FUNDAÇÃO GETULIO VARGAS
ESCOLA DE ADMINISTRAÇÃO DE EMPRESAS DE SÃO PAULO

CAROLINA GOMES DE ARAÚJO

RESISTANCE TO DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY WITH BRAZILIAN PROFESSIONALS

SÃO PAULO
2026

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Ph.D. thesis submitted to Fundação Getúlio Vargas - Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo (FGV-EAESP), as fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree.

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2026

Dados Internacionais de Catalogação na Publicação (CIP)
Ficha catalográfica elaborada pelo Sistema de Bibliotecas/FGV

Araújo, Carolina Gomes de.
Resistance to diversity, equity and inclusion : an exploratory study with Brazilian professionals / Carolina Gomes de Araújo. - 2026.
196 f.

Orientador: Joana Sabrina Pereira Story.
Tese (doutorado CDAE) – Fundação Getulio Vargas, Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo.

1. Diversidade no ambiente de trabalho. 2. Comportamento organizacional. 3. Administração de pessoal. 4. Integração social. I. Story, Joana Sabrina Pereira. II. Tese (doutorado CDAE) – Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo. III. Fundação Getulio Vargas. IV. Título.

CDU 658.3

Ficha Catalográfica elaborada por: Isabele Oliveira dos Santos Garcia CRB SP-010191/O

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Date: February 4th, 2026

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SÃO PAULO

2026

Este estudo foi financiado em parte pela Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) - Código Financeiro 001

Dedico esta tese de doutorado ao meu filho, Luca,
aos meus pais, Luiz e Kátia, e ao meu irmão, Bernardo.

I dedicate this Ph.D. thesis to my son, Luca, to my
parents, Luiz and Kátia and to my brother, Bernardo.

AGRADECIMENTOS

Existem sentimentos difíceis de traduzir, e um deles é a gratidão. Viver um doutorado é algo desafiador e uma grande conquista. É um processo intenso de aprendizado, pelo qual sou profundamente grata por ter tido o privilégio e a oportunidade de viver. Obrigada, Deus.

Nada disso seria possível sem o apoio da minha família, a quem devo meus mais sinceros agradecimentos: mãe, pai, irmão e filho. Vocês são meu alicerce. Cresci vendo vocês trabalharem duro para me dar melhores oportunidades do que tiveram. Se hoje eu venci, vocês venceram comigo. Agradeço pelo presente de tê-los sempre por perto. Obrigada pelo suporte, pelo incentivo, por acreditarem em mim mesmo quando eu não acreditava e, principalmente, por me ensinarem o que é o amor incondicional.

Luca, meu filho, você foi a grande virada de chave na minha vida e a mola propulsora que me fez me dedicar cada vez mais para ser seu motivo de orgulho – você é meu tudo. Obrigada por compreender quando eu não podia brincar, por ser forte quando estive na Austrália e por me inspirar todos os dias a evoluir. Um dia, espero que você entenda e que eu seja para você um exemplo de coragem para seguir seus sonhos.

Agradeço também aos meus antepassados, que me permitiram estar aqui hoje. Em especial, aos meus avós Áurea (*in memoriam*) e Aécio (*in memoriam*), que dedicaram suas vidas a mim desde que nasci com tanto afeto e são minhas maiores saudades. E aos meus avós, Francisca e Sebastião (*in memoriam*), exemplos de quem sempre lutou com coragem diante das enormes adversidades que enfrentaram ao longo da vida.

Desde 2019, quando entrei no mestrado, tenho o privilégio de trabalhar de perto com duas professoras que mudaram a minha trajetória. Agradeço especialmente à minha orientadora e amiga, a Professora Dra. Joana Story, pelo seu alto astral, pelo entusiasmo pela pesquisa e pelas ideias brilhantes, tornando essa caminhada mais leve. Seu suporte, confiança e incentivos foram essenciais nessa jornada. Sua companhia em Boston, na minha primeira Academy of Management Conference, tornou a experiência inesquecível. Também agradeço à Professora Dra. Maria José Tonelli, com quem aprendi muito sobre a vida acadêmica e com quem colaboro em pesquisas desde 2019 que resultaram na minha primeira apresentação em uma conferência internacional (*EGOS 2021*) e na minha primeira publicação de um artigo em uma revista internacional.

Um agradecimento especial à Professora Dra. Alison Pullen, que me recebeu

durante o doutorado sanduíche na Macquarie University, em Sydney, na Austrália. Ela construiu pontes para me levar mais longe (do outro lado do planeta), me apresentou uma cidade linda e não mediu esforços para me apoiar. Sua enorme gentileza, cuidado e exemplo de como ser uma rede de suporte para outras mulheres na Academia me marcaram profundamente.

Sou grata aos professores, colegas e funcionários da FGV-EAESP com quem convivi nesses anos. Ao Prof. Dr. Rafael Alcadipani que ministrou a minha primeira aula do mestrado, no dia do meu aniversário de 23 anos, um momento memorável. Ao Prof. O Dr. Chico Aranha, que despertou em mim uma nova forma de olhar a sala de aula. À Débora Ferreira, que tantas vezes me ajudou com rapidez e dedicação. Por fim, agradeço também às amizades que caminharam comigo e tantos outros que tornaram este percurso menos solitário (em ordem alfabética): Alice Oleto, Beatriz Abreu, Caio Coelho, Caroline Rodrigues, Danilo Andretta, Fabio Sant'anna, Hellen Marquezini, Ianaira Barretto, Jussara Pereira, Rodolfo Maritan, Sana Mukarram, Vinícius Galante.

Agradeço ainda aos professores do Insper com quem trabalhei e tantas outras pessoas deste instituto que me abriram as portas para a docência.

Agradeço à banca que avaliou minha tese, contribuindo para torná-la mais robusta e completa, e aos entrevistados que cederam seu tempo a esta pesquisa.

Sou também imensamente grata à rede de apoio que me ajudou a cuidar do meu filho. Como diz o provérbio africano: "É preciso uma aldeia para educar uma criança". Minha jornada pela graduação, pelo mestrado e pelo doutorado, enquanto mãe, não teria sido possível sem a minha "aldeia".

Aos meus "poucos e bons" amigos, sem citar nomes, mas que sabem quem são. Amigos da escola, de Niterói, de São Paulo e os que a vida me presenteou. Vocês foram, são e sempre serão essenciais. "Quem tem um amigo verdadeiro tem tudo.

Enfim, foi uma longa jornada até este momento. Muitas pessoas cruzaram meu caminho e me ajudaram de diferentes formas. Deixo aqui registrado meu muito obrigada, do fundo do coração.

Por último, mas não menos importante, para a garota curiosa e, agora, a mulher ainda mais curiosa que nunca para de perguntar 'por quê': EU. Por todo o esforço que dediquei para fazer isso acontecer e por todas as coisas de que abri mão durante esse processo. Obrigada!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Some feelings are difficult to translate and one of them is gratitude. Living through a doctorate is challenging and a great achievement. It is an intense learning process, for which I am deeply grateful to have had the privilege and opportunity to live. Thank you, God.

None of this would be possible without the support of my family, to whom I owe my most sincere thanks: mother, father, brother and son. You are my foundation. I grew up seeing you work hard to give me better opportunities than you had. If I have won today, you have won with me. I am grateful for the gift of always having you close by. Thank you for the support, for the encouragement, for believing in me even when I didn't believe in myself and especially for teaching me what unconditional love is.

Luca, my son, you were the great turning point in my life and the driving force that made me dedicate myself more and more to being your reason for pride – you are my everything. Thank you for understanding when I couldn't play, for being strong when I was in Australia and for inspiring me to evolve every day. One day, I hope you understand and that I will be an example of courage for you to follow your dreams.

I also acknowledge my ancestors, who allowed me to be here today. In particular, my grandparents Áurea (*in memoriam*) and Aécio (*in memoriam*), who dedicated their lives to me since I was born, with so much affection, are my greatest longing. Moreover, my grandparents, Francisca and Sebastião (*in memoriam*), are examples of those who always fought courageously in the face of the enormous adversities they faced throughout their lives.

Since 2019, when I entered the master's program, I have had the privilege of working closely with two professors who changed my trajectory. I especially thank my advisor and friend, Professor Dr. Joana Story, for her high spirits, her enthusiasm for research and her brilliant ideas, making this journey lighter. Her support, confidence and encouragement were essential on this journey. Her company in Boston, at my first Academy of Management Conference, made the experience unforgettable. I also thank Professor Dr. Maria José Tonelli, from whom I learned a great deal about academic life

and with whom I have been collaborating on research since 2019, which resulted in my first presentation at an international conference (EGOS 2021) and my first publication of an article in an international journal.

A special thank you to Professor Dr. Alison Pullen, who hosted me during my Visiting Scholar at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. She built bridges to take me further (to the other side of the planet), introduced me to a beautiful city and spared no effort to support me. Her immense kindness, care and example of how to be a support network for other women in academia have deeply impacted me.

I am grateful to the professors, colleagues and staff at FGV-EAESP with whom I have worked over these years. To Professor Dr. Rafael Alcadipani, who taught my first master's class on my 23rd birthday, a memorable moment. To Professor Dr. Chico Aranha, who awakened in me a new way of looking at the classroom. To Débora Ferreira, who has helped me so many times with speed and dedication. Finally, I also thank the friends who walked with me and so many others who made this journey less lonely (in alphabetical order): Alice Oleto, Beatriz Abreu, Caio Coelho, Caroline Rodrigues, Danilo Andretta, Fabio Sant'anna, Hellen Marquezini, Ianaira Barretto, Jussara Pereira, Rodolfo Maritan, Sana Mukarram, Vinícius Galante.

I also thank the professors at Insper with whom I worked and so many other people from this institute who opened the doors to teaching for me.

I thank the committee that evaluated my thesis, contributing to making it more robust and complete and the interviewees who shared their time with this research.

I am also immensely grateful to the support network that helped me take care of my son. As the African proverb says, "It takes a village to raise a child". My journey through undergraduate, master's and doctoral studies, as a mother, would not have been possible without my "village".

To my "few but good" friends, without mentioning names, but who know who they are—friends from school, from Niterói, from São Paulo and those that life has given me. You were, are and always will be essential. "Who has a true friend has everything".

In short, it has been a long journey to this moment. Many people have crossed my path and helped me in different ways. I leave here my heartfelt thanks.

Last but not least, to the curious girl and now the even more curious woman who never stops asking 'why': ME. For all the effort I dedicated to making this happen and for all the things I gave up during this process. Thank you!

ABSTRACT

Organizational diversity initiatives often encounter resistance that slows, redirects, or weakens their effects. Scholarly debate explains resistance to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) through individual attitudes or lack of leadership commitment. However, most research continues to give limited consideration to DEI resistance as a multilevel and dynamic phenomenon within organizations. The thesis addresses this gap by analysing how resistance to DEI takes shape across contexts, circulates through relationships and oscillates over time, with three interconnected aims: (1) to identify the organizational and societal conditions that enable resistance to DEI initiatives; (2) to examine how resistance to DEI is expressed in organizational interactions and decisions; and (3) to trace temporal oscillations in its meanings and manifestations in organizations. Anchored in a pragmatist epistemology and reflexive thematic analysis, this study draws on 55 in-depth interviews with individuals who work with or around diversity initiatives in Brazil, a country characterised by high demographic diversity and persistent inequality. The analysis treats participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretation as co-constructed meaning-making about resistance and its implications within organizations. The results are organised into three interrelated themes: contextual, relational and temporal. The contextual theme explains how resistance is structured within broader social and organizational environments, where polarized public debates, narratives about meritocracy, historical legacies and business priorities influence responses to diversity initiatives. Within this contextual layer, political polarization emerged as a recurrent interpretive frame through which DEI was read as legitimate, risky, ideological, or strategically avoidable. The relational theme highlights how resistance circulates through roles, relationships, identities and hierarchies, with emphasis on leadership levels, informal networks and patterns of voice and silence. A recurring pattern within this relational layer concerns middle managers as a practical interface between formal commitments and everyday implementation, where discretion over pace, scope and visibility shaped how resistance became consequential. The temporal theme traces how resistance oscillates over time between explicit opposition and subtle forms, such as symbolic compliance, the narrowing of diversity language and cycles of institutional prioritization and interruption. Across the themes, the thesis maps forms of resistance by visibility and by intentionality and it shows how resistance can become capillary through routines, local interpretations and recurring implementation patterns. Conceptually, the

thesis portrays resistance as a multilevel phenomenon and offers an integrative architecture that links contextual conditions, relational dynamics and time oscillations as interdependent dimensions of resistance to DEI. Empirically, it provides a Brazil-based account that offers a way to interpret assumptions prevalent in Global North scholarship and may resonate in other settings marked by contested diversity agendas. Methodologically, it illustrates how a pragmatist and reflexive approach can connect practitioners' accounts with broader theoretical debates while keeping attention on the practical applicability. In sum, the thesis conceptualizes resistance to DEI as one of the ways through which organizations negotiate tensions, protect established arrangements and regulate the pace and direction of change. The research opens avenues for future studies to examine diversity initiatives and resistance as evolving, multilevel and interdependent processes that co-shape organizational change over time.

KEYWORDS: resistance to diversity; exploratory qualitative study; interviews; reflexive thematic analysis; management and organizational studies

RESUMO

Iniciativas organizacionais de diversidade frequentemente encontram resistência que desacelera, redireciona ou enfraquece seus efeitos. O debate acadêmico explica a resistência à diversidade, equidade e inclusão (DEI) por meio de atitudes individuais ou da falta de comprometimento da liderança. No entanto, a maior parte das pesquisas continua a dedicar atenção limitada à resistência à DEI como um fenômeno multinível e dinâmico nas organizações. A tese aborda essa lacuna ao analisar como a resistência à DEI se configura em diferentes contextos, circula por meio das relações e oscila ao longo do tempo, com três objetivos interconectados: (1) identificar as condições organizacionais e societais que possibilitam a resistência a iniciativas de DEI; (2) examinar como a resistência à DEI é expressa em interações e decisões organizacionais; e (3) rastrear oscilações temporais em seus significados e manifestações nas organizações. Ancorado em uma epistemologia pragmatista e na análise temática reflexiva, este estudo baseia-se em 55 entrevistas em profundidade com indivíduos que trabalham com ou em torno de iniciativas de diversidade no Brasil, país caracterizado por alta diversidade demográfica e desigualdade persistente. A análise aborda os relatos dos participantes e a interpretação da pesquisadora como processos de construção conjunta de sentido sobre a resistência e suas implicações nas organizações. Os resultados são organizados em três temas inter-relacionados: contextual, relacional e mutacional. O tema contextual explica como a resistência é estruturada em ambientes sociais e organizacionais mais amplos, nos quais debates públicos polarizados, narrativas sobre meritocracia, legados históricos e prioridades de negócios influenciam as respostas às iniciativas de diversidade. Dentro dessa camada contextual, a polarização política emergiu como um enquadramento interpretativo recorrente por meio do qual a DEI foi compreendida como legítima, arriscada, ideológica ou estrategicamente evitável. O tema relacional destaca como a resistência circula por meio de papéis, relações, identidades e hierarquias, com ênfase nos níveis de liderança, nas redes informais e nos padrões de voz e silêncio. Um padrão recorrente nessa camada relacional refere-se aos gerentes intermediários como uma interface prática entre compromissos formais e a implementação cotidiana, na qual a discricionariedade sobre ritmo, escopo e visibilidade moldou a forma como a resistência se tornou consequente. O tema mutacional rastreia como a resistência oscila ao longo do tempo entre a oposição explícita e formas sutis, como a conformidade simbólica, o

estreitamento da linguagem da diversidade e ciclos de priorização institucional e interrupção. Ao longo dos temas, a tese mapeia formas de resistência segundo a visibilidade e a intencionalidade e mostra como a resistência pode se tornar capilar por meio de rotinas, interpretações locais e padrões recorrentes de implementação. Conceitualmente, a tese retrata a resistência como um fenômeno multinível e apresenta uma arquitetura integrativa que conecta condições contextuais, dinâmicas relacionais e oscilações temporais como dimensões interdependentes da resistência à DEI. Empiricamente, fornece um relato baseado no Brasil que oferece uma forma de interpretar pressupostos prevalentes na produção acadêmica do Norte Global e que pode ressoar em outros contextos marcados por agendas de diversidade contestadas. Metodologicamente, ilustra como uma abordagem pragmatista e reflexiva pode conectar os relatos de profissionais a debates teóricos mais amplos, mantendo a atenção na aplicabilidade prática. Em síntese, a tese conceitualiza a resistência à DEI como uma das formas pelas quais as organizações negociam tensões, protegem arranjos estabelecidos e regulam o ritmo e a direção da mudança. A pesquisa abre caminho para estudos futuros examinarem iniciativas de diversidade e resistência como processos evolutivos, multiníveis e interdependentes que co-moldam a mudança organizacional ao longo do tempo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: resistência à diversidade; estudo qualitativo exploratório; entrevistas; análise temática reflexiva; estudos em gestão e organizações

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and motivation

Despite the growing visibility of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, organizational progress remains uneven and often fragile. Diversity has gained prominence in corporate communications, formal policies and public commitments, yet this visibility is not consistently matched by sustained investments in resources, accountability mechanisms, decision-making authority, or leadership incentives (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Leslie, 2019; Workman-Stark et al., 2023). Although research has documented positive associations between diversity and outcomes such as creativity, engagement and performance (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Nishii, 2013), these benefits are difficult to sustain when investments fluctuate, responsibilities remain peripheral, or DEI priorities compete with other organizational demands (Noon, 2007; Dobbin & Kalev, 2022). For example, research indicates that perceived backlash against DEI initiatives negatively affects employee engagement and organizational commitment (Showkat & Yahya, 2025). As a result, a persistent tension emerges between what diversity is expected to deliver and the material and organizational conditions that support and shape its implementation in practice (Noon, 2007; Ahmed, 2007a).

Increasingly, scholars point to resistance as a key factor shaping how DEI unfolds in organizations (Allen et al., 2025; Gündemir et al., 2024). Resistance to DEI (occasionally referred to as resistance to diversity throughout the thesis) refers to patterns of opposition, hesitation, or constraint that shape how DEI initiatives are interpreted and implemented, through explicit or implicit actions that limit their scope or effects (Thomas & Plaut, 2008; Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens, 2018), particularly when equity-oriented interventions are perceived as conflicting with norms of merit or equal treatment (Castilla & Benard, 2010; Fraser, 2009). Within organizations, resistance manifests across levels, from individual interpretations and decisions to cultural patterns, routines and structural arrangements (Thomas & Summerville, 2024; Holck et al., 2016). While some studies associate resistance with psychological dynamics such as perceived threat or fear of loss (Thomas, 2020; Plaut et al., 2018), resistance also operates through less visible mechanisms, including slow implementation, fragmented efforts, symbolic endorsement, constrained investment, or quiet discontinuation of initiatives (Holck, 2016; Flood et al., 2021; Kanitz et al., 2024).

Resistance to DEI has consequences that extend beyond organizational processes, shaping working conditions and career trajectories for different social groups. Women

continue to face barriers related to advancement, pay and expectations around family responsibilities (Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018), reflecting patterns of access and valuation discrimination (Blau & Kahn, 2017). Black professionals remain underrepresented in leadership positions and experience persistent pay gaps, even in organizations that publicly support diversity (Lang & Lehmann, 2012; Ethos, 2024). LGBTQ+ employees frequently report pressures to conceal aspects of their identities and encounter exclusion or harassment that affects job satisfaction and retention (Maji et al., 2024; Badgett et al., 2019). Persons with disabilities face structural barriers to hiring, social integration and career progression, despite evidence of strong performance and organizational commitment (Kulkarni & Lengnick-Hall, 2014; Schur et al., 2017). These patterns illustrate how resistance to diversity operates simultaneously at individual and organizational levels, intersecting with broader societal inequalities (Acker, 2006; DiTomaso, 2024).

Institutional and political environments further shape how organizations approach diversity, influencing both the scope of DEI initiatives and the legitimacy attributed to them (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; Kelly & Dobbin, 1999). Much of the empirical evidence on these dynamics comes from the Global North, where institutional arrangements and labor market structures differ from those in other regions (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; Lee, 2023; Triana et al., 2021). In the United States, recent judicial and political shifts have prompted organizations to dismantle, redesign, or scale back DEI initiatives in both public and private sectors, altering how diversity is framed and prioritized (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; Ng et al., 2025). In Europe, organizations navigate long-term migration, regulatory pressure to disclose diversity data and regional conflicts that increase workforce displacement and organizational complexity (European Union, 2024; UNHCR, 2025). Brazil, as part of the Global South, faces similar tensions but under distinct social and economic conditions that combine high demographic diversity with persistent inequality and conservatism, making it a strategic case for examining how resistance to diversity is negotiated in organizations (Saraiva & Irigaray, 2009; Saraiva & Quental, 2024).

Reports indicate that although companies have DEI structures, their integration into strategic decision-making remains limited. In Brazil, for example, only 18% of organizations allocate specific budgets to diversity initiatives, 27% link diversity goals to leadership performance and 22% reduced their diversity investments in 2024 (Ethos, 2024; Blend Edu, 2024; Travessia, 2025). Although Black people constitute the majority of the population, they hold only 4.9% of executive roles and 0.4% of board seats, while

women represent 45.6% of the workforce but only 16.9% of executive positions (Ethos, 2024). Similar patterns appear internationally. Only 29% of organizations report integrating diversity goals into leaders' performance evaluations and DEI leaders consistently identify limited engagement and accountability among senior executives as major obstacles (APQC, 2022; Gartner, 2023). Employee surveys further indicate that DEI initiatives are often perceived as divisive or peripheral, even in organizations that formally frame diversity as strategic (SAP, 2023; Great Place to Work, 2023).

Taken together, this evidence points to a recurring organizational configuration: DEI initiatives become increasingly visible and formalized, while their integration into core decision-making, resource allocation and redistribution of opportunity remains constrained. Resistance, in this sense, does not operate solely through open opposition but through organizational systems and routines that preserve continuity while limiting ambition, accountability and sustained investment (Ahmed, 2007a; Thomas, 2008; Castilla, 2015).

Understanding how professionals who work with or around DEI initiatives perceive and make sense of resistance offers a lens into these dynamics. Their accounts illuminate how resistance is observed, interpreted and negotiated in organizational practice and how it shapes the implementation, adaptation and durability of DEI initiatives over time (Risberg & Corvellec, 2022; Prasad & Śliwa, 2024).

1.2 Problem statement

Although organizations have expanded their public commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), resistance to these initiatives remains recurrent and insufficiently explored (Thomas, 2008, 2020; Workman-Stark et al., 2023). Much of the literature conceptualizes this resistance as a technical implementation obstacle or as an individual attitudinal reaction (linked to prejudice, lack of support or psychological threat), rather than as a multilevel process embedded in everyday organizing (Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens, 2018; Gündemir et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, practitioners and researchers alike continue to ask why diversity initiatives so often fall short of their goals, despite significant investments and formal commitments (Ely & Thomas, 2020; Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; DiTomaso, 2024). This thesis approaches that broader question by examining how resistance to diversity is perceived and experienced by professionals who work with or around DEI initiatives and how they see this resistance shaping the direction, scope and durability of diversity efforts

in their organizations.

At the same time, research indicates that resistance to DEI is not limited to explicit opposition. It often takes shape through organizational arrangements, such as limited material support, symbolic commitments, constrained authority and selective prioritization of diversity-related goals (Ahmed, 2007a; Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). The metaphor of the "brick wall" captures situations in which formal commitments to DEI coexist with organizational priorities, routines and decision-making structures that restrict change, leaving professionals accountable for outcomes while lacking resources, influence, or institutional backing (Ahmed, 2007a).

Resistance to diversity, therefore, unfolds through patterns of decision-making, allocation of resources and interpretations of legitimacy that accumulate over time (Castilla, 2015; Noon, 2007). These dynamics are especially consequential for professionals who work with or around DEI initiatives, as they frequently occupy boundary-spanning roles that mediate institutional policies, leadership expectations and everyday organizational practices (Bierema, 2010; McGowan & Ng, 2016; Chrobot-Mason et al., 2008). Their proximity to implementation positions them to observe how resistance circulates across individual actions, organizational routines and broader societal discourses. Despite this proximity, how these professionals perceive and describe resistance remains underexplored, which limits understanding of why DEI initiatives so often lose force over time, even when they are highly visible, formally endorsed or framed as organizational priorities (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; DiTomaso, 2024). Examining resistance from their perspectives makes it possible to access different layers of the phenomenon (meanings, negotiations and contextual constraints that shape how diversity work unfolds in practice), including subtle and to identify mechanisms through which diversity is interpreted, contested, or assimilated in contemporary organizations (Holck et al., 2016; Risberg & Corvellec, 2022).

1.3 Research gaps

Despite growing interest in diversity, resistance remains insufficiently theorized and empirically explored. This thesis addresses three interconnected gaps: substantive, analytical–methodological, and regional.

First, the literature points to a **substantive gap** in explanations of why resistance to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives emerges and how it is experienced in practice. Despite their central role in designing, coordinating and sustaining DEI efforts, the perspectives of DEI professionals remain largely absent from empirical accounts.

Resistance is frequently treated as a technical problem or an implementation failure, rather than as an expression of broader organizational dynamics involving norms, power and hierarchy (Hill, 2009; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). In parallel, research has disproportionately emphasized the positive outcomes of diversity, including performance, innovation and legitimacy (Cox, 1993; Ely & Thomas, 1996), leaving the mechanisms that generate tension, disengagement, or opposition underexplored. Prior studies suggest that reactions to DEI vary depending on framing, with appeals to fairness sometimes provoking stronger resistance than business-oriented justifications (Kidder et al., 2004). Examining resistance as described by DEI professionals becomes critical, as their accounts reveal how diversity efforts encounter indifference or pushback when perceived as challenging established organizational arrangements, thereby shaping the trajectory and meaning of DEI over time (Risberg & Corvellec, 2022; Kanitz et al., 2024).

Second, there is an **analytical** and **methodological gap**. Research on resistance is fragmented across frameworks such as organizational justice, social identity, backlash and resistance to change, which limits conceptual clarity and integrative explanations of how resistance is expressed, reproduced and sustained across contexts (Lee, 2023). At the same time, diversity research remains dominated by quantitative designs and performance indicators (Cox, 1993; Milliken & Martins, 1996), which capture outcomes but often overlook resistance as an active component of inclusion processes. Reviews call for qualitative, context-sensitive studies that examine how resistance emerges in everyday interactions and how it is made sense of by organizational actors (Lee, 2023; Yadav & Lenka, 2020). Existing continuum and typology models contribute conceptually (Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens, 2018), but are seldom grounded in practitioner accounts, which could contribute more deeply.

Third, there is a **regional gap**. Most empirical work on diversity and resistance comes from North America, Europe, or Australia (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; Lee, 2023; Workman-Stark, 2023), narrowing the empirical base of theorizing. As outlined before, Brazil combines formal engagement with DEI agendas and persistent inequalities in upper organizational levels, within a distinct legal, social and historical context (Freitas, 2017; Saraiva & Irigaray, 2009; Saraiva & Quental, 2024). Brazilian studies document symbolic compliance, imported models and limited disruption of established practices (Hanashiro & Carvalho, 2005; Irigaray, 2013; Irigaray et al., 2022), yet systematic analysis of how resistance unfolds from the perspective of professionals who work with or around DEI initiatives remains scarce.

Combined, these gaps highlight how limited current scholarship remains in accounting for resistance to diversity as an organizational phenomenon grounded in everyday practice. They point to the need for empirical work that moves beyond outcome-oriented evaluations of DEI and instead attends to how resistance is perceived, interpreted and navigated by those involved in sustaining these initiatives within organizations.

1.4 Objectives and research question

Building on this problematization, the thesis adopts an exploratory qualitative approach designed to capture how resistance to diversity is understood. The study draws on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Brazilian professionals who engage with diversity initiatives from different positions, including DEI specialists, HR professionals, business leaders and consultants. Their roles place them close to the tensions between strategic intentions and organizational routines, allowing insight into how resistance becomes consequential for the direction and continuity of DEI initiatives.

The central research question guiding this thesis is:

How do professionals who work with or around diversity initiatives perceive and experience resistance to diversity in organizations, and how do they see this resistance influencing the trajectories of these initiatives?

This research question is intentionally broad to allow resistance to DEI to emerge from participants' accounts rather than from predefined categories. The study does not seek to measure prevalence, predict outcomes, or test causal relationships. Instead, it aims to interpret how resistance to DEI is occurs within organizational contexts marked by contested inclusion agendas.

From this question, the study advances three specific objectives:

1. To identify the organizational and societal conditions that enable resistance to diversity initiatives.
2. To examine how resistance to DEI is expressed in organizational interactions and decisions.
3. To describe temporal oscillations in the meanings and manifestations of resistance to DEI in organizations.

1.5 Significance of the study

This study addresses these gaps by advancing an understanding of resistance to

diversity as an organizational phenomenon embedded in societal, relational and temporal contexts. Rather than approaching resistance as a technical obstacle or an individual stance, the thesis conceptualizes it as a process shaped by shared meanings, negotiated through relationships and recalibrated as organizational priorities and public debates evolve. This perspective enables resistance to be examined as part of how diversity initiatives are interpreted, enacted and carried forward in organizational practice, rather than as a deviation from their intended path.

The contributions operate at three interconnected levels. First, an integrative architecture linking Context, Relations and Time oscillations. Second, two empirically salient mechanisms: political polarization (contextual condition intensifying legitimacy struggles) and middle management (relational interface where discretion becomes consequential). Third, recurring peculiarities map how resistance occurs through variations in visibility, intentionality and capillarity. Together, these levels clarify both structural architecture and practical mechanisms of resistance.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes by bringing together insights from scholarship on power, resistance and organizational change to clarify how resistance to diversity unfolds through linked movements of interpretation, decision and adjustment (Barbalet, 1985; Clegg, 1994; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994). It highlights how broader discourses and institutional logics shape what appears reasonable or legitimate in organizational contexts, how such interpretations become embedded in relations of coordination, authority and responsibility and how resistance may shift form as priorities are revisited and external pressures change. Thus, ambiguity is treated as an inherent feature of this process, reflecting tensions between competing expectations rather than a lack of clarity or commitment.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of qualitative and reflexive inquiry for examining resistance as a situated and evolving phenomenon. In contrast to dominant quantitative approaches in DEI research (Cox, 1993; Milliken & Martins, 1996), in-depth interviews and reflexive thematic analysis enable attention to how professionals explain meanings, justify decisions and revisit earlier choices as organizational and societal conditions shift. By focusing on professionals who work with or around DEI initiatives, the analysis captures how resistance is perceived and negotiated across levels and over time, without isolating context, relations, or temporal movement as separate analytical domains.

Empirically, situating the study in Brazil contributes to expanding the contextual

scope of diversity research. Brazil combines high demographic diversity with persistent inequality and strong conservatism, offering a setting in which resistance to diversity can be examined in relation to societal histories and institutional arrangements that differ from those emphasized in Global North scholarship (Saraiva & Irigaray, 2009; Freitas, 2017; Saraiva & Quental, 2024). This focus supports a more globally inclusive understanding of how resistance to DEI is shaped and sustained.

From a practical standpoint, the study offers insight into how resistance becomes visible in the organization of DEI work. By foregrounding the connections between meanings, decisions and temporal adjustments, the analysis supports more reflexive understandings of DEI implementation that recognize ambiguity and negotiation as constitutive features of organizational dynamics rather than as anomalies to be eliminated (Leslie, 2019; Risberg & Corvellec, 2022).

Overall, the significance of the study lies in clarifying what resistance to diversity shares with broader theories of organizational resistance and what remains specific to diversity as a moral, political and organizational project. By making societal embeddedness, relational negotiation and temporal oscillation more analytically central, the thesis provides a stronger conceptual foundation for future research on how DEI initiatives are negotiated, constrained and sustained in contemporary organizations.

1.6 Organization of the thesis

The thesis is structured in six chapters. The first introduces the research topic, outlines the problem and presents the research gaps, objectives and significance. The second reviews the literature on diversity and resistance, identifying theoretical debates and gaps. The third explains the methodological approach, grounded in pragmatism and reflexive thematic analysis. The fourth presents the empirical findings derived from participants' accounts. The fifth discusses these findings in relation to existing theories and their implications for DEI in organizations. The final chapter consists of a conclusion that summarizes the contributions, highlights limitations and proposes future research directions on resistance in underexplored contexts.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Resistance in Management and Organizational Studies

This chapter positions resistance as organizationally situated actions and meanings through which people contest, negotiate, or redirect managerial aims, established routines and relations of authority in Management and Organizational Studies and traces how the field has approached, contested and refined this concept over time (Mumby, 2005; Workman-Stark, 2023). Rather than introducing resistance to diversity as a fixed construct from the outset, the chapter reconstructs the intellectual traditions that shaped how resistance has been theorized.

Resistance to organizational change and resistance to power traditions shaped how scholars interpret compliance, contestation and the maintenance of control inside organizations, even when diversity was not the explicit object of analysis (Collinson, 1994; Mumby, 2005; Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016). Historically, these literatures developed along two partially separable trajectories. Studies of resistance to organizational change tended to conceptualize resistance as a patterned response to planned interventions that disrupt established routines, roles, or expectations (Coch & French, 1948; Lewin, 1951; Katz & Kahn, 1966). In parallel, work on resistance and power conceptualized resistance as embedded in relations of authority, legitimacy and identity, emphasizing its constitutive role in organizational life rather than treating it as a deviation from normal functioning (Barbalet, 1985; Clegg, 1994a; Collinson, 1994).

Although later scholarship increasingly examined how change processes intersect with power relations, these traditions did not emerge as a unified framework. Their analytical emphases, assumptions and normative orientations differed and several reviews continue to reconstruct them as distinct genealogies before examining their points of convergence (Mumby, 2005; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016). It is important to distinguish resistance streams because in this thesis, resistance to change and power are treated as historically distinct but progressively converging roots. Although intertwined in later theory, they were not born as a single tradition. Reconstructing them separately allows this literature review to show how subsequent debates (particularly those concerned with DEI) inherit assumptions from both lineages, while also exposing the limits of interpreting resistance primarily as a change-management problem.

The review proceeds by building conceptual ground in stages so that later analysis of resistance to diversity can be read as cumulative, not isolated (Smollan, 2011; Ford et

al., 2008). The following subsections revisit classic work on resistance to organizational change and resistance to power, which together establish resistance as a patterned feature of organizational life.

2.1.1 Historical roots I: resistance to change

Early organizational scholarship developed a partially independent tradition that conceptualized resistance primarily as a "problem of change". This tradition emerged from planned change and systems-stability frameworks, which assume that organizations tend toward equilibrium and that resistance appears when change disrupts established routines, roles, or expectations (Lewin, 1951; Katz & Kahn, 1966). Within this perspective, resistance is treated in the literature as a response to change initiatives, frequently framed as psychological, social, or group-based rather than as an inherent feature of organizing (Coch & French, 1948; Piderit, 2000). However, power is also present in these accounts mainly in implicit form, appearing through authority, leadership and control over implementation, rather than being theorized as a relational process shaping resistance itself (Lewin, 1951; Trader-Leigh, 2002).

Classic formulations framed resistance as part of a force field surrounding planned change, in which competing pressures either promote movement toward a new state or stabilize existing arrangements (Lewin, 1951). In this formulation, resistance is described as one of the restraining forces that preserve routines and operational coherence when disruptive demands arise, particularly when transformation is experienced as externally imposed or destabilizing (Lewin, 1951). Lewin's analysis thus positions resistance as functionally related to organizational stability rather than as irrational obstruction.

Coch and French (1948) provided early empirical support for this view by examining responses to changes in work procedures introduced without consultation. Their study documented reactions such as anger, production decline and refusal, which they associated with perceived loss of control, competence and status within work groups (Coch & French, 1948). When participation increased, acceptance and performance recovered, leading the authors to interpret resistance as a response to perceived threat and procedural illegitimacy rather than as opposition to change per se. Katz and Kahn (1966) extended this reasoning by conceptualizing resistance as part of organizational homeostasis in complex systems. In their account, individuals and subunits generate self-

correcting responses to maintain predictability, continuity and local control when expectations, hierarchies, or workflows shift too quickly (Katz & Kahn, 1966).

Subsequent research expanded the behavioural vocabulary of resistance beyond explicit refusal. Trader-Leigh (2002) identified patterns such as passive noncompliance, withholding of effort and strategic compliance, which she described as situations in which formal agreement with a change coexists with narrowing its scope, slowing execution, or redirecting responsibility so that visible commitments remain while disruptive elements lose operational force (Trader-Leigh, 2002). Hollander and Einwohner (2004) systematised this insight by distinguishing resistance along the dimensions of visibility and intentionality, allowing for the analysis of subtle, indirect and quiet forms of resistance that nonetheless influence outcomes. Building on this approach, Ybema and Horvers (2017) described resistance through compliance, showing how public alignment with initiatives can coexist with implementation practices that dilute impact, protect local interests, or preserve authority relations.

The change-oriented literature also emphasizes how meaning and interpretation shape resistance during implementation. Ford, Ford and D'Amelio (2008) argued that resistance emerges through interaction between those advancing a change agenda and those expected to enact it, reflecting judgments about credibility, trustworthiness, distributive impact and procedural fairness. Ford and Ford (2010) further demonstrated that managers often categorize a wide range of behaviours (such as requests for clarification, expressions of fatigue, or critiques of timing) as resistance when these behaviours slow implementation. They identified managerial practices that intensify resistance, including overselling benefits, minimizing costs, failing to deliver promised support and discarding existing practices without acknowledgment, which they argue erode credibility and foster disengagement, delay, or symbolic adherence (Ford & Ford, 2010).

Table 1 — Core perspectives on resistance to organizational change

Main focus on change	How resistance is conceptualized	Reference
Planned change in social systems; field theory of change processes	Resistance as one of the "restraining forces" in a social "force field" that counterbalances "driving forces" and holds behaviour in an "equilibrium" during planned change.	Lewin (1951)
Productivity and morale during changes in work methods; effects of worker participation	Resistance to change as "a combination of an individual reaction to frustration with strong group-induced forces", expressed in absenteeism, turnover and declines in output when new methods are imposed without participation.	Coch & French (1948)
Organizations as open systems; stability and adaptation in complex organizations	Resistance as part of "dynamic homeostasis" in open systems, through which organizations seek a "steady state" by counteracting perturbations that disrupt established role expectations.	Katz & Kahn (1966/1978)
Systemic discrimination and organizational change; equality and employment equity initiatives	"Institutionalized resistance to change" as "patterns of organizational behaviour that decision makers or people in power positions employ to actively or passively deny, reject and refuse to implement, repress or even dismantle" initiatives, moving through "denial of the need for change", refusal of responsibility, non-implementation and "repression".	Agócs (1997)
Implementation of change programs and organizational learning	Resistance as a spectrum of behaviours during implementation, ranging from open opposition and passive noncompliance to strategic compliance in which actors formally agree to a change while selectively slowing, narrowing, or redirecting its enactment in practice.	Trader-Leigh (2002)
Conceptual clarification of resistance across disciplines	Resistance as "action" that embodies "opposition" to power relations and is classified along dimensions of "intent" and "recognition" to distinguish overt, covert and unrecognized forms.	Hollander & Einwohner (2004)
Everyday organizing and subtle enactment of change programs	Resistance as "resistance through compliance", where "frontstage" agreement and execution coexist with "backstage resistance" that subtly subverts, delays, or redirects the intended change.	Ybema & Horvers (2017)
Change conversations; interaction between change agents and recipients	Resistance as "an irrational and dysfunctional reaction located 'over there' in change recipients", but reconceptualize it as a conversational and interpretive process in which resistance can become "a resource for change" depending on how change agents respond.	Ford, Ford & D'Amelio (2008)
Managerial labelling and communicative dynamics of resistance	Resistance as a label that managers often apply to a wide range of responses that slow change (questioning, expressing fatigue, or asking for clarification), arguing that what is called "resistance" frequently reflects concerns about credibility, timing and follow-through in the change process.	Ford & Ford (2010)

Source: Elaborated by the author (2026).

Across these studies, the resistance to change literature consistently portrays resistance as patterned, interpretable and consequential for how new agendas are integrated into organizations (Coch & French, 1948; Katz & Kahn, 1966; Trader-Leigh, 2002; Smollan, 2011). These works describe resistance as emerging through perceived threats to status and control, assessments of procedural legitimacy and forms of strategic compliance that regulate the pace and depth of implementation (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Ford & Ford, 2010). Subsequent research has extended these mechanisms beyond technical or process-oriented change to organizational initiatives that intervene in evaluative criteria, access to opportunity and definitions of legitimacy at work (Thomas & Ely, 1996; Agócs, 1997).

In brief, the resistance to change literature identifies several recurring mechanisms through which resistance is produced and sustained during organizational transformation. Studies consistently associate resistance with perceived threats to status and control when change alters criteria of competence, advancement, or influence (Coch & French, 1948; Katz & Kahn, 1966). Research also shows that assessments of procedural legitimacy and leadership credibility shape resistance, particularly when initiatives are perceived as externally driven, reputational, or weakly embedded in resource allocation and decision-making processes (Trader-Leigh, 2002; Ford & Ford, 2010). In addition, work on strategic compliance demonstrates how resistance may operate through formal agreement combined with containment in practice, especially when initiatives remain weakly integrated into evaluation, promotion and succession systems (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Ybema & Horvers, 2017; Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens, 2018). Across these accounts, resistance is described as a structured response that regulates the pace and depth of implementation rather than as simple refusal (Smollan, 2011). See Table 1 for a summary.

2.1.2 Historical roots II: resistance to power

A second historical root conceptualizes resistance as inseparable from power, control and identity in organizational life. Influenced by labor process theory, critical sociology and post-structural thought, this tradition treats organizations as arenas of contested interests rather than neutral systems of coordination (Barbalet, 1985; Clegg, 1994a). Within this stream, resistance is described in the literature not as a reaction to

discrete initiatives but as a relational and political phenomenon embedded in everyday practices of authority, evaluation and identity construction (Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994; Collinson, 1994). Power and resistance are thus theorized as mutually constituted and resistance is understood as potentially present even in the absence of formal change initiatives (Foucault, 1978; Barbalet, 1985).

Foundational analyses of domination and legitimacy underpin this perspective. Weber conceptualized authority as resting on shared beliefs about who may rightfully decide, which creates the possibility of resistance when legitimacy is questioned or withdrawn (Weber, 1978). Foucault conceptualized power as dispersed, productive and embedded in the constitution of subjects, arguing that resistance emerges wherever individuals contest the interpretations and norms through which they are governed (Foucault, 1978). Building on these foundations, Barbalet (1985) argued that power and resistance are mutually constituted, positioning resistance as integral to the functioning of power rather than external to it.

Organizational scholars extended these insights to routine work contexts by documenting subtle and low-profile practices through which individuals navigate domination while maintaining formal compliance. Studies identified repertoires such as distancing, irony, selective cooperation, controlled withholding, strategic silence, cynicism and disengagement as ways of preserving autonomy, credibility and dignity within hierarchical settings (Scott, 1990; Collinson, 1994; Fleming & Spicer, 2014). Clegg (1994a) showed that resistance unfolds within the same evaluative and disciplinary arenas that produce compliance, while Collinson (1994) demonstrated how identity management and exposure are negotiated through mixtures of cooperation and covert dissent.

Across these studies, the literature locates resistance in the micro-processes through which legitimacy, authority and professional standing are continuously negotiated in organizational life (Barbalet, 1985; Clegg, 1994a; Scott, 1990). Rather than episodic confrontation, resistance is described as operating through discursive reframing, symbolic endorsement and subtle containment that shape how power is reproduced in everyday practice (Collinson, 1994; Fleming & Spicer, 2014) (see Table 2 for a summary).

Table 2 — Core perspectives on resistance to power

Reference	Main focus on power	How resistance is conceptualized
Weber (1978)	Authority, legitimacy and obedience	Resistance as the refusal or questioning of "domination", understood as "the probability that a given group of persons will obey certain specific commands" and thus appears when legitimacy and voluntary compliance are no longer taken for granted.
Foucault (1978)	Power/knowledge, discipline and subject formation	Resistance as immanent to power, insisting that "where there is power, there is resistance and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power", so that resistance consists in counter-conducts and redefinitions that arise inside the networks of discipline and normalization.
Barbalet (1985)	Theoretical relationship between power and resistance in sociology	Resistance as an integral part of power relations, arguing that power and resistance are distinct but interdependent aspects of power relations and that the concept of resistance is necessary for an adequate understanding of how subordinates limit and test power.
Clegg (1994a)	Power relations and subjectivity in organizations	Resistance emerges from "power relations and the constitution of the resistant subject", conceptualizing resistance as the ways subjects position themselves and contest identity, evaluation and control within regimes of discipline and surveillance.
Scott (1990)	Everyday resistance, domination and transcripts of power	Resistance through "everyday forms of resistance" and the contrast between "public" and "hidden", emphasizing small-scale practices such as foot-dragging, feigned ignorance and coded talk as "weapons of the weak" that quietly blunt domination.
Collinson (1994)	Workplace resistance, identity and masculinity	Resistance as "strategies of resistance" in workplace relations, showing how humour, cynicism, role-distancing and selective cooperation are used to negotiate power, knowledge and subjectivity in the workplace while maintaining formal compliance.
Knights & Jermier (1994); Knights & Vurdubakis (1994)	Identity, subjectivity and control in organizations	Resistance as part of identity work, in which employees construct narratives that present themselves as rational, competent and morally serious while casting managerial demands as unreasonable or misaligned with professional standards, using identity claims to limit and reinterpret control.
Prasad (2001)	Discursive approaches to power, diversity and difference	Resistance in terms of how organizational discourses around diversity and difference manage and contain critique, analysing resistance as subtle discursive moves that expose the limits of apparently progressive rhetoric while leaving formal commitments intact.

Reference	Main focus on power	How resistance is conceptualized
Fleming & Spicer (2014)	Power, identity regulation and contemporary corporate control	Resistance as operating through cynicism, irony and dis-identification, where employees comply with corporate demands while using distancing talk and practices to preserve a sense of integrity and to contest managerial claims to meaning and morality.
Ybema & Horvers (2017)	Resistance through compliance	Resistance via "frontstage" agreement and "backstage" dilution or slowing of program implementation.

Source: Elaborated by the author (2026).

2.1.3 Integrating the traditions

The literature on resistance to organizational change and resistance to power offers two complementary but historically distinct perspectives on resistance in Management and Organizational Studies. Research on resistance to change conceptualizes resistance as a patterned response to the introduction of new agendas, particularly when such initiatives are experienced as disruptive to established routines, expectations, or distributions of control (Coch & French, 1948; Lewin, 1951; Katz & Kahn, 1966; Trader-Leigh, 2002). In contrast, work on resistance to power conceptualizes resistance as an embedded feature of organizational life, operating through everyday practices that negotiate legitimacy, identity and authority rather than through discrete episodes of opposition (Barbalet, 1985; Clegg, 1994a; Collinson, 1994; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994; Scott, 1990).

Studies within the change-oriented tradition emphasize how resistance emerges in response to managerial interventions and how participation, communication and perceptions of credibility shape acceptance, delay, or non-adoption of proposed initiatives (Coch & French, 1948; Lewin, 1951; Trader-Leigh, 2002; Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008). Studies within the power-oriented tradition, in turn, emphasize how resistance operates through selective compliance, symbolic endorsement, irony, distancing and other subtle practices that allow formal agreement to coexist with practical containment (Barbalet, 1985; Clegg, 1994a; Collinson, 1994; Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Ybema & Horvers, 2017).

Across these bodies of work, scholars argue that resistance should not be understood solely as irrational opposition or overt defiance. Instead, resistance is described as taking shape through interactions between formal initiatives and existing

organizational arrangements, where interpretations of legitimacy, fairness and authority influence how new policies or practices are enacted in everyday work (Smollan, 2011; Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016). This perspective highlights how formal endorsement of an initiative can coexist with limited implementation, delay, or reframing, without necessarily appearing as explicit resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Ybema & Horvers, 2017).

By bringing these traditions together, the literature positions resistance as a recurring and intelligible aspect of organizational life (Mumby, 2005; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). This integrated reading also helps explain why resistance may remain difficult to identify, as it can operate through legitimate managerial practices, professional language and formally sanctioned procedures rather than through open refusal (Collinson, 1994; Fleming & Spicer, 2014).

Rather than defining a specific construct at this stage, the integration developed here establishes a conceptual foundation for examining how organizational initiatives become sites of contestation. The following sections build on this foundation by introducing core concepts related to diversity, equity and inclusion and by tracing how these agendas became institutionalized in organizational contexts. The formal conceptualization of resistance in relation to diversity initiatives is developed later in the chapter, after these conceptual and historical elements have been established.

2.2 Diversity, equity and inclusion: core concepts

Organizations frequently use the acronym DEI (Diversity, Equity or Equality and Inclusion) to refer to policies, programs, targets and formal commitments addressing inequality. This section clarifies the core concepts that structure contemporary debates on DEI in management and organizational studies. It defines diversity, inclusion, equity and equality as analytically distinct but frequently conflated terms in organizational discourse and research (Ely & Thomas, 1996; Nishii & Özbilgin, 2007; Roberson, 2019). In addition, it outlines the main justificatory logics through which DEI has been legitimized in the literature. Together, these clarifications establish a shared conceptual vocabulary for understanding how DEI has been debated in organizations, without yet addressing resistance directly.

Earlier research already positioned resistance as a recognizable response to diversity. Ely and Thomas (1996) described organizational paradigms in which diversity was approached through discrimination-and-fairness or access-and-legitimacy logics.

Dass and Parker (1999) later identified resistance as a distinct organizational response to diversity initiatives. This trajectory was consolidated in Thomas and Plaut's (2007) work on diversity resistance, which foregrounded resistance as a central dimension of organizational diversity dynamics. Building on this lineage, this study uses DEI when referring to contemporary managerial initiatives, while situating resistance within the broader tradition of research on resistance to diversity.

In organizational contexts, diversity refers to the demographic and social composition of the workforce, encompassing categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disability and social class background, which shape access to opportunities and status at work (Cox, 1993; Ely & Thomas, 1996). This conceptualization is primarily representational, focusing on patterns of hiring, promotion, leadership presence and visibility in formal organizational communication (Roberson, 2019). Prior research shows that organizations may be described as "diverse" when numerical representation increases, even when underlying practices, decision criteria, or power relations remain unchanged (Ely & Thomas, 1996; Ahmed, 2007a).

Inclusion shifts attention from representation to participation and influence, because it is defined as the extent to which employees experience belonging and are recognized as legitimate contributors whose perspectives are valued in decision-making processes (Mor Barak, 2000, 2005; Shore et al., 2011, 2018). Empirical and conceptual work emphasizes that inclusion is enacted through everyday routines, such as access to information, informal sponsorship, voice in meetings and tolerance for disagreement without disproportionate reputational risk (Roberson, 2011; Janssens & Zanoni, 2014). In this sense, inclusion reframes diversity from a question of presence to one of credibility and influence within core organizational processes (Ferdman, 2013; Roberson, 2019).

Equity extends the analysis by foregrounding how historical and institutionalized patterns of privilege and inequality shape organizational outcomes across groups; it focuses on whether organizational systems reproduce unequal access to opportunities, rewards and recognition rather than assuming equal starting points (Acker, 2006; Fraser, 2009; Roberson, 2019). Within organizations, equity-oriented approaches are reflected in targeted recruitment, mentoring and sponsorship programs and adjustments to evaluation, promotion and succession practices designed to counter cumulative bias (Castilla & Benard, 2010; Castilla, 2011). Research on meritocratic cultures indicates that even formal, neutral criteria can still favor traditional incumbents, thus perpetuating inequality and maintaining beliefs in fairness (Castilla & Benard, 2010; Castilla, 2011).

Equality, by contrast, is grounded in a formal justice logic that emphasizes identical treatment through uniform rules, procedures and standards (Rawls, 1971; Nozick, 1974). In organizational settings, equality underpins standardized HR systems, such as structured recruitment, performance appraisal and compensation frameworks, which are justified by appeals to neutrality and objectivity (Castilla, 2011; Morand & Merriman, 2012). While equality aims to ensure consistency, the literature documents persistent disparities within formally equal systems, indicating that identical treatment does not necessarily produce equitable outcomes (Neumark, 2018; Klein et al., 2021).

Across these definitions, prior research highlights a central tension between equality and equity. Equality frames fairness as sameness of treatment, whereas equity frames fairness as addressing structural disadvantage so that outcomes are not predictably skewed toward already privileged groups (Fraser, 2009; Sen, 2009). This distinction has been shown to shape how organizations define legitimacy, merit and belonging and it underpins many of the debates that later emerge around DEI initiatives (Ahmed, 2007a; Roberson, 2019). In this thesis, equity is adopted as the corrective principle underlying DEI initiatives, whereas equality is treated as a distinct justice logic grounded in identical treatment through uniform rules and procedures, irrespective of unequal starting positions. The tension between these principles informs the justificatory frameworks through which DEI initiatives are resisted in organizational contexts.

2.2.1 Justificatory logics of DEI

Beyond definitional distinctions, the literature identifies distinct justificatory logics that organizations and scholars have used to legitimize DEI initiatives (Ely & Thomas, 1996; Nishii & Özbilgin, 2007). Integrative analyses converge on three dominant logics: moral justice, business case and power activism (Hellerstedt, Uman, & Wennberg, 2024).

The moral justice logic frames DEI as an ethical and legal obligation grounded in civil rights traditions and principles of equal treatment and non-discrimination (Noon, 2007; Crosby et al., 2006). Within this logic, equity and inclusion are justified as remedies for historical exclusion, whereas diversity is treated as a consequence of fairer systems rather than a primary objective (Fraser, 2009). Prior studies note that this logic can enable formal compliance without substantial organizational change when equality frameworks are adopted symbolically (Edelman et al., 2001; Hellerstedt et al., 2024).

The business case logic links DEI to organizational performance, innovation and competitiveness, positioning diversity as a strategic resource (Cox & Blake, 1991; Ely & Thomas, 1996). Inclusion is often framed as a condition that enables diversity to translate into performance benefits, while equity is often implicit or unaddressed in practice (Nishii, 2013). A substantial body of research has questioned the consistency of performance effects and documented how instrumental framings may obscure persistent inequality or substitute representation for structural change (Noon, 2007; Dobbin & Kalev, 2021; Hellerstedt et al., 2024).

The power-activism logic emphasizes external pressure, enforcement and accountability, drawing on social movement and stakeholder theories (Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). In this framing, organizations respond to DEI demands primarily through coercive mechanisms, such as regulation, public scrutiny, or investor pressure, often prioritizing visible diversity outcomes as signals of compliance (Hellerstedt et al., 2024). Empirical studies suggest that these approaches may generate symbolic adoption or uneven implementation rather than sustained organizational change (Mun & Jung, 2018; Seierstad et al., 2021).

Taken as a whole, these justificatory logics highlight that DEI has not been institutionalized through a single rationale. Instead, organizations often combine or shift between logics, producing ambiguity around goals, priorities and evaluation criteria (Noon, 2007; Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000). Clarifying these logics provides a basis for understanding how diversity management practices evolved historically and why DEI became a contested object of managerial attention. Yet, because these logics rest on different organizational justifications, mirroring the tensions between equality and equity and drawing on distinct research traditions, they can also work at cross-purposes in implementation, making DEI practices harder to enact and more vulnerable to symbolic adoption, contestation and resistance (Noon, 2007; Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000; Edelman et al., 2001).

With the core concepts and justificatory logics established, the next section traces how diversity entered organizational practice and how these rationales became embedded in successive waves of diversity management.

2.2.3 The evolution of diversity management in organizations

This section traces how diversity entered organizational agendas, how it was progressively reframed as "diversity management" and how it became embedded in managerial discourse, organizational processes and governance mechanisms over time (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014; Dobbin & Kalev, 2021). Prior scholarship describes these shifts as historically contingent, shaped by changing institutional environments and managerial interpretations of equality, difference and legitimacy (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). The literature also suggests that each period tended to foreground a dominant justificatory framing for diversity (such as moral justice, business case and power activism) while generating recurring forms of organizational ambivalence, contestation, or constrained implementation (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014; Dobbin & Kalev, 2021; Thomas & Plaut, 2008). Historical accounts, therefore, position contestation around diversity as developing alongside the institutionalization of diversity as a managerial concern, rather than appearing only in recent periods (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014; Thomas, 2008).

The discussion is organized into five overlapping phases described in prior reviews of the field (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014; Nkomo et al., 2019). The 1960s–1980s are characterized in the literature as a period in which diversity was framed primarily as a legal and regulatory issue (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). The 1990s are described as a period in which diversity was increasingly reframed as a strategic and performance-related resource in managerial discourse (Cox, 1993; Thomas & Ely, 1996). The 2000s are described as a period in which diversity management consolidated as a corporate norm, alongside growing scholarly attention to legitimacy tensions and backlash (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000; Litvin, 2006; Kidder et al., 2004). The 2010s are characterized in the literature by intensified critical engagement with power, intersectionality and external pressure shaping organizational diversity agendas (Zanoni et al., 2010; Bierema, 2010; Nkomo et al., 2019). The early 2020s are discussed as a period of simultaneous institutionalization of DEI and heightened public and organizational contestation of its legitimacy and scope (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021; Prasad & Śliwa, 2024; Workman-Stark, 2023). Across these phases, reviews of the field describe diversity management and contestation as co-evolving in response to shifting societal and organizational conditions (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014; Nkomo et al., 2019; Thomas, 2008).

2.2.3 Anti-discrimination and equal opportunity (1960s–1980s)

Between the 1960s and 1980s, equality entered organizational agendas primarily through legal and regulatory frameworks that translated civil rights demands into formal employment protections (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). In the United States, legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Pay Act of 1963 established anti-discrimination principles in hiring, promotion and compensation, while the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) introduced mechanisms for monitoring compliance (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998). In Western Europe, feminist movements and trade unions contributed to labor reforms addressing the gender pay gap, embedding equality within employment regulation rather than organizational strategy (Healy et al., 2011).

Research characterizes organizational responses during this period as oriented toward legal compliance rather than proactive transformation (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). Firms introduced formal procedures, documentation requirements and reporting systems designed to demonstrate adherence to anti-discrimination law, often centralized within personnel or human resource departments (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998). Within this framing, diversity and formal equality were treated as external constraints imposed by the state, positioning organizations as subjects of regulation rather than as agents of inclusion (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014).

Empirical studies identify two enduring effects of this compliance-driven phase. First, it established administrative infrastructures (such as demographic monitoring, formalized recruitment criteria and grievance procedures) that later became foundational to diversity management systems (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). Second, the literature documents a pattern of symbolic conformity, whereby organizations complied with legal requirements while leaving underlying hierarchies and evaluative standards largely unchanged (Kanter, 1977; Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990; Kaiser et al., 2013). Kanter's (1977) analysis of tokenism showed that numerical inclusion without structural change often reinforced stereotypes and marginality, while Morrison and Von Glinow (1990) demonstrated the persistence of "glass ceilings" despite the formal presence of equal opportunity policies.

Across national contexts, the literature converges on the conclusion that early equality and anti-discrimination efforts expanded formal access while leaving structural power relations largely intact (Kanter, 1977; Kelly & Dobbin, 1998; Nkomo & Hoobler,

2014). This body of work establishes that compliance with equality legislation did not, by itself, produce organizational transformation, but rather created the conditions under which diversity would later be reframed as a managerial and strategic concern.

As equality became institutionalized through regulation and formal procedures, scholarly attention increasingly shifted toward the limits of compliance-based approaches, setting the stage for the subsequent redefinition of diversity as a potential organizational resource in the following decade (Cox, 1993; Thomas & Ely, 1996).

2.2.4 The managerial turn and the performance logic (1990s)

The literature characterizes the 1990s as a period in which organizations increasingly reconceptualized diversity through managerial and strategic rationales rather than primarily through legal compliance (Cox, 1993; Thomas & Ely, 1996; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). Scholars link this shift to broader processes of globalization, technological change and workforce heterogeneity, which were associated with the framing of diversity as a potential source of innovation and competitiveness (Cox, 1993; Robinson & Dechant, 1997). In Europe, studies connect growing labor mobility following the establishment of the European Union to heightened attention to cross-cultural management and workforce integration (Healy et al., 2011). In Brazil, research documents that the expansion of multinational corporations and the diffusion of imported Human Resource models reinforced performance-oriented and efficiency-driven interpretations of diversity (Fleury, 2000). At the same time, early Brazilian studies already pointed to tensions in this framing, as analyses of women's career trajectories showed how managerial cultures and meritocratic ideals constrained gender inclusion (Betiol & Tonelli, 1991; Souza & Vasconcelos, 2021).

Empirical research during this period contributed to legitimizing performance-based interpretations of diversity. O'Reilly, Caldwell and Barnett (1989) showed that heterogeneous teams could outperform homogeneous ones under conditions of trust and effective communication. Building on such findings, Roosevelt Thomas (1990, 1992) introduced the concept of managing diversity, arguing that inclusion requires cultural and behavioral transformation rather than numerical representation or compliance with regulation alone. Loden and Rosener (1991) further expanded managerial definitions of diversity by incorporating education, nationality and professional background, thereby embedding diversity more firmly into leadership and organizational discourse.

Cox (1993) extended this line of inquiry by demonstrating that demographic diversity is associated with improved creativity, decision quality and adaptability when supported by inclusive organizational systems. Thomas and Ely (1996) consolidated these ideas through their articulation of three diversity paradigms (discrimination-and-fairness, access-and-legitimacy and learning-and-effectiveness), showing that organizational outcomes vary according to how difference is framed and managed. Their learning-and-effectiveness model emphasized that diversity contributes to performance when it is linked to organizational learning and core work processes rather than treated as a peripheral compliance activity (Thomas & Ely, 1996).

Advancing this managerial perspective, Dass and Parker (1999) proposed a typology of strategic responses to diversity management that distinguished among defensive, reactive and proactive organizational postures. Their framework differentiated approaches oriented toward risk containment, responses to external pressure and the integration of diversity into strategy and culture as a source of learning and competitive advantage (Dass & Parker, 1999). This typology reflected a broader movement in the literature toward conceptualizing diversity management as an ongoing organizational capability rather than a finite policy intervention (Dass & Parker, 1999).

Critical scholarship emerging during the same decade cautioned against the depoliticizing effects of this managerial turn. Litvin (1997) argued that corporate diversity discourse translated structural inequality into issues of individual awareness and interpersonal sensitivity, thereby obscuring relations of power and exclusion. Lorbiecki and Jack (2000) reinforced this critique by showing that organizations increasingly framed inequality as a technical Human Resource problem addressable through training and communication, rather than as a political issue involving redistribution of authority and resources. Together, these analyses suggest that while the managerial turn expanded the legitimacy of diversity initiatives, it also narrowed their scope by aligning them with dominant norms of efficiency, neutrality and managerial control (Litvin, 1997; Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000).

Overall, the literature describes the 1990s as a period in which diversity was reframed as a strategic resource within managerial discourse, gaining legitimacy through performance-oriented justifications while becoming increasingly detached from its political and redistributive origins (Cox, 1993; Thomas & Ely, 1996; Litvin, 1997; Dass & Parker, 1999). This reframing is presented as establishing the conditions for subsequent institutionalization, while simultaneously introducing tensions around instrumentalism,

legitimacy and the limits of managerial approaches to inequality that would become more visible in the following decade (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014).

2.2.5 Organizational postures and friction around legitimacy (2000s)

Reviews of the literature characterize the 2000s as a period in which diversity management consolidated as a global corporate norm, marked by the widespread diffusion of formal diversity programs in large organizations (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000; Nkomo & Cox, 1996). In the United States and Europe, research links this consolidation to expanding regimes of public accountability, anti-discrimination monitoring and corporate governance standards that encouraged firms to institutionalize diversity through formal programs, training routines and performance systems (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000; Cox & Blake, 1991; Nkomo & Cox, 1996). These developments coincided with the global diffusion of managerial models that explicitly connected diversity to competitiveness, innovation and organizational reputation (Cox & Blake, 1991; Robinson & Dechant, 1997). In Brazil, studies document that multinational subsidiaries and large domestic firms adopted diversity frameworks aligned with global corporate social responsibility agendas and international management standards (Fleury, 2000). Empirical research in the Brazilian context, however, showed that these imported models frequently reproduced existing hierarchies, reinforcing rather than transforming patterns of inequality (Hanashiro & Carvalho, 2005; Saraiva & Irigaray, 2009). Comparative research indicates that, in Brazil, the organizational uptake of equality and diversity has developed gradually and unevenly, often remaining peripheral to core managerial practices (Fleury, 2000; Alves & Galeão-Silva, 2004). Saraiva and Irigaray (2009) argue that Brazilian organizations frequently display contradictions between diversity-related discourse and actual practices, as DEI initiatives have increasingly been framed through market-oriented rationales, privileging instrumental and reputational gains over substantive structural change. Fleury (2000) similarly observes that early diversity-related practices in Brazilian organizations were often introduced through multinational influence and subsequently absorbed into prevailing managerial logics, without fundamentally challenging dominant criteria of competence, merit, or leadership legitimacy. Across the decade, studies observed that the diffusion of diversity committees, awareness campaigns and training programs increased formal visibility while remaining largely symbolic, as initiatives were often limited to communication and branding without redistributing

authority or decision-making power (Hanashiro & Carvalho, 2005; Saraiva & Irigaray, 2009).

Amid this expansion, scholarship increasingly identified tensions between symbolic and substantive inclusion (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000; Litvin, 2006). Critical authors questioned whether corporate enthusiasm for diversity altered underlying power relations or primarily reframed inequality within managerial discourse (Litvin, 2006; Noon, 2007). In the Brazilian literature, Alves and Galeão-Silva (2004) articulated an early critique of this managerialization, arguing that diversity was being reframed as an organizational technique oriented toward efficiency, image and competitiveness rather than toward confronting structural exclusion. Comparable concerns appeared in international debates, which described the incorporation of diversity into a market-driven logic that translated political claims into technical management problems (Litvin, 2006; Noon, 2007).

Early in the decade, Kidder et al. (2004) offered one of the first empirical analyses of backlash to diversity initiatives, showing that employee responses varied systematically according to framing. Their findings indicated that justice-based or corrective rationales, framed as addressing historical discrimination in ways comparable to affirmative action, generated stronger resistance among those who perceived them as threats to merit and fairness norms (Kidder et al., 2004). In contrast, innovation- or performance-based narratives, framed as enhancing competitiveness and organizational effectiveness, elicited greater acceptance because they aligned with dominant organizational logics of efficiency and value creation (Kidder et al., 2004).

In the same year, Dick (2004) provided a conceptual advance by situating resistance to diversity within the language and everyday context of work rather than attributing it to individual prejudice or irrational opposition. Her analysis showed that employees draw on discourses of individualism, equal treatment and “fair chances” to position themselves as reasonable while portraying diversity initiatives as unfair, unnecessary, or as forms of “political correctness” that undermine merit (Dick, 2004). Within this framework, resistance appears in contexts of unequal and hierarchical opportunities for advancement but is expressed through individualized narratives that deflect attention from structural inequality and help preserve existing organizational arrangements (Dick, 2004). Subsequent work linked this approach to broader theories of power and resistance, emphasizing that such reactions are patterned and embedded in

organizational control systems rather than idiosyncratic responses (Dick, 2004; Conroy et al., 2024).

During the same period, several authors revisited the conditions under which diversity produces beneficial organizational outcomes. Ely and Thomas (2001) argued that the effects of diversity depend on whether difference is treated as a source of learning or as a compliance requirement. Mannix and Neale (2005) synthesized prior empirical findings and concluded that diversity improves creativity and problem-solving only when supported by climates of trust and psychological safety. Basset-Jones (2005) similarly emphasized that innovation through diversity requires deliberate and sustained management of interpersonal and cognitive differences. Together, these studies reinforced a conditional view in which diversity's positive effects depend on contextual alignment, leadership practices and organizational climate (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Mannix & Neale, 2005; Basset-Jones, 2005).

Critical perspectives during this decade also warned that the performance-oriented logic that legitimized diversity simultaneously rendered it vulnerable. Litvin (2006) and Noon (2007) argued that once diversity was instrumentalized as a business tool, its political and ethical foundations became subordinated to return-on-investment criteria. According to these authors, this shift transformed diversity into a conditional commitment, supported when it promised measurable gains and deprioritized when outcomes were uncertain or long-term (Litvin, 2006; Noon, 2007). The business case framing was therefore associated with new forms of resistance expressed through strategic disengagement, selective adoption and symbolic compliance (Noon, 2007; Ahmed, 2007a). Subsequent analyses interpreted these dynamics as early indicators of diversity's commodification and depoliticization (Ahmed, 2007a).

By the end of the decade, Thomas and Plaut (2008) formalized resistance to diversity as a multilevel construct encompassing both individual and organizational dynamics. They conceptualized resistance as a continuum ranging from overt opposition to more subtle expressions such as avoidance, compliance without conviction and selective interpretation of inclusion goals (Thomas & Plaut, 2008). This reconceptualization positioned resistance as a constitutive and analyzable feature of organizational life rather than as an anomaly (Thomas & Plaut, 2008).

In sum, the literature portrays the 2000s as a decade in which the managerial discourse that legitimized diversity as part of strategic competitiveness simultaneously transformed it into a measurable, conditional and instrumental practice (Lorbiecki & Jack,

2000; Litvin, 2006; Noon, 2007). Reviews of the period suggest that this paradox laid the groundwork for subsequent debates, as diversity became increasingly entangled with broader struggles over fairness, legitimacy and the boundaries of organizational change (Thomas & Plaut, 2008; Nkomo et al., 2019).

2.2.6 Power, intersectionality and external pressure (2010s)

The literature characterizes the 2010s as a period of consolidation and critical reassessment of diversity management (Nkomo et al., 2019; Zanoni et al., 2010). In North America and Europe, studies document that diversity became increasingly incorporated into governance frameworks, corporate reporting and leadership models, particularly through sustainability reporting and accountability mechanisms (Zanoni et al., 2010; Bierema, 2010). At the same time, sociological and political analyses describe growing public debates on "diversity fatigue" and "multiculturalism backlash", which exposed renewed skepticism toward inclusion policies at societal and organizational levels (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). In Brazil, empirical research shows that major organizations (often influenced by multinational standards) expanded DEI programs, while structural inequalities related to race, gender, class and sexuality continued to shape workplace hierarchies (Saraiva & Irigaray, 2009; Irigaray, 2013). This body of work portrays diversity during this decade as an established managerial domain whose translation into structural transformation remained contested (Nkomo et al., 2019).

As diversity became a routine element of organizational discourse, scholars increasingly questioned the epistemic and institutional assumptions sustaining its institutionalization (Bierema, 2010; Swan & Fox, 2010; Kalonaityte, 2010). Bierema (2010) argued that Human Resource Development often resists diversity at an epistemic level by privileging efficiency, neutrality and instrumental learning over equity, reflexivity and power analysis. In turn, Swan and Fox (2010) examined how diversity practitioners learn to navigate organizational expectations by "playing the game", balancing symbolic compliance with limited opportunities for substantive engagement in order to preserve legitimacy. While Kalonaityte (2010) conceptualized diversity management as a form of internal boundary-setting, suggesting that it regulates belonging and acceptable difference rather than dismantling exclusionary organizational norms. In the Brazilian context, empirical studies reinforced this diagnosis, such as Pereira and Hanashiro (2010) who observed that professionals frequently expressed discursive

support for diversity while demonstrating hesitation when initiatives were perceived as misaligned with meritocratic and performance-oriented norms.

Parallel to these critiques, research during the 2010s increasingly framed resistance as a structural component of organizational change rather than as a marginal or deviant reaction (Erwin & Garman, 2010; Courpasson et al., 2012). For example, Gonzalez (2010) conceptualized diversity change as a systemic, nonlinear and multilevel process. In their part, Erwin and Garman (2010) associated resistance with experiences of instability and loss of control accompanying organizational transitions. Courpasson, Dany and Clegg (2012) introduced the notion of "productive resistance", arguing that dissent can surface organizational contradictions and contribute to renewal. Within the diversity literature, Arredondo (2013) documented recurring forms of resistance (including denial, avoidance and symbolic adherence) when diversity initiatives challenge entrenched hierarchies. Similarly, Bebbington and Özbilgin (2013) described a "paradox of diversity in leadership", in which inclusion is promoted rhetorically while decision-making levels remain persistently homogeneous.

Intersectional analyses have emerged as central to diversity research during this decade, demonstrating how race, gender, class and sexuality as dimensions of difference interact simultaneously and shape perceptions within organizations (Crenshaw, 2013; Hearn & Louvrier, 2015). Building on this perspective, Gagnon and Collinson (2017) argued that inclusion and dissent are co-constitutive processes, as attempts to integrate marginalized groups inevitably redefine organizational norms of belonging and provoke new tensions. Brazilian research documented similar dynamics. Cavazotte et al. (2010) identified how gender stereotypes restrict women's career progression and increase turnover intentions. Studies on sexuality highlighted subtle mechanisms of normalization and concealment: Garcia and Souza (2010) and Irigaray et al. (2010) showed how humor and professionalism discourses mask exclusion; both Irigaray and Freitas (2011) and de Souza and Pereira (2013) examined pressures toward conformity among LGBTQ+ employees; while Diniz et al. (2013) and Carrieri et al. (2014) demonstrated how corporate diversity policies can simultaneously enable recognition and constrain expression. Collectively, these studies describe resistance as operating predominantly through everyday practices that sustain dominant norms rather than through overt opposition.

By the late 2010s, the literature increasingly addressed organizational ambivalence and societal backlash against diversity initiatives (Brannon et al., 2018;

Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens, 2018). Brannon et al. (2018) identified three primary drivers of opposition among socially dominant groups: perceived restrictions on autonomy, preference for color-blind norms and beliefs that equality had already been achieved (Apfelbaum et al., 2012). Brannon et al. (2018) "inclusion-for-all" framework suggested that resistance reflects divergent motivational orientations rather than uniform opposition (Apfelbaum et al., 2016). Moreover, Wiggins-Romesburg and Githens (2018) examined the psychological foundations of resistance, highlighting status threat and moral disengagement as recurrent mechanisms. Furher, Brazilian empirical studies showed how apparently open and inclusive climates coexist with symbolic compliance and humor-based exclusion (Fernandes et al., 2014; Pompeu & Souza, 2019).

By the end of the decade, scholarship consistently described diversity management as an established organizational practice marked by persistent tensions between visibility and depth of change (Nkomo et al., 2019). In the Academy of Management Journal Special Topic Forum "Diversity at a Critical Juncture", Nkomo et al. (2019) argued that these tensions reflect broader societal patterns of intensified resistance to diversity. Their analysis positioned the field at a crossroads, where the central challenge was no longer implementation alone, but the maintenance of legitimacy and transformative capacity amid growing social and organizational contestation.

2.2.7 Institutionalization, contestation and visible resistance (2020s)

The early 2020s reshaped how diversity is understood and practiced, as the COVID-19 pandemic accentuated pre-existing inequalities and reconfigured experiences of workspace, safety and belonging across employee groups (Dalessandro & Lovell, 2024). Empirical research shows that disruptions to routine work arrangements and heightened uncertainty produced uneven experiences of well-being and social status, as exposure to health risks, isolation and emotional strain varied across social positions and employment conditions (Kira et al., 2021; Mahdanian, 2025). Rather than suspending organizational hierarchies, crisis conditions often reorganized evaluative criteria, sustaining ambivalent judgments of legitimacy, experience and contribution, particularly toward older workers and other groups already subject to contested assessments of competence and adaptability (Axelrad et al., 2024). These differentiated experiences of recognition and inclusion formed an important backdrop against which resistance to DEI

initiatives became more explicit, affectively charged and publicly articulated (Gündemir et al., 2024; Workman-Stark, 2023).

As organizations sought to respond to these disruptions, DEI entered a phase of institutional consolidation under strain. Dedicated functions, metrics, training programs and leadership initiatives became increasingly standardized, reflecting the formal stabilization of DEI within organizational governance structures (Triana et al., 2021; Roberson et al., 2024). At the same time, this institutionalization coincided with growing polarization and organizational fatigue, as DEI became entangled with broader political and moral disputes about merit, neutrality and fairness (Flood et al., 2021; Allen et al., 2025). Research documents that resistance during this period was no longer confined to subtle forms of avoidance or symbolic compliance, but increasingly surfaced through budgetary retrenchment, rhetorical reversals and explicit questioning of DEI's legitimacy and scope (Hellerstedt et al., 2024; Prasad & Śliwa, 2024).

Contemporary debates identify several interrelated clusters shaping resistance in this period. One cluster centers on the psychological and affective foundations of resistance. Studies show that perceptions of threat, moral disengagement and identity fatigue shape responses to DEI initiatives, particularly among groups who perceive loss of status, autonomy, or belonging (Iyer, 2022; Gündemir et al., 2024). Within this stream, resistance is interpreted less as overt opposition and more as an outcome of misalignment between organizational change demands and employees' experiences of recognition, safety and legitimacy. Research on neurodiversity further demonstrates how exclusionary climates foster disengagement and subtle forms of resistance when organizational norms remain narrowly defined despite formal inclusion commitments (Khassawneh, 2025).

A second cluster emphasizes power, ethics and leadership. Scholarship increasingly shows that resistance circulates through managerial layers rather than emerging solely at organizational margins (Workman-Stark, 2023). Studies of middle management highlight how resistance may express ethical tension rather than defiance, particularly when managers are positioned between formal DEI commitments and conflicting performance, cultural, or accountability demands (Conroy et al., 2024). This work reframes resistance as a relational and interpretive process, shaped by sensemaking around fairness, merit and responsibility rather than by simple disagreement with inclusion goals (Allen et al., 2025; Story et al., 2024).

A third cluster concerns the institutional paradox of DEI itself. As inclusion became normalized as a standard organizational practice, its boundaries narrowed, with

increasing emphasis on measurable outputs such as representation, engagement scores, or training completion rates (Triana et al., 2021; Hellerstedt et al., 2024). Research demonstrates that this outcome-oriented institutionalization can inadvertently reproduce inequality, as initiatives that prioritize visibility and compliance over redistribution of authority leave underlying power relations intact (Van Douwen et al., 2022; Tonelli et al., 2025). In this context, resistance emerges not only in opposition to DEI but also through the very mechanisms designed to implement it, as organizations comply formally while containing its transformative potential (Hellerstedt et al., 2024).

Taken together, the literature shows that diversity management has progressed from legal compliance (1960s–1980s), to strategic resource framing (1990s), to legitimacy management and symbolic expansion (2000s), to explicit engagement with power and identity (2010s) and finally to institutionalization under active contestation (2020s) (Triana et al., 2021; Thomas, 2020). Across these phases, resistance has adjusted its form, moving from minimal adherence and conditional support to overt challenges concerning merit, neutrality and organizational priorities (Flood et al., 2021; Prasad & Śliwa, 2024). This trajectory indicates that resistance is not an anomaly external to diversity management, but a structurally embedded feature of how DEI agendas are negotiated, limited and contested within organizations over time (Thomas, 2008; Hellerstedt et al., 2024).

2.3 Diversity resistance as a construct

The present section advances the literature review to approach diversity resistance as a construct. Management and Organization Studies describe resistance as a normal feature of organizing, linked to how meanings, interests and hierarchies are protected when agendas or practices shift (Coch & French, 1948; Clegg, 1994a; Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). In parallel, diversity scholarship maps how organizations define and operationalize diversity and inclusion and how workplace experience reflects unequal credibility, belonging and access to opportunity even under formal commitments (Cox, 1991; Roberson, 2006; Triana et al., 2021). Recent work brings these trajectories together by showing that resistance to DEI frequently operates through containment, silence, procedural dilution and symbolic alignment, which allows organizations to display commitment while limiting redistributive or governance consequences (Ahmed, 2007a; Ng & Sears, 2020; Thomas, 2020). Building on this convergence, the section defines

diversity resistance early and then unpacks its boundaries, forms and consequences across the subsections that follow (Thomas, 2020; Gündemir et al., 2024; Allen et al., 2025).

2.3.1 Defining resistance to diversity

Organizational research has treated resistance, in general terms, as both a behavioral response to managerial intervention and a process through which people negotiate legitimacy, authority and identity in ongoing work (Coch & French, 1948; Collinson, 1994; Mumby, 2005). In early formulations, resistance appeared mainly as a managerial challenge to be overcome, usually during implementation of new procedures or structures (Coch & French, 1948; Katz & Kahn, 1966; Erwin & Garman, 2010). Later work reframed resistance as a situated and political process that emerges in language, routines and micro-practices that reproduce or contest power relations in everyday work, which positioned resistance as a field of meaning and not only as an attitude (Clegg, 1994a; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994; Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Within this move, resistance was no longer interpreted only as deviance from a plan, but as part of how organizations define what is acceptable, credible, or legitimate (Mumby, 2005; Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016; Conroy et al., 2024).

Diversity research followed a parallel path by examining how differences in gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, nationality and other social markers are recognized, valued, or marginalized inside organizations and by linking those patterns to structures such as evaluation, promotion, access to sponsorship and voice in decision-making (Cox, 1991; Van de Ven et al., 2008; Triana et al., 2021). This body of work connects formal commitments to inclusion with lived experience at work and shows how inclusion depends on credibility, belonging and access to influence, rather than on demographic representation alone (Roberson, 2006; Metz et al., 2022; Khassawneh, 2025). At the same time, this line of research documents persistent friction, irony, distancing and disqualification directed at equity efforts, showing that such reactions are frequently articulated as neutral professional judgment rather than as explicit opposition (McGowan & Ng, 2016; Irigaray et al., 2022; Smith & Griffiths, 2022).

Dick (2004) was among the first to position resistance to diversity in direct relation to diversity work, describing these reactions as taking shape in discourse and routine practice rather than only in explicit statements of disagreement (Dick, 2004). In this view, people draw on definitions of what is “reasonable”, “fair”, “professional”, or

"normal" and these definitions structure when and how they support, reinterpret, or slow down initiatives linked to inclusion, development, representation, or redistribution (Dick, 2004; Mumby, 2005; Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016). Resistance is therefore treated as embedded in context and language, rather than as a purely individual refusal (Dick, 2004; Conroy et al., 2024).

Within this intellectual trajectory, Thomas and Plaut (2007) consolidated these insights and conceptualized them explicitly as diversity resistance, defining it as "a range of practices and behaviors within and by organizations that interfere, intentionally or unintentionally, with the use of diversity as an opportunity for learning and effectiveness" (Thomas & Plaut, 2007, p. 5). This formulation positioned diversity resistance as an outcome-based construct that encompasses both individual and organizational behaviors and practices that impede access, fair treatment and learning. Diversity resistance thus includes visible confrontation as well as selective cooperation, procedural delay, resource withdrawal, reframing DEI as not urgent, performative endorsement without follow-through, treatment of DEI as secondary work and silent disengagement in everyday practice (Thomas & Plaut, 2007; Chrobot-Mason et al., 2008; Workman-Stark, 2023). These behaviors appear across levels, operating both interpersonally and organizationally (Thomas & Plaut, 2007).

In this thesis, the following working definition is adopted, aligned with this stream and grounded in the empirical material. Resistance to diversity is defined here as *the intentional or unintentional ways through which the value-added of diversity is derailed by actions inside organizations, ranging from individual conduct to cultural patterns and organizational routines* (Thomas & Plaut, 2007; Thomas, 2020; Thomas & Summerville, 2024). This definition positions resistance as an organizational process enacted through governance, prioritization, interpretation and resource allocation, rather than as a matter of personal opinion or isolated attitude (Ng & Sears, 2020; Morton, 2025; Cox & Nguyen, 2024).

The literature shows that these processes are frequently presented as rational managerial decisions, such as budget reprioritization, narrowing of targets, postponement of timelines, or reclassifying DEI as "communications work" rather than as core operational change (Ng & Sears, 2020; Hellerstedt et al., 2024; Cox & Nguyen, 2024). Similar mechanisms appear at the interactional level, where irony, distancing and strategic politeness function as signals that DEI has low status and where credibility is quietly withdrawn from those associated with DEI agendas in everyday conversation and

evaluation (McGowan & Ng, 2016; Irigaray et al., 2022; Smith & Griffiths, 2022). Research on belonging and participation shows that these interpersonal dynamics shape inclusion outcomes by influencing perceived legitimacy, psychological safety and willingness to remain in the organization, particularly among those who already experience exposure or isolation (Metz et al., 2022; Kundro & Neely, 2024; Khassawneh, 2025).

Building on the original formulation, Thomas (2020) documents how diversity resistance has evolved alongside the mainstreaming of DEI. She describes a specific pattern of resistance operating through formal display, often referred to as diversity performance, in which visible structures such as councils, dashboards, awards and training modules signal institutional maturity without producing equivalent movement in promotion, sponsorship, pay, or decision access (Thomas, 2020; Thomas & Summerville, 2024). Diversity performance supports external legitimacy and stakeholder expectations while containing inclusion within controlled channels such as branding, compliance, or human resources (Thomas, 2020; Ng & Sears, 2020; Hellerstedt et al., 2024). Related analyses of non-performativity and symbolic compliance show how documents, audits and KPIs can stabilize existing authority structures while displaying commitment to DEI (Ahmed, 2007a; Holck, 2016; Cox & Nguyen, 2024).

In the DEI literature, a recurring methodological and interpretive problem is that limited results of diversity initiatives are frequently coded as an "implementation failure", which can obscure the patterned ways in which organizational priorities, legitimacy claims and governance routines shape what DEI becomes in practice (Ng & Sears, 2020; Hellerstedt et al., 2024; Allen et al., 2025). For that reason, it is important to distinguish failure as an outcome label from resistance as a set of processes through which DEI is slowed, diluted, reframed, or symbolically affirmed while its practical effects are limited (Ahmed, 2007a; Thomas, 2020; Workman-Stark, 2023). This distinction matters because "resistance" is conceptually broader than discrimination or bias alone, covering patterned responses that can be intentional (such as backlash) or unintentional (such as unconscious bias) (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Iyer, 2022; Gündemir et al., 2024).

Studies on microaggressions, routine incivility and subtle harassment further confirm that resistance travels through everyday interactional conduct that erodes credibility and belonging for underrepresented groups, while leaders frequently frame such incidents as interpersonal rather than structural (Thomas & Plaut, 2007; Irigaray et al., 2022; Smith & Griffiths, 2022). Repeated exposure to irony, dismissal, questioning

of competence, or social exclusion affects turnover intentions, voice and engagement, thereby undermining DEI outcomes in practice (McGowan & Ng, 2016; Metz et al., 2022; Khassawneh, 2025).

The psychology of resistance to DEI has been mapped through perceived threats to identity, career security, status, or moral order, showing how these threats translate into recognizable repertoires such as sarcasm, passive delay, selective compliance and the moral defense of neutral merit (Kidder et al., 2004; Iyer, 2022; Gündemir et al., 2024). These repertoires often rely on fairness language and claims that DEI distorts professional standards and they are frequently articulated by members of historically advantaged groups who describe DEI as a challenge to deserved opportunity and legitimate hierarchy (Flood et al., 2021; Allen et al., 2025; Morton, 2025).

At the same time, people in historically marginalized positions often engage in calibrated forms of escalation, resignation, selective withdrawal, or strategic compliance when they perceive that formal commitments to DEI will not generate meaningful protection or mobility (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016; Conroy et al., 2024; Tonelli et al., 2025). Research in hierarchical and conservative environments shows how these employees self-regulate speech, downplay claims, or limit participation in "sensitive" conversations to preserve employability and credibility where DEI is politically loaded (Islam, 2012; Van Douwen et al., 2022; Tonelli et al., 2025).

Recent literature adds two further elements. First, studies document a visible increase in explicit contestation of DEI through public argument, reputational threat and legal or political pressure directed at DEI structures, targets and budgets, making resistance more vocal and public in some contexts (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024; Ng et al., 2025; Sands & Ferraro, 2025). Second, research identifies diversity fatigue as an internal climate of emotional exhaustion and disengagement arising from repeated messaging and formal programming without corresponding change in daily work conditions, career access, sponsorship, or pay equity (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Legate & Weinstein, 2025). Both elements shape how DEI is interpreted as legitimate, necessary, or excessive and both contribute to future cycles of support and resistance (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024; Ng et al., 2025; Hellerstedt et al., 2024).

Broadly, diversity resistance emerges as a construct that links organizational governance, interpersonal practice and institutional narrative, providing the analytical foundation for the empirical strategy of this thesis (Thomas & Plaut, 2007; Thomas, 2020;

Ng & Sears, 2020; Gündemir et al., 2024). Throughout the thesis, resistance is treated as an organizational process rather than an individual disposition.

2.3.2 Resistance, backlash and unintended consequences

The literature uses several related terms to describe reactions to DEI and an analytic distinction among them is important for conceptual clarity (Leslie, 2019; Dover et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2025). Diversity resistance, backlash, unintended consequences, symbolic compliance, diversity performance and diversity fatigue refer to connected dynamics that operate through different intensities, mechanisms and attribution logics (Leslie, 2019; Dover et al., 2020; Gündemir et al., 2024).

Diversity resistance, as defined in the previous section, refers to practices and behaviors within and by organizations that interfere with the use of diversity as an opportunity for learning and effectiveness, including effects on access and fair treatment (Thomas & Plaut, 2007, p. 5; Thomas, 2020). This construct captures how resistance may be enacted through interaction, managerial decisions and organizational routines that slow, redirect, or contain DEI while maintaining formal alignment with DEI language and legitimacy demands (Ahmed, 2007b; Ng & Sears, 2020; Workman-Stark, 2023). Empirical and conceptual work describes this repertoire as including overt contestation as well as selective cooperation, procedural delay, controlled agreement with limited follow-through and resource withdrawal justified as prioritization and efficiency (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2008; Workman-Stark, 2023; Story et al., 2024).

Backlash refers to a higher-intensity and often politicized form of reaction to DEI, commonly framed as a defense of merit, fairness, professionalism and legitimate hierarchy (Kidder et al., 2004; Harris & Jackson, 2021; Allen et al., 2025). Studies describe backlash as including open rejection of targets or corrective measures and the use of grievance language, such as claims of reverse discrimination or accusations that DEI "lowers standards" or imposes an ideological agenda (Hill, 2009; Plaut et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2024). Research also indicates that backlash is often amplified when DEI is framed in moral or equity terms that explicitly name historical exclusion and redistribution, thereby making status and legitimacy salient and contested (Kidder et al., 2004; Iyer, 2022; Ng et al., 2025). Within this view, backlash may translate into reputational and political pressure used to pause, defund, or roll back DEI structures (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024; Sands & Ferraro, 2025; Ng et al., 2025).

For example, Kidder et al. (2004) illustrate backlash as a structured reaction shaped by framing and perceived distributive implications. Their scenario experiment showed that an affirmative-action justification produced more negative attitudes than a competitive-advantage justification when the underlying initiative was held constant, with stronger negative emotions and fairness concerns among respondents who perceived loss for themselves or their group (Kidder et al., 2004). These findings support the claim that backlash intensifies when DEI evokes zero-sum interpretations and is framed as corrective and redistributive rather than performance-enhancing (Kidder et al., 2004; Iyer, 2022).

Then, Mihaylova and Rietmann (2025) distinguish between *backlash* (intentional rejection) and *backfire* (unintended negative outcomes of DEI initiatives). Their scoping review demonstrates that both coexist across micro, meso and macro levels, underscoring that workplace resistance reflects not only ideological opposition but the unintended side effects of intervention design. Furthermore, Leslie, Kim and Ye (2025) synthesize research on the intended and unintended effects of diversity initiatives, showing how design and communication choices can produce *backfire* or *negative spillover* when perceived as moralizing or procedural overreach. Their review reinforces that unintended effects form part of the same continuum of resistance that shapes DEI outcomes.

Unintended consequences of diversity initiatives describe outcomes that emerge from how DEI is designed, framed and communicated, rather than from deliberate obstruction (Von Bergen et al., 2002; Leslie, 2019; Dover et al., 2020). One pattern concerns stigmatizing effects: targeted programs can send the message that certain groups "need special help", which can undermine perceived competence and reinforce stereotypes in evaluation and promotion (Leslie, 2019; Dover et al., 2020; Guschke & Christensen, 2021). Another pattern concerns saturation: repeated messaging and mandatory training can generate fatigue and skepticism when employees perceive performative communication and tracking but perceive little structural change in workload fairness, sponsorship, psychological safety, or pay (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Legate & Weinstein, 2025). These dynamics affect willingness to engage with DEI and influence future managerial decisions on scope and cadence (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Hellerstedt et al., 2024; Cox & Nguyen, 2024).

Symbolic compliance and diversity performance describe situations in which organizations produce the visible infrastructure of DEI (e.g., councils, dashboards, awards, mandatory training, messaging from leadership) and hold that infrastructure up

as evidence of maturity, while keeping intact the deeper rules that govern promotion, sponsorship, pay and authority (Ahmed, 2007a; Holck, 2016; Thomas & Summerville, 2024). This pattern satisfies governance expectations, protects legitimacy with external stakeholders and communicates that DEI is already under control, which can reduce internal pressure for structural review (Ahmed, 2007a; Ng & Sears, 2020; Hellerstedt et al., 2024). Holck et al (2016) extend this logic by demonstrating that procedural equality mechanisms themselves can reproduce exclusion, making structural inertia a form of unintended resistance embedded in everyday routines.

Diversity fatigue describes emotional saturation and disengagement, often expressed as “we are tired of this topic”, “this divides the team”, or “this is already solved here” and it appears after cycles of reporting, campaigns and required learning with limited visible effect on credibility, access, or fairness in daily work (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Legate & Weinstein, 2025). Managers can then deploy fatigue as a justification to scale down DEI, presenting downscaling as pragmatism rather than resistance (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024; Sands & Ferraro, 2025; Ng et al., 2025). However, Risberg and Corvellec (2022) argue that diversity work resists binary evaluations of success and failure; its ambiguity reflects ongoing negotiation and “trying”, through which both progress and resistance coexist as part of the same organizational motion.

From a broader perspective, diversity resistance operates as an umbrella for practices that hinder DEI in ways that often appear legitimate, while backlash represents a visible and often politicized expression of this process. In turn, unintended consequences of diversity initiatives emerge from program design, signaling, evaluation and communication and they can generate both negative and positive spillovers. In contrast, symbolic compliance and diversity performance describe how organizations protect legitimacy and stability while limiting structural disruption. Finally, diversity fatigue describes an internal climate that supports the slowdown and reframing of DEI as a burden. Together, these constructs form the conceptual basis for the mechanisms discussed in Section 2.5 (Leslie, 2019; Gündemir et al., 2024; Allen et al., 2025). Table 3 synthesizes three of these constructs.

Table 3 — Conceptual differences between constructs

Concept	Definition	Intentionality	References
Diversity Resistance	Processes, behaviors, interpretations and routines that divert, slow, or contain DEI in practice while presenting formal alignment with DEI language, governance and reputation demands. This includes selective cooperation, procedural delay, withdrawal of resources, polite agreement with no follow-through and reframing DEI as secondary work under the language of prioritization and efficiency.	Intentional or unintentional, located in interpersonal, managerial and institutional practice	Thomas (2020); Workman-Stark (2023); Story et al (2024)
Backlash	A high-intensity and often politicized reaction that frames DEI as a threat to status, moral order and professional standards and that uses grievance language to contest the legitimacy of DEI goals. Backlash draws on fairness and merit narratives to claim that DEI creates unfair advantage, violates neutrality, or lowers standards.	Primarily intentional, identity-protective and often public	Kidder et al. (2004); Hill (2009); Harris & Jackson (2021); Lee et al. (2024); Allen et al. (2025); Ng et al. (2025)
Unintended Consequences of Diversity Initiatives	Outcomes that follow from how initiatives are designed and communicated, instead of from deliberate opposition. Includes stigmatizing effects (e.g., perception that targeted groups "need help"), credibility doubts and diversity fatigue. Includes positive spillovers such as new pressure for transparency in pay, sponsorship and leadership demographics.	Program-driven and communication-driven rather than oppositional	Leslie (2019); Dover et al (2020); Legate & Weinstein (2025); Hellerstedt et al (2024); Cox & Nguyen (2024)

Source: Elaborated by the author (2026).

Diversity resistance, backlash and unintended consequences share historical antecedents in inequality, stereotype and perceived threat and these antecedents shape both emotional reactions and procedural responses inside organizations (Dovidio et al., 2010; Fiske & Lee, 2008; Iyer, 2022). In many cases, advantaged groups frame opposition to DEI as a fairness claim, describe DEI as preferential treatment and present resistance as a defense of competence and merit, which stabilizes hierarchy while appearing principled (Flood et al., 2021; Allen et al., 2025; Morton, 2025). In parallel, repeated exposure to DEI discourse without visible change produces saturation and withdrawal, which leaders then describe as "fatigue" and this narrative supports budget cuts, deprioritization and symbolic consolidation of DEI under corporate communication or legal risk management (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Sands & Ferraro, 2025).

By presenting these constructs together, the thesis establishes a basis to analyze how resistance to diversity operates as an organizational process, how backlash functions as a visible and politically charged expression of that process and how unintended consequences shape the field in which these reactions gain legitimacy and continuity (Leslie, 2019; Gündemir et al., 2024; Allen et al., 2025).

2.3.4 Overt and subtle forms of resistance

Research in Management and Organization Studies describes resistance to diversity as a patterned repertoire of behaviours enacted within organizations, rather than as isolated refusals by particular individuals (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Gündemir et al., 2024). This repertoire encompasses explicit opposition, procedural containment, strategic distancing and affective withdrawal, which operate as analytically distinct yet mutually reinforcing responses to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts (Smollan, 2011; Conroy et al., 2024). Thomas and Plaut (2007) situate these responses along a continuum of overt and covert forms at both interpersonal and organizational levels, defining diversity resistance as "*a range of practices and behaviors within and by organizations that interfere, intentionally or unintentionally, with the use of diversity as an opportunity for learning and effectiveness*" (p. 5).

At the explicit end of this spectrum, resistance appears as direct contestation of DEI goals, public critique of DEI discourse, visible refusal to endorse specific measures, or active interruption of proposed interventions, which are frequently framed as principled objections rather than as opposition to inclusion (Kidder et al., 2004; Harris & Jackson, 2021). Thomas and Plaut (2007) emphasize the visibility of these dynamics by noting that "cases of overt resistance to diversity are typically easy to identify" (p. 7), often involving discrimination, harassment, or direct exclusion. These confrontational responses commonly mobilize managerial claims about fairness, performance standards, merit and cultural fit to legitimize opposition to DEI and to position resistance as a defense of institutional integrity (Hill, 2009; Allen et al., 2025). Empirical studies show that explicit opposition frequently links DEI to ideological interference or reputational risk, portraying it as politically charged, morally intrusive, or externally imposed rather than as part of core organizational practice (Harris & Jackson, 2021; Mahdanian, 2025). As Mahdanian (2025) demonstrates, such debates often become polarized within

organizations and institutional fields, complicating binary interpretations of support versus opposition.

Beyond visible confrontation, resistance manifests through procedural containment, where formal agreement with the language of inclusion coexists with the redirection, delay, or dilution of structural measures such as pay equity reviews, promotion criteria revisions, or leadership pipeline interventions (Ahmed, 2007b; Ybema & Horvers, 2017; Workman-Stark, 2023). In these cases, organizations maintain diversity councils, statements, training calendars and compliance artefacts while altering timelines, limiting budgets, or assigning responsibility to units with limited influence, which keeps DEI symbolically present but materially constrained (Ford et al., 2008; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). This pattern aligns with organizational analyses showing that deferral and reframing can be enacted as routine governance practices while remaining difficult to name explicitly as resistance (Smollan, 2011; Mikel-Hong et al., 2024).

A further pattern is strategic distancing, in which managers and senior leaders express support for fairness and inclusion in principle but withdraw from visible sponsorship, resource allocation, or personal accountability for implementation (Plaut et al., 2011; McGowan & Ng, 2016). Strategic distancing shifts responsibility for DEI work onto members of underrepresented groups or those already expected to engage with inclusion, concentrating emotional labour and reputational exposure while framing DEI as a niche responsibility rather than an enterprise mandate (Kundro & Neely, 2024; Metz et al., 2022). This strategic distancing allows dominant groups to appear aligned with inclusion discourse while avoiding association with internal controversy, identity politics, or perceived political risk, thereby protecting their legitimacy and neutrality within the organization (Plaut et al., 2018; Allen et al., 2025).

Resistance also appears through affective withdrawal, frequently described as diversity fatigue, in which employees disengage from DEI efforts because they experience the topic as repetitive, emotionally exhausting, administratively burdensome, or disconnected from "real work" (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Legate & Weinstein, 2025). Thomas and Plaut (2007) explicitly include silence within the repertoire of subtle resistance, arguing that "silence in the face of others' discrimination, harassment and mistreatment only serves to reinforce the resistance" (p. 8). Empirical research shows that disengagement driven by fatigue reduces willingness to participate in DEI learning processes, weakens psychological safety for those who continue to advocate for equity and signals that DEI is optional and reputationally risky (Legate & Weinstein, 2025; Allen

et al., 2025). This affective mode of resistance is particularly durable because it frames withdrawal as self-protection and workload management, making it difficult to challenge within formal culture, performance, or leadership conversations (Gündemir et al., 2024; Mahdanian, 2025).

Taken together, explicit opposition, procedural containment, strategic distancing and affective withdrawal stabilize existing distributions of influence, access and credibility within organizations while leadership narratives continue to signal public commitment to diversity and inclusion (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Ybema & Horvers, 2017).

2.3.5 Organizational and individual consequences of resistance

Resistance to diversity produces organizational, workforce and individual consequences that jointly shape credibility, retention, health, voice and long-term performance capacity (Workman-Stark, 2023; Allen et al., 2025). Allen et al. (2025) argue that misalignment between DEI framing and practice erodes belonging and trust, signaling inconsistency in leadership commitment and generating downstream consequences for engagement and retention.

At the organizational level, selective endorsement of DEI combined with structural containment of change creates a visible gap between public commitment and internal enforcement, which damages perceived institutional integrity (Kaiser et al., 2013; Roberson et al., 2024). Externally, this misalignment increases reputational exposure with investors, regulators, clients and civil society, particularly in environments where DEI is both institutionalized and politically contested (Hellerstedt et al., 2024; Ng et al., 2025). Such erosion of credibility reduces identification with the employer and weakens willingness to invest discretionary effort in future culture initiatives, purpose campaigns, or leadership branding framed as values-driven (Ng et al., 2025; Sands & Ferraro, 2025).

When leaders distance themselves from DEI or assign responsibility to those already marginalized, employees outside dominant groups interpret development promises as conditional and unstable, reporting higher exit intentions and lower willingness to compete for promotion tracks perceived as politically unreceptive (McGowan & Ng, 2016; Morton, 2025). Evidence from Brazil shows that organizational and leadership narratives frequently frame inclusion as a matter of interpersonal style or communication rather than as a structural issue of access, protecting corporate image

while signaling that advancement remains dependent on informal tolerance rather than institutional guarantees (Islam, 2012; Tonelli et al., 2025; Irigaray et al., 2022).

At the workforce level, resistance to diversity affects retention, progression and succession pipelines for underrepresented groups by shaping perceptions of sponsorship, access and the viability of long-term careers within the organization (Metz et al., 2022; Khassawneh, 2025). When employees observe that DEI is celebrated symbolically but translated inconsistently into systems such as pay, promotion, sponsorship, or disciplinary protection, they reassess whether the organization can be trusted to act on equity when doing so becomes politically or operationally costly (Ng & Sears, 2020; Story et al., 2024). Employees monitor signals such as access to high-visibility assignments, entry into decision-making arenas and public backing during conflict, treating these cues as indicators of whether advancement is structurally attainable (Kundro & Neely, 2024; Metz et al., 2022).

At the individual level, resistance to diversity generates cognitive load, emotional strain and health-relevant stress responses for those who experience exclusion, delegitimation, or constant scrutiny in daily work (Smith & Griffiths, 2022; Khassawneh, 2025). Studies document patterned exposure to incivility, subtle disrespect, expertise undermining and gaslighting, where reports of bias are reframed as oversensitivity, producing anxiety, self-surveillance and strategic silence over time (Irigaray et al., 2022; Smith & Griffiths, 2022). These dynamics reduce psychological safety, suppress voice and limit creativity and learning for underrepresented employees, directly affecting performance, progression and mental health sustainability (Khassawneh, 2025; Allen et al., 2025; Mahdanian, 2025).

Consistent patterns of delay, distancing and selective enforcement corrode trust in leadership, as employees infer whether leaders will intervene when inequity becomes politically sensitive or reputationally risky (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Roberson et al., 2024). When DEI is interpreted as negotiable and deferrable, employees become less likely to report discrimination, less willing to mentor across differences and less inclined to attach their future to the organization, increasing voluntary turnover risk and weakening long-term succession capacity (Story et al., 2024; Metz et al., 2022). For these reasons, contemporary scholarship treats resistance to diversity as a strategic organizational issue, given its implications for retention, capability development, psychological safety, leadership credibility and employer reputation (Workman-Stark, 2023; Allen et al., 2025).

Figure 1 — Descriptive map: synthesis of prior literature

	Subtle / Covert	Overt / Explicit
Everyday interaction (micro-practices)	• Irony and distancing • Strategic politeness • Humour and pauses • Vague talk ('people think...') • Silence • Credibility • Credibility quietly withdrawn • Microaggressions • Routine incivility • Questioning competence • Social exclusion	• Direct insults • Harassment • Explicit discriminatory comments • Open confrontation in meetings
Managerial decisions and implementation	• Postponement ('not right time') • Procedural delay • Selective cooperation • Controlled agreement, limited follow-through • Narrowing targets • Reclassifying DEI as 'communications work' • Shifting responsibility ('not my job') • Budget reprioritization framed as pragmatism • Strategic distancing from sponsorship/accountability	• Explicit refusal to sponsor initiatives • Open rejection of targets/quotas • Blocking proposals • Cancelling initiatives visibly
Organizational governance and public positioning	• Symbolic compliance • Performative endorsement • DEI councils/dashboards/awards without real change • Decoupling formal structures from routines • Diversity washing ('for show') • Reputational management • Selective reporting of problems	• Public contestation of DEI • Defunding or rolling back structures • Legal/political pressure • Reputational threat campaigns • Formal restrictions on language/budgets

Source: Elaborated by the author (2026).

Across the literature reviewed, resistance to DEI is consistently described as a repertoire of practices that varies by visibility (subtle to overt) and by where it operates in organizations, ranging from everyday interactional conduct to managerial implementation choices and broader governance and legitimacy work (Thomas & Plaut, 2007; Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Ahmed, 2007a; Workman-Stark, 2023). These forms can include explicit contestation and backlash, as well as more ordinary patterns such as procedural delay, selective cooperation, strategic distancing, symbolic compliance and affective withdrawal, which can constrain DEI while maintaining formal alignment with inclusion language (Ahmed, 2007b; Thomas, 2020; Ng & Sears, 2020; Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens, 2018). See Figure 1 for reference.

In combination, this synthesis clarifies what resistance looks like across levels and degrees of visibility, creating a basis for the next section, which turns from repertoire to explanation by examining the mechanisms through which these patterns are generated and sustained in everyday work.

2.4 Mechanisms that generate resistance

Resistance to diversity follows a patterned logic grounded in how DEI enters everyday work, rather than appearing as an incidental outburst in isolated situations (Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens, 2018; Workman-Stark, 2023). Building on this premise, Wiggins-Romesburg and Githens (2018) frame resistance and integration as points along

a continuum, where organizational responses evolve through dynamic interaction between individual psychology and collective behaviour. In their account, these patterned reactions are framed as the interplay between unconscious psychological defense and collective organizational routines, so that resistance to diversity functions as an equilibrium mechanism through which organizations manage perceived threats to established meaning systems (Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens, 2018).

From this standpoint, resistance does not arise in a vacuum but emerges through identifiable mechanisms that include perceived threats to resources and identity, appeals to merit and procedural justice and perceptions of exclusion (Iyer, 2022; Tyler & Blader, 2003). Employees and leaders interpret DEI through these mechanisms and build justification for withholding sponsorship, questioning urgency, or expressing open opposition, which positions resistance as a more "socially acceptable" response (Craig & Richeson, 2014; Branscombe et al., 1999).

Against this backdrop, a growing body of work in Organizational Psychology and Management argues that the design and delivery of DEI initiatives operate as structured triggers for these mechanisms (Leslie, Kim, & Ye, 2025; Gündemir et al., 2024). Diversity initiatives carry specific content such as training modules, mentoring schemes, hiring targets, compliance systems, or demographic scorecards and each of these elements signals how decisions about access and advancement will proceed inside the organization (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021; Roberson, Moore, & Bell, 2024). Implementation style functions as a driver of interpretation because leaders frame the initiative either as a moral correction grounded in fairness and historical inequality or as a strategic investment linked to innovation, competitiveness and talent retention (Ely & Thomas, 1996; Ng & Sears, 2020). These two frames travel with different expectations and different emotional charges, which activate different forms of resistance among different groups (Noon, 2007; Chrobot-Mason, Hays-Thomas, & Wishik, 2008).

In this line, Leslie, Kim and Ye (2025) describe DEI initiatives as multi-step interventions in which the content of the initiative, the strength of enforcement and the communication style shape both intended effects and unintended effects for different groups (Leslie, Kim, & Ye, 2025; Burnett & Aguinis, 2024). Intended effects include increased access, stronger psychological safety, clearer accountability and visible progress for historically marginalised employees, which aligns with the long-term organizational case for representation and belonging (Ng & Sears, 2020; Kundro & Neely, 2024). Unintended effects include backlash and negative spillover, meaning

defensive reactions among those who perceive moral blame, status loss, or procedural unfairness in the initiative, which creates new sites of friction around legitimacy, trust and authority (Craig & Richeson, 2014; Allen, Murrell, & Pil, 2025). In this sense, the same initiative can produce gains for one audience and mobilisation against DEI for another audience inside the same firm (Leslie, Kim, & Ye, 2025; Hellerstedt, Uman, & Wennberg, 2024), placing resistance squarely inside organizational practice rather than outside it.

Furthermore, resistance is a mechanism-rich field that links individual interpretation, group identity work and organizational governance, instead of treating resistance as a purely attitudinal obstacle (Ford, Ford, & D'amelio, 2008; Smollan, 2011). The following subsections examine three recurring mechanisms: perceived threat to status, resources and identity; meritocracy and procedural fairness; and perceived exclusion among "dominant groups" (Iyer, 2022; Kaiser et al., 2013).

2.4.1 Status threat, resource threat and identity threat

Perceived threat operates as a central pathway through which resistance to diversity gains coherence, moral vocabulary and energy inside organizations (Iyer, 2022; Sidanius et al., 1992). In this view, individuals and groups interpret DEI initiatives as a potential loss of influence, material opportunity and cultural centrality, which anchors resistance in a defence of position rather than in an admission of bias (Craig & Richeson, 2014; Branscombe et al., 1999). Recent work summarises this as a "multiplicity of threats" that can undergird diversity resistance, including threats tied to resources, culture, status and perceived exclusion (Plaut et al., 2020).

Within this broader category of threat, resource threat refers to the perception that hiring policies, leadership pipelines, or fast-track programmes will redirect coveted opportunities such as promotions, visibility projects, or salary growth, which activates resistance in competitive internal labour markets (LeVine & Campbell, 1972; Craig et al., 2018). Status threat, in turn, refers to the possibility that an established group will experience a drop in prestige, moral standing, or implicit authority, especially when DEI messaging links past advantage to structural unfairness, which can feel like a reputational downgrade for groups that perceive themselves as legitimate incumbents (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005; Esses et al., 2001). Alongside these dynamics, identity threat surfaces

when individuals experience DEI language as a challenge to the values, norms, or worldview that shape their sense of belonging at work, which frames DEI as a cultural intruder rather than a developmental tool (Ahmed, 2007b; Blumer, 1958; Craig & Richeson, 2014).

Collectively, Social Identity Theory and Intergroup Threat Theory describe these reactions as predictable under conditions of perceived status instability and resource competition, especially in periods of visible organizational change or symbolic realignment around fairness and inclusion (Branscombe et al., 1999; Sidanius et al., 1992). Majority-group members frequently report fear of being deprioritised in advancement decisions, which supports resistance narratives that present DEI as a zero-sum exchange in which gains for underrepresented groups correspond to immediate losses for incumbent groups (Craig & Richeson, 2014; Craig et al., 2018). These zero-sum beliefs often appear together with a language of self-protection and procedural vigilance, which gives resistance an image of rational defence of entitlements, rather than an emotional refusal of inclusion (Ballinger et al., 2024; Brown & Jacoby-Senghor, 2022).

A related strand of work on moral identity shows that some individuals experience diversity messaging as an accusation of complicity in inequality, which encourages distancing, disengagement and rhetorical pushback framed as "fairness to everyone" and this mechanism supports legitimacy for resistance in public forums and inside daily work routines (Iyer, 2022; Dover et al., 2020). Building on this, recent work in management studies links these threat dynamics directly to the design and rollout of DEI initiatives, creating a bridge between micro-level perception and organizational practice (Leslie, Kim, & Ye, 2025; Gündemir et al., 2024).

Strong, explicit initiatives communicate demographic targets, assign measurable responsibility and weigh diversity evidence in decision-making processes, which signals structural reallocation of access and authority inside the organization (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021; Roberson, Moore, & Bell, 2024). The same features that communicate seriousness, however, increase the chance of backlash and negative spillover among employees who do not identify as the target group, because they perceive prioritisation, moralisation and redistribution in a highly salient and personalised way (Allen, Murrell, & Pil, 2025; Leslie, Kim, & Ye, 2025). Through this chain, threat-based resistance emerges as an organized and recurring response, which positions resistance as an internal governance issue within the firm rather than an isolated behavioural episode (Workman-Stark, 2023; Ford, Ford, & D'amelio, 2008).

2.4.2 Meritocracy and procedural fairness

A second recurrent mechanism for resistance is the mobilization of meritocracy arguments and procedural fairness, which many times positions opposition to DEI as a defence of neutral standards, individual effort and due process inside the firm (Tyler & Blader, 2003; Littler, 2017). The meritocracy narrative shares beliefs that advancement flows from talent and work ethic, so any policy that appears to prioritise demographic or identity-based considerations enters organizational discourse as an intervention in the natural order of selection and reward (Castilla & Benard, 2010; Konrad, Richard, & Yang, 2021). Employees and leaders may justify resistance through arguments about equal treatment and procedural purity, which frames DEI as a source of unfair advantage for specific groups and, by implication, a dilution of standards for the organization as a whole (Craig & Richeson, 2017; Wilkins et al., 2017). Through this narrative, resistance circulates as stewardship of organizational quality and institutional fairness and therefore appears aligned with performance, productivity and risk management, especially in high-visibility or high-stakes functions such as promotion and succession planning (Ng & Sears, 2020; Kundro & Neely, 2024).

Scholars in diversity and employment systems describe a consistent effect in which visible DEI structures create a widespread perception of fairness, even in environments where unequal treatment persists at the level of daily interaction and evaluation (Kaiser et al., 2013; Castilla, 2011). This perception of fairness can reduce willingness to acknowledge discrimination claims, because the existence of DEI policies itself becomes treated as proof of equity, which in turn delegitimises continued requests for structural change and frames persistent critique as exaggeration or personal grievance (Kaiser et al., 2013; McGowan & Ng, 2016).

Research in organizational psychology characterises this dynamic as reputational closure: once the company claims “inclusive culture”, employees experience social pressure to align with that status and can classify further calls for change as unnecessary escalation, which embeds resistance in everyday moderation language and conflict-avoidance practices (Plaut et al., 2018; Ng & Lam, 2020). This mechanism converts resistance into an apparently reasonable stance that protects the image of the organization and the self-image of incumbents, while simultaneously limiting the practical reach of DEI (Allen, Murrell, & Pil, 2025; Burnett & Aguinis, 2024).

The link between procedural fairness language and resistance appears in work on unintended consequences of DEI initiatives, where experts describe how certain programme features can induce perceptions of preferential treatment, stigma, or moralising tone (Leslie et al., 2025; Dover et al., 2020). Strong initiatives such as demographic hiring targets, accountability scorecards, or mandatory training communicate explicit redistribution and employees who identify with advantaged groups can experience these signals as institutional endorsement of identity-based decision rules, which activates fairness-based pushback (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021; Roberson, Moore, & Bell, 2024). At the same time, weaker initiatives that rely on broad statements, celebration events, or generic culture pledges tend to generate perceptions of empty display and this perception undermines credibility and creates cynicism that feeds resistance, especially among employees who expect concrete action and measurable change (Ng & Sears, 2020; Hellerstedt, Uman, & Wennberg, 2024). Through both routes, meritocracy and procedural fairness operate as legitimising frames: they allow resistance to circulate as responsible governance, ethical stewardship and defence of quality, rather than as hostility to inclusion (Konrad, Richard, & Yang, 2021; Tyler & Blader, 2003).

2.4.3 Resistance across groups in the workplace and the role of leadership

The literature divides resistance to DEI across both dominant and underrepresented groups and frames this resistance as a patterned response to contested change rather than an individual failure to collaborate or a matter of personal attitude alone (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Scholars describe resistance as combining behavioural withdrawal, emotional distancing, narrative reframing and strategic delay, which shows that resistance often operates through negotiated interpretation of what DEI should do and for whom, instead of appearing only as explicit verbal opposition (Gündemir et al., 2024). This position treats resistance as part of normal managerial and professional practice because these patterned responses are frequently described as neutral prioritisation of core work, operational pragmatism, or mature judgment, which makes resistance difficult to capture through formal compliance indicators (Mumby, 2005).

“Dominant groups” are defined as employees who are overrepresented in positions of strategic authority and symbolic credibility (such as leadership positions),

while “underrepresented groups” are defined as employees who remain concentrated in lower-status roles and face restricted access to leadership positions even in organizations that publicly state a commitment to inclusion, which reflects a leadership bottleneck rather than a numeric minority alone (Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). Studies show that some employees in "dominant groups" interpret DEI as an agenda designed for “others”, which produces a perception that inclusion is outside their own identity, contribution, or career interest (Plaut et al., 2011). This perception often results in withdrawal from sponsorship behaviours such as mentoring, advocacy in succession processes, or public endorsement of DEI, even when those same employees verbally support general fairness or equal treatment (Unzueta & Binning, 2010).

Researchers analyse this withdrawal as a resource-based mode of resistance, because the withholding of political protection, advocacy and informal opportunities quietly reduces advancement channels for underrepresented colleagues without requiring overt rejection of DEI (Metz, Stamper, & Ng, 2022). Managers frequently justify this withdrawal as a neutral focus on “core business”, which frames the decision as legitimate performance discipline and makes it difficult to challenge through accountability structures or performance systems (Kundro & Neely, 2024). This pattern is organizationally significant because mentoring, sponsorship and advocacy are repeatedly identified as core channels through which access to influence, visibility and leadership preparation circulates and limiting these channels slows the leadership pipeline for those already underrepresented in senior roles (Allen, Murrell, & Pil, 2025).

Besides resource withdrawal, resistance in "dominant groups" can take discursive form through narratives that protect established hierarchies while maintaining a performance of modernity and rationality, which allows leaders to appear objective and fair while defending existing norms of advancement and authority (Brown & Jacoby-Senghor, 2022). Evidence from interviews with senior male executives in Brazil shows repeated reliance on essentialist explanations of gender roles, assertions that promotion systems are already neutral and based only on merit and the use of humour to relativise gender equality demands, which frames gender equity as an already achieved reality and positions further structural intervention as unnecessary within Brazilian firms (Tonelli et al., 2025). Scholars refer to these repertoires as discursive resistance because they recast inequality as a matter of personal style or interpersonal fit instead of naming systemic barriers in evaluation, promotion, or recognition, which shifts responsibility for inequity back onto individuals rather than work structures (Roos & Zanoni, 2018).

Studies in Brazil show that reported experiences of exclusion and discrimination are sometimes reframed as communication issues or personality incompatibility, which protects organizational legitimacy while discouraging formal escalation and leaving informal norms intact in Brazilian workplaces (Irigaray et al., 2022). Work on sexuality and inclusion shows that policies in support of sexual minorities can generate explicit backlash, such as moral rejection and rhetorical counter-claims, which aim to reassert cultural dominance and redraw the boundaries of what is treated as legitimate identity expression at work (Hill, 2009). This narrative reframing stabilises the status quo by translating structural questions into interpersonal ones, which makes formal intervention appear excessive, reputationally risky, or politically sensitive and allows inequality to be presented as already managed (Mahdanian, 2025).

Resistance is observed among underrepresented groups and this observation is important because it challenges the assumption that resistance always represents the defence of status advantages by "dominant groups" (Piderit, 2000). Underrepresented employees report withdrawing or withholding engagement from certain DEI initiatives when they perceive that inclusion is offered on the condition that they adapt to dominant norms of behaviour, communication and presentation instead of seeing those norms examined or renegotiated, which they interpret as assimilation pressure rather than structural inclusion (Khassawneh, 2025).

Research shows that underrepresented employees often regulate their visibility, limit self-disclosure and restrict unpaid “representation work”, especially when they are repeatedly asked to educate peers about inequity without parallel influence over evaluation criteria, workload, promotion pathways, or access to leadership preparation (Ensher, Grant-Vallone, & Donaldson, 2001). Such “controlled” engagement strategies are considered as situated resistance because they allow employees to protect credibility, psychological safety and career security in environments where naming inequity directly can still result in informal penalties and reputational cost (Ahmed, 2007a).

Studies link these protective strategies to cumulative psychological strain, showing that sustained self-monitoring, identity management and vigilance in equity conversations correlate with chronic stress, cognitive fatigue and burnout symptoms over time for underrepresented professionals (Tan et al., 2019). Longitudinal work demonstrates that repeated exposure to subtle exclusion and micro-invalidations is associated with lower affective organizational commitment, higher expectations of withdrawal and higher intent to exit among underrepresented groups, which indicates that

everyday resistance in the work environment produces measurable consequences for retention and career continuity (Schmitt et al., 2014).

Studies of employee response profiles identify “discontent opponents”, “torn shapers”, “calm compliers” and “excited supporters”, which shows that resistance can take the form of explicit challenge, conflicted engagement, passive compliance, or selective implementation and demonstrates that resistance travels across emotional, behavioural and cognitive dimensions rather than appearing as a single uniform stance (Kanitz et al., 2024). These patterns align with research on ambivalence in organizational change, which shows that employees often express partial endorsement of new initiatives while slowing, interrupting, or selectively implementing them in practice when they perceive that the associated material and emotional costs are unevenly distributed and that this ambivalence itself operates as resistance within daily work (Smollan, 2011).

This body of work positions resistance as a relational process shaped by perceived risk of exposure, perceived gain or loss of resources and subjective assessments of credibility, which means that resistance operates as an active negotiation over belonging, legitimacy, voice and career continuity within the organization (Workman-Stark, 2023). Leadership and managerial practice intensify these dynamics because managers shape evaluation criteria, control access to informal sponsorship and define which interpretations of fairness and merit appear legitimate, which means that managerial conduct is itself a central site where resistance emerges and circulates (Wahl & Holgersson, 2003).

Studies of managerial identity in public service contexts show that leaders may publicly endorse equality while framing structural intervention as a threat to their professional autonomy, which protects their status while allowing them to continue to present themselves as modern and accountable (Thomas & Davies, 2005). Research on corporate commitments to prevent gender-based violence shows that managers can acknowledge responsibility for prevention in formal terms but minimise urgency in practice, which protects organizational image while avoiding resource-intensive redistribution of attention and enforcement (Vara-Horna, Asencios-Gonzalez, Quipuzco-Chicata, & Díaz-Rosillo, 2022).

Work on gender and leadership norms argues that senior men often continue to define credible management in terms closely aligned with historically masculine expectations of authority, availability and detachment, which means that access to leadership for others depends not only on formal policy but on the willingness of these

men to redefine what legitimate leadership looks like (Wahl, 2014). Classic analysis of corporate careers shows that this leadership template has been historically constructed around a masculine model of control and uninterrupted presence, which means that continued adherence to this template operates as an implicit form of resistance because it narrows the terms under which difference can be recognised as credible leadership (Wajcman, 1998). At the board level, research documents that some directors resist quota policies for women by framing mandatory gender targets as political interference that threatens shareholder value and violates merit, which protects existing selection norms by classifying structural intervention as externally imposed and economically irrational (Roos & Zanoni, 2018). Scholars have shown that patterns of cultural default and comfort with established norms reduce motivation to challenge familiar routines even when those routines reproduce unequal access to leadership, which helps explain why resistance persists over time in different segments of the workforce (Thomas & Plaut, 2008; Cole, Bruch, & Vogel, 2016; Thomas & Summerville, 2024).

2.4.4 Credibility, implementation and the interpretation of failure

Management studies observe that organizations frequently interpret resistance as an execution or messaging problem and respond with communication plans, broad awareness sessions, or standardised compliance tools, which assume that resistance results from misunderstanding rather than from structural contestation over resources, authority, or recognition (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021). At the same time, evidence shows that employees often interpret highly standardised DEI initiatives as branding, reputational insurance, or compliance theatre instead of governance and that this perception produces scepticism, disengagement and irony, which then sustains resistance under the language of pragmatism and professional efficiency (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024). This skepticism increases when leadership messaging promises transformation, but everyday decisions about influence, visibility and developmental opportunity continue to move through informal sponsorship networks that reproduce the existing hierarchy, which signals to employees that the structural rules remain unchanged (Roberson, Moore, & Bell, 2024).

This combination of organizational framing and employee interpretation produces what can be described as a credibility gap. Studies link this credibility gap to downstream withdrawal by showing that when employees perceive DEI as symbolic or politically motivated rather than structurally backed, they deprioritise it in their daily work, reduce

voluntary engagement and restrict discretionary advocacy, which erodes the continuity of DEI over time (Ng & Sears, 2020). This pattern indicates that resistance does not emerge only from defence of status or identity; resistance emerges from disappointment with perceived inconsistency between stated ambitions and observable practice, which produces fatigue, cynicism and distancing, especially among employees who initially expected change (Story, Iwai, & Tavares, 2024). Research shows that resistance to DEI has operational and symbolic consequences for organizations because this resistance weakens retention of targeted groups, generates legal exposure through grievances and noncompliance risk and can restrict innovation capacity when teams lose psychological safety and voice diversity, which produces measurable performance costs (Riordan, Schaffer, & Stewart, 2007; Jones et al., 2022).

In addition to these operational effects, resistance also shapes symbolic dynamics inside organizations. Studies show that resistance can produce symbolic effects by encouraging superficial compliance and tokenistic visibility without redistributing authority, which fosters perceptions of false progress and undermines internal trust in DEI as a credible governance process (Wolfgruber, Gillani, & Schultz, 2022). These symbolic effects can serve reputational goals by projecting an image of inclusion to internal and external audiences and at the same time preserve core decision structures in their existing form, which stabilises the status quo while reducing the perceived need for structural review (Wolfgruber et al., 2022).

From this angle, credibility becomes central to how resistance evolves. Scholars therefore argue that credibility is central to how resistance evolves, because credibility determines whether DEI is interpreted as governance or as display and this interpretation shapes whether employees engage, withdraw, or actively challenge the initiative (Ng & Sears, 2020). The burden of these dynamics is not evenly distributed, because marginalised employees absorb a disproportionate share of the interpersonal and emotional impact created by resistance, which includes chronic hypervigilance, reduced affective commitment and cumulative exhaustion from navigating repeated signals of conditional acceptance (Ensher, Grant-Vallone, & Donaldson, 2001; Schmitt et al., 2014).

Research shows that repeated exposure to subtle discrimination and micro-invalidations produces stress responses that accumulate over time and can manifest in cognitive depletion, burnout symptoms and psychosomatic strain, which links day-to-day resistance to individual health and well-being (Tan, Dörrenbächer, & Nguyen, 2019; Mahdanian, 2025). Scholars describe this ongoing work of emotional regulation, strategic

self-presentation and protective silence by underrepresented employees as institutional affective labour, which refers to the continuous effort to sustain interpersonal safety and professional credibility inside environments where inclusion is unevenly enacted (Ahmed, 2007a). This labour includes the need to maintain interpersonal harmony in the face of subtle resistance while absorbing pressure to represent a whole social group in formal and informal DEI forums, which remains largely invisible and unrewarded in organizational systems (Gündemir et al., 2024).

Consequently, the costs associated with resistance extend beyond immediate reactions to DEI and accumulate over time. Studies connect these demands to stalled careers, lowered morale, reduced voice and heightened exit intentions for targeted groups, which shows that resistance reproduces inequality through policy or access and through long-term psychological load (Thomas & Plaut, 2008; Thomas & Summerville, 2024). At the same time, subtle exclusionary practices such as microaggressions, mixed messaging about commitment to diversity and the positioning of underrepresented professionals as visible "tokens" without equivalent authority, reinforce uneven credibility in decision-making and reinforce status hierarchies even in formally inclusive environments (Sue et al., 2007; Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2020). These patterned experiences then influence how employees interpret organizational fairness and shape their willingness to remain in the pipeline toward leadership, which links subtle resistance practices to long-term representation outcomes (Plaut et al., 2020).

Likewise, perceived credibility and perceived fairness interact, because highly visible DEI structures such as awards, official statements and public training programmes can create an internal impression that the workplace is already fair, which reduces sensitivity to continuing reports of discrimination and increases scepticism toward claims of exclusion that challenge the official image of equity (Kaiser et al., 2013). This "fairness impression" protects organizational legitimacy but can isolate employees who still experience bias, because further change requests can then be interpreted as unreasonable escalation, reputational threat, or political overreach, which reinforces silence and discourages reporting (Allen, Murrell, & Pil, 2025).

Moreover, scholars argue that strategic compliance by organizations, in which leaders publicly endorse DEI but do not alter structures, reinforces a form of "non-performative inclusion", which refers to institutional claims of commitment to diversity that do not generate material transformation in governance, access, or evaluation (Ahmed, 2007a). Such symbolic gestures as legitimising mechanisms that stabilise existing

hierarchies by translating inequality into controllable rhetoric, which can increase cynicism and disengagement among employees who perceive that DEI discourse is not matched by structural follow-through (Prasad & Mills, 1997; Payne, 2024; Liaquat et al., 2023).

Overall, these dynamics suggest that resistance cannot be reduced to technical flaws in programme rollout. At the same time, scholarship warns against reducing all resistance to weak rollout or communication gaps, because resistance reflects contested resource allocation, perceived status threat, reputational risk, identity protection and psychological survival for those navigating exposure under conditions of conditional acceptance, which means resistance is structurally produced and strategically maintained inside ordinary work (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). This broader view positions resistance as part of how inclusion itself is negotiated, delimited and redirected inside the organization, which means that resistance is not external to the DEI process but is one of the mechanisms through which DEI is continuously shaped in practice (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016).

In turn, change theory in management research shows that resistance frequently operates through compliance, delay, reframing and selective uptake rather than explicit refusal, which means that verbal endorsement of DEI goals cannot automatically be read as full behavioural or structural adoption in daily decisions (Ford, Ford, & D'amelio, 2008). On the other side, paradox and sensemaking research shows that managers and teams negotiate tensions between stated values and operational demands by producing narratives that justify partial implementation, staged timing, or controlled application and these narratives stabilise day-to-day routines while diluting the original ambition of equity reforms (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008).

Specifically, leadership studies on resistance to organizational change argue that managers often respond to inclusion requests by protecting their own role security, local processes and identity as competent leaders, which means that resistance can work by holding space for established practices instead of openly rejecting new expectations (Erwin & Garman, 2010). This interaction is cyclical because weak or symbolic implementation can generate scepticism and distancing and this scepticism and distancing can then be used to justify limiting structural action by positioning further investment as unnecessary, premature, or strategically risky, which embeds resistance into ongoing governance logic (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024).

A structural perspective further sharpens this picture. Adding to these

observations, To, Sherf and Kouchaki (2024) demonstrate that resistance often stems from structural power rather than individual ideology. Their studies show that managers in positions of authority perceive less inequity due to organizational identification, which reduces their support for DEI. This evidence positions managerial roles as structural sites where resistance can materialize. A body of scholars, therefore, argues that resistance is inseparable from power, resource control, legitimacy work and leadership identity and proposes that resistance should be treated as a stable feature of organizational functioning rather than a temporary disruption that can be repaired and then closed (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021).

Against this backdrop, a final remark concerns how resistance is normatively interpreted. A final remark is that resistance to DEI initiatives is frequently interpreted only as an obstacle to organizational change (Nkomo et al., 2019). However, the literature on organizational change suggests that some manifestations of such resistance can be productive, functioning as a signal of critical engagement that highlights flaws in interventions or opportunities for refinement (Weick & Quinn, 1999). For example, managers' reluctance to adopt standardized DEI training may reflect legitimate critiques of their disconnection from local contexts, leading to adjustments that enhance effectiveness. This perspective complements the dominant view of resistance as destructive, suggesting that some forms of resistance can catalyze positive changes when addressed appropriately. Thus, this research considers both destructive resistance (e.g., intentional sabotage of DEI policies) and constructive resistance (e.g., critiques that lead to reformulations), exploring their management implications.

2.5 Overview of the theoretical background

The literature reviewed in this chapter converges on the understanding that resistance to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) is a structured and recurring feature of organizational life, rather than a marginal deviation or an exceptional reaction (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Thomas, 2007). Across different theoretical traditions, resistance appears as a response to attempts to redistribute access, recognition and legitimacy at work, operating through discourse, everyday practices and organizational procedures at multiple levels (Mumby, 2005; Workman-Stark, 2023). The historical roots of resistance to organizational change and resistance to power provide two enduring foundations for contemporary analyses, highlighting how authority relations, formal change efforts and sensemaking processes shape organizational responses to inclusion agendas.

The review also shows that scholarship on DEI has moved beyond treating resistance as explicit refusal or overt backlash. Empirical and conceptual studies increasingly describe resistance as encompassing ambivalence, partial compliance, delay, withdrawal of sponsorship, silence, humour and symbolic support that is not followed by structural change (Gündemir et al., 2024; Kanitz et al., 2024). This body of work suggests that resistance should be understood as a repertoire of situated responses across emotional, cognitive and behavioural registers, rather than as a binary opposition between support and rejection (Smollan, 2011; Starck et al., 2021). At the same time, much management research continues to operationalize resistance through simplified dichotomies of cooperation versus opposition, leaving these negotiated and intermediate responses analytically underdeveloped.

Another important insight from the literature concerns covert and institutionally embedded forms of resistance. Studies on symbolic adoption, ceremonial compliance, humour-based minimization and depoliticization of inequality demonstrate how organizations may display strong rhetorical and formal commitments to inclusion while enacting practices that stabilize existing hierarchies (Ahmed, 2007a; Kaiser et al., 2013; Liaquat et al., 2023). Public commitments, awards, training initiatives and formal policies can create an appearance that fairness has already been achieved, narrowing the space to question discrimination and reframing further equity claims as excessive, disruptive, or reputationally risky (Kaiser et al., 2013). These contributions complicate the identification of resistance by showing how it can operate through legitimate managerial language and professional norms rather than through overt opposition.

The literature further identifies a range of mechanisms associated with resistance to DEI. Research on status threat, resource threat and identity threat shows how inclusion efforts may be experienced as losses or risks by those who benefit from existing arrangements (Leslie, 2019; Tan et al., 2019). Work on meritocracy and procedural fairness illustrates how appeals to neutrality and objectivity can protect status positions and legitimate selective implementation or delay (Tyler & Blader, 2003; Konrad et al., 2021). Studies on leadership credibility, implementation quality and perceptions of DEI "failure" highlight how resistance is intertwined with evaluations of effectiveness, legitimacy and organizational priorities in everyday practice (Ford et al., 2008; Erwin & Garman, 2010; Roberson et al., 2024; Story et al., 2024). Together, these strands emphasize that resistance is closely connected to how people interpret change, fairness and risk at work.

Context also emerges as a critical, yet still under-theorized, dimension. Much research on resistance to DEI remains concentrated in North American and Western European settings, where institutional arrangements, legal frameworks and public debates differ significantly from those in the Global South (Lee, 2023). Brazilian and Latin American studies show that organizations frequently import global diversity frameworks and adapt them to local histories of inequality, race, class, religion and informality (Hanashiro & de Carvalho, 2005; Islam, 2012; Irigaray et al., 2022; Tonelli et al., 2025). This work underscores that societal and institutional contexts shape what counts as resistance, which forms become visible or costly and how DEI initiatives are translated into organizational practice (Freitas, 2017; Saraiva & Quental, 2024). Despite these insights, societal conditions are often treated as background variables rather than as constitutive elements in theorizing resistance.

Finally, the literature documents that resistance has material consequences at individual, collective and structural levels. Research links resistance to outcomes such as retention, innovation, legal exposure and organizational climate, while also describing the cumulative strain experienced by minoritized employees who navigate conditional belonging, emotional labour and reputational risk (Ensher et al., 2001; Tan et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2022). Studies on stigma, discrimination and exclusion further connect resistance to long-term effects on well-being, voice and career trajectories (Schmitt et al., 2014; Ahmed, 2007a). Conceptual work highlights how collective dynamics form a bridge between everyday interactions and institutional narratives, linking micro-level exchanges to formal structures and policy (Thomas & Plaut, 2008; Workman-Stark, 2023).

Table 4 — Map of resistance forms derived from the literature

Dimension	Form of Resistance / Manifestation	Definition	Mechanism or Trigger	References
Emotional	Backlash; blowback; negative emotional reactions; resistance to gender equality; dynamic resistance	Emotional pushback against DEI efforts, expressed as resentment, anger, or a sense of injustice.	Perceived status threat, zero-sum beliefs, ideological discomfort with redistribution or norm change.	Flood et al. (2021); Harris & Jackson (2021); Mansbridge & Shames (2008); Jones et al. (2022); Mihaylova & Rietmann (2025); Allen et al. (2025); Iyer (2022); Leslie (2019); Leslie et al. (2025); Mansbridge & Shames (2008)
	Status threat, identity threat, stigma, fear, anxiety, disengagement	Affective reactions when DEI is perceived as threatening identity, belonging, or	Fear of losing status or influence; stigma; unsafe climates; DEI perceived as	Leslie (2019); Leslie et al. (2025); Khassawneh (2025); Kulkarni & Lengnick-Hall (2014); Gündemir et al.

Dimension	Form of Resistance / Manifestation	Definition	Mechanism or Trigger	References
		professional legitimacy.	punitive or reputationally risky.	(2024); Workman-Stark (2023)
Cognitive	System-justifying beliefs; illusion of fairness; presumed fair	The belief that formal DEI structures signal fairness, reducing perceived inequality even when discrimination persists.	The presence of DEI policies creates cognitive inferences of fairness, delegitimizing discrimination claims.	Kaiser et al. (2013); Dover et al. (2020); Leslie (2019); Leslie et al. (2025); Triana et al. (2021)
	Meritocracy framing; appeals to neutrality; references to objectivity	Use of meritocratic or procedural-fairness language to challenge or delegitimize DEI initiatives.	Perceptions that DEI violates merit norms or creates reverse discrimination and belief in a “level playing field".	Tyler & Blader (2003); Konrad et al. (2021); To et al. (2024); Lang & Lehmann (2012); Neumark (2018)
	Misunderstanding; ambivalence; partial support; discursive confusion	Mixed, inconsistent, or unclear discourses that neither reject nor fully endorse DEI initiatives.	Low clarity about DEI aims, competing fairness interpretations and insufficient communication.	McGowan & Ng (2016); Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens (2018); Pereira & Hanashiro (2010); Fernandes et al. (2014)
	Stereotyping, everyday incivility and stigmatizing attributions	Cognitive schemas that position minoritized groups as less competent or deserving, shaping reactions to DEI.	Prejudice and stereotypes normalize exclusion and reduce the legitimacy of DEI measures.	Dovidio et al. (2010); Fiske & Lee (2008); Smith & Griffiths (2022); Kulkarni & Lengnick-Hall (2014)
Behavioural	Symbolic adoption; window dressing; decoupling; ceremonial compliance	Visible DEI commitments without substantive change in practices or resource allocation.	Desire for reputational gain without redistributing power; symbolic compliance replaces structural action.	Ahmed (2007, 2012); Agocs (1997); Holck (2016); Von Bergen et al. (2002); Kalonaityte (2010); Kaiser et al. (2013)
	Procedural delay; inaction; selective non-execution; refusal to implement	Slowing, weakening, or reversing DEI changes while maintaining formal commitments.	Fear of political risk; high cost of disruption; bureaucratic shielding; elite opposition.	Agocs (1997); Davidson & Proudford (2008); Holck (2016); Gonzalez (2010); Workman-Stark (2023)
	Selective engagement; minimal compliance; withdrawal of sponsorship	Formal participation with minimal substantive engagement or support.	Protection of time, resources, or status; scepticism about DEI impact; DEI seen as a low priority.	Gündemir et al. (2024); Leslie (2019); Chrobot-Mason et al. (2008); Roberson et al. (2024); Story et al. (2024)
	Silencing; exclusion; non-listening; micro-obstruction	Practices that marginalize DEI advocates or minoritized employees through subtle exclusion.	Power asymmetries, stigma and subtle obstruction discourage voice and maintain resistant climates.	Khassawneh (2025); Smith & Griffiths (2022); Gagnon & Collinson (2017); Swan & Fox (2010); Thatcher et al. (2023)
	Humour-based minimisation; joking; ridicule; trivialisation	Use of humour to undermine or trivialize inequality or DEI issues.	Humour functions as a social shield, enabling resistance while avoiding accountability.	Hill (2009); Pompeu & Souza (2019); Irigaray et al. (2010); Smith & Griffiths (2022)
	Discursive resistance by leaders; reframing DEI as a threat to standards or cohesion	Managerial talk that redefines, downplays, or challenges DEI while affirming abstract equality.	DEI is perceived as incompatible with professional identities, performance norms, or cultural narratives.	Wahl & Holgersson (2003); Lee-Gosselin et al. (2013); Van Douwen et al. (2022); Roos & Zanoni (2018); Vara-Horna et al. (2022); Tonelli et al. (2025)
	Cycles of resistance and co-optation; “playing the game”	Patterns in which groups alternately	Intersections of power, dependency and identity	Davidson & Proudford (2008); Gagnon & Collinson

Dimension	Form of Resistance / Manifestation	Definition	Mechanism or Trigger	References
		resist, co-opt, or strategically accommodate DEI.	management produce recursive resistance patterns.	(2017); Swan & Fox (2010); Ahmed (2007, 2012)
	Unintended consequences; backfire effects; increased bias; surveillance	DEI initiatives generate negative spillovers or reinforce inequalities.	Poorly designed initiatives trigger perceptions of unfairness or threat, fuelling new forms of resistance.	Leslie (2019); Hellerstedt et al. (2024); Von Bergen et al. (2002); Mihaylova & Rietmann (2025); Leslie et al. (2025)

Source: Elaborated by the author (2026).

As a whole, the theoretical background establishes that resistance to DEI is multilevel, heterogeneous and embedded in organizational life. What remains less well understood, however, is how these elements are held together as an organizational phenomenon. Existing studies provide rich descriptions of forms, mechanisms and consequences of resistance, but often examine them in isolation, focusing on particular actors, levels, or moments. There is limited integrative theorization of how societal conditions, organizational relations and temporal dynamics interact to render resistance acceptable, durable and difficult to confront, particularly in contexts marked by persistent inequality and political polarization. Addressing this gap requires an approach that treats resistance not as a discrete obstacle or individual disposition, but as a patterned and evolving process situated at the intersection of context, relations and time. It is this unresolved theoretical space that motivates the empirical study developed in the chapters that follow.

3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the thesis's philosophical foundations, methodology and analytical approach. To understand how professionals working with or around diversity initiatives in organizations perceive and experience resistance to diversity, the research employs a qualitative design grounded in pragmatism, emphasising that knowledge is constructed through experience, interaction and practical consequences (Dewey, 1938; Biesta, 2010; Morgan, 2014). Guided by Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), themes are approached as interpretive constructions developed through sustained engagement with the dataset, theoretical sensitivity and reflexive awareness of how interpretation is shaped by positionality (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021, 2022). RTA principles informed both data generation and analysis, which required analytical reflexivity throughout, treating interpretation as situated rather than neutral (Cunliffe, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

This thesis analyses resistance to DEI employing interviews with individuals because the interviews elicited accounts of organizational routines, implementation choices, decision practices and recurring patterns of coordination that extend beyond singular experiences. In RTA terms, the analysis treats these accounts as situated resources for interpreting how organizations act, how meanings circulate and how practical consequences unfold, rather than as direct measurements of stable attitudes. To maintain coherence in what the thesis contributes, the writing distinguishes three nested levels: an integrative architecture that links Context, Relations and Time oscillations; a second level that highlights two empirically prominent mechanisms, political polarization and middle management, as illustrative within those dimensions; and a third level that maps the peculiarities of the phenomenon through forms and modes, including visibility, intentionality or awareness, alongside organizational practices that can normalize or invisibilize resistance and shape responsibility across organizational interactions. Table 5 outlines the methodological path of the study.

Table 5 — Methodological path of the study

Phase	Procedures	Description	Main References
1. Research Design	Philosophical orientation and methodology	Qualitative design aligned with pragmatism, focusing on perceptions and experiences of diversity resistance.	Dewey (1938); Biesta (2010); Morgan (2014); Shields (2006, 2017)

Phase	Procedures	Description	Main References
2. Data Collection	Semi-structured interviews	Ethics approval; 55 interviews with Brazilian professionals involved in DEI; focus on perceptions and experiences of resistance in organizations.	Kvale & Brinkmann (2009). Braun & Clarke (2022)
3. Reflexive Engagement	Reflexive analytic writing	Continuous reflection on interpretations, assumptions and positionality, registering how meanings were constructed.	Dewey (1938); Braun & Clarke (2021); Schön (1983)
4. Data Organization	Transcription, coding, iterative reading	Organization in ATLAS.ti to support traceability of analytic decisions and iterative engagement with the dataset.	Braun & Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021, 2022)
5. Thematic Construction	Clustering codes into themes (Reflexive Thematic Analysis)	Codes were grouped through interpretive reflection into provisional themes capturing shared meanings. Themes reviewed and refined iteratively through cycles of analysis to strengthen coherence, distinctiveness and resonance.	Braun & Clarke (2022); Terry et al (2017); Bernstein (1971, 2010)
6. Interpretation & Synthesis	Integration with theory	Final themes integrated with literature on organizational resistance to diversity, building a coherent analytical narrative through RTA.	-

Source: Elaborated by the author (2026).

The construction of meaning in this process is ongoing, with analysis evolving as new insights arise through repeated engagement with the data. A reflexive stance treated interpretations as situated representations of participants' accounts rather than objective findings (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). Within this pragmatist orientation, the purpose of inquiry is consequence-oriented understanding: interpretations are assessed by their capacity to illuminate how resistance to diversity is experienced and made meaningful within organizational life, rather than by claims of universal truth (Dewey, 1938; James, 1907; Morgan, 2014). A pragmatist orientation supports this reflexive thematic analysis by treating meanings, interpretations and consequences as central to understanding how resistance to DEI operates in practice, rather than as variables to be isolated or controlled (Dewey, 1938; Biesta, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2021). The following sections detail how these phases unfolded, showing how inquiry evolved through cycles of experience, reflection and interpretation.

3.1 Research paradigm: ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions

3.1.1 Pragmatism as the philosophical foundation

A research paradigm is a general worldview that shapes how research is understood, designed and conducted (Creswell, 2014). It includes assumptions about ontology, epistemology and methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This study is grounded in pragmatism, which emphasises flexibility and the practical consequences of knowledge claims in real-world contexts (Dewey, 1938; Morgan, 2014; Shields, 2006, 2017). In pragmatism, theories and methods function as tools for inquiry, adjusted to the questions and situations at hand (Dewey, 1929; James, 1907; Bernstein, 1971, 2010). This stance supports adaptation as understanding develops and aligns with dialogical approaches to inquiry that foreground situated, practice-oriented knowing (Biesta & Burbules, 2003; Simpson, 2010; Cook & Wagenaar, 2012; Mead, 1934).

The turn to pragmatism in the social sciences marked a shift away from deterministic frameworks and toward action, interpretation and lived experience as core to understanding social life (James, 1907; Joas, 1996). Rather than assuming that people merely follow structures, a pragmatist view highlights how meaning is made and remade in interaction, which supports qualitative interviews as a way to explore complex organizational situations (Dewey, 1929; James, 1912; Mead, 1934). The research began without a fixed theoretical model, adopting an exploratory orientation that remained responsive to participants' accounts as the inquiry developed (Biesta & Burbules, 2003; Morgan, 2014). This stance provided the groundwork for adopting Reflexive Thematic Analysis, which similarly treats interpretation as evolving and situated.

3.1.2 Ontological and epistemological positioning

Within a pragmatist ontology and epistemology, reality is viewed as dynamic and shaped through action, relationships and language (Dewey, 1938; Joas, 1996; Morgan, 2014). Knowledge is understood as relational and situated rather than "discovered" and a pragmatist lens emphasises how meaning is co-constructed through engagement with the world and assessed in light of practical consequences (Dewey, 1933; Cunliffe, 2010; James, 1907, 1912).

Intersubjectivism and "withness-thinking" frame knowing as relational participation rather than detached observation (Shotter, 2008). Within this orientation, the researcher's background in DEI and interaction with practitioners shaped interpretation

and reinforced the centrality of reflexivity, as detailed in Section 3.2.2 Researcher Positionality (Mead, 1934; Braun & Clarke, 2021). This positioning reflects a commitment to pragmatic knowing as partial, co-constructed and responsive to ambiguity, aligned with RTA's reflexive approach (Bernstein, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.1.3 Reflexive thematic analysis in a pragmatist framework

Although RTA is an interpretive method grounded in reflexivity, it is compatible with a pragmatist paradigm. RTA treats themes as actively constructed through cycles of interpretation shaped by positionality and theoretical commitments, rather than as entities waiting to be discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). This aligns with pragmatism's view of knowledge as relational, contingent and oriented to consequence (Dewey, 1938, 1939; Morgan, 2014; James, 1907, 1912). Rather than seeking universal truths, both RTA and pragmatism emphasise situated meaning-making and responsiveness to contextual nuance (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022; Mead, 1934; Joas, 1996).

In Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the aim is to develop interpretive coherence across participants' accounts rather than to verify pre-existing categories (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2020). The emphasis, therefore,e lies on reflexive engagement and the articulation of patterns of shared meaning, rather than procedural reliability. From a pragmatist perspective, this analytic work can be understood as inquiry in action, where emerging ideas are continually refined in relation to the dataset and assessed by their explanatory usefulness for understanding lived experience (Dewey, 1938; Biesta & Burbules, 2003; Morgan, 2014).

Moreover, this combination supports interpretive work that connects individual accounts to broader structural dynamics, an important tension in DEI research where experience can be discussed without adequate connection to "inequality regimes" (Gagnon, Augustin, & Cukier, 2022). This integration supports sensitivity to "subtle" and "evolving" forms of discrimination, including manifestations of resistance to DEI (Mercat-Bruns, 2016). Therefore, themes were constructed inductively through cyclical engagement with the dataset and articulated within a pragmatist sensibility, remaining open to revision as analysis progressed (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Bernstein, 1971, 2010).

3.1.4 Methodological design

Accordingly, the study's methodological design was shaped by its pragmatist ontological and epistemological commitments (Shields, 2006, 2017). Additionally, it incorporates Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), a method that views theme development as a creative, iterative process guided by researcher interpretation.

Based on pragmatist theory, inquiry happens between experience and action, so that knowledge is developed through practice (Dewey, 1938; Biesta & Burbules, 2003). In this spirit, each interview encounter was treated as a site of inquiry and reflexive writing was used as a way of sharpening interpretive attention in real time. This stance aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2021) formulation of "writing as part of thinking" and with Dewey's (1938) articulation of "thinking as doing": questions were posed, accounts were heard and observations were recorded as part of the inquiry itself. During early interviews, reflections written immediately after a conversation often highlighted tensions that later became core analytic threads. In this sense, writing and thinking were treated as interdependent practices that supported ongoing interpretation (Dewey, 1938; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

In RTA, such reflections differ from the memos used in grounded theory, as they are not aimed at developing theoretical propositions but at making visible the interpretive journey and decision-making process (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). Rather than recording methodological checkpoints, reflexive notes served as active thinking tools, that is, short paragraphs written during interviews, immediately after coding, or during transcript review. Writing itself functioned as part of the analysis, an act of thinking through meaning and articulating interpretive clarity (Cunliffe, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Beyond handwritten notes taken during interviews, an ongoing digital record was maintained in Google Docs, where reflections continued after each conversation and throughout later stages of analysis (Schön, 1983). This simultaneous and interactive process supported analytic reflections (evolving interpretations tied to the data) and sustained reflexive engagement by registering how positioning shaped what became noticeable and how sense-making developed, informing Section 3.2.3 Navigating Researcher Positionality (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Shotter, 2008).

After each interview, iterative reflection supported revisiting notes, tracking

emerging ideas, refining questions and deciding which lines of inquiry to pursue or discard (Dewey, 1938). In practice, data collection and analysis were not treated as separate phases but as a continuous loop where Dewey's "thinking as doing" intersected with Braun and Clarke's "writing as part of thinking". This ongoing cycle of recording experiences and producing analytic reflections gradually informed the themes outlined in the RTA findings (Dewey, 1938; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Schön, 1983).

3.1.5 Research quality

Aligned with a pragmatist perspective and RTA's quality principles, the study prioritised coherence, reflexivity, transparency of analytic reasoning, resonance and contribution (Tracy, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022).

According to Czarniawska's (2016) critique of "rigor" as simply following methodological rules, reflexivity is seen as dialogical and evolving, allowing for reinterpretation throughout the project. Czarniawska's idea of stepping back from action (2016), echoing Dewey's concept of productive interruption (1933), helps clarify reflexivity. For instance, pauses during coding and writing support deeper re-examination. These reflective pauses enable reassessment and more thorough engagement, enhanced by feedback from mentors and colleagues (Maxwell, 2013). More details of how reflexivity was operated were discussed in the previous Section 3.1.4 (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Dewey, 1938; Schön, 1983).

In turn, transparency was pursued through thorough and systematic documentation of the methodological choices, the analytic process and how reflexivity was operationalized. Analytic reflections were written throughout data collection and analysis to record interpretive reasoning and conceptual shifts (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Each note documented the context of interpretation, the rationale for merging or discarding codes and the analytical questions guiding theme development. This practice produced a visible reflexive trace, showing how understanding evolved through engagement with the data.

The process documentation reflected the reflexive ethos of RTA, which values transparency and coherence over procedural standardisation (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and it aligned with the pragmatist principle of coherence among questions, methods and philosophical commitments to foster critical dialogue and actionable insight (Dewey, 1938; Shields, 2017).

In pragmatist and RTA terms, quality was judged by the analysis's usefulness and contribution, understood as the capacity to generate insights that could inform both academic theory and organizational practice. In this study, usefulness was operationalized by producing interpretive dimensions that help practitioners and scholars recognize mechanisms of resistance and their implications for DEI work. Contribution was demonstrated by extending conceptual discussions on diversity resistance, connecting individual and structural interpretations in the Brazilian context (Morgan, 2014).

Another central quality aim was empirical and theoretical resonance, ensuring interpretations genuinely reflect participants' accounts and connect to broader organizational and societal dynamics. This was achieved by grounding interpretations in quotes capturing lived realities and reviewing analytical decisions for thematic authenticity. Though based in Brazil, the insights may resonate elsewhere with similar DEI challenges, allowing transferability through shared organizational issues and cultural dynamics (Biesta & Burbules, 2003; Morgan, 2014).

In the larger picture, research quality rests on methodological integrity, sustained reflexivity and pragmatic relevance, prioritizing knowledge that is analytically robust and contributes to understanding and action (Morgan, 2014; James, 1907, 1912).

3.1.6 The boundaries of resistance: avoiding overgeneralization

Given the complex nature of resistance, one key methodological concern was to avoid overgeneralization, which could lead to including "any behavior" under this concept (Jermier et al., 1994; Thomas & Davies, 2005). To ensure analytic coherence, two criteria guided the inclusion of excerpts: (1) the account needed to be situated within organizational contexts and derived from participants' interpretations; and (2) it had to show a link with dynamics of change and/or power, the two domains that the literature consistently identifies as the conceptual foundations of resistance. This procedure aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2019) caution against over-inclusive coding and supports the construction of rigorous and contextually grounded themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Bernstein, 2010).

Therefore, an excerpt was coded as resistance only when it indicated opposition, contestation, or delegitimization of DEI efforts, even if expressed in subtle or ambivalent ways. A triangulated interpretive logic was applied, considering discourse, context and consequences. For example, a participant's statement about missing a diversity-related

training session was coded as resistance only when the justification implied avoidance or disinterest rather than practical constraints. This process made it possible to distinguish between ambivalence, indifference and opposition, ensuring analytical rigor while remaining attentive to the contextual specificities of resistance as observed in Brazilian organizations.

3.2 Data collection

3.2.1 Strategy

In line with the exploratory and inductive approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Creswell, 2017), the study used in-depth semi-structured interviews as the main method (Patton, 2015), aligned with the pragmatist focus on context-specific, action-oriented knowledge (Dewey, 1938; Morgan, 2014; Shields, 2006). Semi-structured interviews followed a flexible guide that ensured consistency across participants while allowing exploration of subjective experiences (Seidman, 2019; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In-depth interviews, in turn, are open and detailed conversations that aim to understand how people interpret and experience organizational life (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Seidman, 2019).

The sampling strategy employed to recruit participants involved purposive and snowball sampling methods (Patton, 2015), as the study aimed to gather diverse perspectives across various social positions, sectors and levels of seniority, rather than producing a statistically representative sample. The recruitment process combined referrals from previous participants with direct outreach to professionals identified through LinkedIn searches. In total, the recruitment process involved contacting over one hundred individuals.

The interviews took place in Brazilian Portuguese from February to June 2024, with sessions lasting between 30 and 106 minutes. The videoconferences generated recordings through Google Meet and Cockatoo Transcription produced versions in both Portuguese and English. The analysis relied on the English transcripts while continually comparing them with the original Portuguese to preserve meanings (Cunliffe, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Shotter, 2008).

The semi-structured interview guide began with literature-informed questions and evolved as new insights developed (both versions are provided in the Appendix), reflecting pragmatist flexibility and responsiveness (Dewey, 1938; Morgan, 2014; James, 1907) and aligning with RTA's emphasis on reflexivity and adaptation (Braun & Clarke,

2019; Bernstein, 2010). For example, after polarization emerged as a topic in early interviews, subsequent interviews included questions to explore how it could influence resistance to DEI. Open-ended questions encouraged concrete examples and specific episodes (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Seidman, 2019), facilitating identification of the under-the-surface behaviors associated with resistance, from overt opposition to subtle everyday practices (Owens, 2006; Mead, 1934).

For example, leadership dynamics and work relationships were explored more deeply as they became more prominent. More specifically, the early interview rounds explored leadership influence only in general terms and participants' spontaneous distinction between middle management and top leadership led to a deeper exploration of these dynamics throughout the study. However, the evolving interview process later deprioritized some topics that did not appear in the original guide but surfaced during conversations, because participants mentioned them inconsistently across interviews, such as the influence of organizational size on resistance to DEI. Conversely, the guide retained topics like political polarization until the last interview because participants mentioned them regularly. This approach shows how the method remained flexible to participants' perspectives, allowing the findings to guide the direction.

Data collection proceeded until the interviews collectively offered enough analytical richness to support a coherent and well-substantiated interpretation of resistance to diversity. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2019, 2021) principle of meaning sufficiency, the decision to conclude data collection was based on an evaluative judgment that the material held adequate interpretive depth for the research aims. The emphasis rested on whether the dataset enabled the construction of a compelling and trustworthy account, rather than on reaching a point at which no new content appeared.

All demographic information was self-reported through a confidential online form prior to the interviews. The results are presented in aggregate form to avoid potential identification, particularly where intersecting characteristics (e.g., gender identity and leadership level) could reveal a participant's identity. To protect confidentiality and follow qualitative research ethics (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Braun & Clarke, 2021), combined demographic and professional profiles are not presented in tables to avoid identification. Codenames (e.g., P1) are used only in direct quotes to preserve participants' voices without revealing sensitive identity details.

3.2.2 Researcher positionality

The study treated positionality as something that moved with the inquiry, consistent with a pragmatist understanding that knowledge takes shape in the space between experience and action and in the consequences that follow from that movement (Dewey, 1938). Following that same orientation, meaning was constructed through the researcher's interaction with participants: how questions were phrased, how silence opened space and how their responses redirected the dialogue. Interpretation, therefore, happened also within the interviews, not only afterwards (Mead, 1934; Shotter, 2008; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Building rapport was essential for sustaining these exchanges. Shared education, professional background, or social networks sometimes created early trust and smoother conversations, yet encouraged assumptions of shared understanding about DEI. When this occurred, selective researcher self-disclosure (e.g., briefly acknowledging personal involvement or experience) helped balance proximity or distance while striving to maintain the participant's voice at the center. For instance, mentioning the researcher's experience as a mother often created an immediate sense of connection with some participants. At the same time, as a relatively young doctoral researcher, interviewing older professionals or in senior leadership positions sometimes generated initial hesitation, eliciting comments indicating 'surprise'. These moments required careful positioning, using openness and curiosity to bridge possible generational differences and turn potential distance into dialogue.

The interview prompts often invited participants to recall specific situations (e.g., meetings, decisions, or interactions) to ground general statements in concrete experience (Mead, 1934; Braun & Clarke, 2021). In other moments, differences such as race, gender, position, or worldview led to more cautious dialogue. Allowing longer pauses and using descriptive questions like "What happened next?" or "How did that situation unfold?" supported reflection and kept attention on lived experiences rather than "evaluative" judgments (Dewey, 1938; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Joas, 1996). A quiet sense of allyship shaped the interview stance, expressed through attentive listening, moments of clarification and a consistent return to concrete examples, which helped surface how participants understood the practical consequences of their accounts (Biesta & Burbules, 2003).

Sensitive topics frequently surfaced (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). Because

resistance to diversity often touches on sensitive and morally charged experiences, listening involved creating a space in which participants felt sufficiently at ease to articulate complexity, uncertainty and tension. Feelings of empathy, guilt and vulnerability occasionally emerged in this process, underscoring listening as an ethical practice intertwined with the methodological task of inquiry (Cunliffe, 2011). By sustaining attentiveness rather than steering accounts toward coherence or resolution, listening allowed participants to explore difficult issues in their own terms, enabling complexity to surface (Bernstein, 2010; Morgan, 2014). Some participants expressed perspectives that contrasted with the researcher's own views, while others shared painful experiences of discrimination or exclusion, sometimes revealing untold stories that are rarely voiced in work contexts. In these moments, responses such as "I am sorry you went through that" or "Thank you for sharing this" acknowledged participants' experiences without shifting focus away from their accounts.

Maintaining such responsiveness demanded continuous reflexive engagement. Awareness of tone, phrasing and timing shaped how much participants shared and how deeply the dialogue developed. Some interviews flowed easily, while others required time for trust to build or emotional space to hold difficult accounts. Reflection on these dynamics reinforced that the interaction itself co-constructed meaning, consistent with the pragmatist and RTA view of the researcher as an active participant in meaning-making. This reflexivity alternated between reflection-in-action, adjusting the tone and the questions within interviews and reflection-on-action, revisiting notes and transcripts to refine later interpretations (Schön, 1983; Dewey, 1938; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Lastly, concluding the interviews required careful attention. Ending the research relationship involved acknowledging the emotional investment from both sides. For example, thanking participants for their time and contributions ("Thank you for helping with this research") and, in some cases, for shared traumatic experiences ("I am sorry again that you went through that"). It also involved recognizing the fatigue that can follow the researcher's deep engagement and exhaustion (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). These feelings often arose from listening to sensitive or discriminatory memories shared by the participants that evoked a sense of researcher vulnerability and powerlessness to help (Bashir, 2020).

Summing up, the thesis understands positionality as an ongoing mode of engagement, grounded in concrete events, open to revision and responsive to context. This approach entailed ethical reflexivity, recognising that the researcher's interpretations

carried consequences for how the analysis represented participants' voices. Through this approach, interaction and consequence guided the development of themes rather than assumptions of neutrality (Mead, 1934; Shotter, 2008; Joas, 1996; Bernstein, 2010).

3.2.3 Ethical considerations

The study obtained ethical approval from the Comitê de Conformidade Ética em Pesquisas Envolvendo Seres Humanos da Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV CEPH). Before the interviews, participants signed informed consent and completed a short demographic questionnaire via Google Forms. The consent procedure informed participants about the study's objectives, their voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time and the option to request the removal of any part of their narrative. The interviews approached sensitive topics with care and active listening. The analysis anonymized all quotations, using codenames (e.g., P1) to replace real names. The reporting strategy omitted compound demographic tables to prevent potential traceability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Data management procedures securely stored audio files, transcripts and analytic documents in encrypted cloud folders and restricted their use to academic purposes. The project organized files containing codes, reflections and thematic drafts in ATLAS.ti and mirrored them in the same encrypted environment for accessibility and backup. The dataset retained transcripts in both Portuguese and English, while the final analysis used English for reporting. The translation process cross-checked all versions for accuracy, tone and cultural nuance to preserve participants' voices and avoid interpretive distortion (Temple & Young, 2004).

3.2.4 Participants

A total of 55 professionals from different roles and organizational settings across various sectors in Brazil participated in this study. They were selected based on their experience with or exposure to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, including DEI specialists, HR professionals, business leaders and consultants. These participants[1], working at the intersection of strategy and operations, provided valuable

[1] Following both RTA principles and a pragmatist perspective, I use the term *participants* throughout the thesis, which aligns with the co-constructive and action-oriented understanding of experience central to both approaches. I refer to the material generated in the interviews as *participants'*

insights into how DEI initiatives are interpreted, negotiated and redirected amid resistance. Their roles allowed them to observe the development and management of resistance, connecting strategy, DEI structures, HR, operations and stakeholders.

Sample Description. Recruitment followed an intentional effort to achieve a composition broadly aligned with the demographic profile of the Brazilian population. Among participants, 60% identified as women, 38.2% as men and 1.8% as non-binary. Within these groups, 52.7% were cisgender women, 7.3% transgender women, 36.4% cisgender men and 1.8% transgender men. The gender identities go beyond the binary male/female categories used in the Brazilian census, which reports approximately 51% women and 49% men (IBGE, 2023).

Regarding race[2], following IBGE (2023) classifications, 50.9% of the sample identified as White, 27.3% as Black, 16.4% as Brown (Brazilian *pardo* or mixed race) and 5.5% as Asian. In national data, 43.5% identify as White, 45.3% as Brown and 10.2% as Black. The higher proportion of Black professionals and the lower proportion of Brown participants (when comparing the sample to the Brazilian population) may be related to the research topic and the networks through which recruitment happened, since DEI communities in Brazil include many Black professionals.

Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 64 years. Based on age at the time of data collection in 2024, participants aged 18–24 were classified as Generation Z (3.6%); those aged 25–29 as Zillennials, a transitional group between Generation Z and Millennials (16.4%); those aged 30–39 as Millennials (41.8%); those aged 40–49 and 50–59 as Generation X (29.1% and 5.5%, respectively); and those aged 60–64 as Baby Boomers (3.6%), following commonly used generational classifications (Dimock, 2019).

With respect to sexual orientation, 72.7% identified as heterosexual, 20% as lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB+[3]) or other and 7.3% did not answer. In federal data, around 94.8% identify as heterosexual and about 2% as LGBT+ (IBGE, 2022). This difference

accounts, emphasizing that these are situated interpretations rather than fixed data points.

[2] The IBGE (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística*/Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistic) defines "race" as a socially constructed term that may encompass factors such as family origin, skin color, physical characteristics, and ethnicity. The IBGE employs a binary gender categorization that only considers the categories 'women' and 'men'. Data on the LGBTQ+ population depends on self-reports.

[3] Transgender identity was not included in this category because gender identity and sexual orientation constitute distinct constructs in the scientific literature. As recommended by established guidelines for sexuality and gender research, transgender respondents should be analyzed and answered separately to avoid conflating gender identity with sexual orientation, which could lead to conceptual and methodological inaccuracies.

is expected because people connected to DEI networks are often more open about sexual diversity.

Disability and neurodivergence were reported by 7.3% of participants, which is close to national estimates of 7–9% (IBGE, 2023). For privacy reasons, no further information about these participants' disability types is shared, since small numbers could make them identifiable.

The educational level of the group was high: 36.4% had postgraduate specializations, 38.2% master's degrees and 9.1% doctorates. In Brazil, only 18.4% of adults aged 25 or older have a university degree and around 56% have completed secondary education (IBGE, 2024). This may indicate that DEI work is mainly carried out by highly educated professionals in managerial, academic and consultancy positions.

Marital and parental status were diverse. 58.2% were married, 29.1% single, 10.9% divorced and 1.8% widowed. Around 34.6% had children. These variables were not the main focus of the analysis, but they help illustrate the diverse range of profiles represented.

Table 6 — Demographic information of participants compared to the Brazilian population

Category	Subcategory	Study sample (%)	Brazil (IBGE)
Gender	Woman	60,00%	51%
	Cisgender Woman	52,73%	
	Transgender Woman	7,27%	
	Man	38,18%	49%
	Cisgender Man	36,36%	
	Transgender Man	1,82%	
	Non-binary	1,82%	
Race/color	White	50,91%	43.5%
	Black	27,27%	10.2%
	Mixed-race /Brown (Brazilian *Pardo*)	16,36%	45.3%
	Asian	5,45%	0.42%
Age range	18-24	3,64%	12%

Category	Subcategory	Study sample (%)	Brazil (IBGE)
	25-29	16,36%	12%
	30-39	41,82%	24%
	40-49	29,09%	22%
	50-59	5,45%	18%
	60-64	3,64%	7%
Sexual orientation	Heterossexual	72,73%	94,8%
	LGB/other	20,01%	2%
	Undeclared	7,27%	-
Disability and Neurodiversity	With disability and/ or neurodiversity	7,27%	5,4%
	Without disability and /or neurodiversity	92,73%	95%
Educational level	High school	1,82%	31,3%
	Bachelor's	12,73%	20,3%
	Specialization	36,36%	-
	Master's	38,18%	
	Ph.D.	9,09%	
	Undeclared	1,82%	

Source: Elaborated by the author (2026).

Note: Brazilian data was compiled by the author based on IBGE (2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d; 2023a, 2023b).

When compared with national demographics, the sample has more women and Black professionals, fewer Brown (*Pardo*) participants and higher education levels. The sample also includes identities not yet found in official statistics, such as transgender and non-binary people. A greater representation of White men was desired; both younger and older professionals were less represented; however, they were harder to recruit. This heterogeneity provided the empirical ground for identifying varied forms and rationales of resistance, as explored in the following analytical section.

3.2.5 Professional and organizational characteristics

Along with demographic diversity, participants represented a broad range of

professional roles, organizational levels, work areas, industries, company sizes, work arrangements and company origins. This variety supports the richness of the analysis by enabling the examination of how different positions within organizations, sectoral contexts and structural factors may influence resistance to diversity. The table summarizes participants' professional trajectories and organizational characteristics, highlighting diverse experiences and viewpoints related to DEI work.

Table 7 — Professional and organizational information of participants

Category	Subcategory	%
Position	Director	21,82%
	Partner Consultant	20%
	Coordinator	12,73%
	Analyst	10,91%
	Manager	9,09%
	Independent Consultant	7,27%
	Researcher	5,45%
	President	5,45%
	Specialist	3,64%
	Professor	3,64%
Department	DEI	50,91%
	Human Resources	12,73%
	Education	9,09%
	Operations	7,27%
	Presidency	5,45%
	Technology	3,64%
	Communication	3,64%
	Commercial	3,64%
	Social Impact	1,82%
	Customer Relationship	1,82%
Sector	Consultancy	43,64%
	Technology	10,91%
	Education	10,91%

Category	Subcategory	%
	Financial	9,09%
	Food and beverages	7,27%
	Reinsurance	3,64%
	Non-governmental organization	3,64%
	Health	3,64%
	Services	1,82%
	Insurance	1,82%
	Energy	1,82%
	E-commerce	1,82%
Headcount	1-19	36,36%
	20-99	5,45%
	100-499	12,73%
	>500	45,45%
Work modality	Hybrid work	49,09%
	Remote work	45,45%
	On-site work	5,45%
Organizational origin	National (Brazilian)	74,55%
	Multinational	25,45%

Source: Elaborated by the author (2026).

Participants held roles across various organizational levels and industries. Senior leaders (directors, presidents, partner consultants) composed 52.73% of the sample, while middle managers (managers and coordinators) accounted for 21.82%. Other participants included analysts, specialists, independent consultants and academic professionals. Roles were distributed among DEI (50.91%), HR, education, operations and other fields. Based on their roles, participants were categorized into organizational levels (see table 8).

Table 8 — Participants categorization by role

Professional role	Specific Role	%
Senior Leaders	President, Director, Partner-Consultant	52.73%
Middle Managers	Manager, Coordinator	21.82%
Frontline Professionals	Specialist, Analyst	14.55%

Independent Consultants	Independent Consultant	7.27%
Academic Professionals	Researcher, Professor	9.09%

Source: Elaborated by the author (2026).

Partner consultants are considered to be senior professionals who act as partners or strategic leaders in consulting firms (typically with a formal link or leadership position within the firm, sometimes as founders), distinguished from independent consultants, who either work at a consulting firm or operate autonomously, without any fixed institutional affiliation. Furthermore, academic professionals were included due to their expertise in diversity and related fields, as many serve as consultants or participate in affirmative action policies.

The sample covered multiple sectors, primarily Consultancy (43.64%), but including Technology, Education, Financial Services, Food and Beverage, among others. Company sizes ranged from micro to large organizations and most participants worked in hybrid or remote modalities. Brazilian organizations were the most represented (74.55%), compared to multinationals (25.45%).

Participants differed in career stage: the largest groups had 6–10 or 16–20 years of experience (21.82% each). It was followed by participants with 21–25 years (18.18%). Smaller proportions had 1–5 years due to their ages (10.91%), 11–15 years (10.91%), 26–30 years (9.09%), or over 30 years of experience (5.45%). Job tenure, considering time spent in their current organization, was typically under five years (45.45%), but varied widely. The following were those with less than 1 year (16.36%), 6–10 years (12.73%), 11–15 years (7.27%), 21–30 years (3.64%), or 16–20 years (1.82%) in the same organization; 12.73% did not declare.

Following the data collection and participant overview, the next section presents the analytical strategy, based on Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), which aligns with the study's pragmatist and reflexive approach by constructing themes through iterative, context-sensitive interpretation.

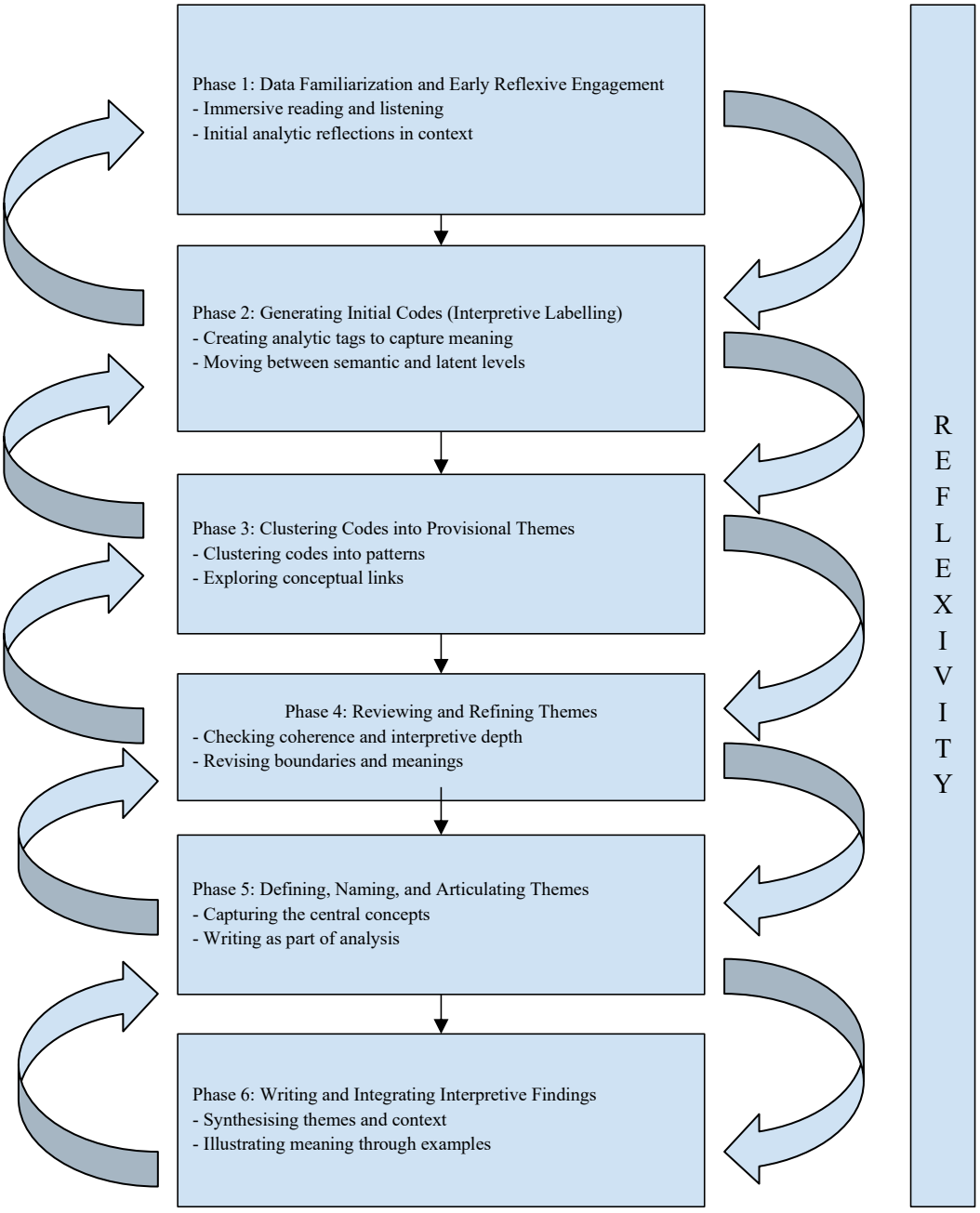
3.3 Data analysis: reflexive thematic analysis within a pragmatist orientation

This section describes how the data were analysed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), following the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021, 2022). The philosophical rationale for this choice was introduced earlier; the

following pages focus on how meaning was gradually constructed, reviewed and refined through continuous engagement with the data (See Figure 2). RTA aligns with the pragmatist orientation of this thesis, which views inquiry as a flexible and action-oriented process, where understanding develops through interaction between experience, reflection and consequence (Dewey, 1938; Morgan, 2014).

Within this framework, analysis was not conceived as a technical procedure of discovering pre-existing truths, but as an interpretive process of meaning-making that occurred through cycles of reading, reflection and rewriting (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Consistent with pragmatism, knowledge was treated as situated and provisional, growing through iterative engagement between data and ideas (Biesta & Burbules, 2003).

Figure 2 — Reflexive thematic analysis process within a pragmatist orientation



Source: Elaborated by the author (2026).

Note: The figure shows the iterative and reflexive nature of the analysis (Dewey, 1938; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Although it appears as a 'sequence', each phase was informed by and revisited through cycles of inquiry and reflection, as illustrated by the arrows

RTA offers a flexible yet systematic approach to identifying patterns of shared meaning across qualitative datasets while remaining sensitive to context, language and power dynamics (Terry & Hayfield, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2021). It emphasises the researcher's reflexive role in interpretation rather than aiming for coding reliability or replicability (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). In this sense, the analysis unfolded as a

dialogue between the data and interpretation, where every decision contributed to constructing a coherent narrative about resistance to diversity within organizations.

3.3.1 Cycles of interpretation: from reading to meaning

The analytic process developed gradually through iterative cycles of engagement, reflection and reinterpretation, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2021) conceptualisation of RTA as a meaning-making rather than rule-following practice. Rather than a linear sequence, these definitions acted as flexible anchors revisited multiple times as understanding deepened through successive readings and reflections.

In this study, a code was defined as a short interpretive label that captured something meaningful about how participants experienced, justified, or questioned diversity initiatives (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2021). A code represents the most basic segment of data that seems interesting or relevant to the research question and acts as a conceptual tool to interpret meaning rather than a mere descriptor of content (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Some codes stayed close to participants' language, preserving their original wording to maintain proximity to their lived realities (semantic coding), while others reflected deeper interpretive insights that captured what was implied but not explicitly stated (latent coding) (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

A theme, in turn, is understood as a pattern of shared meaning that is organized around a central idea and captures something important about the phenomenon in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). A theme is not a topic or a cluster of codes with similar content, but an interpretive story that reflects how meaning operates within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In this study, themes represented different ways participants made sense of resistance to DEI in organizations. They were (re)developed gradually as the dataset expanded and refined through iterative comparison and reflection.

This interpretive movement was also guided by the pragmatist view that knowledge is generated through inquiry and action, not through detached observation (Dewey, 1938). Accordingly, the construction of themes developed through cycles of reading, reflection and writing (practices that constitute inquiry in action). Each analytical decision was therefore a practical response to the data, reflecting what Dewey (1938) and Morgan (2014) describe as knowing through doing.

3.3.2 Iterative engagement with the data

The analytic process unfolded through repeated immersion, reading and rewriting, not as distinct phases but as overlapping cycles of familiarization, coding and reflection. Data familiarization is understood as the active and reflexive immersion in the data through multiple readings and note-taking (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Each interview transcript was read several times and recordings were revisited to capture tone, pauses and laughter, which often revealed meanings beyond the textual layer. Early analytic reflections, short interpretive notes written alongside the data, helped to register emerging ideas, emotional responses and contextual observations (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Reading and coding were conducted in English with comparison to Portuguese transcription to preserve cultural and linguistic nuances. Notes written in the margins identified key expressions, hesitations and rhetorical strategies used by participants to frame their views on diversity. This step reflected Braun and Clarke's (2021) emphasis on situated meaning-making, in which the researcher actively engages with the data rather than attempting to maintain distance or neutrality.

Coding was conducted in ATLAS.ti, where initial coding involved attaching short interpretive labels to excerpts that appeared conceptually significant. Early codes were primarily descriptive, such as "quota resistance" or "training fatigue", but as familiarity increased, the coding became more interpretive, generating insights like "meritocracy as moral justification" or "bureaucratic resistance disguised as neutrality". Draft titles were rewritten repeatedly until they captured both the analytical logic and the tone embedded in participants' narratives. These transitions illustrated the interpretive depth typical of RTA, where codes evolve from concrete to conceptual as the analysis progresses (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021).

3.3.3 Moving between codes, patterns and themes

Codes, patterns and emerging themes were in constant dialogue. Some were refined, others merged or dissolved as new interviews reopened previous interpretations. This movement illustrates the pragmatist view of inquiry as experimentation, each interpretive adjustment tested the usefulness of emerging ideas in explaining lived experience (Dewey, 1938; Morgan, 2014). Moreover, such organic movement reflected the evolving engagement between data and analysis, which Braun and Clarke (2022)

describe as a process of continuous conceptual development rather than procedural stability.

As more transcripts were analysed, conceptual connections were explored. For instance, comments such as “we already hire everyone”, “it is about merit, not quotas” and “diversity has gone too far” clustered around a shared logic of defensive normalisation, a mechanism that neutralises the meaning of inclusion by portraying it as redundant or excessive. Such clustering was provisional, continuously revisited as new interviews brought fresh perspectives. Each iteration reflected what Dewey (1938) describes as inquiry as experimentation: each analytic decision tested the explanatory value of the emerging patterns and adjusted the interpretation accordingly.

During one of several cycles of re-engagement, the process of clustering codes into provisional themes played a central role. This phrase refers to a moment of interpretive experimentation rather than mechanical aggregation, consistent with Braun and Clarke’s (2021) view that analysis in Reflexive Thematic Analysis is an evolving and creative act of meaning-making. Codes were not joined by surface similarity but by conceptual connection, how they collectively expressed a particular assumption, tension, or practical consequence related to resistance to diversity (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022). These clusters represented provisional patterns of shared meaning that evolved through continuous cycles of reading, reflection and comparison, a movement that mirrors Dewey’s (1938) notion of inquiry as iterative adjustment between experience and interpretation.

As interpretations evolved through multiple iterations, the focus shifted toward building coherent thematic structures, defined as interpretive patterns that connect multiple codes through one central organizing concept (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The phase of reviewing and refining themes involved a constant dialogue between coded extracts, analytic reflections and theoretical sensitivity to test whether each grouping represented a unified meaning structure or simply a collection of related topics (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

For instance, in the early stages of analysis, several participants referred to “a bottleneck in the middle”, describing how middle managers often slowed or redirected diversity initiatives due to competing priorities, limited resources, or fear of political misinterpretation. Initially, these accounts were coded separately as “managerial overload”, “lack of support” and “fear of exposure". As interviews progressed and the political context became more salient, these fragments began to connect as a single

interpretive thread: the middle layers of leadership acted as filters through which resistance adapted to organizational and societal pressures. What first appeared as hesitation later revealed itself as a form of pragmatic containment, a way of maintaining equilibrium amid polarized environments and shifting expectations. This insight eventually developed into the theme Relational Dynamics of Resistance, capturing how resistance mutates over time and across hierarchical boundaries (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022).

Themes were redefined multiple times to ensure both internal coherence, resonance and analytical distinctiveness (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Tracy, 2010). Coherence ensured that each theme held together conceptually, while resonance reflected its capacity to connect with the lived realities described by participants. For example, an early broad theme that grouped defensive reactions was later divided into two: one centred on bureaucratic delay as quiet opposition and another on moral justification as ethical self-defence. This refinement process illustrates the interpretive and iterative nature of RTA, where themes are reshaped as understanding deepens rather than confirmed through coding reliability metrics (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021).

3.3.4 Reflexive integration and analytical maturity

The interpretive movement toward defining, naming and articulating themes marks the transition from descriptive coding to deeper sense-making, demonstrating the study's development toward analytical maturity. This occurs when cycles of engagement no longer transform the central insights, even though interpretation can still be refined. This point, in line with Braun and Clarke's (2019) idea of meaning sufficiency, signifies the transition from simply generating insights to articulating them as coherent thematic narratives.

In writing the findings, analysis and interpretation continued to interact: the act of writing became another layer of analysis, testing the clarity, coherence and resonance of each theme. Through this recursive process, the dataset was not "closed" but re-encountered as an evolving conversation between data, theory and reflection.

The following chapter presents these interpretive outcomes, the synthesized themes and conceptual dimensions that illuminate how resistance to diversity is perceived and experienced among Brazilian professionals.

4 FINDINGS

This chapter presents the main themes that were constructed based on the findings from the interviews, grounded in participants' accounts and in the researcher's interpretation through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). The analysis followed an inductive orientation informed by a pragmatist epistemology that values empirical complexity, situated meaning-making and context-sensitive insight (Morgan, 2014). In line with Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021), themes are understood as "patterns of shared meaning" organized around a central concept, developed through iterative engagement with the data rather than predefined categories, reflecting an interpretive process of gradual refinement and meaning construction.

Broader thematic categories captured shared meanings across accounts, while subthemes illustrated specific mechanisms, rationalizations and consequences of resistance, supported by excerpts that anchored interpretations in participants' accounts. Three overarching Theme Categories were developed, each reflecting a distinct yet interconnected dimension of how resistance to DEI occurs in organizations. These categories are not exhaustive or mutually exclusive; they offer an interpretive foundation for understanding the ambivalence, plurality and adaptability of resistance as a social and organizational process.

Themes in this chapter are not organised by isolated "topics" (e.g., polarization, meritocracy, leadership). They capture interpretive patterns of how resistance to DEI was perceived and experienced in organizations. Quotes provide illustrative evidence; when the same topic could plausibly support more than one theme, excerpts were placed where they most clearly anchor the theme's central interpretive point.

The central research question guiding the investigation was:

How do professionals who work with or around diversity initiatives perceive and experience resistance to diversity in organizations and how do they see this resistance influencing the trajectories of these initiatives?

In relation to this question, the findings align with three analytical objectives:

(1) To identify the organizational and societal conditions that enable resistance to DEI;

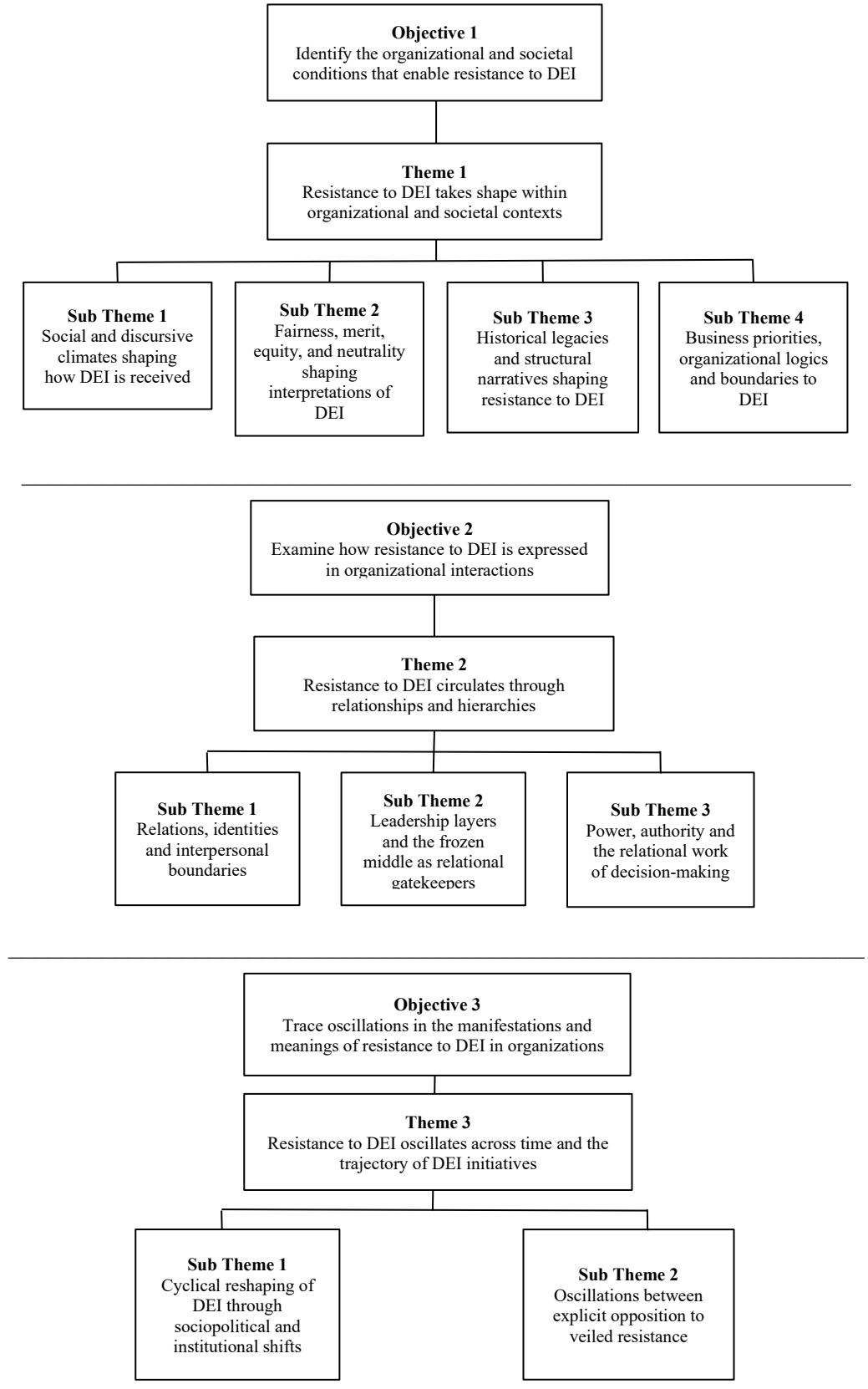
(2) To examine how resistance to DEI is expressed, shared and experienced in organizational interactions; and

(3) To trace temporal oscillations in the meanings and manifestations of resistance to DEI in organizations.

Across these themes, the analysis brings to the surface the peculiarities of how diversity resistance occurs by mapping forms and modes and by showing how organizations may normalize or invisibilize resistance through routines, local interpretations and recurring implementation patterns.

To guide the reader, Figure 3 offers a visual synthesis of how the three Theme Categories connect in an orientation map and how each contributes to the overall understanding of diversity resistance in organizations by Brazilian professionals.

Figure 3 — Findings orientation map



Source: Elaborated by the author (2026).

Before presenting the three Theme Categories, it is important to note that participants' accounts also highlighted recurring descriptors that cut across the dataset. Interviewees described resistance as varying in visibility (subtle to explicit) and in intentionality/awareness (intentional to less conscious or routine). They also described how resistance can spread through routines and small decisions, scale across many touchpoints and become embedded in everyday implementation. These descriptors clarify how resistance was perceived and experienced in organizational life. Resistance demonstrates capillarity: spreading through dispersed, small-scale decisions and routine interactions across many organizational touchpoints without centralized coordination. Capillary resistance operates through accumulated micro-practices (e.g., hiring preferences, informal networks, meeting invitations, performance criteria) that individually appear neutral yet collectively reproduce exclusion. This quality explains why resistance persists even when formal policies change, becoming woven into the everyday organizational fabric.

Debates about DEI have become increasingly prevalent in corporate and public arenas globally, yet translating inclusion into practice often involves uneven follow-through. Many organizations publicly endorse DEI as part of their institutional identity, while day-to-day implementation tends to expose competing priorities, limited alignment, or even fatigue. The professionals interviewed for this study, including HR specialists, DEI managers, consultants and business leaders, worked in roles that placed them in close contact with implementation demands. This proximity to practice shaped what they were able to narrate about their experiences regarding diversity initiatives.

In this study, resistance occurs here as a complex phenomenon. This complexity is treated analytically as a defining feature of how DEI initiatives unfold and how the topic is perceived and experienced within organizations, rather than as a limitation. Resistance to DEI did not appear as concentrated in a single group, nor as directed at a single identity category. In the Brazilian context, marked by historical social inequalities and regional specificities, resistance to DEI also rarely appeared as open opposition in the interviews. Participants never self-described as "resistant" to diversity initiatives. Instead, resistance surfaced indirectly through stories, reported speech, hesitation and irony. Formulations such as *"people think that…",* "*there was this one director who said…*", or "*I heard someone say…*" allowed potentially controversial opinions to be introduced without personal attribution. Humor, pauses and vague expressions also created distance, enabling participants to approach sensitive issues without turning the exchange into an

explicitly evaluative stance.

From a pragmatist perspective, these indirect formulations can be read as self-presentation strategies shaped by organizational norms. As diversity becomes an expected component of contemporary corporate discourse, openly expressing disagreement may carry reputational risk. The result is not the disappearance of resistance, but its articulation through more covert forms. As one participant observed, "*No one ever declares himself prejudiced, capacitist, or sexist, but there are daily behaviors that make biases very clear*" (P43).

Participants also recounted situations that can be interpreted as strategic deflection or politics of inaction. Resistance often operated through postponement, ambiguity and justifications such as "*Not the right time*" or "*Not my job*". As one HR professional explained, "*We are all in favor of diversity, but no one really knows who is supposed to make it happen. So it just floats*". These narratives point to organizations positioned between stated intent and practical execution, where diversity is supported in principle but encounters structural and operational constraints.

Symbolic compliance was another recurring pattern. Several participants described diversity efforts that were recognized internally but perceived as having limited impact on organizational routines. As one noted, "*Once we have done the campaign, the job is done. But the problems stay the same".* Another added, "*We have the policies, but honestly, I don't think they make much difference in day-to-day decisions".* In these accounts, formal DEI structures functioned mainly as procedural references rather than as mechanisms that reliably reshape routine decisions.

The emotional dimension of this process was also visible in the interviews. Participants reported frustration, exhaustion and disengagement, especially among those expected to sustain inclusion agendas, such as diversity consultants. Some accounts emphasized the fatigue of repeatedly advocating for change, explaining concepts to colleagues, or maintaining momentum when organizational priorities shifted. One participant summarized, "*There's no explicit backlash. Just this silence. You bring it up and people nod. But nothing happens".* In such cases, silence worked as a stabilizing force that preserved routine while avoiding open confrontation.

Resistance was frequently described as adaptive and persistent, oscillating between open hesitation and discreet disengagement. Participants shared recurring expressions that justifying the lack of initiatives, framing resistance as *"common sense", "we already respect everyone"*, *"it doesn't fit here", "it doesn't change behaviors",*

“let’s not get into that”, “focus on results”, “business reality” and “we don’t take sides". These phrases captured how inclusion objectives were repeatedly weighed against perceived operational constraints.

Although resistance to diversity involves attitudes, emotions, practices and organizational routines that redirect or slow inclusion efforts (Thomas, 2008), it is not interchangeable with errors or failures in the design or coordination of diversity initiatives. Some obstacles reflect limitations in how programs are structured, while others reflect how people and organizational systems respond when inclusion introduces new expectations.

In sum, the accounts presented here suggest that resistance to diversity in organizations is complex, dynamic and intertwined in relations. Furthermore, it varies not only in the level of manifestation, occurring at the individual, organizational and societal levels (as the study adds), but also in terms of visibility and intention, manifesting explicitly or covertly and intentionally or unintentionally, consciously or unconsciously. For example, it appears through delayed action, procedural reasoning, symbolic gestures, or emotional weariness rather than only explicit opposition (namely, backlash). Examining these dynamics requires treating resistance as gradual and situated, in interaction with organizational discourse, structures and priorities.

In the sections that follow, each Theme Category is presented in detail. Theme 1 focuses on the contextual conditions that shape what becomes legitimate, acceptable, or contestable under the DEI label. Theme 2 examines how resistance circulates through relationships, hierarchies and everyday decisions. Theme 3 attends to oscillations in how resistance is expressed across situations and moments, particularly in visibility and language as DEI initiatives unfold. The next sections develop each theme through close engagement with participant accounts and interpretive commentary, following the iterative and reflexive logic detailed in Section 3.3.3.

4.1 Theme 1: resistance to DEI takes shape within organizational and societal contexts

The first theme described resistance to DEI as connected to broader social, political, historical and organizational landscapes. This theme captures how broader organizational and societal conditions shape the terms under which DEI initiatives are interpreted and acted upon. Participants described four interrelated sets of conditions: (1) social and discursive climates shaped by polarization, (2) frames of fairness and neutrality that give resistance a legitimate form, (3) historical and structural conditions that define who belongs and (4) organizational responses shaped by global–local dynamics and business pressures. Together, these patterns indicate that resistance cannot be reduced to individual attitudes alone. The analysis foregrounds the conditions that make certain reactions to DEI more likely and, at times, more acceptable than others. In this theme, excerpts were selected when they clarified how these contextual conditions of DEI become interpretable, contestable, or "safe" to support (or to resist) before and around concrete initiatives. These conditions recur later in Theme 2 through relationships and hierarchies and in Theme 3 as participants describe oscillations in visibility, language and expressed intent across situations and moments.

4.1.1 Subtheme 1.1 - social and discursive climates shaping how DEI is received

Participants consistently described Brazil's broader environment as a central force shaping how people respond to DEI. Their accounts show that resistance does not emerge inside organizations in isolation, instead, it is deeply connected to how political divisions, vocabulary, family conversations and information flows create conditions that guide how DEI is interpreted before any specific initiative is introduced. Under a pragmatist reading, the meaning of DEI is not fixed; it takes form in situations and participants show how those situations are strongly shaped by polarization. As an example, the following participant described this discursive dynamic:

> *"Since before 2018, polarization and the politicization of words have shaped how diversity and inclusion are received. Terms like human rights, sustainability, quotas are labeled as left-wing, triggering resistance (...). Words such as 'feminism' or 'sexism' must be replaced with 'women's struggle' to avoid rejection in companies (...). Neutral pronouns or inclusive language become a flashpoint, right-wing employees react strongly (...). Polarization transforms vocabulary into a barrier for discussing DEI".* (D13)

This participant explains how words acquire political meaning and elicit opposing reactions depending on their context and their receivers. The participant is describing a climate where DEI vocabulary functions as a political signal rather than an informational tool. Under this climate, resistance to DEI appears when specific terms are communicated, because the language activates alignment, suspicion, or rejection. The example of replacing "feminism" with "women's struggle" illustrates how practitioners anticipate these reactions and adjust their framing to keep room for dialogue. The challenge shifts from presenting DEI to selecting vocabulary that does not close interactions too early. This adaptation also shows how resistance becomes visible in small communicative decisions, while still being rooted in a broader sociopolitical environment.

Another participant expanded this connection between political polarization and DEI reception by focusing on the family environment:

> *"Brazil's recent political process mirrored the US, with divided elections split roughly 50% between Lula and Bolsonaro supporters. This reflected a broader societal divide rooted in ideology, meritocracy and capitalism, often excluding socio-cultural diversity. These political allegiances were evident even in families, where discussions at gatherings revealed deep-seated differences. Supporters of the right-wing parties tended to resist diversity, while left-wing political supporters generally embraced it. This polarization within families and communities exposes societal challenges that will take time to overcome". (D54)*

Even when the interview content was inside organizational and workplace spheres, the participant spontaneously connected resistance to DEI with a broader political context, which deepens the understanding of resistance because it suggests that political identity travels with individuals into the workplace, shaping expectations and interpretations before any corporate policy is introduced. A third participant brought these dynamics into workplace interactions:

> *"Some people express negative views of diversity out of resistance. When we discuss diversity and inclusion, we often encounter personal values and experiences that shape people's perspectives. There is a social issue that has historically caused certain groups to feel excluded or marginalized, which can influence interactions in very personal ways. One clear factor in Brazil is political polarization over recent years. This polarization often leads to a victimization narrative, associating diversity efforts with 'leftist' agendas. Even in a corporate environment, which ideally should be neutral on these issues, we deal with people who have opinions and sides, and these can sometimes create barriers in the workplace. I believe resistance is a factor. Leadership may understand and recognize the importance of inclusion, even if they do not always*

embrace it. However, I think that middle management sometimes feels threatened by inclusion policies and affirmative actions". (D23)

This participant offers a layered interpretation of resistance by describing personal values and historical-political identities as central elements guiding how people respond to DEI. The reference to a "victimization narrative" points to a process in which inclusion is reinterpreted as disadvantage to oneself. The observation about middle management also foreshadows Theme 2, indicating how contextual forces later become visible through hierarchy, workload, perceived risk and managerial discretion.

Next, another participant illustrated how polarization shapes engagement patterns through symbolic and selective participation:

"Social polarization is a basic problem. People fit themes under personalities: if it is diversity and inclusion, it is a left-wing agenda; if you are against it, it is right-wing. This dualization limits discussion. Companies have their own agendas, but inside, people may boycott initiatives because they do not want to be linked to A or B. We see diversity-washing: June is colorful, July is black and white again. But we also see serious companies". (D33)

This participant demonstrates that employees observe how engagement in DEI could shape the political identity that others attribute to them. Thus, boycotting emerges as a subtle and identity-based form of resistance. According to the account, people may avoid participating in DEI initiatives not because they reject inclusion, but because participation would signal a political alignment they wish to avoid. The criticism of the visibility of Pride Month in June, followed by silence in July, highlights how professionals perceive organizations engaging in symbolic participation (referred to as diversity washing). This pattern creates an environment where public gestures coexist with restrained attitudes, reinforcing the perception that DEI is intermittently legitimate for the organization and, therefore, reinforcing the logic that professionals should remain neutral regarding support for DEI.

Participants reflected on how the information ecosystem intensifies these dynamics:

"The world is polarized in everything (gender, sex, color, politics) with 50% on each side. Spreading fake news or propaganda only deepens the divisions". (D10)

This participant interprets polarization as a pervasive condition rather than an episodic phenomenon. The mention of fake news indicates that misinformation becomes

part of the interpretive landscape, shaping how people imagine DEI before they encounter it directly. In this view, resistance is influenced by narratives circulating in digital environments, which amplify emotional reactions and consolidate group alignments within organizations. Another participant emphasized the importance of maintaining dialogue within this environment:

> *"We live in a very polarized country, in a world that is very polarized, so we need to try to promote dialogue instead of moving people away". (D34)*

This reflection demonstrates a pragmatic orientation, because even in a context that seems dominated by division, some practitioners invest in interpersonal dialogue as a way to preserve the possibility of engagement. This statement provides a counterpoint to the preceding examples, showing how professionals develop strategies to keep conversations open despite the surrounding polarization.

In a wider view, these accounts show that resistance takes form inside a discursive environment marked by politicized language, identity-based interpretations and selective forms of engagement. Participants describe how vocabulary becomes a trigger, how political identities shape reactions and how information flows shape perceptions regarding DEI. The social climate surrounding DEI creates interpretive conditions that precede any organizational initiative.

4.1.2 Subtheme 1.2 - fairness, merit, equity and neutrality shaping interpretations of DEI

Participants often relied on ideas of fairness, neutrality and legitimacy to evaluate DEI practices and structure their reactions to targeted initiatives. These concepts functioned as reference points through which individuals organized what they perceived as professionally appropriate, morally acceptable, or organizationally consistent. Although participants used similar vocabulary, the meanings they attached to these terms varied substantially, revealing a landscape of interpretations that coexist, overlap and at times diverge. The accounts below illustrate how fairness, merit, equity and inclusion were understood through different experiential, historical and organizational lenses.

One participant articulated fairness through a procedural lens, focusing on skills and equal treatment. In their view, legitimacy in hiring was grounded in selecting

candidates based on competence and maintaining neutrality across demographic attributes:

> *"I hire programmers based on skills, ignoring race or gender and select candidates I feel more sympathy for. Our company includes women and people of various races. A girl told me, 'You offer few opportunities for trans people. You should give them more chances than others.' I asked, 'Why? I only need programming skills.' (...) I value diversity training, but small and medium-sized companies cannot afford it (...) I find initiatives like a black-only trainee program unfair and divisive, risking favoritism and internal issues, which is a market challenge".* (D46)

This account shows fairness as something perceived through neutrality and skill-based evaluation. Targeted initiatives are experienced as inconsistent with this interpretation, raising concerns about unfairness, division and favoritism. Fairness and merit appear intertwined with a sense of organizational practicality and a belief that legitimacy derives from uniform criteria applied to all.

Participants engaged the same vocabulary (fairness, merit, neutrality) but defined these ideas through unequal opportunities and different life trajectories. Other participants challenged this procedural interpretation by highlighting how meritocracy assumptions obscure unequal starting points:

> *"Resistance is very connected to leadership. When we talk to leaders, we need to use numbers to convince them of the importance of adopting the theme [DEI]. This same leadership often comes with meritocracy arguments. Meritocracy is linked to power, so whoever is in power, using this argument, may resist or implement programs in a biased way. This belief and social polarization have impacted organizations. But people forget trajectories... Sometimes the best resume [curriculum vitae] is not the best talent. Social skills and affinity bias shape choices more than merit. And there is a difference between meritocracy and merit. For example, I studied the English language not only by my own effort, but because my grandmother had time to take me to class and my family had resources. Merit is multifactorial, embedded in networks and structures that support individual effort".* (D49)

In this account, meritocracy is described as a principle people use to claim neutrality, while merit is portrayed as something that emerges from a combination of individual effort and enabling conditions. The example about learning English makes this distinction concrete: what appears as personal achievement is also the product of time, family support and resources. Building on this reflection, fairness is interpreted as the

capacity to recognize equity (balancing opportunities for people who faced different starting points) rather than assuming that identical treatment leads to legitimate outcomes.

The next participant reflected on inclusion as a concept that gains depth when connected to social justice, while also noting how this framing may be received:

> *"The inclusion agenda expands when we frame it through social justice, because this perspective brings another level of depth. People who are not used to this way of thinking sometimes label it as militancy".* (D18)

Here, inclusion is perceived as more substantive when linked to social justice and the term 'militancy' appears as a pejorative label used to express discomfort with this framing. The reflection shows how justice-oriented interpretations can be resisted when they challenge expectations of "neutrality". The theme of inclusion then shifts to an organizational level, where companies interpret fairness through measurable indicators and communication strategies:

> *"Hiring remains the most tangible form of inclusion, like having at least 50 percent women and men in a company or board, or 30 percent Black employees. These numbers are easy to showcase as evidence of inclusion. Beyond hiring, other aspects like promotion, salary and roles are harder to prove. Companies often present themselves as inclusive through marketing campaigns, but these may not reflect real internal policies. Ultimately, companies control what and how they communicate to the market, which may or may not match their actual practices. The focus should be on genuine inclusion, not just polished campaigns".* (D40)

In this account, inclusion is perceived through visible outcomes that can demonstrate legitimacy to external audiences. Numbers become signals of equity, even when internal processes remain harder to observe, which connects inclusion to how organizations build narratives of fairness, with the risk that communication becomes more developed than internal transformation. A third perspective questioned meritocracy's very existence as a legitimate framework, situating it historically:

> *"Meritocracy is controversial and often used to oppose diversity efforts. I believe it does not truly exist. Originating in Medieval France alongside the rise of the bourgeoisie, it applied to white, upper-class men, making sense then but not now. Changes in society, like women working and Black people's rights, reveal meritocracy's flaws. It compares vastly different backgrounds in a system that does not always reward effort, limiting social mobility. Hard workers, like a person working 14 hours, deserve wealth, but often do not benefit from the system. Despite claims of inevitable inequality, we should demand*

> *more from the government and organizations, especially in education and skill development. Relying solely on resumés and tests for hiring is superficial and undermines meritocracy. This is a recurring debate".* (D41)

These accounts show fairness mobilized through divergent frames: identical treatment, structural recognition, or historical critique. Each logic feels coherent internally while operating from conflicting premises, demonstrating how resistance draws on seemingly reasonable justifications. Such an account deepens the vocabulary already presented by describing meritocracy as a historically situated construct that does not reflect equal opportunity in practice. Effort, capability and achievement are experienced as shaped by structural conditions and fairness becomes linked to broader commitments to education, learning and development.

Across these accounts, participants draw on fairness, merit, meritocracy, neutrality, justice and legitimacy to articulate different ways of interpreting DEI. Fairness is understood either as equal treatment or as equitable balancing of opportunities for people with different life histories. Merit is described as both capability and accumulated support. Meritocracy is framed as neutrality, cultural conditioning, or a historically situated narrative. Legitimacy appears linked to neutrality, justice, visibility, or historical awareness. At the same time, 'militancy' appears as a pejorative label attached to justice-oriented framings. These varied meanings show that resistance to DEI follows recognizable logics that can feel coherent and morally grounded to those who adopt them.

4.1.3 Subtheme 1.3 - historical legacies and structural narratives shaping resistance to diversity

Participants frequently located resistance within long historical processes structuring Brazilian society. Their accounts show how colonial legacies, racial hierarchies, regional norms and inherited social orders shape how diversity is interpreted and practiced. These reflections emphasize that DEI is not introduced into a neutral environment; it enters a landscape deeply marked by inequality and cultural narratives that continue to define who seems to belong, who appears disruptive and how organizations justify their decisions. From a pragmatist perspective, these historical legacies operate as interpretive resources guiding everyday meaning-making and shaping the conditions in which resistance emerges.

One participant articulated this clearly by linking organizational challenges to the country's history of slavery:

> *"Now, Black and Brown people are statistically harder to bring in because we organically built a slave-trade country with a deeply unequal past. It is very difficult to have diversity in the workplace if you are not willing to see, welcome and understand this perverse history. Another point: you hire these people, they come through the front door, but what about their permanence? Companies say it has to be meritocratic and then do not hire them, or when they do, they cannot make them feel they belong or stay because the company is not prepared to receive them".* (D7)

The account reveals how exclusion is maintained through contemporary racist practices that continue older structures of inequality. The workplace appears as part of this longer chain: recruitment, belonging and career progression reflect historical dynamics. By describing the organization as "not prepared to receive them", the participant highlights how structures of belonging have been built to target specific groups, making inclusion dependent on confronting this inheritance rather than assuming neutral ground. A broader historical perspective adds another dimension to these discussions. One participant connected meritocracy to long-standing societal patterns:

> *"We were shaped by a dominant colonial ideology in Brazil, which creates various axes of oppression. We are influenced by meritocracy, which reinforces barriers that persist despite appearing repeatedly. Since childhood, we have been conditioned by this colonial, elitist meritocratic ideology".* (D9)

Here, meritocracy is experienced as learned and reproduced over time rather than as a neutral mechanism. Colonial ideology is presented as a living structure that shapes expectations, judgments and everyday evaluations of who seems credible or appropriate. Resistance is positioned within deep cultural inheritance: people rely on moral vocabularies learned early in life, grounded in hierarchies that naturalize inequality.

Historical narratives also appeared in reflections about regional identities and local socialization. One participant described how community norms shaped reactions to sexuality and gender diversity:

> *"I have seen diversity perceived negatively many times. When I did my undergraduate thesis on homosexuality in Brazilian contemporaneity, my mother, my family and the people around me thought it was absurd that I was working with LGBT texts in an academic context. In the countryside, where I was at the time, diversity was treated as*

> *irrelevant, veiled under phrases like 'here we hire everyone the same way' or 'we don't look at it.' Once, I faced strong resistance from a superintendent when I tried to make an affirmative hiring of transsexual professionals through a public partnership. He said it was a big problem, that we were bringing problems to the organization about how to deal with these people, how the culture would see it and how we would be judged for recruiting differently. This practice strongly evidenced transphobic conduct. Today, in the big company where I work, people are more careful with what they say, but I have faced many barriers to putting the theme of diversity forward".* (D33)

The account shows how regional culture, family expectations and local social norms shape organizational behavior. The phrases "we hire everyone the same way" and "we don't look at it" operate as learned justifications that conceal exclusion while performing neutrality. The trajectory from the countryside to large firms illustrates how these frameworks travel across contexts and remain influential even when expressed more subtly.

A final participant highlighted how structural narratives shape business-to-business relationships in specific sectors:

> *"The Brazilian business landscape includes sectors like beauty, where women are the main consumers, heavily influenced by large firms purchasing from smaller ones due to geographic proximity. Many companies do not participate in the diversity agenda, but larger firms promote the agenda to encourage others, often adopting training and commitment strategies. There is a push to buy from socially marginalized groups, such as women-led businesses or those with women in leadership, but the movement is still in early stages and remains chaotic, with many businesses influenced by stereotypes rather than fully embracing this agenda".* (D12)

This account shows how sector logics and stereotypes shape DEI across supply chains. It suggests that participation in DEI is mediated by market structures and by inherited assumptions that influence decision-making even when companies attempt inclusive practices.

Across these accounts, participants portray resistance as embedded in long-term histories shaping judgments, expectations and organizational routines, in which racial history, colonial ideologies, regional norms and inherited social orders seem to define the conditions under which DEI is interpreted.

4.1.4 Subtheme 1.4 - business priorities, organizational logics and the boundaries assigned to DEI

Participants described resistance as shaped by the business environment in which organizations operate. Their accounts show that DEI enters a landscape structured by economic pressures, sector-specific logics, global influences and shifting political climates. These forces define how much attention diversity receives, which initiatives gain legitimacy and how organizations calculate reputational and operational risks. Under a pragmatist view, DEI does not exist as a stable priority; its position can be rearranged depending on cycles, leadership strategies and competitive context.

One participant illustrated this dynamic by explaining how political contexts shape corporate appetite for public positioning:

> *"Nowadays, I see other dimensions: gender, race and diversity in general are in the middle of a political discussion. High leadership is no longer classic left or right but a kind of conservatism, a 'customs agenda' that is worrying. Many men and women in senior roles are in that spectrum. Companies fear taking a public stand because of coexistence with other firms and potential media backlash. Yet some brands saw more profit than problem, no sales drop despite controversy. The business world is volatile, listed companies are under pressure and capital logic has not incorporated ESG".* (D16)

The interpretation highlights how calculations about market reactions, competitive positioning and reputational risk shape decision-making about DEI. The participant describes leaders as operating under a logic in which taking a stand is interpreted through financial consequences, investor expectations, sector norms and visibility in the media landscape. DEI becomes situated inside this complex evaluation of risks and gains, which means that resistance often takes the form of caution, hesitation or strategic silence rather than explicit opposition.

The same participant linked these business market dynamics to the uneven uptake of DEI practices over time and context:

> *"One part of the company is doing well, the other is not. In one year, the company did well, then it went back a little. So even when it has already decided what is important, it is only minimally committed. It has these movements that somehow reflect the country and the society it is in and the priorities of the business".* (D28)

In this reflection, DEI appears as a flexible priority that moves according to external pressures and internal shifts. The participant interprets these oscillations as part

of the broader system in which organizations operate. Changes in societal debates, political climates or business indicators create movements of investment and retreat. Resistance emerges when the organizational agenda contracts, placing DEI behind more immediate priorities, or when leadership signals commitment without mobilizing resources.

Another participant highlighted how corporate strategies translate into sectoral ripple effects, especially in industries shaped by local supply chains:

> *"The Brazilian business landscape includes sectors like beauty, where women are the main consumers, heavily influenced by large firms purchasing from smaller ones due to geographic proximity. Many companies do not participate in the diversity agenda, but larger firms promote the agenda to encourage others, often adopting training and commitment strategies. There is a push to buy from socially marginalized groups, such as women-led businesses or those with women in leadership, but the movement is still in early stages and remains chaotic, with many businesses influenced by stereotypes rather than fully embracing this agenda".* (D43)

This participant frames resistance as emerging from the layered structure of the market. He describes how DEI adoption depends on the influence of major players, sector-specific demands and geographic relations. The early and chaotic nature of supplier diversity in Brazil shows that organizational commitment depends on how business ecosystems are structured. Resistance here takes the form of hesitation, fragmented adoption and adherence to stereotypes that shape procurement decisions.

Another dimension of this subtheme relates to the movement of DEI practices across national boundaries. One participant explained how multinational corporations introduced DEI into the Brazilian context. Resistance is positioned as part of a translation process in which imported practices meet local expectations, cultural norms and business realities. DEI becomes an object of adaptation. Companies choose which practices to adopt, which to adjust and which to postpone, based on organizational identity, sector pressures and leadership comfort. This adaptation dynamic becomes even clearer in a participant's account:

> *"I have had contact with this issue of importing practices from one country to another, this tropicalization, copy and paste from multinationals, bring it from there and put it here, no one questions it and just repeats it, sometimes it does not even make sense for our scenario. However, in the United States, a very strong aversion to the topic is emerging more explicitly, while here in Brazil, there is still a stigma against those who*

> *are resistant. It is on both sides. We are very hindered, very polarized here".* (D27)

The participant's interpretation shows how DEI circulates internationally through organizational routines, but is not always aligned with Brazilian realities. Tropicalization is described as a process where practices are transferred without sufficient contextualization, which shapes how employees respond. In this account, resistance appears when people experience misalignment between imported templates and their actual context. At the same time, the participant highlights that in Brazil, being perceived as resistant carries its own stigma, creating an environment where reactions to DEI combine local norms, global influences and concerns about reputation.

Participants mentioned sector characteristics that shape how DEI is interpreted. One participant who came from retail described how organizational culture and business logic influenced the experience:

> *"Coming from retail, I was not mainly involved in diversity work. Retail is a hostile, competitive environment where you sell daily, often at lower prices, fostering rivalry among products and people. There is a whole context around that. It requires being tough with partners and suppliers for the best conditions. Although I have these traits, I usually adopt a collaborative, moderate approach of listening, influencing and seeking consensus. However, in my business life, I learned to question things more assertively. During diversity talks, I feel compelled to say, 'What you are doing is clearly sexist,' especially when someone says absurd things".* (D25)

The account shows how business logic shapes what feels acceptable to say and do. The retail environment demands assertiveness, speed and constant pressure for results. These traits become part of the professional identity and influence how the participant engages with DEI conversations. Resistance emerges in this subtheme not through negative intent but through the demands and styles that each sector cultivates. Certain organizational cultures normalize competition, confrontation or silence in ways that influence DEI uptake.

Overall, Theme 1 shows that resistance to diversity, equity and inclusion is deeply situated in context. Participants described how broader social and organizational climates shape how DEI is interpreted and evaluated, including, but not limited to, political polarization, disputing notions of fairness and merit, historical inequalities, sector cultures, global–local dynamics and dominant business rationalities. DEI enters environments structured by market pressures, strategic calculations, organizational

identities and reputational concerns, which set boundaries on what organizations prioritize, how inclusion is communicated and which initiatives are sustained over time.

These contextual conditions help explain why DEI can be publicly endorsed while remaining fragile in practice. When resistance is supported by competing interpretations of fairness and merit, politicized readings of language, inherited narratives of belonging and business logics of risk, performance and reputation, it can appear as reasonable caution rather than open opposition. In these accounts, the work of DEI becomes constrained before it even starts, as professionals anticipate reactions, translate vocabulary and navigate what can be proposed without threatening organizational identity or legitimacy.

However, such conditions do not remain abstract, because they shape how people position themselves in relation to leadership, authority and different identity groups inside organizations, which becomes the focus of Theme 2. At the same time, participants' narratives suggest that these contextual forces do not operate with the same intensity in all situations, as meanings, priorities and boundaries can shift across moments. How these shifts unfold over time is taken up in Theme 3.

4.2 Theme 2 – resistance to DEI circulates through relationships and hierarchies

The second theme focuses on how resistance to DEI is enacted through interactions, roles and hierarchies in everyday organizational life. In practical terms, this theme focuses on how resistance to DEI shows up in day-to-day working relationships: who gets heard and who gets ignored when DEI is raised, who gets invited and who gets avoided in DEI-related work, what feels safe to say and what becomes "better not to mention" in DEI conversations. Rather than appearing as a private attitude contained within individuals, resistance to DEI was described as taking form through conversations, silences, jokes, hiring decisions, leadership signals, including organizational positioning and silence and routine negotiations among people occupying different positions and identities in the context of DEI. In this theme, resistance to DEI becomes visible in how inclusion is supported, questioned, or constrained in everyday work interactions.

Participants repeatedly linked their experiences of resistance to DEI to the settings in which DEI is enacted. Everyday exchanges shaped how DEI was interpreted and acted upon, especially in situations where hierarchy, authority and identity affect whose voice carries weight, what becomes discussable and what remains strategically avoided in DEI implementation. Leadership appeared in these accounts as a key site where DEI was interpreted, filtered, or redirected. Participants described how managers "translate" DEI as it moves down the hierarchy, at times supporting it and at other times slowing it, softening it, or reframing it in ways that can contain or dilute DEI commitments. These dynamics were not framed as deliberate opposition but as emerging from positional pressures, competing demands and interpretations of organizational priorities that shape how DEI is handled in practice.

Participants also described how individual and collective identities shaped resistance to DEI in everyday interactions and decisions. Differences in gender, race, seniority, or professional background influenced how people were read at work (e.g., as credible, "risky", "militant", or "not a fit"), who felt safe to speak up about DEI and who was invited into or kept at a distance from DEI-related work. Across accounts, representation, positional authority and everyday interactions intersected to structure whose perspectives were amplified, who could advance DEI concerns and where resistance to DEI was more likely to surface or remain unspoken. In this sense, identity shaped credibility and perceived risk in interactions, sometimes before any direct exchange occurred, conditioning how DEI was approached, questioned, or avoided.

Participants described three interrelated dimensions through which resistance to DEI circulated:

(1) identities and interpersonal boundaries shaping reactions to DEI,

(2) leadership layers mediating and redirecting diversity initiatives and

(3) power, authority and decision-making practices enacting resistance to DEI in concrete situations.

These dimensions are analytically separable but empirically intertwined. For example, identity and interpersonal boundaries shape who can speak about DEI. In contrast, leadership layers shape how messages travel about DEI and authority is exercised through the interactional routines that make some decisions look "reasonable" and others look "excessive" when DEI is at stake.

Together, these patterns indicate that resistance to DEI travels through hierarchy and everyday working dynamics rather than residing solely in individual dispositions. While Theme 1 highlighted how broader social, political and organizational contexts create conditions in which resistance to DEI becomes intelligible or legitimate, Theme 2 brings the analysis closer to everyday organizational life by showing how these conditions materialize in workplace exchanges and decisions around DEI work. These dynamics also connect to Theme 3, where participants describe how this circulation becomes more explicit or more coded depending on situations and moments as DEI is negotiated over time.

4.2.1 Subtheme 2.1 – relations, identities and interpersonal boundaries

This subtheme examines how identities, personal histories and interpersonal boundaries shape the ways people relate to DEI at work. Participants describe situations involving racism, sexuality, gender, generation and class that surface in daily interactions. These experiences show that resistance often emerges when social markers influence who speaks, who is heard and who remains silent.

One participant began by highlighting the tension between personal identity and professional expectations:

> *"We can't be half professional and half personal. We work through impressions, prejudices, segregation and discrimination within the organization's reality. At the same time, I know we need data to show this. Looking at the level of leadership, sometimes there is resistance to work on diverse and transversal themes of the organization. It's like: 'let's talk about it, but let's stop here; we don't need to move forward. Big companies are not doing that, so we don't need to do it.' We should stand out as innovators, facing diversity beyond what people do and beyond what is today considered public. These signs happen a lot when we compare things".*

In this account, prejudice and segregation are understood as part of how people "work", shaping decisions and interactions rather than existing outside the professional sphere. Leadership responses create boundaries around how far DEI discussions can proceed, with relational signals indicating what topics can be raised and which push against accepted limits.

Another participant described how racialized expectations shape credibility in public meetings:

> *"I attended a work meeting and a senior executive asked all managers to name a leadership role model (...) After others answered, it was my turn and I was told I did not need to speak because I would say Pelé [Brazilian Black football player]. Everyone laughed and I felt embarrassed. As the newest member, I faced prejudice that hindered my career growth".* (D29)

Here, resistance to DEI materializes through humor. The assumption that this participant would pick a Black football player as a leadership role model collapses professional identity into a racial stereotype for being a Black professional and the collective laughter signals who is recognized as a legitimate voice. This episode shows how identity-based jokes mark boundaries around who belongs to the legitimate leadership conversation. The resistance to diversity appears in the relational effect: the participant feels exposed and affects organizational relationships.

Another participant expanded the same pattern in recruitment and promotion processes:

> *"I observed situations where people applied for jobs, but during interviews, they were considered for an internal promotion process and the feedback was negative because they were Black. Similar issues arose with comments about sexual diversity; some executives criticized hiring trans people, implying it caused problems. These examples illustrate resistance to this movement".* (D32)

In these episodes, identity becomes a decisive filter during face-to-face evaluations. Negative feedback or concerns about "problems" associated with trans hires indicate that race and gender identity guide interpersonal evaluation, producing resistance through everyday scrutiny. Another participant described how prejudice appears in "semi-joking", ambiguous comments that nonetheless have strong interpersonal consequences:

> *"For example, if we display a pride flag and someone says 'But it is a f@g,' using that pejorative term. We face resistance and prejudice, but it depends on how the company shapes its culture. If the company is committed to diversity and recognizes that a manager's action was inappropriate (or anyone's, since prejudice can exist at any level), it must take a stand. I have seen people fired through an ethical channel for committing subtle prejudice, but some suffer silently and leave without reporting. Depends on whether the person speaks up. Many do not, out of fear or powerlessness, leading to illness or leaving the company. Open resistance is acknowledged, but implicit prejudice harms gradually, reducing retention and hurting valuable employees. If held by colleagues or managers and unaddressed by the company, the barrier grows. Hidden prejudice is most damaging because it is common. Recognizing it is hard, but I would try to address it directly as a manager. If confirmed, the person can be separated, but developing responsible individuals through culture, training and education is key. Diversity groups like committees for women, people with disabilities, or LGBT individuals help develop strategies. Recently, we trained employees about Black and Brown people, focusing on privilege, which prompts reflection and sometimes tears, helping prejudiced individuals understand different perspectives".* (D14)

This account highlights how subtle verbal cues and ambiguous comments shape whether people feel safe, supported, or exposed. Resistance emerges through language, silence and fear of speaking up. Organizational responses, such as training, committees and managerial intervention, are described as relational mechanisms that can mitigate or reinforce these dynamics, while identity shapes who is considered legitimate to claim space and voice for DEI.

Another participant described how identity influences credibility and how generational and racial markers shape whose expertise is validated:

> *"The main barrier is the generational factor, as most leadership is older and from different generations, often resisting change. When sharing information due to my age, gender and race, especially as a young, Black woman, this often leads specialists to overlook my contributions (...). Others, including CEOs, suggest inviting a speaker*

> *similar to the audience to reduce resistance. I am lucky to have a manager who understands these issues and often represents us when discussing sensitive topics. We use this dynamic to navigate resistance, especially with leadership, understanding how attention and perception vary by speaker".* (D38)

This participant describes a very concrete relational mechanism: the combination of age, race and gender influences whether others consider the message valid. The suggestion to bring someone "similar to the audience" shows that resistance is negotiated through who speaks and not just what is said, since the message and the messenger are inseparable. In this case, the participant's manager becomes a relational bridge with the audience, using identity to ensure that ideas that might face greater resistance from the participant, as a speaker, are heard.

Another participant reported how assumptions create barriers to hiring and collaboration in DEI projects:

> *"People want to develop a diversity and inclusion project in their company. Usually, they start with a lecture or call someone to discuss it. These people often fear some consultants, viewing them as aggressive, combative, or 'militant', in the language they use in this context. There is a significant bias that a person like me, a Black, trans woman, will be more militant, more combative, more acidic, or more accusatory, while a White, cisgender person will not be as 'militant'. I believe there is a filter, an unspoken barrier, that affects much of my work in diversity and inclusion. In other areas, this is even more hidden because there is no explicit agenda". (D37)*

Here, identity creates expectations before any interaction begins. The assumption that a Black, trans woman will be "militant" becomes an interactional barrier, shaping invitations, trust and collaboration. Resistance emerges through anticipated interactions rather than explicit conflict. Another participant described how organizational silence can produce a similar interactional barrier:

> *"The lack of a company's positioning on this topic does not attract candidates from underrepresented groups, which may have a repellent effect. This invisible barrier is not discussed as much as it could be".* (D11)

Absence of organizational positioning is received as a relational signal about belonging and support. The lack itself becomes a message, producing resistance through inaction or omission. Although these accounts sometimes reference organizational conditions, they fit the relational theme because they describe how meanings circulate through everyday ties and anticipated interactions, defining who is approached, who is avoided and whose presence is treated as risky. Another participant described a form of

conditional acceptance:

> *"I continue to feel that I suffer beyond just my identity. So, as a Black Brazilian woman from the lower middle class, I face barriers that go beyond what is said and denied opportunities. They say, 'I will even let you in', but I feel as if 'I am tolerating you and respecting norms, I am not including you, I am not letting you be who you are.' This relates to my personal life, but it is a lot about diversity too".* (D39)

This account shows how resistance operates through subtle messages in relations. Resistance manifests not through open conflict but through subtle boundaries that differentiate presence from inclusion. This dynamic reinforces a boundary between formal access and real participation, as belonging is experienced as limited.

In addition, one participant reflected on the continuous relational work required when challenging prejudice:

> *"I approach resistance with humor, with data, or with a more serious attitude, depending on the person I am dealing with (...) For example, if someone says, 'Hey, you [insult for gay men]', if it is someone I know, who is more playful, I say, 'Oh, you want to offend me? Call me straight' (...) Last week, I had a situation. We have a new manager who makes a lot of bad jokes that offend women (...) I said to him, 'Let me just remind you that we have a reporting channel, if I were you, I would think before you speak.' (...) Someday, someone like this who makes a dumb remark could say something inappropriate in front of a client, a CEO and a woman might be offended, costing us a client. So, it is not just internal; it is about preparing people for the outside world. I think companies need to be responsible for that".* (D52)

This account shows how resistance unfolds in ongoing interactions that demand organizational support, emotional labor and tactical adaptation. Humor, confrontation and appeals to formal channels are all described as tools for navigating resistance to DEI in relations with colleagues at the workplace.

Across these accounts, resistance to DEI appears through interpersonal boundaries that shape safety, credibility and belonging in concrete interactions. Microaggressions, jokes, credibility gaps, anticipatory fears and conditional inclusion show how resistance can be communicated without being formally declared and how its effects are carried in relationships.

4.2.2 Subtheme 2.2 – leadership layers and the frozen middle as relational gatekeepers

This subtheme examines how resistance to DEI becomes organized across

leadership layers, especially in the middle levels that participants often describe as a "frozen middle". Here, resistance is relational because it depends on how messages, priorities and practices are interpreted and re-signaled between top leadership, middle management and frontline teams, sometimes amplifying the agenda, sometimes slowing it and sometimes keeping it only symbolic. The accounts show middle managers as key gatekeepers who can support or stall DEI by how they interpret and enact directives. One participant described the tension between leadership bubbles and lived realities:

> *"Everyone has resistance, but with decision-makers, this should not exist. Resistance is not just about affirmative action but about staying in one's bubble. Ideal leadership understands different social realities. If I encounter resistance, it indicates my leadership is not fully prepared or aligned with my beliefs. Leadership must reveal the truth. If biases are hidden, I recognize signs, discuss with the person, understand their perspective and bring transparency to foster understanding. Socially responsible leadership acknowledges biases and works to overcome resistance to diversity. To me, acting means showing transparency and accepting imperfection. I have biases and areas to improve, like everyone else. We must constantly evolve and embrace change. Leaders, who influence others, especially need this. They should see resistance and diversity and handle them properly. Middle leaders may lack a full view of the company's strategic or product details, but often understand others' realities better. I observe that top leaders can overlook issues like mental health (...) Many leaders are isolated from diverse audiences, affecting relationships and the company. Middle leaders usually have a broader view through exposure to different social groups. Connecting diversity initiatives with top leaders is challenging, as change starts with self-leadership. Effective diversity begins from the top, promoting a top-down influence that attracts diverse people. Instead of demanding, leaders may become resistant".* (D55)

This participant describes a layered system where top leaders hold strategic power but remain distant from everyday realities, while middle leaders see more of the social complexity of the workforce. At the same time, middle managers depend on top leadership for direction and support. Resistance appears in both the "bubble" at the top and the hesitation or overload in the middle. The relational work of leadership involves naming biases, opening dialogue and accepting imperfection, but this work is uneven across levels. Another participant emphasized how middle managers shape everyday culture:

> *"Middle leadership influences culture often more accurately than top leadership, which may overlook ground realities. While senior leaders have a strategy, middle leaders*

> *create microcultures within organizations, such as groups with strict or relaxed norms. These microcultures can coexist within a larger culture, but often lack cohesion. Building cohesion among middle leaders is key to a unified culture, as they live and enact the organizational values daily".* (D13)

Here, resistance takes the form of microcultures that interpret DEI messages differently. Even when there is a formal corporate culture, the daily experience depends on how middle leaders manage teams. Some microcultures may support inclusion, others may normalize exclusion. This aligns with the idea of relational gatekeeping: middle managers control how values become practices. Several participants highlighted how global DEI strategies meet local resistance at middle levels. One account illustrates this:

> *"We face challenges balancing scale, especially as new HR leadership in Latin America embraces diversity and inclusion. While top leadership has global goals and mandates training on unconscious bias, middle management often deprioritizes diversity initiatives, citing financial and result priorities. This resistance to change hampers culture shifts, stalling initiatives and creating obstacles to progress. The main challenge is middle leadership, which resists change, impacting organizational culture and hindering advancement".* (D48)

In this case, top leadership sets ambitious goals and introduces formal training, but middle managers treat DEI as secondary when compared to financial targets. Combined with previous accounts, there is a paradox: middle managers appear to understand diversity challenges better, yet resist most strongly. This tension reflects their structurally ambivalent position, as proximity to diverse teams generates awareness, but also exposes them to competing pressures from above (targets, performance) and below (team needs, conflicts). Resistance may emerge not from ignorance, but from perceived risk and insufficient authority to navigate these tensions. Middle managers appear as both potential allies and structural bottlenecks, depending on the support and accountability they receive.

Another participant connected leadership roles to the consistency of the agenda:

> *"A key person for DEI success is the CEO or president. Their engagement and emphasis on its importance, even in early stages, can significantly advance the cause. When leadership values DEI, about 50 percent of progress occurs as followers, especially top leaders, align with genuine or superficial effort. Leadership is crucial; at [previous company], a new diversity network reporting to the president boosted DEI and improved*

> *brand perception. At [current company], the first female Latin America president actively promotes diversity, showing the company's commitment".* (D43)

This participant shows how visible commitment at the very top changes the relational environment for middle managers. Presidential support creates space for networks, reporting lines and symbolic validation. However, the mention of "genuine or superficial effort" indicates that alignment can be mixed and middle managers receive signals that may be strong in discourse but variable in practice. Another participant focused on the relational position of middle leadership:

> *"Middle leadership needs more focus. While senior leaders like vice presidents and superintendents operate in a political arena requiring awareness of broader issues to influence, middle managers are closest to the team and have significant influence but face challenges such as resistance and disengagement. They must actively communicate and lead initiatives to prevent disconnection. Without genuine commitment from middle leaders, progress stalls, especially without clear guidance from top leadership, leading to larger issues".* (D50)

Here, middle managers appear as both powerful and constrained, because they are close to employees and can mobilize change, but they face resistance from above and below. When guidance is weak, they become a bottleneck where messages stop. Participants also pointed to misalignment inside leadership teams. One of them explained:

> *"Leadership plays a key role, especially at the presidency and below, as they set the tone. These leaders, along with HR and communications, need strategic development because this is where issues often arise. However, I have observed that even at top leadership levels, few companies have all 12 to 15 key leaders fully committed to the agenda. Slightly below the executive committee, it is not usually an issue of anonymity; some may not fully buy in, sending conflicting messages to their teams. Thus, while more leaders support the agenda, commitment varies, especially among lower-level positions".* (D31)

This participant describes a leadership architecture where formal endorsement does not always translate into aligned messages. Some leaders support DEI, others hesitate and teams receive conflicting signals. Resistance appears in this uneven commitment, which creates relational ambiguity for middle managers who try to navigate expectations. Another participant emphasized the dependence of middle managers on top-level support:

> *"Top leadership must be more responsible for the topic of diversity and be a driving*

> *force for middle management. We need to put these actions into practice and they need to be effective, so middle management operates on a hierarchical scale, typically following directives from above. They need top leadership to motivate workers and set the tone".* (D3)

In this view, middle managers cannot transform culture without clear and consistent backing from above. Resistance emerges when top leadership delegates responsibility but does not provide consistent direction or accountability. The importance of this top–middle connection appears in another account:

> *"Top leadership must be firm and assertive on certain issues so middle management feels supported and comfortable to collaborate, discuss and take action daily. Support from top leadership enables middle management to work effectively and act when needed".* (D15)

Here, resistance is less about explicit refusal and more about hesitation when support is unclear. Middle managers may agree with DEI, yet avoid action when they feel exposed or unsupported. At the same time, some participants described middle managers as those closest to diversity in practice:

> *"It is the middle management that has diverse teams; it is not the top leadership. Who has the will nowadays? I would say it is those with more desire and urgency to work with diversity and inclusion, it is the middle management because they already have diverse teams. They face a latent need and encounter challenges every day. And then, by facing these challenges, the work we do as leaders, including raising awareness, is to help these people position themselves and ensure that team members can find their place. High leadership in most companies has a very homogeneous team".* (D16)

This participant frames middle managers as both pressured and motivated. Diversity is not abstract for them; it appears in daily conflicts, requests and tensions. Resistance, in this sense, does not come from a lack of exposure but from the difficulty of handling complex demands with limited support. Another participant described middle leadership as a zone of structural blockage:

> *"Middle leadership often faces clashes between top and bottom levels. It has goals and responsibilities to deliver. We know that, especially after the pandemic, teams are smaller and changes include shifting to hybrid, remote, or returning to in-person work. The question is: how to transform this into a strong culture? How do we propose changes?*

> *How do we modify processes and procedures? How do we avoid falling into biases and prejudices that often lead us astray? I suggest three approaches: first, institutionalize and demonstrate impacts and develop and showcase real results within institutional structures. Second, bring middle leadership closer to us so they can actively promote and implement these changes daily, who hires, who promotes. And third, it is important to see this as a nonpartisan issue, a human issue that involves everyone. The idea of opposition to diversity and inclusion stems from politics, currently challenged by movements like Trump's influence in the U.S. This can create stress, but I believe we are resilient enough to handle it. I would add a fourth point there, which I think is one of the big issues we are experiencing today, which is this big wave of anti-diversity".* (D20)

This participant links structural change, political polarization and middle leadership responsibilities. Workload, reduced teams, hybrid arrangements and the perception of rising anti-diversity movements shape resistance at this level. The proposals given show a search for ways to support middle managers instead of treating them as isolated obstacles. Another participant described middle management as a recurrent stopping point:

> *"Middle management is a problem for us, not only in this matter, but it is a structural problem of the organization we work in. This goes through the questions of freedom of inclusion, but it goes through any kind of culture we want to implement. It is a very resistant leadership, a very resistant track to change. If a company wants to make a change in culture, we stop there, in that place. You have a very good speech going down, then it gets there and the business stops and then you have people who, from below, receive the content from above and want to make the business happen, but then it is so much no, no, no, no, no, that we end up giving up. And then this means killing any attempt to change culture. This is a big problem for us".* (D26)

Here, the participant describes how repeated refusals at the middle level discourage those who want to implement change from below. Resistance becomes a structural pattern: messages flow down, stop and the people at the base withdraw. Another participant used a specific expression to name this layer:

> *"Well, one of the biggest challenges, we even nicknamed the middle management 'Frozen Middle.' It is the most difficult group to engage in. Top leadership, the board and executive committees have ESG goals and at the base, affinity groups are involved and linked to the market, trying to evolve. From our 40 diversity diagnoses each year, what we see is that this frozen middle is the hardest to engage. They do not participate in meetings, training, or awareness-raising, usually only when obligated. Maybe it is*

> *prejudice, maybe a veiled aversion, but understood institutionally as something to follow. They hold small powers to hire, fire and promote and within this autonomy, they may or may not promote inclusion. As they are not open to learning, they often reinforce myths: that they are meritocratic, that they will just hire the best, regardless of whether it is a man or a white man. So, engaging middle leadership and engaging men and non-minority groups are the two biggest challenges we face, even as companies demand it strongly".* (D49)

This quote captures the role of the frozen middle as a gatekeeper. Middle managers hold "small powers" that are very significant in practice. They decide who joins, who leaves and who progresses. Resistance appears in their absence from DEI spaces, their recourse to meritocratic myths and their reluctance to learn. At the same time, they sit between ESG goals at the top and affinity group activism at the base, which intensifies their gatekeeping position.

Across these accounts, resistance to DEI appears as a layered relational process. Top leaders send signals, middle managers translate or block them and employees experience the consequences in teams and careers.

4.2.3 Subtheme 2.3 – power, authority and the relational work of decision-making

This subtheme examines how resistance was experienced in the practical exercise of power: deciding who enters, who grows, whose concerns are treated as credible and which priorities prevail. Participants described authority as something enacted in interaction (through feedback, silence, investor pressure, humor, technical language and performance management) rather than as a neutral "structure" that operates by itself. Resistance appears here as a situated practice of authority, shaped by the moment, the tone, the room and the relative positions of the people involved. Across accounts, two patterns were especially recurrent: what counts as "evidence" when DEI is discussed and who is authorized to initiate action or to make initiatives real.

One participant described how representing "the company" can be used to draw boundaries around identity and expression, framing inclusion as legitimate only up to a certain limit:

> *"They must follow company rules. When representing a legal person, we set aside the individual, focusing on the environment, beliefs and traditions. The challenge is deconstructing personal identity while representing the organization. It is important to*

> *promote debate about diversity, but sometimes more drastic measures are necessary because everything has limits".* (D24)

This account frames authority as boundary-setting: individuals may hold convictions, but in official roles they are expected to embody organizational norms. Resistance is not described as an explicit refusal of DEI, but as the use of institutional representation and "limits" to restrict what can be expressed or advanced. The mention of "drastic measures" also shows how sanctioning power becomes part of how organizations manage prejudice when it becomes visible or risky.

Other accounts emphasized how "evidence" becomes a gatekeeping device, where inclusion is valued when it fits metrics, image or reputational calculus and where experiential knowledge about exclusion becomes easier to dismiss unless it aligns with what higher levels recognize as legitimate:

> *"Top leaders focus on metrics and image, like racial demographics, to avoid market mistakes, neglecting inclusion and mainly prioritizing profits. Middle leaders handle operations, are more aware of employee issues like minority groups and social barriers and recognize inclusion's impact. Black leaders may form affinity groups, but Vice Presidents often focus on numbers, making initiation difficult without approval. Top leaders often overlook or ignore inclusion, unlike middle leaders who understand its importance in daily work". (D25)*

Although the content may initially sound related only to the organizational level, the participant is describing an experienced relational dynamic whose knowledge is heard, whose urgency counts and who is allowed to start something. Metrics and image-management operate as an authority language that travels down the hierarchy, shaping what can be proposed and what remains stalled. At the same time, the account shows how identity-based experience (for example, the push from Black leaders) can lack decision weight when endorsement depends on those with formal power.

A related tension appears when formal DEI structures exist, yet follow-through depends on whether decision-makers choose to mobilize them in everyday practice:

> *"Companies committed to diversity, with dedicated teams and clear goals, should not be deterred by inaction, regardless of resistance. Leadership generally supports diversity initiatives and sometimes resistance is unintentional, as they may agree with the issue of diversity but not be the ones raising it, motivating the team, or setting an example for middle management. The clear commitment of senior leadership contrasts with the misunderstanding or opposition of middle management, creating obstacles to the advancement of diversity. Middle managers may resist because they feel threatened,*

> *perhaps due to the company's preference for external hiring to meet quotas. Resistance from middle managers is a significant obstacle, compounded by opposition, passivity, or avoidance of diversity initiatives by senior leadership".* (D43)

Here, resistance is described as emerging through relational non-action: agreement without initiative, commitment without example and selective silence that leaves middle levels exposed. Even when policies and teams are in place, the participant suggests that authority is performed through what leaders choose to prioritize publicly, what they model and what they allow to remain ambiguous.

Participants also described how authority and identity intersect at the top, where meritocratic language can sound neutral while reproducing familiar profiles and delaying recognition of unequal starting points:

> *"Leadership, mostly white cis men at the privilege pyramid's top, often resist understanding why to hire from lower-ranked universities or different backgrounds. They value meritocracy but are influenced by biases, seeing themselves in the new generation yet holding stereotypes about underrepresented groups and women. These leaders are aware of these issues, but still have many questions".* (D42)

This account shows how credibility and "fit" can be shaped by who leaders see themselves in and by which backgrounds they interpret as legitimate signals of talent. Resistance appears less as explicit rejection and more as persistent doubts that slow decisions and keep inclusion conditional. For those trying to advance DEI, participants described that authority is also exercised through tone and interactional moves, especially when humor turns disagreement into a social pressure to drop the topic:

> *"I faced questions that turned discussions into disparaging humor instead of declaring opposition. Leaders of a diversity agenda must influence, argue convincingly and present data and examples. It is challenging, requiring good memory for debates and avoiding anger. Maturity and emotional intelligence are crucial but complex".* (D44)

Here, resistance is enacted through the communicative format of the conversation. Humor does not simply "express" a view; it positions the advocate as excessive, sensitive, or unreasonable, raising the interpersonal cost of insisting. The work of influence becomes emotional and strategic, requiring advocates to remain composed while being subtly delegitimized.

Finally, participants linked authority to performance systems, describing how what is measured becomes what is acted on and how DEI becomes easy to treat as optional

when it is not part of evaluation and reward:

> *"Even when a company claims to defend a cause, it still comprises people who may subtly support it. About 5 percent genuinely boycott, but most support causes publicly while concentrating on personal goals like cost reduction or growth, especially when DEI is not part of performance metrics. This causes career-focused individuals to overlook DEI issues since they are not emphasized in metrics or rewards".* (D31)

In this account, resistance is embedded in incentive logic that shapes everyday decisions and attention. When DEI is absent from what counts as performance, support can remain symbolic, while managers prioritize cost and growth in their interactions with teams and peers. The outcome is relational and practical: what is spoken in favor of inclusion does not necessarily translate into what is defended in trade-offs.

Another participant focused on the role of the first line of authority in implementation:

> *"Differences exist, especially in implementation. The first leader, the middle manager, is a decision-maker crucial for influence, deciding on hires and development. Their role can improve scores modestly, but significant progress from 1 to 20 requires top leadership involvement; without it, change is limited. Relying solely on bottom-up efforts, risking a wall of complaints, is not effective. Gaining top support is essential, whether they are engaged or not makes a big difference. Influencing top leadership involves a budget they support, using strategies like engaging a better officer, a consultancy, or aligning with business goals".* (D2)

This participant shows how authority is distributed: middle managers hold power over individual careers, while top leaders control budgets and strategic choices. Resistance emerges when these levels do not move together. Bottom-up pressure can accumulate as a "wall of complaints" when everyday experiences of exclusion are not matched by decisions that change systems, priorities, or incentives at the top.

Another participant described how investors and boards shape the boundaries of what leaders can do:

> *"Leadership, especially middle leadership, is important but only if it is a key responsibility for top leaders; otherwise, it is overshadowed by senior management. When high-level executives, especially the CEO, control decisions, investors often prevent action, prioritizing shareholder interests over employees and stakeholders. Without board diversity or scrutiny, progress is slow and scandals are ignored. Only one*

> *company I know manages diversity well, though there is much room for improvement. Standards should reflect organizational values, like policies against social markers and teams should have at least two members, including women and minorities. Ignoring diversity is a leadership problem, requiring a broader perspective and influence. Many claim their company's diversity efforts are good, even leaving because they feel it is excessive".* (D5)

Here, resistance is narrated as a governance condition rather than an interpersonal disagreement. Accountability flows upward: CEOs answer to investors, boards may lack diversity or scrutiny and reputational crises can be absorbed without consequences. The participant interprets this as a leadership problem that limits what can be sustained inside the organization. Even when middle managers are expected to "implement", the available room for action is constrained by what top governance tolerates, funds and monitors.

A different participant connected authority, meritocracy and lived experience of race to describe how inequality is reproduced through career decisions:

> *"Concerning high leadership, it is easy to be indifferent due to the effort required to engage with different levels, especially at middle leadership, where competition emerges. For example, when comparing myself with a colleague who has not studied at the same school, I question diversity and fairness in career advancement. Despite equal or better performance, I wonder how to promote Black leadership. We work in a meritocratic environment that uses tools for performance and growth, but middle management often feels like 'we are all just trying to survive, beaten down by top leadership. '" (D47)*

This account highlights how formal meritocratic tools coexist with unequal opportunities. Competition inside middle management is described as intense and survival pressure is experienced as coming from above. In this setting, resistance is not necessarily spoken of as "anti-DEI". It takes shape through decisions about potential, sponsorship and advancement, where certain profiles remain easier to recognize as "leadership material", while others remain questioned or postponed.

Another participant narrated a training situation that revealed how deep racialized fears can shape authority in interaction:

> *"During a training I conducted, a CEO shared a personal story of recognizing he was*

> *racist. He visited a top hospital where a Black neurologist treated him. He felt threatened, thinking the doctor might 'kill' him because of his race. He then questioned the doctor's background (education, languages, life path), according to him, 'to find humanity in the guy.' It is absurd, but he asked BECAUSE the doctor was Black. He acknowledged this was racist and, for me, as a DEI worker, I wanted to die, but I saw it as an opportunity to be pedagogical with him. I said, 'We are here discussing race. Imagine you are at an elite hospital, treated by a Black neurologist who worked ten times harder than any White doctor, overcoming racism daily. This neurologist is competent, not mediocre. The success of the Black doctor shows merit. That day, you were saved by this doctor, which might make you reflect.'"* (D29)

This episode shows how an authority figure can acknowledge racism while still holding power in the moment. The participant responds with a pedagogical move that reframes merit and professional legitimacy. Resistance here lies in the original suspicion and in the social order that makes such suspicion feel "reasonable" to the person in power. At the same time, the account also hints at how meanings can be reworked in interaction, which connects to Theme 3's focus on oscillations across situations and moments.

One participant summarized how proximity to people and incentive structures can shape resistance differently across levels:

> *"Resistance from middle management stems from more interaction with people, which creates additional fears. Meanwhile, top leadership simply does not see any profit opportunities. Leadership's role is to manage implementation and resistance, especially implicit. Leaders should devise a top-down strategy, inspiring and allocating resources for initiatives, especially for diversity and inclusion programs. Senior leaders provide resources and inspire middle management, who in turn need skills and practices to motivate their teams. Middle managers are crucial in inspiring others".* (D48)

This account brings together several elements of this subtheme. Resistance grows where fears, pressures and incentives meet. Authority is enacted relationally: top leaders decide on resources and strategic legitimacy, while middle managers face everyday tensions and must translate priorities into practice. When these layers do not align, DEI becomes dependent on individual effort, informal persuasion and local discretion—conditions that make resistance easier to sustain without being named.

Overall, Theme 2 shows how resistance becomes consequential through social relations and power dynamics inside organizations. Participants described resistance as unfolding through interactions, identities and positions, rather than as explicit refusal. It

appeared in who was invited to speak and who was expected to remain silent, in how credibility was granted or withdrawn and in how leadership roles shaped what could be prioritized without risk. Across accounts, middle managers emerged as central relational gatekeepers, positioned between strategic endorsement and operational execution, with discretion over pace, scope and visibility of DEI initiatives.

Resistance also intersected with identity dynamics. Participants described how race, gender, position and worldview shaped exposure to risk, voice and legitimacy, influencing who could question inequality and who carried the cost of doing so. In this sense, resistance is described as interpersonal but also organized through hierarchies, authority and everyday judgments about what is reasonable, professional, or safe. These relational processes help explain why DEI initiatives can exist formally while remaining thin in practice: resistance operates less through overt opposition than through coordination, delay, selective support and controlled implementation.

In sum, Theme 2 thus locates resistance in the relational organization of power and legitimacy, showing how contextual conditions described in Theme 1 are enacted in practice. At this stage, the focus is not yet on how these dynamics change over time, but on how resistance is stabilized through relationships and leadership structures within organizations.

4.3 Theme 3 – resistance to DEI transforms across time and organizational change

The third theme captures how resistance to DEI changes over time, shifting in visibility, intensity and form across organizational cycles and external events. Across accounts, resistance was not portrayed as something that appears once and is resolved, nor as a fixed position held by specific groups. Instead, participants consistently located resistance within temporal sequences, referring to different periods, phases and moments in which DEI agendas gained momentum, lost legitimacy, stalled, or were redefined.

In this theme, temporality is not approached as a linear trajectory of progress or decline. Participants described resistance through cycles and turning points that reshaped both the space available for DEI and the ways resistance was enacted. These turning points included broader sociopolitical and institutional shifts, leadership changes, moments of organizational instability and business cycles that recalibrated priorities. At the same time, participants described changes in how resistance appeared, moving between more explicit and more veiled forms as organizational expectations and norms shifted.

Theme 3, therefore, adds a temporal layer to the interpretations developed in the previous themes. While Theme 1 focused on the contextual conditions that make certain reactions to DEI appear legitimate or reasonable and Theme 2 examined how resistance circulates through relationships, hierarchies and decision-making, Theme 3 examines how these configurations re-enter organizational life over time. Participants described how what could be said, supported, or contested at one moment became harder to sustain at another and how earlier advances could lose stability as conditions changed.

Within this theme, two interrelated temporal dynamics were constructed from participants' accounts. One concerns time as periods, cycles and turning points, through which DEI agendas advance, recede, pause, or lose legitimacy. The other concerns time as change in the form of resistance, as opposition oscillates in visibility and intentionality, shifting from explicit contestation to more veiled, procedural, or system-embedded expressions. Together, these dynamics show that resistance to DEI is reshaped over time both in when it gains or loses organizational ground and in how it becomes visible and consequential. They also described the practical implications of this: DEI work requires ongoing recalibration as the form of resistance shifts, because what can be confronted directly in one moment may only be approached indirectly in another.

4.3.1 Subtheme 3.1 - cyclical reshaping of DEI through sociopolitical and institutional shifts

This subtheme examines how participants described resistance to DEI in relation to time understood as periods, cycles and turning points. Across accounts, resistance is not located in isolated events, but situated within broader temporal frames, such as phases of expansion, slowdown, regression, or renewed contestation. Participants consistently described how DEI agendas gain or lose organizational space over time, shaping how initiatives are approached in different moments.

Rather than remaining stable, resistance is described as recurring and reconfigured as sociopolitical contexts, institutional pressures and organizational conditions shift. Participants referred to political cycles, leadership transitions, economic crises and global influences as moments that recalibrate what DEI can mean in practice and how much legitimacy it holds inside organizations. Temporality here is central to how resistance is narrated: resistance unfolds, persists and returns as organizational priorities are reorganized.

Several participants described DEI as moving forward and backward across different periods. The present moment is often marked by a sense of regression, where topics that once appeared more settled are pulled back into dispute. This oscillation becomes visible in accounts of business cycles and organizational crises, where diversity values are maintained in discourse while being withdrawn in practice:

> *"In times of crisis, only money and power matter. I saw this change a lot. You can see capitalism, it is a pulsating thing, it has no purpose, no respect, nothing. It is money. In times of crisis, everything changed. But the company kept preaching the diversity values it claimed to have, but it was no longer putting them into practice as it had before. So, this guy started having very fierce discussions, not only about issues of diversity, but also about organizational justice. And then there came a time when he was fired". (D33)*

This excerpt strengthens the temporal argument by linking resistance to economic conditions and institutional ambiguity. Crisis is described as a turning point in which tolerated boundaries tighten and the dominant organizational logic shifts toward "money and power", even as diversity values remain present in formal discourse. Resistance

becomes visible not through the emergence of new beliefs, but through changes in what the organization rewards and sanctions over time, making the insistence on diversity and justice increasingly costly.

Other accounts offered a more phase-based timeline from within practice, contrasting earlier moments of trivialization with later moments of politicization and risk. One participant described how resistance moved from being framed as irrelevance or "mimimi" to becoming politically charged, generating caution, fear of exposure and reputational concern:

> *"Ten years ago, it wasn't so much a 'negative agenda' but seen as irrelevant or 'mimimi'. Over time, I realised this 'non-relevance' often came from discomfort with the agenda itself. Back then, society was less polarised, feminism wasn't so distorted or attacked and I had no fear of speaking. Today, I'm more careful… People can attack on social media, take a video out of context. At the start of my journey, allies were mostly women in leadership who wanted to push the agenda and asked me for a business case. Today, issues of gender, race and diversity are embedded in political discussion. We have senior leaders, men and women, in a conservative spectrum bringing 'customs' agendas. Companies worry about media backlash, such as what happened with advertisements with a trans woman. Some brands suffer attacks but not sales loss; others see profit. The business world is volatile, capital logic hasn't incorporated ESG and leaders worry about survival and bonuses. Few boards have social impact or DEI as a frontal goal. Even in companies with mature agendas and sustainability reports, inconsistencies remain; ERGs complain of slow support and lack of leadership appreciation. Even where progress is declared, implementation falters". (D53)*

What makes this excerpt central to Theme 3 is its temporal framing. Resistance is described as reconfigured over time: in earlier phases, it appeared through avoidance and trivialization; in the current phase, DEI is more politically charged and exposed to reputational risk. The participant's increased caution signals how temporal shifts reshape what can be said publicly and how positions are calculated inside organizations.

Alongside these wider cycles, participants also described institutional rhythms within organizations. DEI agendas are traced as entering through compliance pressures, multinational diffusion, or regulation and later slowing or hardening into contestation as meanings and incentives shift:

> *"I have been following this agenda for 15 years and I see that American multinationals pioneered it. While many European countries are well-ranked in the World Forum, the U.S. lags due to issues like maternity and paternity leave. American companies faced pressure about 15 years ago to adopt compliance standards post-scandals, including DEI. Major American multinationals led this movement. Recently, European multinationals have started adopting DEI outside their home countries, especially after the 2019 UK laws on wage transparency prompted some to establish UK headquarters. England has initiatives aiming for 30% women on boards. But in the last five years, progress has slowed as DEI intertwines with personal beliefs and politics, making the landscape more complex". (D21)*

This account frames resistance as something that can intensify even after formal adoption. For a period, DEI expands through institutional pressure and formalization. Later, as DEI becomes entangled with politicized debates and personal beliefs, the agenda slows and becomes more contested. Temporality here appears as an institutional rhythm, in which DEI gains legitimacy under one set of conditions and loses momentum under another.

Participants also described moments of advancement followed by a return to more elementary forms of discussion, or the loss of previously secured ground. These accounts emphasize not only the presence of polarization, but its experience over time as a rollback in the perceived maturity of the DEI agenda. One participant captured this sense of regression through a temporal metaphor, comparing the process to "going back to the 'anemone'" like in the Finding Nemo movie, evoking a return to an earlier stage rather than a continuation of debate:

> *"Polarization is something I honestly can't understand. The difference of ideas has always existed, but today, if you don't agree with an idea, you are automatically framed in another group. And not necessarily are there only two groups. I think we need to have an open mind to listen and debate, but polarization has brought many setbacks, especially with conservative issues coming back in vogue. This gets a lot in the way of minorities and diversity in companies. Themes we had already advanced returned to the be-a-ba, like going back to the 'anemone' in Nemo [movie]. It feels like a big setback that will last for years". (D35)*

While Theme 1 highlights how polarization shapes the initial reception of DEI by

attaching political meanings to words and agendas, the emphasis here is temporal. Polarization is described as interrupting trajectories of learning and institutionalization, producing cycles in which earlier advances lose stability and debates restart at a more basic level. Resistance does not stem from unfamiliarity with diversity agendas, but from the reactivation of frames that undo prior forms of stabilization.

Several participants also described how organizational commitment to DEI intensifies in some periods and is later withdrawn as conditions change. Leadership turnover, economic uncertainty and restructuring processes appear as turning points that alter internal legitimacy. One participant illustrated this dynamic by describing the rise and subsequent disappearance of a DEI leadership role within a multinational organization:

> *I was responsible for the vice-presidency of Latin America's first chair of diversity and inclusion. (...) Shortly after I took on this role, the agenda gained so much relevance and strength that I began reporting directly to the company's president. (...) I was in this position for almost three and a half years and the role was divided into two perspectives. One focused on our internal public, the labor force, covering representativeness, career acceleration for underrepresented groups and everything related to our communication and data transparency. The other was to design the business strategy for diversity and inclusion. So, how to bring global content into the local language, give it more visibility and optimize the cultural aspects that connect with the public here in Brazil. (...) Then [the company] went through a layoff. It has been a year now since I was laid off. There was a global layoff at that time and many tech companies went through this process and my position [Diversity and Inclusion VP] ceased to exist. (D4)*

The elimination of a senior DEI role following a global layoff reflects how resistance can take the form of structural withdrawal rather than explicit contestation. In this temporal framing, resistance emerges through cycles of expansion and contraction, where diversity remains symbolically valued but becomes vulnerable to leadership changes and organizational instability. What is withdrawn is not the discourse of inclusion, but the positions and structures that previously sustained it.

Participants emphasize how long resistance is expected to last, how often it returns and how its persistence reshapes what seems achievable for DEI and for minorities at work:

> *"I think we will suffer a lot from now on. We have been suffering for a few*

years now and I think this wave will last for a few more years. And it will impact a lot of the lives of the minorities here". (D6)

In this account, temporality is expressed through duration ("for a few years now") and projection ("a few more years"), framing resistance as an ongoing condition rather than a passing episode. The metaphor of a "wave" positions resistance as something that endures and repeatedly affects organizational life. Importantly, the emphasis is not on a transformation of the broader context, but on how this prolonged resistance narrows perceived possibilities for minorities at work. What is foregrounded is a shift in expectations: resistance is anticipated as sufficiently durable to constrain progress, shaping decisions, priorities and horizons of action over time.

Bringing these strands together, the accounts show that temporality is constructed through how participants describe duration, recurrence and projection and through the effects these temporal patterns have on action. Resistance is not portrayed as tied to a single moment or trigger, but as something that advances, recedes and returns across cycles of organizational change, leadership turnover and shifting priorities. Polarization remains present in the background, but its analytical relevance lies in how it contributes to prolonged and recurring conditions rather than in explaining resistance itself. What becomes salient is how expectations are recalibrated over time: earlier advances lose stability, initiatives are redefined or interrupted and horizons of action are narrowed or postponed. In this way, resistance appears as a temporal phenomenon that reshapes continuity, momentum and the perceived feasibility of DEI work.

4.3.2 Subtheme 3.2 - oscillations between explicit opposition and veiled resistance to DEI

This subtheme examines how participants described changes over time in the form and visibility of resistance to DEI. Unlike Subtheme 3.1, which focuses on periods, cycles and turning points that affect the stability of DEI agendas, Subtheme 3.2 centers on how resistance shifts in how it is expressed. Across accounts, resistance was not described as simply increasing or decreasing. Instead, participants contrasted moments in which resistance appeared openly and could be named with later moments in which it became harder to identify, as it was expressed through ambiguity, symbolic agreement, procedural language, or seemingly reasonable organizational justifications.

Temporality in this subtheme appears in how resistance changes its surface. What could be said directly in one period becomes difficult to state openly in another. The same discomfort with diversity reappears over time, but through different modes, such as professionalism, urgency, neutrality, compliance, or performance orientation. Participants described this shift as consequential for DEI work because resistance becomes less confrontable even as it remains effective.

One participant, reflecting on earlier work experiences, recalled how resistance appeared in direct and embodied ways, particularly in relation to race:

> *"I've witnessed many situations in the past, such as when we had little digital media and communication was mainly through email or phone. People would meet for the first time in face-to-face meetings and be surprised to see a Black man like me in a management role. They would react with looks of surprise and sometimes say, 'Oh, it's you? Oh, you're quite young, aren't you?', trying to mask the racial stereotype by citing age. I saw this as a reflection of stereotypes, where people assumed I only held operational roles, among other prejudices". (D17)*

In this account, resistance to Black leadership appears as visible reactions, looks and comments that attempt to explain away race. The participant also points to an early form of coding, where stereotypes are softened rather than openly stated. This memory helps situate the temporal shift described in later accounts: resistance does not disappear, but becomes increasingly mediated by what is acceptable to say in organizational spaces.

Other participants described this change explicitly. One contrasted earlier moments of explicit resistance with current situations in which resistance is described as veiled and harder to contest:

> *"(...) In the past, resistance was more explicit, today it is more veiled. It was easier to work with what you see, because you have counter-arguments and can negotiate. The veiled one is harder: people say 'we are open, we must invest in diversity', but they are in great resistance, making it much harder to show them they are resisting change. Today, besides resistance, the pressure for companies to adapt and evolve makes people feel obliged and increases resistance. Before we were more organized, negotiating and showing results. Now companies are so behind they need results fast, but diversity, equity and inclusion is a cultural transformation: you don't change overnight, a company doesn't stop being prejudiced just because you created a policy or took a commitment"*

(D51)

This passage organizes time into two regimes. In the earlier regime, resistance was explicit and therefore contestable: practitioners could "work with what you see", argue back and negotiate. In the current regime, resistance is described as veiled because people can adopt the language of openness while keeping strong opposition. The same quote also introduces a temporal pressure that intensifies veiling: organizations demand quick visible outputs even though DEI is described as slow cultural work. Under these conditions, resistance can present itself through urgency, acceleration and "results", rather than through direct refusal.

A participant described the practical challenge of the DEI resistance's shift in form through a strong reaction when asked how to deal with resistance that is not expressed openly:

> *"What are the specific challenges of dealing with this resistance when it is not expressed openly? Oh, [expletive]. It changes, it is subtle, because you cannot say openly, you have difficulties with this topic (...), it is about trying to open the dialogue and open the conversation. Really, there is no other way". (D47)*

The analytical value of this excerpt also lies in the use of an expletive. The outburst contrasts with the very nature of veiled resistance: while resistance becomes harder to name and confront in organizational settings, the participant resorts to informal language to convey the frustration it generates. The expletive signals the effort required to express and work through resistance that cannot be addressed openly at work, highlighting how veiled resistance constrains not only action but also language itself. In temporal terms, the shift to veiled resistance changes the mode of action: instead of episodic confrontation, the work becomes iterative and prolonged, because resistance surfaces indirectly and can be continuously denied.

Several accounts show that veiled resistance becomes more consequential when it shifts from individual attitudes to organizational systems. In these cases, resistance no longer appears primarily through open disagreement, but through routine alignment with what organizations measure and reward. This marks a temporal shift in form: as DEI becomes easier to endorse publicly, resistance relocates into less visible and more normalized practices:

> *“Even when a company positions itself as a defender, it still consists of people. Support for a cause doesn't necessarily mean that the individuals will support it. Often, they do so in a subtle way. There are many levels to this. About 5% of people genuinely dislike the subject and intentionally boycott it. However, I don't believe these people are the majority. Some support causes publicly but focus on personal metrics like cost reduction or market growth for evaluations, especially when DEI isn't integrated into performance measures. This leads many career-focused individuals to ignore DEI issues, as metrics and rewards don't emphasize them". (D37)*

This account illustrates how resistance changes its surface over time. The participant contrasts a small group that resists openly with a broader pattern in which resistance is expressed indirectly, through everyday decisions guided by metrics and incentives. As DEI becomes normalized in organizational discourse, opposition no longer needs to be stated. It can operate through what remains unchanged: performance criteria, evaluation systems and career rewards. In this sense, resistance oscillates from explicit refusal to system-embedded indifference. It becomes harder to identify and contest precisely because it aligns with ordinary organizational rationality rather than appearing as opposition.

Another participant linked this oscillation to how advocacy itself is interpreted over time. The account highlights the ambiguous and often paradoxical space in which advocacy and resistance coexist. Actions intended to confront exclusion can simultaneously trigger new forms of resistance, not through open rejection, but through how such actions are reinterpreted:

> *“You have to be intolerant against intolerance. That is, even the very fact that we react and demand that people are treated with respect becomes a form of raw militancy. Of course, I recognize that there is a part that is more concerned with being an advocate of diversity rather than collaborating and this shows a lack of the broader, integrative vision to understand that, okay, we've been discussing this for a long time. Yes, but nothing has changed. I particularly believe that things won't improve by simply highlighting issues or forcefully pushing for change; on the contrary". (D12)*

This account illustrates a temporal shift in the meaning of advocacy. Naming prejudice and demanding respect are framed as necessary, yet over time, these same

actions can be read as excessive or counterproductive. The paradox lies in the fact that efforts to reduce exclusion can, in certain moments, intensify resistance by being reclassified as “militancy". Resistance thus operates ambiguously, not by opposing DEI directly, but by problematizing how it is voiced.

A similar pattern appears in accounts that connect changes in the form of resistance to new regimes of visibility and performance. One participant contrasted earlier moments, when resistance was easier to identify, with current situations in which resistance becomes deeper and harder to locate:

> *“Resistance was easier to bypass and work around in the past, but now it reaches deeper layers. The rush for quick results often leads to superficial outcomes to impress leadership and secure their support, neglecting true cultural transformation on deeper aspects of diversity. Driven by the need for ‘quick wins,’ I see this as a form of resistance (maybe not resistance in name, but a significant barrier), especially with new generations and social media influence. Some become a top voice on LinkedIn, lacking organizational experience, because they prove adept at discussing diversity online but fail to foster real change within companies. This has caused other people, lacking maturity, to reinforce stereotypes inside organizations by claiming, "diversity is just activism". (D30)*

This excerpt makes the temporal shift in the form of resistance explicit. Resistance is described as moving from visible and confrontable expressions to less visible and more system-aligned forms. Over time, resistance becomes ambiguous in its expression: public alignment with DEI increases, while opposition is enacted through urgency, demands for quick results and performance-oriented practices. The paradox lies in the coexistence of visible commitment and constrained change, exemplified by actions that appear supportive, but can simultaneously limit deeper transformation by prioritizing speed, visibility and reputation over structural work. In this sense, resistance is described as not being expressed through refusal, but through forms that align with dominant organizational norms, making it harder to identify and contest while remaining consequential. In this context, superficial “quick wins” become a barrier because they satisfy short-term visibility demands while leaving deeper practices untouched. The participant also describes a newer layer of resistance tied to digital influence: DEI becomes entangled with online performance and reputational dynamics and this can fuel an internal narrative that “diversity is just activism". In this sense, resistance mutates by

absorbing new objects (social media, public discourse, “top voices”) and by shifting its justifications from open opposition to critiques of legitimacy and seriousness. What makes this a theme is the patterned shift in form: as contexts and organizational priorities turn, resistance is repeatedly re-expressed through different surfaces (open prejudice, cautious silence, procedural delays, metric-driven indifference and legitimacy critiques) without requiring a stable “anti-DEI” identity.

Integrating these insights, Subtheme 3.2 shows how resistance oscillates over time in its visibility and intentionality. While Subtheme 3.1 traced how resistance gains or loses organizational space across periods and turning points, Subtheme 3.2 highlights how resistance adapts its form within those periods. In relation to the previous themes, Theme 3 shifts the focus from the conditions that make resistance appear legitimate (Theme 1) and the relational dynamics through which it circulates (Theme 2) to how these configurations are reworked over time, reshaping both the space available for DEI and the forms through which resistance becomes visible and consequential.

5 DISCUSSION

The discussion builds directly on the empirical patterns identified in the findings, treating the three themes as interpretive lenses rather than as explanatory variables. Rather than moving beyond the data, the discussion returns to them to examine how resistance to DEI becomes meaningful through context, relations and time, in line with interpretive approaches to organizational resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Thomas, 2020).

The discussion is structured around three interdependent themes developed from the data: Context, Relations and Temporal dynamics. These themes do not operate as hierarchical levels or causal stages. Instead, they function as analytical lenses through which resistance to diversity can be understood as a patterned, situated and evolving organizational phenomenon. Overall, they offer an integrated interpretive account of how resistance is assembled, enacted and recalibrated across organizational and societal settings.

To avoid fragmenting the findings into discrete empirical "themes", the discussion retains Context, Relations and Time oscillations as its analytical backbone, while adopting a nested contribution logic to clarify how the analysis offers a way to interpret and reconfigure existing knowledge. At a second level, the discussion engages with empirically salient mechanisms that concentrate these dynamics. For instance, political polarization is examined as a contextual condition that sharpens struggles over legitimacy, meaning and acceptable organizational purpose in relation to DEI, while middle management is analyzed as a leadership level with a relational interface where discretion over pace, scope and visibility becomes consequential for implementation. At a third level, these mechanisms are interpreted alongside recurrent peculiarities of resistance mapped across the dataset, including variation in visibility, variation in intentionality or awareness and the capillary nature of resistance as it circulates both top-down and bottom-up through routine organizational work. This circulation allows resistance to accumulate through dispersed decisions and interpretations without requiring overt opposition, while remaining compatible with formal DEI discourse. The discussion also considers how organizations may normalize or invisibilize resistance through selective responsibility, reporting and public positioning.

The chapter proceeds by first outlining the interpretive logic that connects these empirical patterns to broader debates on power and organizational change. It then

examines each analytical dimension in turn, discussing how resistance is conditioned by organizational and societal contexts, coordinated through interactions and hierarchies and reworked across time as organizational priorities, political climates and public discourses shift. The final section integrates these dimensions into a single interpretive architecture, showing how resistance to diversity is sustained through their interaction rather than through any single mechanism.

Throughout the discussion, the analytical focus remains on organizational and social processes rather than individual attitudes or dispositions. This analysis suggests that resistance may operate as accomplished through ordinary practices of interpretation, coordination, sequencing and justification, becoming embedded in everyday implementation work. This orientation allows resistance to be examined as part of how organizations govern diversity, legitimacy and accountability in practice.

Rather than conceptualizing resistance as an episodic reaction or an implementation failure, the findings reposition resistance as an organizational pattern through which diversity is continuously negotiated and delimited. The findings indicate that resistance can take the form of neither as simple opposition nor as unintended drift, but as a process that stabilizes existing arrangements while permitting symbolic alignment with DEI agendas. In this sense, the contribution does not rest on identifying novel forms of resistance. Instead, it lies in reconfiguring established insights by showing how known forms and modes of resistance operate in combination across context, relations and time, rendering resistance an ordinary, durable and consequential feature of DEI implementation in contemporary organizations.

5.1 The contextual dimension: how organizational and societal conditions shape resistance

This section advances prior research by showing how resistance to DEI is produced through a contextual configuration in which politicized public discourse, contested vocabularies of fairness, historical inequalities and globally circulating DEI models become combined in organizational sensemaking, rendering the slowing, narrowing, or deferral of DEI initiatives legitimate as responsible management rather than as opposition.

According to Thomas & Plaut (2007, p. 16): “Organizations by themselves do not choose to discriminate, harass, nor devalue diversity; individuals engage in those behaviors (...) Although human behaviors and inadequacies drive organizations,

organizations are also microcosms of the larger society". The contextual dimension shows how resistance to diversity is assembled through organizational and societal conditions that shape what is recognized as appropriate, defensible and manageable in relation to DEI.

Thus, this thesis proposes an extension of Thomas's (2007) taxonomy of diversity resistance by adding a societal level and introducing intentionality as a dimension that cuts across all cells (although it is not depicted as a separate axis in the figure to preserve visual clarity). Within the contextual dimension, the inclusion of a societal layer highlights how broader political, cultural and institutional climates operate as background conditions that shape organizational signals, legitimacy narratives and normative expectations around DEI, thereby influencing when resistance becomes normalized, justified, muted, or rendered less visible in everyday organizational practices. Intentionality, understood as the degree of awareness involved in expressing resistance to DEI, may vary across forms of resistance, ranging from more deliberate and explicit positioning to less conscious manifestations, such as those associated with unconscious bias. These incremental contributions do not seek to establish a new framework, but rather to refine, consolidate and extend existing discussions on resistance to DEI by bringing together patterns identified in the literature with interpretive constructions emerging from the interview accounts (See figure 4).

Figure 4 — An extended taxonomy of resistance to DEI across societal contexts

	Subtle	**Overt**
INDIVIDUAL	Avoidance of DEI conversations; Disengagement in diversity training; Passive non-participation	Open objections to DEI initiatives; Explicit refusal to collaborate; Vocal complaints about "reverse discrimination"
ORGANIZATIONAL	Procedural delays in implementing policies; Symbolic compliance without real change; Resource under-allocation	Formal restrictions on DEI programs; Official policy rollbacks; Public statements against diversity mandates
SOCIETAL	Framing DEI as "divisive" in public discourse; Subtle narrative shifts in media; Normalized exclusionary language	Backlash rhetoric and organized opposition; Legislative bans on DEI; Public campaigns against "woke" policies

Source: Elaborated by the author (2026).

Context influences which categories are taken as meaningful, which claims about fairness are treated as credible and which ways of speaking about diversity are interpreted

as acceptable or ideological. Rather than operating as a background, context actively participates in how DEI is interpreted, evaluated and acted upon in organizations. Consistent with a pragmatist perspective, meanings are not assumed to be stable because they are constructed in use, through situations, interactions and situated accounts that shape what appears possible at a given moment (Dewey, 1938; Weick, 1995).

Across the interviews, resistance to diversity appeared rooted in a contextual configuration in which contemporary political polarization, a national history of inequality and DEI program models circulating through multinational corporations were experienced together. Professionals described programs arriving with standardized categories, targets and narratives designed in global corporate networks, often assuming universal meanings for DEI (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; DiTomaso, 2024; Holck, 2016). These models enter Brazilian organizations that are deeply shaped by colonial legacies of racial hierarchy, class stratification and conservative moralities around gender and sexuality, dynamics widely discussed in Brazilian and international scholarship (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014; Saraiva & Irigaray, 2009; Saraiva & Quental, 2024). The contribution of this study does not lie in identifying these elements separately but in demonstrating how they are experienced as an interconnected configuration that shapes which DEI claims become actionable and which remain contested in organizational practice.

A recurrent pattern concerns how meanings of diversity are negotiated before concrete initiatives are implemented. Diversity appears widely present in slogans, campaigns, dashboards and reports, while its meaning is reworked in ways that preserve existing evaluative regimes. This process can be understood as a form of semantic displacement, whereby DEI language circulates symbolically while its practical implications are narrowed. Similar dynamics have been described in critical diversity scholarship, which shows how inclusion discourse can coexist with limited organizational change (Ahmed, 2007b; Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Irigaray et al., 2022). What the present analysis adds is an account of semantic displacement as a contextual mechanism of resistance: diversity is not misunderstood or rejected, but selectively interpreted in ways that reduce its disruptive potential and maintain organizational continuity.

Participants frequently described DEI categories as “imported”, “generic”, or insufficiently connected to lived organizational realities. Labels such as underrepresentation, equity and inclusion were sometimes experienced as distant or as addressing only specific groups, rather than as a shared organizational concern. These accounts resonate with work on the translation of management ideas, which emphasizes

that practices do not simply diffuse across contexts but are edited, reframed and reassembled as they travel (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996). In this sense, resistance emerges not from the presence of DEI programs per se, but from how these programs are translated through local histories, vocabularies and expectations, shaping what can be sustained without threatening organizational identity.

Broader political and cultural tensions also entered organizational life as contextual conditions for resistance. Participants consistently linked reactions to DEI with political polarization, moral debates and identity-based interpretations circulating beyond the workplace. Such topics align with research on affective polarization, which shows how political identities increasingly overlap with moral and social identities, intensifying distrust toward issues associated with perceived out-groups (Iyengar r& Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2018). In the interviews, DEI language was often described as functioning as a political signal rather than as a neutral description, triggering alignment or rejection before initiatives were discussed. This observation contributes to diversity resistance research by showing how polarization operates as an interpretive resource inside organizations, enabling caution, deferral, or narrowing of DEI agendas to appear reasonable rather than oppositional (Prasad & Śliwa, 2024; Saraiva & Quental, 2024). It is important to note that political polarization is examined as an empirically salient contextual mechanism, not as an alternative to the three analytical dimensions and it illustrates how societal conditions shape DEI interpretations, alongside other contextual forces like meritocratic narratives and colonial legacies. The emphasis on polarization reflects its recurrence in accounts and capacity to sharpen legitimacy struggles. However, it represents one consequential manifestation within the broader contextual architecture, not the sole determinant.

Alongside politicized discourse, participants mobilized competing vocabularies of fairness and neutrality. Resistance was frequently justified through narratives of meritocracy, equal treatment and procedural neutrality, particularly when initiatives involved targets or focused investments aimed at addressing inequality (Castilla & Ranganathan, 2020). These narratives mirror the paradox identified by Castilla and Benard (2010), in which explicit meritocratic framing can intensify bias and align with system justification and social dominance theories that explain how existing arrangements are defended through legitimizing myths such as individual effort and neutrality (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The empirical contribution lies in showing how such narratives function contextually as protective justifications, framing

resistance as responsibility, quality control, or organizational care rather than as opposition to inclusion.

Research on modern and symbolic racism, color-blind ideology and aversive racism indicates that resistance frequently manifests through race-neutral principles such as individualism, "equal treatment" and merit (Ahmed, 2020; Sears, 1988; Henry & Sears, 2002; Sears & Henry, 2003). This is particularly common where reputational risks discourage open bias (McConahay, 1986; Neville et al., 2000; Plaut et al., 2018; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). Color-blind ideology neglects racial categories while opposing policies aimed at addressing inequality, often characterizing them as "discriminatory" (Apfelbaum et al., 2012; Neville et al., 2000). Consequently, diversity goals are viewed as threats, quotas as unfair "merit" violations and race-sensitive initiatives as divisive politics. Brazilian professionals mobilized these vocabularies similarly, positioning resistance as responsibility rather than bias. This explains why DEI efforts are sometimes perceived as illegitimate "preferences" or 'politics", even when presented as neutral and professional. Resistance is thus often justified by respectable vocabularies rather than open confrontation (Castilla & Benard, 2010; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Resistance rarely appeared as outright rejection of diversity. Instead, it was often articulated through claims that the organization was "not ready", that initiatives might compromise standards, or that the business could not absorb perceived risks. These arguments resonate with classic resistance-to-change literature, which conceptualizes resistance as a response to perceived threats to control, competence and stability (Coch & French, 1948; Katz & Kahn, 1966; Ford & Ford, 2010). In the interviews, such protective framings were frequently voiced by managers positioned as guardians of standards and continuity. What this study adds is an explanation of how these framings gain legitimacy in DEI contexts, allowing resistance to be enacted through prudence and pacing rather than through confrontation.

From an institutional perspective, these dynamics can also be understood as struggles over legitimacy. Legitimacy concerns what is perceived as appropriate and acceptable within a given social order (Suchman, 1995). Participants' accounts suggest that DEI becomes evaluated through competing standards of worth: inclusion may be framed as ethical or strategic value, while neutrality and meritocracy are positioned as higher-order principles that constrain action. This reflects broader arguments in institutional theory that conflicts often concern which evaluative criteria should prevail,

rather than disagreement over facts (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). In this context, resistance to DEI appears not as the absence of value, but as a reordering of values that limits the scope of acceptable intervention.

The contextual configuration identified here also connects with research on decoupling and non-performativity. Participants described selective visibility of DEI, where public commitments and symbolic actions coexist with limited internal change. Classic institutional accounts describe decoupling as the separation between formal structures and actual practices (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), while more recent work emphasizes decoupling as an ongoing process shaped by pressures and expectations (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Ahmed's (2012) analysis of non-performative diversity commitments is particularly relevant: commitments can signal virtue without transforming organizational routines. The present analysis shows how contextual narratives (i.e., risk management, neutrality, politicized language) support selective visibility as an acceptable organizational stance, enabling organizations to display alignment with DEI while constraining investment and decision-making.

Power-centered perspectives further clarify these patterns. Critical work on resistance emphasizes that resistance and power are co-constitutive and embedded in institutionalized hierarchies rather than located solely in individual attitudes (Barbalet, 1985; Clegg, 1994a; Collinson, 1994; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994). In the interviews, managerial language of prudence and protection can be read as discursive work that normalizes existing power relations by presenting them as neutral standards. This resonates with scholarship on coloniality and management knowledge, which highlights how claims of neutrality often reproduce historically situated hierarchies of race, class and gender (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014; Souza, 2019). In Brazil, participants explicitly connected these dynamics to colonial legacies and moral conservatism, reinforcing arguments that diversity discourse may become depoliticized through market and reputational logics (Saraiva & Irigaray, 2009; Saraiva & Quental, 2024).

These findings jointly refine how resistance relates to backlash literature. While backlash is often associated with explicit and confrontational opposition (Leslie, 2019; Dover et al., 2020), the empirical material shows resistance operating in quieter forms. Resistance remains consequential without appearing aggressive, because it is embedded in legitimate organizational vocabularies and administrative routines. This distinction matters conceptually: resistance to DEI can be sustained through contextual authorization rather than open conflict, making it harder to identify and contest.

Overall, the contextual dimension advances diversity resistance research by integrating insights that are often treated separately. Prior studies have examined politicized discourse, contested fairness frames, translation of management ideas and decoupling, but typically in fragmented ways. By bringing these elements together within the same empirical field, the analysis shows how resistance is produced through their combination. Politicized language renders DEI sensitive; fairness and neutrality narratives provide respectable justification; imported templates make DEI easier to frame as misaligned; and selective visibility offers an organizational solution that protects legitimacy. In this configuration, resistance becomes an ordinary and patterned feature of DEI implementation, enacted through contextual sensemaking rather than through explicit rejection.

This contextual interpretation prepares the ground for the next sections. Once these conditions are made visible, it becomes possible to examine how resistance circulates through relationships and hierarchies and how its meanings shift over time as contexts evolve.

5.2 The relational dimension: how resistance circulates through interactions and hierarchies

This section builds on previous research by demonstrating how resistance to DEI is not primarily expressed through explicit opposition or individual attitudes, but circulates through relationships, hierarchies and everyday interactions that translate contextual conditions into practical organizational outcomes. While the contextual dimension highlighted how broader societal, political and organizational frames render resistance intelligible and legitimate, the relational dimension brings the analysis closer to organizational life by examining how these frames are enacted through interactions, leadership routines, identity negotiations and decision-making practices. Resistance emerges here as a relational accomplishment, produced through coordination among people occupying different positions, identities and degrees of authority.

Across the findings, resistance to DEI appears embedded in ordinary workplace interactions (e.g., conversations, jokes, silences, hiring discussions, performance feedback and informal negotiations) rather than articulated as open rejection. This aligns with relational and interactionist perspectives in Organizational Studies, which emphasize that meaning, legitimacy and authority are continuously constructed through social interaction (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Scott, 1990). In this

sense, resistance does not reside inside individuals but unfolds through relationships that shape what can be said, who can speak and which issues are treated as appropriate, excessive, or risky to pursue.

Identity plays a central role in these relational dynamics. The findings show that gender, race, sexuality, age, class and professional background shape credibility, visibility and access to influence in DEI-related interactions. Research on identity work demonstrates that organizational members continuously negotiate who they are and how they are recognized through discourse and practice (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Thomas & Davies, 2005). In the empirical material, diversity-related claims were more easily dismissed, reframed, or treated as sensitive when voiced by individuals associated with historically marginalized identities, reinforcing well-documented asymmetries in voice and legitimacy (Acker, 2006; Crenshaw, 2013). These patterns resonate with studies showing that speaking up about inequality often carries higher interpersonal and career costs for those who already occupy vulnerable positions (Gulker et al., 2013; Kutlaca et al., 2020).

These relational dynamics also align with classic and contemporary work on tokenism and critical mass, which shows that when representation remains at very low levels, members of underrepresented groups face heightened visibility, performance pressure and constrained influence, whereas greater numerical presence can shift interaction patterns, coalitions and perceived legitimacy of voice (Kanter, 1977; Dahlerup, 1988; Konrad et al., 2008; Torchia et al., 2011; Joecks et al., 2013; Post & Byron, 2015; Childs & Krook, 2009). The higher costs for raising DEI concerns reflect not only individual risk but structural underrepresentation conditions shaping whose voice appears credible versus political, as relational resistance operates through patterned asymmetries, not isolated bias (Acker, 2006; Crenshaw, 2013).

Relational resistance also materializes through humor and ambivalence, consistent with the literature on discrimination and bias (Axelrad et al., 2024; Irigaray et al., 2010; Pompeu & Souza, 2019). The findings include situations in which jokes or "semi-playful" remarks reproduce stereotypes or signal discomfort with diversity topics, while simultaneously maintaining plausible deniability. Prior research shows that humor can function as a mechanism of exclusion, enabling the expression of prejudice while framing objections as harmless or exaggerated responses (IIrigaray et al., 2022; Morton, 2025). In such interactions, resistance operates not by denying DEI outright, but by raising the social cost of insisting, positioning those who challenge the remarks as overly

sensitive or disruptive. These dynamics contribute to climates of silence, where concerns about discrimination or exclusion remain unspoken due to fear of retaliation, futility, or social isolation (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Kahn, 1990).

Leadership appears in the findings as a key relational site where resistance is coordinated, though not as a homogeneous group. Participants consistently distinguished between leadership layers, describing variation in how DEI commitments are interpreted, enacted, or contained. This supports research that conceptualizes leadership as relational and distributed rather than concentrated solely at the top (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Nishii & Mayer, 2009). Senior leaders often signal commitment through public discourse, external positioning, or symbolic alignment with DEI norms, which resembles patterns of institutional endorsement identified in prior studies (Ahmed, 2007a; Tatli, 2011). However, the findings show that when such endorsement is not accompanied by sustained modeling, accountability, or resource allocation, it leaves significant interpretive space at lower levels.

Middle management emerges as the central relational hinge through which resistance to DEI circulates and stabilizes. Rather than functioning as a neutral transmission belt, middle managers are shown to actively translate, filter and recalibrate DEI initiatives through sensemaking and sensegiving practices (Westley, 1990; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Sharma & Good, 2013). Scholarship on middle management emphasizes their structurally ambivalent position, simultaneously subject to control from above and responsible for control below (Harding, Lee, & Ford, 2014; Thomas & Pullen, 2002). The findings illustrate how this ambivalence becomes particularly pronounced in DEI work, where middle managers must balance expectations of compliance with concerns about legitimacy, performance and team stability.

Resistance at the middle level rarely appears as explicit refusal. Instead, it was described as enacted through pacing, sequencing, deprioritization, or selective engagement, practices that allow managers to show alignment. This pattern aligns with Heyden et al.'s (2017) argument that middle managers continuously adjust their stance depending on perceived support, employee reactions and the credibility of change signals from the top. Emotional dynamics further intensify this process. Research on emotional balancing shows that middle managers absorb anxiety from multiple directions, managing uncertainty while attempting to preserve organizational continuity (Huy, 2002; Huy et al., 2014). In the findings, DEI is often framed as important yet difficult to carry forward amid workload pressure, restructuring and fear of interpersonal backlash, making caution

appear as “responsible” leadership.

In addition, boundary work provides a crucial relational mechanism through which middle managers enact resistance. The findings show that middle managers regulate who participates in DEI initiatives, which topics gain visibility and how far discussions are allowed to proceed. This aligns with research demonstrating how middle managers engage in walling-in and walling-out practices to manage competing demands and protect local order (Azambuja et al.,, 2023). Such boundary regulation is relational because it unfolds through meetings, informal negotiations, selective invitations and framing choices that shape collective understanding of what DEI can reasonably entail.

Secrecy and backstage coordination also feature prominently. The findings include accounts of diversity initiatives being explored, delayed, or reshaped away from formal arenas, particularly when managers anticipate resistance from peers or senior leaders. Toegel, Levy and Jonsen (2022) show how secrecy operates as a strategic practice through which middle managers promote or contain initiatives behind the scenes. In the context of DEI, secrecy often contributes to partial implementation and symbolic compliance rather than transformation, reinforcing resistance without overt confrontation.

Recent research on middle managers and diversity further contextualizes these findings. Sánchez, Sitú and Murillo (2023) demonstrate that translating inclusion into practice depends heavily on middle managers’ relational positioning and perceived room for maneuver. Kalev and Dobbin (2022) similarly show that when organizations delegate diversity responsibility to middle managers without authority or accountability, familiar managerial logics tend to dilute inclusion efforts. The findings align with these insights, showing how middle managers’ discretion over hiring, promotion and team climate becomes a critical site where resistance may be enacted through routine judgments rather than policy violations.

Power, in this relational account, is not treated as a static structure but as something exercised through interaction. Decisions about hiring, promotion, performance evaluation and resource allocation emerge as relational practices shaped by tone, evidence, credibility and positional authority. This view resonates with power-centered analyses that conceptualize power and resistance as co-constitutive and embedded in everyday organizational practices (Barbalet, 1985; Clegg, 1994a; Collinson, 1994). In the findings, appeals to metrics, neutrality, or “business priorities” function as authoritative languages that travel through hierarchies, shaping what is acted upon and what remains optional or deferred.

Importantly, the findings also show that resistance is sustained through coordination across levels. Senior leaders may endorse DEI symbolically, middle managers may recalibrate it pragmatically and frontline supervisors may translate it into interpersonal climate talk focused on respect and coexistence rather than redistribution or structural change. This circulation of responsibility resembles patterns of frontstage compliance and backstage redirection identified in earlier studies of organizational change and diversity (Ahmed, 2007a; Ybema & Horvers, 2017; Thomas, 2008). Resistance thus becomes distributed across the power chain, making it difficult to locate in any single role or decision.

Together, the relational dimension demonstrates that resistance to DEI is embedded in relationships and hierarchies that organize legitimacy, voice and discretion in everyday work. Contextual narratives of merit, risk and polarization are enacted through interactions, leadership routines and identity negotiations, producing outcomes that appear reasonable and professional while limiting structural change. By grounding these dynamics in empirical material, this analysis brings together existing discussions and research on diversity resistance by showing how resistance operates as a relational process (coordinated through sensemaking, emotional labor, boundary work and authority practices) rather than as overt opposition or individual reluctance. This relational architecture prepares the ground for the temporal dimension, where the cumulative effects of these practices reshape the meaning of DEI over time.

5.3 The temporal dimension: how resistance changes over time

This section advances prior research by showing how resistance to DEI operates as a temporal mechanism, through which organizational responses to diversity are repeatedly reconfigured across "cycles of resistance" (Davidson & Proudford, 2007). Resistance appears neither as a one-off reaction nor as a fixed orientation held by specific groups. Instead, it takes shape through sequences of reinterpretation, reclassification and recalibration that unfold as organizations move through socio-economic-political shifts, leadership transitions and internal changes within companies. In this sense, temporality is not treated as a background variable but as constitutive of how resistance persists, adapts and remains effective.

Across the empirical material, resistance to DEI rarely appeared as a single moment of refusal. Participants consistently described temporal sequences in which

diversity agendas gained legitimacy, stalled, lost momentum, or were reframed, often in response to broader contextual and organizational turning points. This processual view aligns with classic process theories of organizational change, which emphasize that organizational phenomena are best understood as unfolding trajectories rather than discrete outcomes (Pettigrew, 1990; Langley, 1999). Resistance, from this perspective, is not overcome or eliminated but reorganized as conditions shift.

A central temporal pattern concerned the cyclical reshaping of DEI agendas across periods of expansion and contraction. Participants described phases in which diversity initiatives were introduced with explicit attention to access, representation and structural inequality, followed by periods in which these agendas were narrowed, paused, or deprioritized. These cycles were frequently linked to sociopolitical change, leadership turnover, economic uncertainty and moments of organizational instability. Such turning points resemble punctuated models of change, in which periods of relative stability are interrupted by episodes that reorient priorities and redefine what is considered legitimate or risky (Tushman & Romanelli, 1985; Greenwood & Hinings, 1996).

Economic crises and restructuring processes emerged as particularly salient temporal inflection points. In these moments, participants described how organizational attention shifted toward financial survival, efficiency and control, even while diversity values continued to be affirmed at the level of discourse. This pattern reflects threat-rigidity dynamics, whereby perceived threats lead organizations to narrow decision criteria, privilege familiar logics and suppress initiatives seen as discretionary or politically sensitive (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981). Resistance, in this context, did not require explicit opposition to DEI. It materialized through changes in what organizations rewarded, tolerated, or sanctioned over time, making continued insistence on diversity more costly despite unchanged formal commitments.

Several accounts traced resistance through longer institutional rhythms, particularly in organizations exposed to multinational diffusion and regulatory pressure. DEI agendas were described as entering organizations through compliance requirements, reputational concerns, or global corporate models, gaining momentum under specific field-level conditions and later slowing as meanings shifted and diversity became entangled with politicized debates. This trajectory resonates with institutional theories of diffusion and legitimation, which show how practices spread when aligned with dominant norms and are later re-evaluated as field conditions and interpretations evolve (Strang & Meyer, 1993; Kondra & Hinings, 1998). Resistance thus appeared not at the moment of

adoption, but in subsequent phases when the implications of DEI for authority, identity and resource allocation became more salient.

Importantly, participants did not describe these cycles as linear progress followed by failure. Instead, resistance was narrated as recurring and cumulative. Earlier advances were perceived as losing stability when conditions changed, producing a sense of regression or return to more elementary debates. This experience of reversal reinforces processual accounts of organizational change that emphasize path dependency and the fragility of institutionalization, especially in contested domains such as DEI (Pettigrew, 1990; Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Temporality here is experienced as repetition and return, not resolution.

Alongside changes in the organizational space available for DEI, participants described a second temporal dynamic: shifts in the form and visibility of resistance. Over time, resistance was described as moving from more explicit and confrontational expressions toward more veiled, procedural, or system-embedded forms. Earlier moments were associated with visible discomfort, direct questioning, or embodied reactions to diversity, particularly in relation to race and leadership. Later moments were characterized by symbolic alignment with DEI combined with indirect practices that limited its effects.

This transformation reflects how resistance adapts as organizational norms change. As equality discourse becomes more institutionalized, overt opposition becomes harder to express without social or reputational cost. Resistance, therefore, migrates into registers that appear reasonable, professional, or neutral. Classic analyses of managerial moral orders and organizational talk help explain this shift. Jackall (1988) shows how organizational actors learn to frame dissent through acceptable vocabularies of prudence and responsibility, while Ashcraft (2013) demonstrates how power operates through what can be said without appearing excessive. In the present material, resistance increasingly appeared through references to urgency, feasibility, operational priorities and performance demands rather than through explicit rejection of DEI.

A recurring temporal contrast involved the perceived difference between earlier periods, in which resistance was visible and contestable and later periods, in which it became harder to identify and confront. Participants described how symbolic endorsement of diversity coexisted with procedural rigidity, selective engagement and alignment with unchanged performance metrics. This pattern is consistent with institutional analyses of decoupling, where formal structures and policies are maintained

while everyday practices remain largely intact (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Bromley & Powell, 2012). Over time, resistance becomes embedded in what organizations routinely measure, reward and prioritize, allowing opposition to operate through continuity rather than disruption.

Several accounts emphasized how resistance increasingly aligned with incentive systems and attention structures. As DEI became easier to support rhetorically, opposition shifted toward indifference embedded in evaluation criteria, career rewards and strategic focus. This dynamic aligns with the attention-based view of the firm, which argues that what organizations do depends on what decision-makers attend to and how issues compete for limited cognitive and organizational resources (Ocasio, 1997). When DEI is absent from core performance metrics, support can remain symbolic while everyday decisions follow established priorities, allowing resistance to persist without being named.

Participants also described how advocacy itself was reinterpreted over time. Actions that previously signaled a necessary confrontation with exclusion came to be reframed as excessive, militant, or politically risky. This temporal reclassification illustrates how resistance operates through shifts in legitimacy rather than shifts in belief. As discourses around DEI become politicized, the same practices can be redefined as unreasonable or counterproductive, narrowing the space for action even when formal commitments remain. Such dynamics echo critical analyses of discursive containment and non-performativity, which show how equality talk can limit its own effects by redefining the terms of acceptable engagement (Agocs, 1997; Ahmed, 2007a).

The temporal evolution of resistance also intersected with new regimes of visibility and reputation. Participants noted how social media, public controversy and demands for rapid results intensified pressures for symbolic action and quick wins. Over time, this emphasis on visibility contributed to superficial forms of inclusion that satisfied short-term expectations while leaving deeper organizational arrangements unchanged. This pattern reinforces arguments that narratives of progress can themselves become a source of resistance by suggesting that sufficient action has already been taken, thereby undermining the perceived need for sustained structural change (Kraus, Torrez, & Hollie, 2022).

This temporal pattern is consistent with evidence that diversity training and bias interventions often generate mixed and context-dependent effects, including fatigue, reactance and backlash, particularly when programmes are mandatory, framed as moral

correction, or implemented without aligned changes in decision systems and accountability (Kalev et al., 2006; Bezrukova et al., 2016; Leslie, 2019; Dover et al., 2020; Kidder et al., 2004; Devine & Ash, 2022). Reviews in social psychology similarly show that prejudice-reduction interventions tend to yield modest average effects and substantial variation across contexts, which helps interpret why repeated training cycles can coexist with stable routines of evaluation and promotion and can even strengthen defensive responses under threat or politicisation (Paluck & Green, 2009; Forscher et al., 2019). Read through the thesis's temporal lens, training can therefore become part of the oscillation itself, alternating moments of visible institutional response with subsequent periods in which resistance becomes quieter and more procedural.

Taken together, these temporal dynamics portray resistance as oscillating over time. It does not simply weaken or intensify but reorganizes itself in response to changing political climates, organizational histories and relational configurations. Explicit opposition may recede as equality norms strengthen, only to re-emerge under new conditions or migrate into less visible practices when overt rejection becomes costly. This oscillation between explicit and veiled forms aligns with research showing that resistance to DEI often alternates rather than disappears, adapting to what is socially and organizationally permissible at different moments (Thomas, 2008, 2020; Mercat-Bruns, 2016).

Viewed through this temporal lens, resistance to DEI appears as a cumulative and recursive process. Each new initiative enters an environment already shaped by prior cycles of engagement, fatigue, disappointment and recalibration. External events such as elections, economic crises, or leadership change interact with internal histories of partial implementation, shaping expectations about what is feasible and worth pursuing. This reinforces multidimensional views of resistance as ambivalent and evolving, rather than as a stable barrier to be removed (Piderit, 2000; Davidson & Proudford, 2007).

The theoretical contribution of this dimension lies in repositioning resistance as an ongoing temporal mechanism through which organizations manage continuity while responding to shifting external and internal pressures. Rather than treating resistance as an initial obstacle to DEI implementation, the temporal analysis shows how resistance persists by reshaping the meaning, scope and legitimacy of diversity across successive cycles of resistance (Davidson & Proudford, 2007). In combination with the contextual dimension, which identifies the conditions that make resistance appear reasonable and the relational dimension, which traces how resistance circulates through hierarchies and

interactions, the temporal dimension completes a multilevel architecture in which resistance is understood as dynamic, adaptive and deeply embedded in organizational life.

5.4 Integrative contributions

The integrative architecture proposed in this thesis organizes empirical patterns observed in this study by linking contextual conditions, relational dynamics and temporal shifts through which resistance becomes meaningful in organizational life. The integration offers a structured way to interpret how resistance operates across situations where inclusion agendas are simultaneously institutionalized and contested (Thomas, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Workman-Stark et al., 2023).

This closing section consolidates what the discussion adds to scholarship by bringing together the three analytical lenses developed from the findings: Context, Relations and Time oscillations. Across these lenses, the thesis reframes resistance to DEI as an evolving organizational pattern that is sustained through ordinary practices of justification, coordination, prioritization and sequencing, rather than as episodic opposition, an individual disposition, or a technical failure of implementation (Thomas, 2008, 2020; Piderit, 2000; Ford & Ford, 2010; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994). The contribution is therefore less about locating "new" forms of resistance and more about showing how familiar forms and modes become durable when they combine across societal conditions, organizational hierarchies and temporal cycles (Barbalet, 1985; Clegg, 1994a; Collinson, 1994; Pettigrew, 1990; Langley, 1999).

From the contextual lens, the discussion demonstrates how resistance becomes legitimate when DEI is interpreted through politicized public debate, contested vocabularies of fairness, historical inequality and globally circulating program templates that are edited as they travel (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2018; Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; Saraiva & Quental, 2024). In participants' accounts, resistance rarely required explicit rejection of the equity (addressing structural disadvantage logic) aims. Instead, it was authorized through "respectable" managerial vocabularies reinforcing equality (sameness of treatment logic) such as neutrality, standards, prudence, timing and risk management, which reposition slowing, narrowing, or deferring DEI as responsible governance (Suchman, 1995; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Thornton et al., 2012; Coch & French, 1948). A further interpretive bridge in this lens is provided by research on modern and symbolic racism, colour-blind racial ideology and aversive racism, which clarifies how claims about individualism, "equal treatment"

and standards can function as principled justifications while avoiding explicit prejudice, especially in settings where openly discriminatory talk carries reputational risk (Ahmed, 2020; Apfelbaum et al., 2012; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004; McConahay, 1986; Sears, 1988; Henry & Sears, 2002; Sears & Henry, 2003; Neville et al., 2000; Plaut et al., 2018). Read alongside organizational research on meritocracy beliefs, system justification and social dominance, these frameworks strengthen the argument that resistance can be sustained contextually through legitimacy work rather than confrontation (Castilla & Benard, 2010; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

From the relational lens, the discussion specifies how contextual frames become consequential through everyday interactions and hierarchical coordination. Resistance is shown as a relational accomplishment that shapes who can raise concerns, which issues become speakable, how responsibility is distributed and how discretion is exercised in decisions about pace, scope and visibility (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Kahn, 1990; Acker, 2006). The analysis links these dynamics to identity and inequality literatures by showing how credibility and risk are patterned by social positioning, with higher interpersonal and career costs for voice in contested domains and with humour and ambiguity functioning as common protective devices that preserve deniability while raising the social cost of insistence (Crenshaw, 2013; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Thomas & Davies, 2005; Irigaray et al., 2010; Irigaray et al., 2022; Gulker et al., 2013; Kutlaca et al., 2020). Within this relational architecture, middle management is theorized as a key hinge: a leadership layer positioned to translate, filter, pace and contain DEI through sensemaking and sensegiving, emotional balancing, boundary work and selective engagement (Huy, 2002; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Heyden et al., 2017; Azambuja et al., 2023; Toegel et al., 2022). This argument is reinforced by classic and contemporary work on tokenism and critical mass, which helps interpret why low representation intensifies visibility pressure and constrains influence, whereas greater numerical presence can shift interaction patterns and the perceived legitimacy of voice (Kanter, 1977; Dahlerup, 1988; Konrad et al., 2008; Torchia et al., 2011; Joecks et al., 2013; Post & Byron, 2015; Childs & Krook, 2009).

From the temporal lens, the discussion shows why resistance persists even when organizations adopt DEI structures, policies and public language. Resistance is conceptualized as adaptive across cycles of organizational change, sociopolitical shifts and leadership turnover, with recurring phases of expansion, interruption, narrowing and

redefinition rather than linear progress toward institutionalization (Tushman & Romanelli, 1985; Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Ocasio, 1997; Thomas, 2008, 2020). This processual account connects classic change theory with institutional arguments about decoupling and non-performativity by demonstrating how symbolic endorsement can coexist with stable evaluative regimes, particularly when diversity remains weakly integrated into accountability and decision systems (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Bromley & Powell, 2012; Ahmed, 2007a). The temporal lens also accommodates evidence that training and bias interventions frequently produce modest and context-dependent effects and can trigger fatigue, reactance, or backlash when implemented as mandatory correction without aligned decision structures and incentives, which helps interpret why repeated training cycles may coexist with persistent implementation routines (Kalev et al., 2006; Bezrukova et al., 2016; Leslie, 2019; Dover et al., 2020; Kidder et al., 2004; Paluck & Green, 2009; Forscher et al., 2019; Devine & Ash, 2022).

Collectively, the three lenses support a single interpretive architecture: resistance to DEI becomes durable when contextual legitimacy frames, relational coordination and time oscillations reinforce one another, enabling organizations to protect established arrangements while maintaining public alignment with inclusion discourse (Barbalet, 1985; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994; Suchman, 1995; Thomas, 2008, 2020). The thesis also clarifies three recurrent descriptors that cut across the dataset and support this integrative argument: variation in visibility (subtle to explicit), variation in intentionality or awareness (intentional to routine and less conscious) and the way resistance spreads through routine work, small decisions and dispersed touchpoints, becoming embedded in everyday implementation. A related mechanism discussed throughout is organizational visibility work, in which organizations may normalize, invisibilize, or selectively take responsibility for resistance, including through public positioning and CSR signalling consistent with critiques of symbolic inclusion and diversity washing (Ahmed, 2007a; Bromley & Powell, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Table 9 — Theoretical contributions of the thesis and addressed research gaps

Contribution level	What the thesis adds	Research gap addressed	Why this matter for the literature

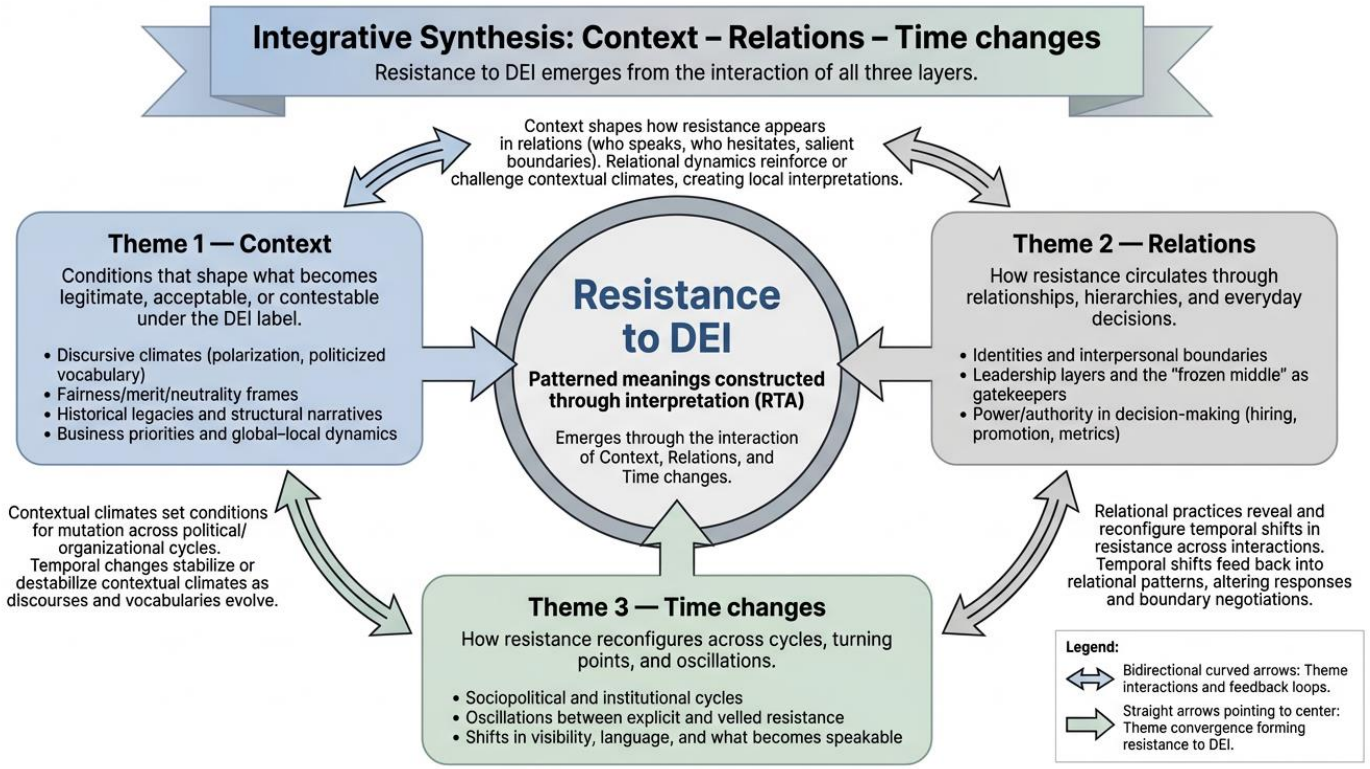
Level 1 (central)	Integrates Context, Relations and Time oscillations to explain resistance to DEI as a multilevel, evolving organizational pattern sustained through legitimacy, coordination and temporal reconfiguration.	Analytical fragmentation in DEI resistance research (isolated focus on attitudes, leadership commitment, or implementation).	Provides a processual, multilevel explanation of durability and adaptation in resistance, consistent with power and change traditions (Thomas, 2008, 2020; Piderit, 2000; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994).
Level 2 (salient mechanisms)	Examines political polarization as a contextual condition that sharpens legitimacy struggles and middle management as a relational hinge where discretion over pace, scope and visibility becomes decisive.	Limited theorization of how contested societal discourse enters organizations and limited specification of how leadership layers shape DEI trajectories beyond "support".	Clarifies where resistance concentrates and how it is coordinated without requiring overt opposition (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2018; Huy, 2002; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).
Level 3 (recurring descriptors)	Maps how resistance varies in visibility and in intentionality or awareness and how it spreads through routines and dispersed decisions, becoming embedded in everyday implementation; specifies organizational visibility work (normalize, invisibilize, selective responsibility).	Limited vocabulary for describing subtle, routine and distributed forms of resistance that remain compatible with formal DEI talk.	Makes the "how" of persistence analysable without relying on resistant identities or single-event explanations (Ahmed, 2007a; Bromley & Powell, 2012; Thomas, 2008, 2020).
Methodological and regional	Uses pragmatist, reflexive thematic analysis to connect practitioners' accounts to multilevel theory in a Brazil-based case.	Dominance of cross-sectional and outcome-focused designs and concentration of evidence in Global North settings.	Strengthens qualitative, context-sensitive theorizing about resistance as situated meaning-making and action (Dewey, 1938; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Saraiva & Quental, 2024).

Source: Elaborated by the author (2026).

Importantly, the discussion highlights what is distinctive about resistance in the domain of DEI. Resistance here is closely tied to contested social meanings and political debates that extend beyond organizational boundaries. As shown in the Brazilian context, polarization, shifting institutional pressures and reputational concerns intensify struggles over legitimacy and feasibility. These conditions shape not only whether DEI advances or stalls, but how it is redefined over time, often relocating diversity into less contentious domains while leaving structural inequalities relatively intact. This insight helps clarify existing work on resistance by showing how societal dynamics become embedded in organizational routines and temporal trajectories of DEI work.

Taken together, the three analytical dimensions developed in this chapter—Context, Relations and Time oscillations—form an integrative synthesis of how resistance to DEI operates in organizational life. Rather than representing separate layers of analysis, these dimensions are analytically intertwined. Figure 5 summarizes how resistance is constituted through its interaction, showing how contextual conditions, relational practices and temporal dynamics co-produce patterns of resistance that are durable, adaptive and often difficult to confront directly.

Figure 5 — Integrative synthesis



Source: Elaborated by the author (2026).

The integrative synthesis does not suggest a linear sequence or a causal hierarchy among dimensions (see Table 10). Instead, it highlights reciprocal connections through which resistance gains coherence and continuity. Contextual climates shape relational possibilities; relational enactments give concrete form to abstract discourses; and temporal oscillations rework both context and relations across successive cycles of diversity work. The table below specifies these intersections and clarifies how each directional linkage contributes to sustaining resistance to DEI.

Table 10 — Integrative synthesis

Direction	**Explanation**
Integrative synthesis: Context – Relations – Time oscillations	Resistance to DEI is sustained through the combined operation of contextual conditions, relational dynamics and temporal reconfigurations. These dimensions do not operate independently; instead, they reinforce one another, shaping how resistance becomes intelligible, enacted and stabilized in organizational life.
Context ↔ Relations	Societal and organizational contexts shape how resistance is enacted in everyday relationships by influencing whose voices are considered legitimate, which concerns are framed as reasonable and where relational boundaries are drawn. In turn, relational practices (such as silence, humour, delegation, or selective engagement) translate abstract contextual discourses (e.g., meritocracy, neutrality, polarization) into concrete interactions that reinforce or subtly rework these broader climates.
Relations ↔ Time oscillations	Relational dynamics mediate how resistance oscillates over time. Shifts in leadership, priorities and interpersonal configurations affect whether resistance is expressed openly, muted, or embedded in routine practices. At the same time, temporal oscillations reshape relational expectations, altering how people interpret risk, support and responsibility in DEI-related interactions across organizational cycles.
Context ↔ Time oscillations	Broader political, economic and institutional contexts condition when resistance becomes more explicit, more cautious, or more indirect across time. Temporal cycles (such as periods of crisis, polarization, or organizational restructuring) reconfigure the legitimacy of diversity agendas, contributing to recurring patterns of expansion, containment, redefinition, or withdrawal that stabilize or destabilize contextual meanings of DEI.

Source: Elaborated by the author (2026).

This integrative synthesis clarifies why resistance to DEI persists even in organizations with formal commitments, dedicated structures and repeated initiatives. Resistance is not located in a single level or moment, but is reproduced through the alignment of contextual legitimacy, relational enactment and temporal reconfiguration. By bringing these dimensions together, the Discussion shows how resistance can remain reasonable, normalized and adaptive without requiring explicit opposition or stable resistant identities. This synthesis closes the Discussion by consolidating the thesis's central analytical contribution: resistance to DEI is best understood as a context-dependent, relational and evolving process through which organizations continuously negotiate the meaning, scope and limits of inclusion.

6 CONCLUSION

Guided by the following research question: How do professionals working with or around diversity initiatives perceive and describe resistance to diversity in organizations and how do they view this resistance influencing the trajectories of these initiatives? The study developed an integrative understanding of resistance as a phenomenon influenced by contextual, relational and temporal lenses.

Based on a pragmatic epistemology and a Reflective Thematic Analysis of 55 in-depth interviews with professionals working in Brazilian organizations, the analysis demonstrated that resistance to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) is not best understood as episodic reactions, individual attitudes, or implementation failures. Instead, resistance emerges as a standardized organizational process, situated within broader social conditions, circulating through organizational interrelationships and hierarchies and oscillating over time, in different diversity work cycles. Throughout the thesis, resistance is explained as a complex, ambiguous and even paradoxical phenomenon, often subtly presented as something reasonable, legitimate and difficult to confront within prevailing organizational logics.

The contributions of this thesis can be understood on three interconnected levels. At the first level, the study proposes an integrative architecture that links the themes of Context, Relationships and Temporal Oscillations as intertwined dimensions through which resistance to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) is configured. At a second level, it highlights empirically relevant mechanisms (e.g., political polarization, middle management) that illustrate how this three-theme architecture operates in concrete organizational settings. At a third level, it maps how resistance is manifested through forms and modes, including variations in visibility, intentionality or awareness, capillarity and organizational practices that normalize, diffuse, or shift responsibility for resistance in interactions and routines.

The first theme showed that resistance to DEI is anchored in broader organizational and social contexts, consistent with the literature on organizational behavior that emphasizes the essential impact of context (Johns, 2006). Participants described how narratives of meritocracy, neutrality and justice lend coherence to resistance, especially when diversity initiatives are perceived as ideologically charged, externally imposed, or disconnected from local histories of inequality and racial hierarchy (Castilla & Benard, 2010; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Saraiva & Irigaray, 2009; Saraiva & Quental, 2024). Political polarization has further intensified these dynamics, transforming

DEI into a symbolic marker that can trigger caution, withdrawal, or defensive positioning (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2018; Prasad & Śliwa, 2024). In this sense, resistance is presented as a response that seems prudent and justified within the prevailing contextual logics and not as an irrational opposition.

The second theme demonstrated that resistance circulates through interrelationships, identities and hierarchies, rather than residing in isolated actors. Senior leadership frequently signals support for DEI at the level of discourse, while responsibility for implementation was delegated to HR departments, DEI teams and especially middle managers, who generally possess discretion over the pace, scope and visibility but limited structural authority. Middle managers emerged as key gatekeepers, also dubbed the "frozen middle," as they can simultaneously adopt forms of gradual compliance, selective prioritization and controlled implementation that can, controversially, preserve existing power and opportunity distributions (Huy, 2002; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Azambuja et al., 2023). Resistance was also manifested through everyday relational practices (i.e., humor, silence, evasion, informal alliances) that shaped who could express their voice and how and who bore the costs of doing so (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Irigaray et al., 2010). Interestingly, in all these accounts, resistance appeared less as an individual refusal and more as an organizational routine circulating through relations.

The third theme revealed the temporal nature of resistance to DEI. Participants described temporal episodes in which the meanings of diversity oscillated over time and cycles in which initiatives began with explicit commitments to equity and structural change, only to be gradually reformulated as projects of culture, coexistence, or awareness. While diversity remained visible in discourse, its redistributive core became increasingly diluted in practice (Ahmed, 2007a; Thomas, 2008, 2020). Accounts described how explicit opposition tended to recede, while resistance persisted through semantic narrowing, reprioritization, fatigue and repeated reformulation of DEI under broader, business-oriented labels. These dynamics echo processual views of change and ambivalence, in which resistance evolves as organizational actors reinterpret initiatives in response to shifts in political, economic and institutional pressures (Piderit, 2000; Ford et al., 2008; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

In combination, the three themes conceptualize resistance to DEI as a systemic, multilevel and dynamic phenomenon (Mansbridge & Shames, 2008), also mirroring Gonzalez's (2010) formulation of diversity change in organizations as a systemic,

multilevel and nonlinear process. Contextual conditions define what appears legitimate; relational dynamics distribute responsibility and enact resistance in practice; and temporal processes allow resistance to adapt and persist across cycles of change. This integrated perspective helps explain why DEI initiatives may expand discursively while remaining constrained in their capacity to transform entrenched organizational inequalities.

6.1 Contributions to scholarship

By addressing a broad research question, this thesis captures how resistance to DEI takes shape through multiple, interconnected processes rather than through isolated variables or levels of analysis. The findings show that resistance cannot be fully understood by focusing solely on individual attitudes or formal organizational structures, supporting calls in the literature to examine resistance as a multilevel and evolving phenomenon (Thomas, 2020; Holck et al., 2016).

This thesis contributes to scholarship on resistance, diversity and organizational change by addressing the substantive, analytical and regional gaps identified in the introduction through an integrated set of contributions that operate at three nested levels.

At the primary level, it advances an integrative architecture that conceptualizes resistance to DEI as a multilevel and dynamic phenomenon that takes shape across contexts, circulates through relationships and oscillates over time, responding to calls for more coherent and qualitatively grounded approaches in DEI resistance research (Lee, 2023; Yadav & Lenka, 2020).

At a second level of emphasis, it foregrounds two empirically prominent mechanisms that illustrate this architecture in concrete organizational life: political polarization as a contextual interpretive frame and middle managers as a relational interface where discretion over pace, scope and visibility becomes consequential for implementation.

At a third level, it brings to the surface the peculiarities of how diversity resistance occurs in practice by mapping forms and modes of resistance in relation to visibility and to intentionality or awareness, showing how resistance can become capillary through routines, local interpretations and recurring implementation patterns and how organizations may act to normalize or invisibilize resistance, including through selective responsibility and positioning that can reverberate through inter organizational interactions (Thomas, 2008, 2020; Thomas & Plaut, 2008; Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens, 2018; Risberg & Corvellec, 2022).

Empirically, these contributions are grounded in 55 interviews with professionals who work with or around diversity initiatives in Brazil, a context characterized by colonial legacies, ongoing inequality and political polarization that remains underrepresented in mainstream theorizing on diversity resistance (Saraiva & Quental, 2024; Prasad & Śliwa, 2024; Ng et al., 2025).

The first contribution is a macro-anchored and multilevel account of diversity resistance that clarifies how resistance persists in organizations and society through the interaction of different factors and conditions. Studies often conceptualize resistance at the level of individual attitudes or localized reactions to particular programmes, even when they recognize broader discourses in the background (Thomas, 2008, 2020; Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens, 2018; Risberg & Corvellec, 2022). By drawing on the accounts of professionals who design, coordinate, or support DEI work, this thesis shows resistance as a process that crosses the boundary between society and organization. Political polarization, meritocratic narratives, moral frames and global DEI templates appear inside companies through language, policies and expectations and are then reworked in practical decisions about recruitment, promotion and leadership visibility (Prasad & Śliwa, 2024; Ng et al., 2025). This perspective reorganizes how resistance to DEI has been discussed and observed in Thomas's taxonomy of diversity resistance, which focuses on individual and organizational levels, by incorporating a societal dimension that treats resistance as situated and cross-level rather than as a process contained within corporate boundaries (Thomas, 2008, 2020). Within this multilevel account, the thesis highlights political polarization as a particularly salient contextual mechanism shaping legitimacy struggles around DEI, while middle managers emerge as a particularly salient relational mechanism through which formal commitments are translated into everyday implementation, often via discretion over pacing, narrowing, postponement, or staged follow-through. Bringing these mechanisms to the surface strengthens the explanatory precision of the broader architecture, while keeping them anchored as illustrative, second-level contributions rather than as alternative pillars that compete with Context, Relations and Time oscillations.

At the third, more fine-grained level, the thesis addresses a foundational descriptive question that is often left underdeveloped in the DEI resistance literature: how does diversity resistance occur? The thesis maps forms and modes of resistance in relation to visibility and to intentionality or awareness and it shows how these variations shape capillarity, meaning how resistance spreads, scales and becomes embedded as routine

organizational work. It also clarifies how organizations can act to normalize or invisibilize resistance through mundane practices such as humour, silence, procedural delays, selective responsibility and public positioning, including "for show" commitments that manage external legitimacy while limiting internal disruption. By articulating these peculiarities and their practical consequences, the thesis characterizes resistance as an ambiguous and complex phenomenon, where meanings and practices can appear contradictory across situations yet remain coherent within local logics and organizational constraints (Thomas, 2008; Thomas & Plaut, 2008).

The second contribution is the development of an integrative architecture that organizes diversity resistance into three interconnected dimensions, thereby integrating theoretical streams that are often treated separately. Research on resistance is dispersed across literature on power and subjectivity (Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994), resistance to change and ambivalence (Piderit, 2000) and critical diversity and backlash (Gündemir et al., 2024). The thesis connects these strands by proposing three analytical dimensions of diversity resistance. The contextual dimension clarifies how political climates, institutional logics and organizational systems make particular responses to DEI appear reasonable and legitimate. The relational dimension clarifies how resistance circulates through interactions, hierarchies, identity work and leadership practices, including the gatekeeping role of middle management. The temporal dimension clarifies how these logics are reworked across successive cycles of DEI initiatives as conditions, vocabularies and priorities shift. Together, these dimensions offer an empirically grounded architecture that links robust but fragmented traditions and clarifies how resistance emerges, is reproduced and gains meaning across levels and moments.

The third contribution is the introduction of a temporal lens that places time oscillations at the centre of diversity resistance. Work on organizational change and resistance has emphasized ambivalence, paradox and evolving reactions, yet temporal dynamics often appear as background description rather than as a focal analytic category (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). In the DEI field, Thomas (2008, 2020) and others have shown how resistance can move from explicit contestation toward more symbolic and rhetorical forms as equality norms strengthen and recent debates on backlash indicate renewed, more overt opposition in specific political moments (Prasad & Śliwa, 2024; Ng et al., 2025). The temporal dimension developed in this thesis systematizes these insights by conceptualizing resistance as a process that learns and adapts across cycles of diversity work. Across such cycles, resistance can shift from direct contestation to semantic

narrowing and symbolic alignment, travelling through recurring sequences of rebranding, reprioritization, interruption and fatigue, while preserving the organizational function of protecting established hierarchies and evaluative regimes (Gonzalez, 2010; Ahmed, 2007a; Saraiva & Quental, 2024; Gündemir et al., 2024). This emphasis on cycles strengthens what future research can examine and compare: how organizational memory, repeated diversity program waves and shifting 'labels' when referring to diversity recalibrate what becomes sayable, measurable and actionable in DEI and how these recalibrations reconfigure the visibility and consequences of resistance over time. In this way, the thesis opens a pathway for studies of DEI resistance that treat oscillation, recurrence and mutation as central empirical patterns rather than as peripheral context.

6.2 Contributions to practice

From an interpretive standpoint, the findings suggest that resistance to diversity can be read as a source of information about how organizations define fairness, merit, risk and legitimacy in practice. Appeals to meritocracy, neutrality, moral values, or operational prudence indicate which interpretations of "good management" are being defended in specific contexts and sectors (Thomas, 2008, 2020; Risberg & Corvellec, 2022). The study was designed to map this phenomenon and describe its characteristics in depth, so that future work on how to address resistance can be grounded in a clearer understanding of how it appears and why it feels coherent for those who mobilize such arguments. This "mapping" does not seek to generalize the phenomenon as being "uniform," nor to diminish the gravity of the resistance, particularly when it sustains exclusion or hostility. Instead, it aims to elucidate how organizational structures and narratives render these positions seemingly justifiable from an internal perspective.

Participants compared periods when resistance was explicit with the current prevalence of subtle and embedded forms. Several DEI professionals mentioned that overt opposition, although harmful, was easier to identify and challenge, whereas subtle resistance in jokes, silences, procedural delays, or symbolic support felt just as damaging and sometimes more exhausting over time. These accounts highlight a practical challenge: discrimination and exclusion can continue in less obvious ways that are harder to contest, even when formal commitments to equality exist (Sue, 2010; Cortina et al., 2013; Irigaray et al., 2010; Irigaray et al., 2022). For practice, this suggests that paying attention to low-level and routine acts of resistance is just as important as addressing openly hostile episodes.

The contextual dimension emphasizes the risks of tropicalizing global DEI models without substantive adaptation. Professionals often described imported frameworks that assumed a generic understanding of "diversity" and did not fully account for Brazilian histories of race, class, religion, coloniality and informality (Ernst Kossek, Markel, & McHugh, 2003; Saraiva & Irigaray, 2009; Saraiva & Quental, 2024). In the empirical data, resistance often appeared where language, categories, or targets did not align with local realities or key concerns. For practice, this highlights the importance of starting with context-specific understandings of which identities are most vulnerable, which inequalities are most prominent and how diversity is locally named and experienced, before translating global discourses into organizational programs.

The relational dimension reveals that resistance is unevenly spread across different identities and hierarchical levels. In the interviews, those on the margins of networks and authority structures, frequently women, Black professionals and LGBTQ+ employees, reported facing greater exposure when raising concerns and higher risks when acting as allies. Simultaneously, middle managers emerged as a key bottleneck in advancing DEI agendas through the hierarchy, positioned between external commitments, senior expectations and operational pressures (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Azambuja, Islam, & Ancelin-Bourguignon, 2023; Cortis et al., 2021). For practical purposes, this highlights the importance of identifying where responsibility for DEI is concentrated, who bears more personal and professional risk when discussing inclusion and which leadership levels have the most discretion to delay, redirect, or support initiatives.

The findings emphasize that DEI unfolds within polarized environments where employees closely observe how organizations position themselves. Practitioners explained how public debates about "wokeness",e gender ideology, or quotas became part of everyday work conversations, influencing whether DEI was seen as a shared value, a partisan marker, or a reputational obligation (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2018; Prasad & Śliwa, 2024; Ng et al., 2025). They pointed out perceived gaps between strong symbolic communication and slow or selective structural changes, which were interpreted as inconsistency and increased skepticism (Ahmed, 2007a). For practice, this suggests that responses to resistance must consider polarization. Efforts to present DEI as neutral or purely technical, while avoiding visible alignment or specific decisions, were described by interviewees as weakening trust rather than protecting it.

In the final analysis, the temporal dimension reveals that resistance and DEI

strategies develop over cycles of programs, restructurings and shifts in the political climate. Practitioners reported repeated waves of rebranding, changing labels and new frameworks that resembled previous initiatives and contributed to fatigue or irony. At the same time, they described moments when windows of opportunity opened, often linked to external events or leadership changes and then gradually closed as priorities shifted again (Gonzalez, 2010; Thomas, 2020; Gündemir et al., 2024). For practice, this perspective encourages taking a longer view: resistance is not a single episode to be "overcome" but a part of how organizations manage and narrate change over time. Engaging with DEI from this angle means viewing resistance as a dynamic indicator of how context, relationships and history intersect in each organizational setting, emphasizing ongoing work rather than a static barrier that can be eliminated once and for all.

6.3 Limitations and future research avenues

This study is bounded by its exploratory design, so the findings do not seek to establish causal relationships or estimate the prevalence of specific forms of resistance to DEI. Instead, they examine how resistance becomes meaningful within particular organizational and societal contexts. The empirical material draws on accounts from professionals working with or around DEI initiatives in Brazil. This perspective enables close engagement with how resistance is interpreted and managed in organizational settings, while also reflecting a situated view of how such dynamics are experienced. This delimitation aligns with the study's focus on organizational phenomena rather than individual attitudes.

Because resistance is accessed primarily through interview accounts, some forms of resistance remain less visible, including informal coordination, silence, non-verbal interactions and backstage decision-making. Future research could complement interview-based approaches with ethnographic designs, shadowing, observation, diary methods and organizational document analysis to unveil how resistance emerges in everyday practices and informal spaces (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Cortis et al., 2021).

The reliance on qualitative data generated with 55 professionals also means that the findings reflect situated and partial perspectives shaped by organizational position, professional status and social location. Experiences of resistance are likely to vary across gender, race, class, sexuality and hierarchical level. Future studies could place intersectionality at the centre of research design, examining how overlapping social positions shape exposure to resistance, opportunities for voice and the use of resistance

by historically marginalized groups themselves, including strategic, defensive, or protective forms of resistance (Crenshaw, 2013; Acker, 2006). Mixed methods research, including survey-based mapping combined with in-depth qualitative follow-ups, could offer a feasible way to examine how these patterns scale across organizational populations.

At the organizational level, the analysis highlights middle management as a key site where resistance is translated, slowed, or redirected while remaining institutionally legitimized. However, this study captures these dynamics mainly through second-order accounts. Future research could examine middle management practices directly, using comparative case studies across sectors or organizational sizes to explore how managerial discretion, performance pressures and accountability structures may shape responses to DEI agendas (Azambuja et al., 2023). Such work could also compare how resistance operates in multinational subsidiaries versus locally owned firms, where global DEI scripts interact differently with national institutional contexts.

The focus on Brazil, while analytically central, limits transferability to other national settings shaped by distinct histories of coloniality, welfare regimes, labour markets and racial formations. Future research could expand this agenda to other contexts, reaching more Global South countries and continents, such as Latin America, Africa and South and Southeast Asia, where DEI initiatives often intersect with postcolonial legacies, informal labour markets and uneven regulatory environments. Comparative studies between Global South and Global North contexts could further illuminate how resistance is shaped by different institutional infrastructures, legal frameworks and dominant diversity narratives (Prasad & Śliwa, 2024; Ng et al., 2025). Such comparisons would help avoid treating Northern models of DEI as universal reference points and instead foreground contextual variation in how inclusion agendas are translated and contested.

The contextual findings also point to strong links between resistance, political polarization, religious discourses and media narratives in Brazil. Future studies could integrate organizational data with public opinion surveys, social media analysis, or regional comparisons to examine how broader ideological climates and political cycles influence organizational responses to DEI (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2018). This line of research could clarify how shifts in public discourse travel into organizational settings and shape what forms of resistance become socially legitimate or contested.

Finally, the proposed integrative interpretive architecture reflects patterns observed in a specific temporal and organizational moment and should therefore be read

as context-sensitive rather than as a transferable model (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thus, the temporal dimension of resistance remains constrained by the cross-sectional design. Future research could adopt longitudinal qualitative designs, process studies and multi-sited case approaches to trace how resistance evolves through leadership transitions, restructuring processes, crises or changing DEI vocabularies (Gonzalez, 2010; Piderit, 2000; Gündemir et al., 2024). Such approaches would enable closer examination of how symbolic commitments to inclusion align with or diverge from material changes in access, authority and recognition over time.

These limitations are consistent with a pragmatist orientation that prioritizes situated knowledge and analytical resonance over universal claims. Rather than weakening the contribution, they delineate the empirical, theoretical and contextual conditions under which the findings should be interpreted, extended and tested in future research.

6.4 Closing reflections

This thesis advances a new way of understanding a longstanding problem in research on diversity, equity and inclusion: how DEI initiatives can move forward while everyday organizational life remains largely unchanged. Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives have become widely institutionalized in organizations through policies, programs, metrics, and symbolic commitments (Edelman et al., 2001; Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Although prior studies have documented multiple forms of resistance to DEI, they have struggled to explain this coexistence in a coherent way. Policies are adopted, diversity discourse is widely endorsed and initiatives continue to operate, yet exclusion and inequality persist. Despite this expansion, research repeatedly documents limited organizational transformation and persistent inequality in everyday work experiences (Ahmed, 2012; Noon, 2018; Zanoni et al., 2017). The analysis developed in this thesis shows that this is not an accidental contradiction, but an effect of how resistance to DEI operates in organizational practice. This tension between formal inclusion and lived organizational realities has foregrounded resistance as a recurring feature of DEI processes (Thomas & Plaut, 2007; Ahmed, 2012).

Rather than asking whether resistance exists, this study shows why resistance matters, how it takes shape, and how it continues to shape diversity work inside organizations. By centering the perspectives of professionals who work with or around DEI initiatives, the study showed how resistance is perceived, interpreted, and navigated

once inclusion efforts are established. What is new is not a single mechanism, but the empirical articulation of how resistance to DEI is experienced across contexts, relationships, and time, as described by professionals who work with these initiatives. Thus, the contribution of this study lies in addressing several limitations that have shaped existing research. First, studies on resistance to DEI have often focused on isolated expressions of resistance, giving limited attention to how different forms become articulated in practice. Second, much of the literature has privileged either individual attitudes or formal organizational structures, leaving the organizational processes through which resistance is enacted underexamined. Third, resistance has frequently been treated as episodic or reactive, with less attention to how it persists and adapts over time.

Drawing on professionals' accounts, this thesis shows that resistance to DEI does not simply occur; it becomes organized. Resistance takes shape as it anchors itself in conditions that carry organizational legitimacy, such as merit, neutrality, efficiency and minimal compliance with legal requirements. These conditions do not function merely as post-hoc justifications. They structure how DEI initiatives are interpreted, how decisions are made and how the scope of inclusion is defined in practice. In doing so, the analysis fills a gap in the literature by showing how resistance is sustained through ordinary organizational reasoning, rather than through overt opposition alone. Taken together, the study reframes resistance to DEI as a constitutive element of how inclusion unfolds in organizations, revealing its role in shaping the trajectories, limits, and possibilities of DEI initiatives.

Resistance also operates through everyday organizational relations. It circulates through interactions, decisions and hierarchical arrangements that regulate voice, silence and responsibility. By bringing attention to these dynamics, the thesis addresses a further gap in DEI research, which has rarely examined how resistance is enacted in the space between strategic commitment and operational practice. In particular, the findings highlight the role of middle managers as a critical site where inclusion agendas are translated, reshaped, or constrained through routine managerial work.

A further contribution of the thesis lies in clarifying how resistance to DEI evolves in relation to broader social conditions. While prior research has acknowledged that resistance can be dynamic, it has paid limited attention to how changing societal and political contexts shape what resistance looks like inside organizations. The findings show that resistance adapts to shifting environments, including contexts of increasing social and political polarization, influencing what is considered legitimate, risky, or

inappropriate in relation to diversity initiatives. This addresses a gap between organizational-level analyses of DEI and wider societal dynamics that increasingly shape organizations.

The findings demonstrate that resistance is shaped by organizational and societal contexts, circulates through relationships and hierarchies, and oscillates over time as meanings, priorities, and conditions change.

Ultimately, these contributions show that resistance to DEI remains consequential even when it is fragmented, subtle and publicly disavowed. By integrating contextual conditions, relational dynamics and temporal shifts, this thesis provides an explanation of how resistance operates, how it is organized and why its effects endure. This perspective does not minimize the harm associated with resistance to DEI. Instead, it offers a clearer analytical basis for understanding how exclusionary outcomes are reproduced within organizations that formally endorse inclusion and operate under legal obligations to promote equality.

In contexts where DEI has become both highly visible and deeply contested, advancing research on diversity requires sustained attention to resistance as a constitutive feature of organizational life. Examining how resistance and inclusion continue to shape one another is essential for understanding the limits, tensions and unfinished character of organizational change — and for recognizing what is at stake when resistance constrains access, dignity and equity at work.

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APPENDIX

This appendix presents the interview guides used during data generation. In line with a pragmatist epistemology and Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the interview guide was progressively refined as data collection and analysis unfolded. The evolution reflects increasing analytical sensitivity rather than a change in research focus. Interviews were conducted in Portuguese. The versions below are presented in English for transparency and consistency with the language of the thesis.

Interview Guide – Version 1 (Initial Exploratory Guide)

1. How do you personally understand diversity?
2. In your current or previous organization, are there initiatives aimed at promoting diversity? If so, which ones?
3. Have you observed any form of opposition or resistance to these diversity initiatives? If yes, how did it appear?
4. Can you describe specific situations from your experience in which resistance to diversity became visible?
5. Do you perceive the presence of subtle or implicit biases related to diversity?
6. How would you describe the way diversity is approached in your organization?
7. Have you personally experienced prejudice or discrimination at work?
8. Have you witnessed situations of prejudice or discrimination involving someone close to you in the workplace?
9. How do such attitudes or behaviors manifest in everyday interactions with colleagues or subordinates?
10. Do barriers to diversity differ across demographic groups, such as women, people from different racial backgrounds, or members of the LGBTQ+ community? If so, how?
11. Are there differences in how diversity is addressed across organizational positions (for example, leadership versus non-leadership roles)?
12. What actions or interventions are taken by leadership to address resistance

to diversity in organizational practice?

Interview Guide – Version 2 (Refined Guide)

1. How do you understand diversity, including debates around quotas or affirmative action?
2. Across your work experiences, which diversity initiatives have you encountered? (e.g., formal policies or informal practices)
3. Have you encountered situations in which diversity was framed or perceived negatively? If so, how did these situations unfold?
4. Are there barriers to diversity that tend to remain undeclared or less visible? Which ones stand out to you?
5. In your view, how do these barriers vary across different demographic groups, such as women, people from different racial backgrounds, members of the LGBTQ+ community, different generations, or persons with disabilities?
6. Have aspects of your identity shaped your experiences at work in any way?
7. Have you personally experienced prejudice or discrimination in the workplace?
8. Have you observed prejudice or discrimination affecting someone close to you at work?
9. Have you noticed forms of opposition or resistance to diversity that are not immediately explicit? How are these expressed and how are they typically handled?
10. Have you observed passive or subtle behaviors related to diversity, such as avoidance, disengagement, or limited participation in diversity initiatives?
11. From your perspective, what concerns, beliefs, or assumptions may underpin resistance to diversity, even when it is not openly articulated?
12. What challenges arise when resistance to diversity is indirect or implicit, compared with resistance that is openly expressed?
13. How might these forms of resistance affect the effectiveness of diversity initiatives or employee retention?
14. Are there organizational responses or approaches that you have seen (or

consider effective) for addressing less visible forms of resistance to diversity?

15. What role do different leadership levels play in recognizing and addressing resistance to diversity, particularly when it is not explicitly stated?
16. Have you participated in diversity-related initiatives or training? If so, how did these experiences shape your understanding of diversity?
17. Can you describe a situation in which your perspective on diversity changed? What contributed to this shift?
18. Considering the broader societal context, how do social and political polarization influence resistance to diversity in organizations?
19. Do you notice any dilemmas, paradoxes, or decision-making tensions shaping how diversity is addressed in organizations?