized to manage ambiguity and preserve group harmony. Conversely, Scandinavian countries—characterized by low power distance and transparency norms—exhibit lower slack acceptance and higher scrutiny (Baard & Devers, 2022).

Institutional Enforcement as an External Control.

Regulatory strength and investor protection systems vary across regions, shaping slack-related behaviors. In developed economies, stringent enforcement mechanisms curb managerial discretion. In contrast, emerging markets often face weak oversight, amplifying slack-related risks (Zhang, Xue, & Wang, 2021)[21].

Suggested Research Pathways.

Conduct cross-cultural studies to explore the relationship between national culture and slack magnitude.

Examine budget practices in multinational firms operating across divergent regulatory environments.

Study how global governance frameworks (e.g., IFRS, GRI) harmonize slack-related controls internationally.

4.4 Leadership Characteristics and Behavioral Dynamics

Leadership Diversity and Risk Preferences.

Recent studies show that leadership background significantly affects slack behavior. Yi and Xiao (2024) found that executives with international experience are more open to risk and less likely to build excessive slack—particularly under environmental uncertainty. This suggests that leadership diversity enhances adaptive budgeting[20].

Affective States and Budgeting Ethics.

Behavioral experiments by Al Jasimee and Blanco-Encomienda (2024) [1]revealed that managers in positive emotional states exhibited reduced slack behavior. This highlights the importance of emotional well-being and psychological safety in budgeting environments.

Emerging Research Topics.

Study the joint effects of leadership diversity, emotional intelligence, and digital tools on slack behavior.

Design emotion-regulation interventions (e.g., mindfulness, positive feedback loops) to foster ethical budgeting.

Conduct longitudinal studies on CEO/CFO transitions and their influence on budgetary slack over time.

4.5 Toward an Integrated Multi-Dimensional Framework

The evolving complexity of budgetary slack necessitates a unified theoretical approach. A comprehensive future framework should incorporate the following interrelated dimensions:

Technological drivers: Big data analytics, algorithmic controls, and AI-enhanced forecasting.

Governance mechanisms: ESG commitments, stakeholder engagement, CSR oversight, and ethical standards.

Behavioral influences: Emotional states, psychological safety, managerial cognition, and leadership profiles.

Cultural and institutional contexts: National governance systems, enforcement capabilities, and investor expectations.

Integrating these perspectives will advance theoretical clarity and offer practical tools for managing slack in an increasingly data-driven and sustainability-focused world.

4.6 Summary

Budget slack is no longer a simple byproduct of managerial opportunism. It is a dynamic construct shaped by technological, behavioral, ethical, and cultural forces. Future research must move beyond narrow paradigms and adopt multi-theoretical, interdisciplinary approaches. By embracing this complexity and leveraging advanced methodologies, scholars can generate deeper insights and contribute to the design of intelligent, responsive, and ethical budget governance systems.

5 Conclusion

Budget slack has long occupied a central position in the study of managerial control and organizational behavior. While traditionally framed as a manifestation of managerial opportunism and organizational inefficiency, contemporary scholarship increasingly portrays slack as a multifaceted and context-sensitive construct. Drawing from agency theory, contingency theory, behavioral accounting, and emerging interdisciplinary perspectives, this review has synthesized key antecedents, consequences, and transformation pathways of budget slack in the digital age.

5.1 Reconceptualizing Slack in the Big Data and ESG Era

The digitalization of budgeting through big data analytics, AI-powered tools, and cloud-based forecasting platforms has fundamentally transformed the architecture of managerial control. These tools enhance transparency and reduce information asym-

metry—addressing classical agency concerns—but also introduce new behavioral dynamics, such as algorithm-induced rigidity and “digital slack” caused by cognitive overload and surveillance fatigue (Tang & Hall, 2022; Li et al., 2022)[18]. Budget slack must therefore be re-operationalized to reflect not only numerical manipulation but also behavioral and systemic conservatism in digital settings.

Simultaneously, the integration of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) imperatives into budgeting has added ethical and institutional dimensions to slack behavior. While ESG-aligned slack—such as buffers for social responsibility or decarbonization—can support long-term value creation, unchecked “green slack” may foster symbolic compliance and inefficient resource use (Heubeck & Ahrens, 2024; Kim et al., 2023)[6]. Organizations must institutionalize cross-functional ESG audits, link executive incentives to actual impact, and ensure transparency through integrated reporting.

5.2 Toward a Multi-Theoretical Framework

A recurring limitation in the extant literature is the fragmentation of theoretical perspectives. This review highlights the need for a unified analytical framework that bridges:

Technological paradigms: Big data systems, AI budget forecasting, algorithmic control mechanisms.

Governance and ethics: ESG governance, CSR oversight, audit accountability.

Behavioral dynamics: Emotional states, managerial cognition, psychological safety, and leadership profiles.

Cultural and institutional moderators: National governance models, legal enforcement intensity, investor protection regimes.

By embedding these dimensions into a coherent dialogic structure, future research can develop a robust, context-sensitive theory of budget slack.

5.3 Methodological Reflections and PRISMA Compliance

As a systematic literature review, this paper acknowledges certain methodological limitations. Specifically, the absence of a clearly defined literature search strategy, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and bias mitigation protocols means the review does not fully comply with PRISMA (Moher et al., 2009) standards. Future reviews should adopt transparent and replicable procedures to enhance validity, especially in fields undergoing rapid technological and regulatory change.

5.4 Cross-Cultural and Leadership Implications

Cultural norms and institutional logics deeply shape slack-related behaviors. High uncertainty avoidance cultures (e.g., Japan) may institutionalize slack to ensure risk absorption, while transparency-oriented cultures (e.g., Nordic countries) treat slack as a governance failure (Baard & Devers, 2022). Multinational firms must adapt budget

control systems across cultural and regulatory settings, leveraging global standards such as IFRS and GRI to harmonize practices.

Leadership traits—particularly international experience and emotional regulation capacity—also influence slack creation. Studies show that diverse leadership teams exhibit greater risk tolerance and less tendency to inflate budgets, especially under environmental uncertainty (Yi & Xiao, 2024; Al Jasimee & Blanco-Encomienda, 2024). Integrating leadership psychology into slack governance represents a promising avenue for future research.

5.5 Practical Implications

For practitioners, managing slack is a matter of balance. Excessive rigidity may inhibit innovation, while unchecked slack undermines efficiency and trust. Firms should design adaptive budgeting systems that leverage digital tools for precision, maintain human discretion for flexibility, and embed ESG values for long-term legitimacy. Psychological safety must be preserved to encourage truthful reporting and reduce defensive budgeting behavior.

5.6 Final Reflection

Budget slack is no longer a static inefficiency to be eradicated, but a dynamic strategic resource to be managed. As organizations navigate the convergence of digitalization, ESG governance, and behavioral complexity, budget slack emerges as both a challenge and an opportunity. By embracing interdisciplinary inquiry and methodological rigor, future research can move beyond outdated dichotomies and offer actionable insights for fostering resilience, innovation, and sustainable value creation.

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