

A holistic view on the opportunities and threats of normative control: a literature review

Abstract

Normative control, or control through organizational culture, has been widely discussed since the 1960s in the management literature. Despite a growing body of research, the concept remains difficult to grasp in its multiple facets and is often approached in a partial and partisan way by scholars and practitioners alike. In this article, we conduct a comprehensive review of the abundant but fragmented literature on normative control, aimed at providing a holistic synthesis of the topic. We take stock of the literature, present descriptive statistics and unravel a chronology of four research streams, consisting of cultural optimists, critics, skeptics, and neo-critics. Our findings also identify and describe behavioral levers and organizational accelerators that encourage the use of normative control, as well as operational side-effects and behavioral inhibitors that discourage its use. We contribute to the literature by offering a unique integrative model of the opportunities and threats of normative control by highlighting their interconnections and tensions, leading to promising avenues for future research. In doing so, we wish to transcend ideological debates and bring clarity, nuance, and pragmatism to a concept that could help address pressing organizational challenges related to purpose, employee wellbeing and workplace culture.

Keywords: normative control, organizational culture, literature review, management control, beliefs systems

1. Introduction

Normative control, or also called control through organizational culture, was initially theorized as the construction of a “culturally homogenous organization” (Ouchi & Price, 1978, p. 64), where adherence to common values ensures that members integrate organizational objectives and procedures to achieve them (Etzioni, 1961; Ouchi & Price, 1978). Over the years, however, the concept has been subject to a number of different perspectives and interpretations, ranging from a tool that helps increase loyalty and commitment (Daniel et al., 1995; Ray, 1986) to one that promotes uniform ways of thinking and entraps employees (Willmott, 1993). While the concept of normative control can give lead to a variety of opportunities and threats, the literature has frequently focused on a particular opportunity or threat in isolation (Grabner et al., 2022; Kleine & Weißenberger, 2014; Rosenthal, 2004; Verbarg et al., 2018; Willmott, 1993), rather than acknowledging that they can often coexist.

Indeed, since its emergence in the management control literature in the 1960s, normative control has been successively worshipped, decried, devalued and even hijacked (Cushen, 2009; Müller, 2017), making it a concept that remains difficult to grasp in its multiple facets. The concept of normative control spread significantly in the 1980s with the contributions of consultants and practitioners. These authors, also called ‘cultural optimists’, praised its positive impact on employee devotion, thereby reducing the need for control and ultimately enhancing productivity (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982). A more critical literature stream followed in the 1990s, called ‘cultural critics’, denouncing normative control for its alleged effectiveness, its mercantile ambition and above all, its totalitarian threat (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Barker, 1993; Knights & Willmott, 1987; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). In the early 2000s, a new stream, again, turned the tide by downplaying both the productivity promises of the ‘cultural optimists’ and the totalitarian narrative of the ‘cultural critics’. These so-called ‘cultural skeptics’ nuanced the outreach of normative control due to the difficulty of manipulating employees and their capacity for resistance (Ezzamel et al., 2001; Gabriel, 1999; Grugulis et al., 2000; Rosenthal, 2004; Welch & Welch, 2006). Finally, ‘neo-critics’ emerged more recently as a new approach to normative control, based on the differentiation of individuals to better leverage their unique capabilities. It is characterized by a florescence of new derivatives of normative control realigned with

current needs for creativity and autonomy (Costas, 2012; Fleming, 2014; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, 2011; Weiskopf & Munro, 2012).

As the literature has covered different theoretical positions over time, the concept has also spread across different fields (e.g., management, organization studies, human resources management, management control) and has been utilized, analyzed, and transformed in different ways. This has led to a rich, but fragmented literature, and to the use of a diverse range of names and conceptualizations in relation to normative control. These are, to name just a few, cultural control, concertive control, identity regulation or neo-normative control. While all of these terms describe a form of control based on organizational culture, translated into social norms that regulate individual actions and behaviors, scholars may get lost trying to position these terms within a certain research stream and to obtain a nuanced view on their value (including the opportunities and threats, as well as potential tensions between them) for organizations.

Summarizing some of the above observations, we find that the abundant literature on normative control remains fraught with a variety of different, but related terms and conceptualizations, as well as divergent and often antagonistic views on the opportunities and threats the concept offers for organizations. This is particularly challenging, since normative control is still utilized in present-day organization studies in new variants that celebrate diversity and inclusion, community and customer engagement and that are conceptualized as liberal and authentic management styles (Bardon et al., 2021; Costas, 2012; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Husted, 2021; Müller, 2017; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015; Resch et al., 2021; Toraldo et al., 2019). Moreover, normative control is also seen as particularly relevant to bridge organizational culture and human resources management with employees' expectations (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Grugulis et al., 2000; Resch et al., 2021; Sewell, 1998). This becomes ever more important in current times of elevated voluntary workforce quitting rates and rising employee expectations on purpose at work and wellbeing (Chopra & Bhilare, 2020; Fuller & Kerr, 2022). To conclude, we currently lack a synthetic and fine-grained view on the debates, concepts, opportunities and threats used in the literature on normative control, to help us make sense of the topic and identify potential future research avenues.

To tackle this issue, our study offers a comprehensive review (Lueg & Radlach, 2016; Tranfield et al., 2003) of the literature on normative control, aimed at providing a holistic synthesis of the topic, with a focus on making sense of the different opportunities and threats the concept entails for organizations. Therefore, our research questions state: *What are the main opportunities and threats of normative control? How to consider these opportunities and threats holistically, including their interconnections and tensions, to further support the reflection on the relevance of normative control?* In addition to offering a holistic synthesis of the literature, answering this question also mobilized us to provide a thorough analysis of the contradictions present in the normative control literature and to elucidate the different literature streams and their corresponding conceptualizations of normative control.

Our article contributes to the literature in different ways. First, in view of the fragmented literature on normative control, we offer a holistic synthesis of its opportunities and threats and provide scholars with an overview of the existing streams, related concepts and lead authors over time. This enables scholars to make better sense of the various, sometimes conflicting, directions taken up in the literature. This is particularly important, since normative control embodies a ‘subtle paradox of high commitment practices in otherwise tightly controlled environments’, which warrants critical analysis while allowing different perspectives on what the rationales and outcomes of such management practices may be (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011, p.180). Second, we provide an integrative model of the opportunities and threats of normative control, that identifies and analyzes connections between the different elements and can help to further develop promising avenues for research. In doing so, we respond to Cushen’s (2009, p. 103) statement, expressing that “future research may benefit from adopting a more holistic analytical approach to avoid over or underestimating the role of normative control”. Finally, this study renders the literature more readable and applicable to organizations, and reconnects research on normative control with field concerns, in the tradition of contingency studies. Thereby, our study paves the way for further studies that wish to understand the relevance of normative control in light of specific organizational challenges.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. We begin the article by defining normative control and designing our conceptual framework. We then specify the multi-step approach used for our literature review, based on Lueg & Radlach (2016) and Tranfield (2003). In the findings section, we

begin with a descriptive analysis of the literature. It includes a chronology of four research streams with a summary of their respective positions. We also present a holistic synthesis of the specific opportunities and threats of normative control. We then offer a unique integrative model of their interconnections and tensions and detail the key themes for each opportunity and threat. Finally, we discuss our contributions and identify avenues for further research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Normative control

The concept of normative control was initially defined by Etzioni (1961, p. 5) as “a type of control encompassing the allocation of symbolic rewards, esteem and prestige symbols, and the use of rituals and norms to facilitate positive response”. We relate normative control to cultural control, i.e., one of the four different types of management control systems as identified by Merchant & Van der Stede (2007), and, therefore, consider it as a sub-branch of management control, where organizational culture is translated into social norms to ultimately align employees' actions and behaviors with the organization's objectives. O'Reilly (1989) identified three stages of commitment of acculturated members: compliance, identification, and internalization. In the final stage of internalization, members “find the values of the organization to be intrinsically rewarding and congruent with personal values” (O'Reilly, 1989, p. 18) leading to “devotion, loyalty, and commitment” to the organization (Ray, 1986, p. 294). Indeed, through the concept of normative control we move from the externalization of control (coercive forms of controls) to its internalization (Ray, 1986).

Different human resources policies and processes are considered in the literature to acculturate members for normative control: selective recruitment, socialization methods (e.g., meetings, events, “buddy systems”), learning and development (e.g., corporate training, job rotation), internal and external communication, and sometimes even workplace design (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Andersson et al., 2019; Carls, 2009; Lebas & Weigenstein, 1986; McDonough & Leifer, 1986; Morris et al., 2016; Ouchi & Price, 1978; Welch & Welch, 2006). More recent conceptions of normative control use a diversity and inclusion strategy as a lever, as well as fun management techniques (Butler, 2015; Fleming &

Sturdy, 2009, 2011; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015; Toraldo et al., 2019). Acculturation is also achieved through management's endorsement of the culture and exemplification, its use of symbols, and rituals (Grabner et al., 2022; Peters, 1978). Normative control generally involves members taking control directly, either through self-regulation or peer control (Ainsworth & Cox, 2003; Barker, 1993; Kamoche et al., 2014; Merchant & Van der Stede, 2007; Mulholland, 2002; Welch & Welch, 2006).

2.2. Opportunities and threats of management control systems

In order to construct a holistic view on the opportunities and threats of normative control, we first built a conceptual framework consisting of opportunities and threats of management control systems (MCSs) as a whole (as explained in section 3, research design). MCSs are defined broadly to include “everything managers do to help ensure that their organization’s strategies and plans are carried out or, if conditions warrant, that they are modified” (Merchant & Van der Stede, 2007, p. 14). The management control literature conceptualizes opportunities and threats of MCSs as side effects generating *costs and benefits*. However, the literature tends to either focus on one opportunity or threat at a time or “on an aggregate measure of firm performance without delineating specific costs and benefits” (Widener, 2007, p. 758). Therefore, we consolidated our conceptual framework, shown in Figure 1, building on the *control system costs and benefits* identified by the foundational work of Merchant & Van der Stede (2007), Widener (2007) and Simons (1995).

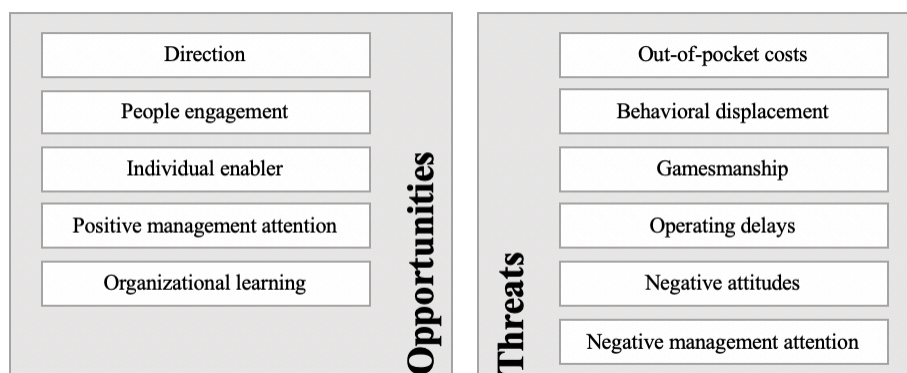


FIG. 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS OF MANAGEMENT CONTROL SYSTEMS

The left-hand side of Figure 1 shows *opportunities* of MCSs, represented in part by the *benefits* as identified by Merchant & Van der Stede (2007). These include: direction (i.e., to “inform employees about how they can maximize their contributions to the fulfillment of organizational objectives” – p.8), people engagement (i.e., to move from self-interest to contribution to organizational goals), and individual enabler (i.e., to provide resources to employees who may lack skills, experience or information). The right-hand side of Figure 1 shows *threats* of MCSs, based primarily on the *costs* as identified by Merchant & Van der Stede (2007). These include: out-of-pocket costs (i.e., direct monetary costs spent on planning and budgeting activities), behavioral displacement (i.e., unproductive behavior indirectly encouraged by management control systems), gamesmanship (i.e., “actions that employees undertake to improve their performance indicators without producing positive economic effects for the organization” – p.184), operating delays (defined as time wasted in complying with standards and procedures) and negative attitudes (i.e., work tension, conflict, frustration and resistance).

To these initial elements of the conceptual framework, we added the costs and benefits identified by Widener (2007) in her theoretical model linking management control systems and organizational performance: management attention and organizational learning. Following Widener's (2007) study, we split management attention into two facets: negative management attention (i.e., efforts added to managers by management control systems—included in the *threats*) and positive management attention (i.e., efforts spared—included in the *opportunities*). We added the *opportunity* for organizational learning (i.e., responsiveness to the opportunities and threats presented by the strategic uncertainties of the company, as developed by Simons, 1995) to the left-hand side of the framework.

3. Research design

The goal of this literature review is the production of a meta-synthesis of the literature by integrating and comparing existing studies and deriving an overall interpretation (Sandelowski et al., 1997). We draw on the multi-step research approach employed by Lueg and Radlach (2016) and incorporate the systematic literature review guidelines of Tranfield et al. (2003) to enhance the reproducibility,

transparency, and rigor of our study. In line with Lueg and Radlach (2016), our approach includes three main steps, which are described in Figure 2.

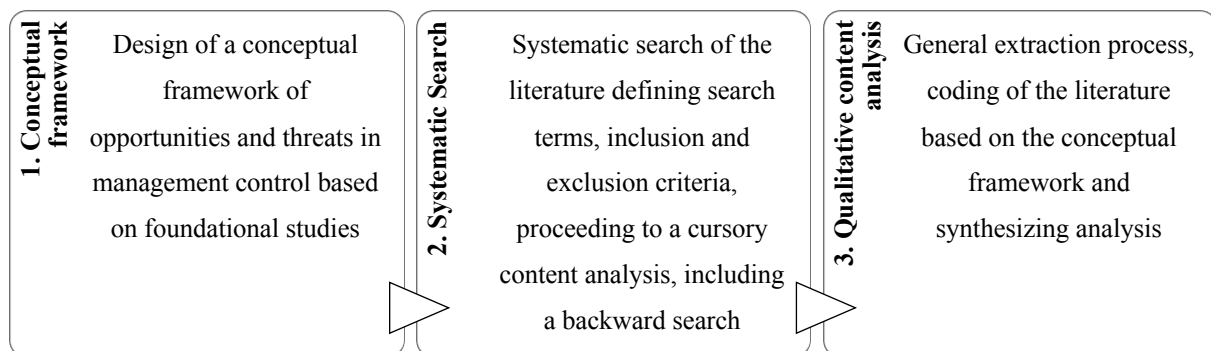


FIG. 2: THREE STEP APPROACH BASED ON LUEG & RADLACH (2016) AND TRANFIELD ET AL. (2003)

The first step of the approach (Figure 2, step 1) consists of the design of the conceptual framework, which is detailed in section 2.2. We subsequently started our systematic search for relevant articles (Figure 2, step 2) by determining keywords and inclusion criteria. We proceeded in SCOPUS to a title and abstract search, crossing the notions of *normative control* with those of *opportunities and threats* under various labels (outcome*, result*, performance, opportunit*, benefit*, *advantage*, profit*, threat*, cost*, challenge*, risk*). To ensure the exhaustivity of our search, we added all titles containing cultur* AND control, normative AND control. In addition, we added all titles, abstracts and key words containing neo AND normative AND control, to integrate the most current trends of normative control and ensure the topicality of our findings. Our literature search was carried out in March 2022 without time limit, filtering only peer-reviewed articles¹, written in English, under the heading “business, social sciences”.

At each stage of our review (title, abstract and full text search), we proceeded to cursory content analysis and retained articles that addressed the research questions a priori, primarily in the field of management, organization, HR, and management control. Articles that did not broadly address our

¹ While we excluded book references from our systematic search, we made an exception to incorporate, as part of the backward search, three book references which are widely listed in the literature and emblematic of the cultural optimists (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982) and cultural critics (Kunda, 1992) streams.

research questions (i.e., because they discussed culture in the sense of national culture or because they focused on organizational culture without touching, in any way, on the field of management control) were deemed out of scope². The initial search in Scopus, excluding duplicates, yielded 523 hits. The title review resulted in 219 relevant articles. We then proceeded to an abstract review to reach 64 relevant articles. We retained only ABS-listed journals to ensure the quality of our findings. A first full text reading allowed us to eliminate 12 articles which did not match our inclusion criteria. Considering that normative control is an abundant but fragmented theme in the literature, approached in various disciplines under different names, we opened our selection through an extended backward search to assure the completeness of our sample. Performing a backward search means that we analyzed the reference lists of the articles included in our sample, to identify additional articles that we may have missed in our systematic search (see also Kunz and Heitz, 2021). In the reference lists of the 52 pre-selected articles, we identified 27 additional readings addressing our research questions. As a result, our final selection (see overview in Figure 3) amounted to a total of 79 academic articles.

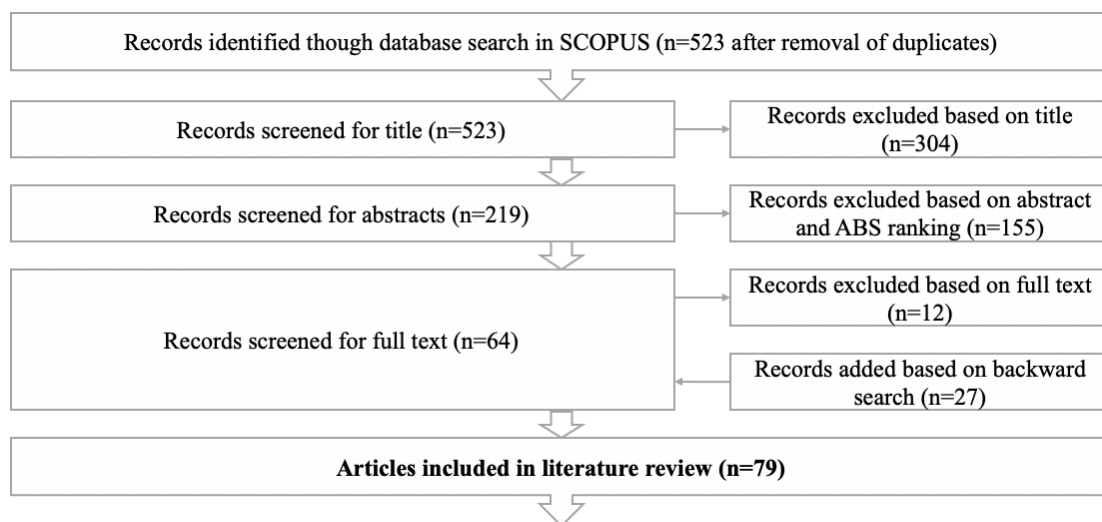


FIG. 3: FLOW FOR THE SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE SEARCH AND SELECTION

² In case of doubt as to whether the article was out of scope, it remained included in the dataset until the next stage (see Figure 3) of the systematic review.

For our qualitative content analysis of the selected academic articles (Figure 2, step 3), we proceeded in three phases, namely, a general extraction process, a topic-specific extraction process and a synthesizing analysis, following the recommendations of Tranfield et al. (2003). The general extraction process consisted of developing a data extraction form including the title, author, publication details, methodology and data collection methods (see Appendix). We sorted the articles from the oldest to the most recent and analyzed the articles chronologically, considering the literature stream to which they belong and the progression in the perception of normative control. We proceeded to a topic-specific extraction process and coding, i.e., the identification and matching of the content of the articles with the elements of our conceptual framework.

In line with Lueg & Radlach (2016), our approach is abductive, as we searched the literature for predefined elements (i.e., opportunities and threats of management control) in our conceptual framework and enriched them with elements specific to normative control that we interpreted from the literature. The initial conceptual framework evolved into a synthesis of the opportunities and threats specific to normative control (see Figure 6, section 4.3). We were then able to analyze the salience of these different elements in the normative control literature (see Figure 7, section 4.3) and to identify the reference articles (see Table 2, section 4.3). We further detailed the key themes for each opportunity and threat, and unveiled their interactions and tensions, leading to an emergent integrative model of the literature (see Figure 8, section 5). This holistic mapping finally allowed us to discuss the gaps identified in the literature and to derive future research avenues to better study the relevance of normative control in line with rising organizational challenges.

4. Descriptive results of literature review

In this section, we describe the trends that emanate from our selection and coding of the literature, in terms of the evolution of methods, concepts and positioning of normative control. We also identify the opportunities and threats specific to normative control. All the data proceed from the 79 articles retained in our dataset, of which an overview can be found in the data extraction form (see Appendix).

4.1. Publication and types of articles

First, we analyze the evolution of publications and the methodology used by the authors (see Figure 4). We observe a constant increase in the number of articles published since the 1970s. The number of articles already published in the 2020s suggests a continuation of this upward trend. In terms of methodology, we observe that the articles of the first three decades are mainly conceptual studies. We identify a tipping point in the 2000s where qualitative research eventually overtakes conceptual research, with a proportion that continues to grow in the following decades. Quantitative research remains largely a minority across earlier decades until a breakthrough in the 2010s. In summary, we observe a growing interest in the subject, which was initially treated conceptually and is gradually evolving towards empirical investigation, focusing mainly on qualitative research.

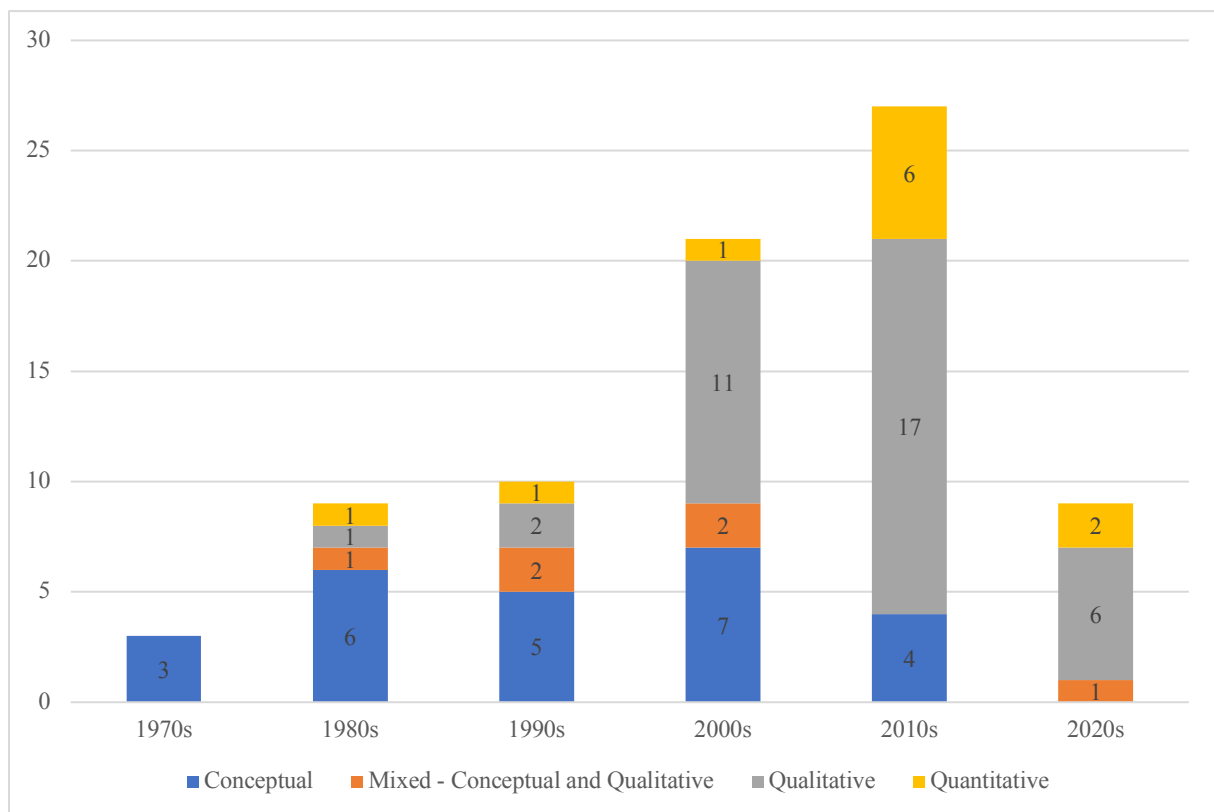


FIG. 4: NUMBER OF ARTICLES ON NORMATIVE CONTROL OVER TIME AND METHODOLOGIES USED

4.2. Positions on normative control: four major streams

Initial coding of the articles resulted in a breakdown in four categories or positions on normative control: (1) presented as an opportunity, (2) presented as a threat mainly for its risk of standardization of thoughts and behaviors for productivity purposes, (3) nuanced opinion minimizing the impact due to employee resistance, (4) presented as a threat, this time in a form appealing to mechanisms of differentiation of individuals and valorization of their own identity. Our analysis allows us to study alterations in these different positions within the literature and identify dominant research streams (see Figure 5). Since the theorization of the concept of normative control in the 1970s, we observe that these four divergent positions have succeeded each other with a dominant stream of literature for each decade: the “cultural optimists” (Ogbonna & Harris, 2002, cited by Cushen, 2009, p. 102) in the 1980s (corresponding to category 1), the cultural critics in the 1990s (corresponding to category 2), the cultural skeptics in the 2000s (corresponding to category 3) and the neo-critics in the 2010s (corresponding to category 4).

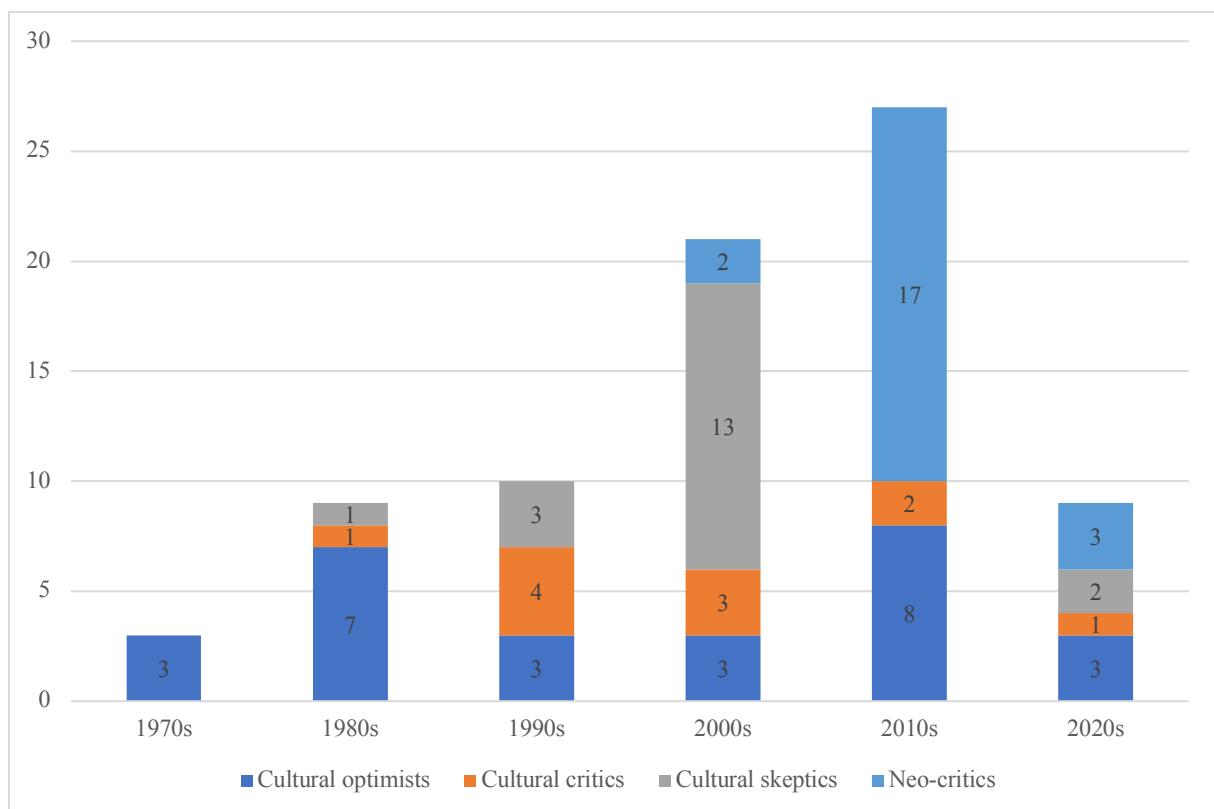


FIG. 5: POSITIONS ON NORMATIVE CONTROL OVER TIME

In our synthesis of the opportunities and threats of normative control (section 5), we have sought to bring together all these views, even though they are sometimes presented as antagonistic in the literature. For ease of understanding of the following sections, it is thus essential to bear in mind the chronology of the different streams of normative control and their respective positions, as presented in Table 1 and elaborated on in the next paragraphs.

TABLE 1: FOUR MAJOR STREAMS OF NORMATIVE CONTROL

<i>Streams</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Thesis</i>	<i>Related concepts and leading authors</i>
Cultural optimists	1970s - 1980s	Praise culture as a lever to increase devotion, loyalty and commitment; reducing the need for control and enhancing productivity	Excellence - Peters & Waterman (1982), Deal & Kennedy (1982)
Cultural critics	1990s	Denounce culture engineering and normative control for its alleged effectiveness, its mercantile ambition and its totalitarian threat	Culture engineering - Kunda (1992) Corporate culturism - Willmott (1993) Concertive control - Barker (1993) Identity regulation - Alvesson & Willmott (2002)
Cultural skeptics	2000s	Nuance the outreach of normative control by the difficulty of manipulating employees and their capacity for resistance	Micro-emancipation - Grugulis (2000), Ezzamel et al. (2001), Rosenthal (2004), Gabriel (2009)
Neo-critics	2010s	Denounce a new approach to normative control based on the differentiation and expression of individualities to better leverage their unique capabilities	Neo-normative control - Fleming & Sturdy (2009, 2011), Costas (2012) Biopower - Fleming (2014), Weiskopf & Munro (2012) Brand-centered control - Müller (2017) Affective control - Resch et al. (2021)

Cultural optimists popularize the early work of Etzioni, Ouchi (1979), and Ouchi & Price (1978). According to these authors, normative control can help increase the devotion, loyalty, and commitment of employees (Daniel et al., 1995; Ray, 1986) and therefore their overall efficiency and productivity (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982), while reducing the need for direct supervision (Birnberg & Snodgrass, 1988; Leifer & Mills, 1996). This stream is porous with the total quality movement and the many concepts that link culture engineering with operational excellence (e.g., lean, continuous improvement, world-class manufacturing) and self-management (post-bureaucratic organizations, humanist management). Authors are firmly rooted in practice and offer culture-based

advice and techniques to make organizations more effective, such as the manipulation of symbols, the creation of patterns of activity, rituals, considering leaders as “high-priests” of their organizations, etc. (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters, 1978; Peters & Waterman, 1982). Employee adherence to normative control relies on new incentives such as trust, inclusion, and self-actualization. Also noticeable is a resurgence of cultural optimists from the 2010s onwards with authors who link normative control with an increased potential for creativity, innovation (Grabner et al., 2022; Ismail, 2016; Janka et al., 2020), resilience (Andersson et al., 2019; Moskovich, 2018) and stakeholder management (Holtgrave et al., 2017; Patel et al., 2019).

At the end of the 1980s, the cultural optimists were confronted with the *cultural critics*. Coming from the academic ranks, these authors criticize normative control on three main aspects: its alleged effectiveness, its mercantile ambition, and above all its totalitarian threat. They blame cultural optimists for their fragmented and trivial approach to culture management, and claim that they do not sufficiently consider the political context in which culture inevitably evolves, nor the limited capacity to manipulate a foundation as deep-rooted and subtle as the organizational culture (Knights & Willmott, 1987). The return on investment of normative control is therefore more uncertain than previously conveyed by cultural optimists. The main criticism from this stream is what Willmott (1993, p. 515) calls “the dark side of the project”: its totalitarian threat. Normative control becomes a tool to manipulate individual subjectivities to construct a uniform way of thinking that serves productivity purposes and entraps employees, thus increasing psychosocial risks (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Harris & Ogbonna, 2011; Knights & Willmott, 1987; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). While cultural optimists emphasize the autonomy and empowerment offered by normative control (Sewell, 1998), cultural critics find individuals submit to a more subtle and powerful control (Barker, 1993), reviving a hidden bureaucracy (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Sundberg, 2019).

In the 2000s, *cultural skeptics* propose a more nuanced approach to normative control. They question the ability of organizations to manipulate the subjectivities of employees, especially without resistance (Carls, 2009; Cushen, 2009; Gabriel, 1999; Marginson, 2009; Parker, 1997; Rosenthal, 2004; Welch & Welch, 2006). According to them, it is necessary to nuance both the effectiveness of normative

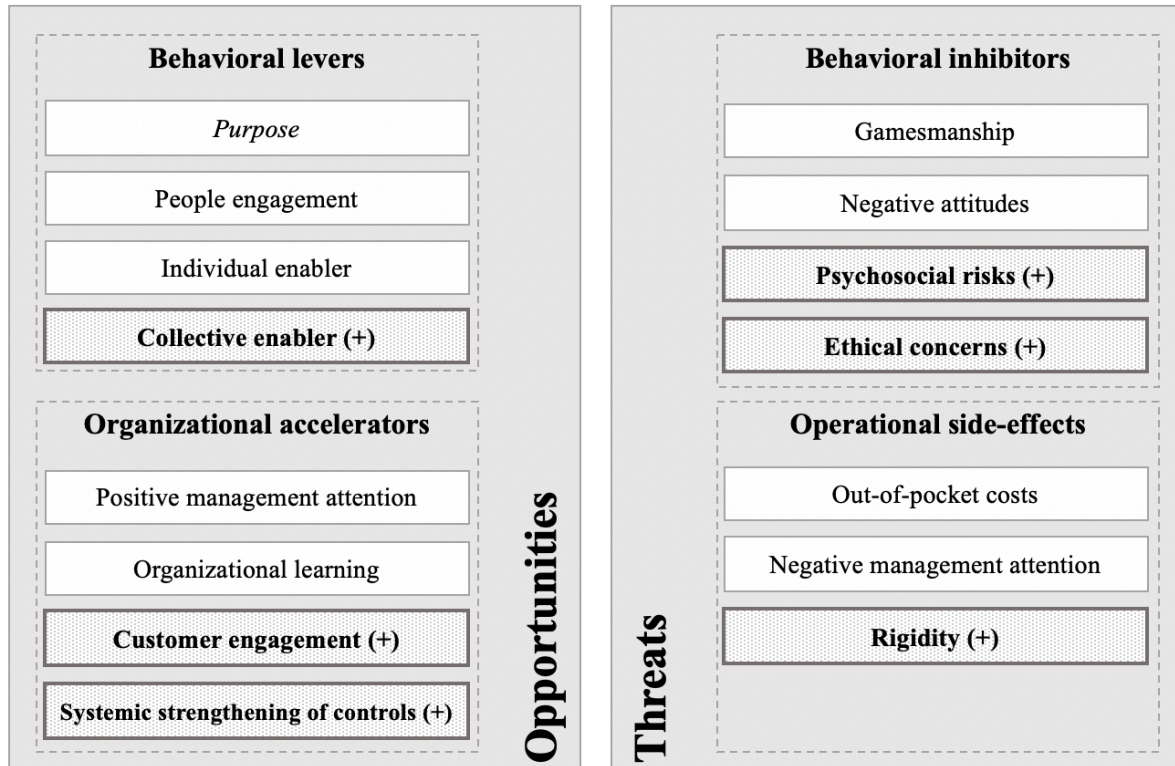
control advocated by cultural optimists and its totalitarian inclination denounced by cultural critics. Parker (1997), for example, presents normative control as an opportunity for employees to use the flexibility discourse to overcome totalitarian threats and assert their citizenship and emancipation through their resistance. Employees cannot be considered “cultural dopes” (Hill, 1995; Keep, 1989; cited by Grugulis 2000, p. 98), divided between the “haggard face of an exhausted, burned-out, stressed-out worker” and the “docile and dependent subject” (Rosenthal, 2004, p. 601). Individual subjectivities are complex and several studies question the ability of organizations to manipulate them unilaterally (Bardon et al., 2021; Cushen, 2009; Marginson, 2009; O’Reilly, 1989). As suggested by Rosenthal (2004), there is an informed bargain between submission to a certain form of control and the “pleasant working conditions” that result from the techniques used to implement it (Ezzamel et al., 2001; Grugulis et al., 2000)—i.e., flexibility, empowerment. For employees who, nevertheless, refuse the bargain, cultural skeptics observe various forms of soft resistance (Ezzamel et al., 2001; Garrety, 2008; McLoughlin et al., 2005), whose real outreach remains contested (Ainsworth & Cox, 2003; Carls, 2009).

Neo-critics highlight and denounce derivative concepts of normative control adapted to the realities of contemporary organizations. Where their predecessors developed types of normative control based on conformity, neo-critics propose an approach centered on authenticity and differentiation (Husted, 2021). In this vision, organizations encourage individuals to bring their unique and authentic selves to work to leverage their “life abilities and extra-work qualities” (Fleming, 2014, p. 875) for productive purposes (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). To implement these new forms of normative control, organizations “create an environment, in which selves are allowed to unfold their potentials and entrepreneurial creativity within a specific frame” (Weiskopf & Munro, 2012, p. 696). To this end, they rely on advanced identity work techniques: through adherence to the culture and the brand, the organizations propose coherent and constant narratives of the self that meet the employees’ need for self-realization (Endrissat et al., 2017; Kamoche et al., 2014; Müller, 2017). Organizations also rely on diversity and inclusion strategies, celebrating, at least on the surface, a sense of non-standardization as it “manufactures the appearance of autonomy and self-expression” (Fleming, 2013, p. 487). Encouraging employees to have fun at work (Butler, 2015; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, 2011; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015), fostering a culture

of friendship (Costas, 2012; Morris et al., 2016) or a strong sense of community (Resch et al., 2021; Toraldo et al., 2019) are further techniques to erase the work/non-work boundary and capture the emotional and social skills of workers for productive ends (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, 2011). According to the neo-critics, these practices, inspired by the liberation management trend, erroneously give the impression that empowered individuals are thereby free of control (Fleming, 2014). Yet they claim that, on the contrary, it makes identities more visible and accountable, both to internal and external stakeholders, ultimately exerting more compelling control and nipping resistance in the bud (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Mills & Owens, 2021; Morris et al., 2016; Müller, 2017; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015).

4.3. Prevalence of opportunities and threats

In addition to adhering to a certain stream of normative control, the literature review also shows that authors tend to focus differently and selectively on particular opportunities and threats of the concept. Moving from our initial conceptual framework (see Figure 1), our analysis led to the identification of opportunities and threats specific to normative control, as presented in Figure 6. In comparison to the MCSs framework, eight elements of the initial framework were identified in the normative control literature and therefore remained unchanged (i.e., people engagement, individual enabler, positive management attention, organizational learning, gamesmanship, negative attitudes, out-of-pocket costs and negative management attention). Two elements were removed as they showed no salience in the context of normative control (behavioral displacement and operating delays). One element was renamed to reflect the altered focus and terminology used in normative control (direction changed to purpose; in *italics* in Figure 6). Finally, we identified and added six new elements specific to normative control (i.e., collective enabler, customer engagement, systemic strengthening of controls, psychosocial risks, ethical concerns and rigidity). We also categorized the opportunities and threats as either emanating from the employees (i.e., behavioral levers and behavioral inhibitors) or from the structure and management (i.e., organizational accelerators and operational side-effects).



(+) represents the new elements specific to normative control added to our initial conceptual framework.

FIG. 6: SYNTHESIS OF OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS SPECIFIC TO NORMATIVE CONTROL

Our coding of the literature³ allowed us to analyze the prevalence of these opportunities and threats (see Figure 7) and identify key articles (see Table 2). Figure 7 shows that the literature has focused slightly more on threats than on opportunities, with a more developed interest in behavioral inhibitors. Negative attitudes and ethical concerns have in fact been developed by several streams of the literature: cultural critics, cultural skeptics and neo-critics. Based on our coding, Table 2 offers a list of key articles for each element of the synthesis.

³ This coding proceeds from our final selection of 79 articles. As soon as one (or more) citation(s) from an article substantially contributes to an element of the synthesis, we count this article for this element. An article can contribute to several elements of the synthesis, but it is counted only once for each element.

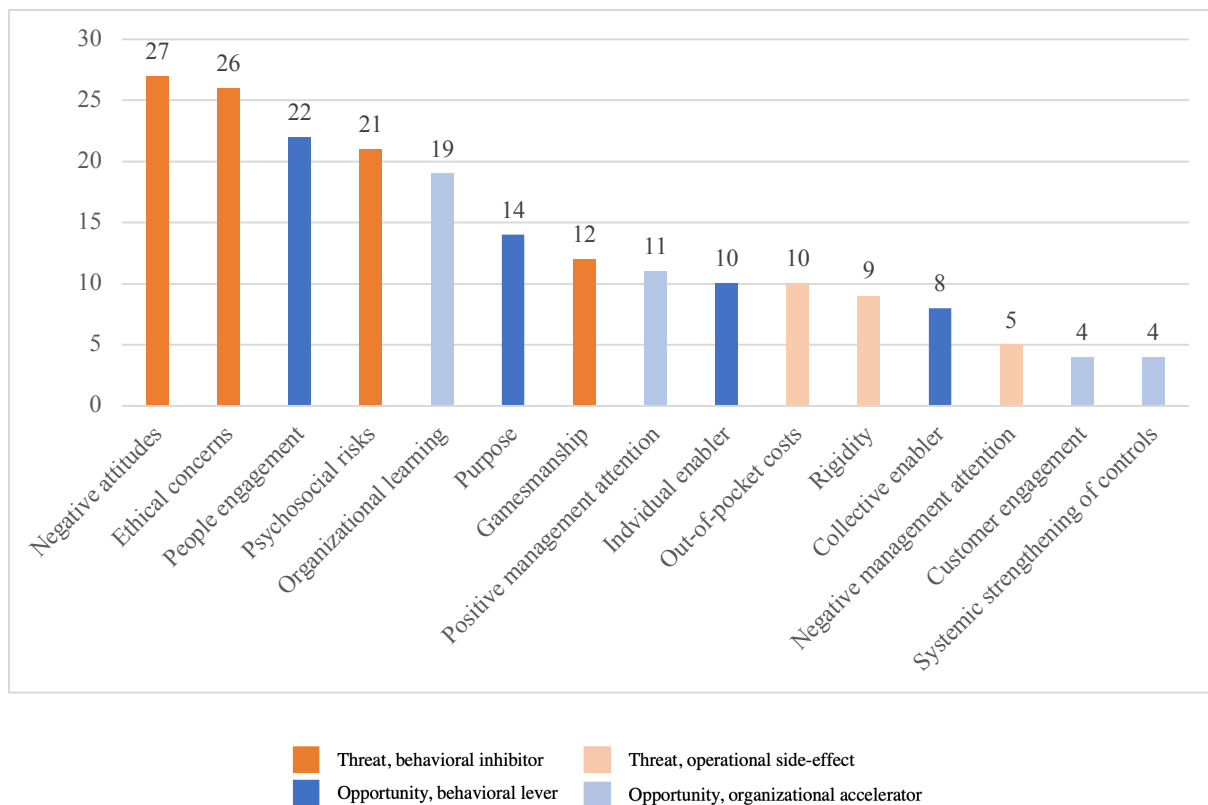


FIG. 7: PREVALENCE OF OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS IN THE LITERATURE

TABLE 2: LIST OF KEY ARTICLES PER ELEMENT OF THE SYNTHESIS

Element of the synthesis	Key articles
<i>Behavioral levers</i>	
Purpose	Cushen (2009), Ouchi & Price (1978), Peters & Waterman (1982), Ray (1986), White (1984)
People engagement	Alvesson & Willmott (2002), Bardon et al. (2021), Deal & Kennedy (1982), Endrissat et al. (2017), Krajcsák (2021), Peters & Waterman (1982), Verburg et al. (2018), Welch & Welch (2006)
Individual enabler	Barker (1993), Leifer & Mills (1996), McLoughlin et al. (2005), Ouchi & Price (1978)
Collective enabler	Krajcsák (2021), Resch et al. (2021), Toraldo et al. (2019)
<i>Organizational accelerators</i>	
Positive management attention	Barker (1993), Birnberg & Snodgrass (1988), Ouchi (1979), Ray (1986)
Organizational learning	Andersson et al. (2019), Grabner et al. (2022), Heinicke et al. (2016), Janka et al. (2020), McDonough & Leifer (1986)
Customer engagement	Endrissat et al. (2017), Fleming & Sturdy (2009, 2011), Müller (2017)
Systemic strengthening of controls	Heinicke et al. (2016), Lebas & Weigenstein (1986), Widener (2007)
<i>Behavioral inhibitors</i>	
Gamesmanship	Bardon et al. (2021), Costas & Fleming (2009), O' Toole & Grey (2016), Toraldo et al. (2019), Willmott (1993)
Negative attitudes	Carls (2009), Cushen (2009), Ezzamel et al. (2001), Fleming (2013), Knights & Willmott (1987), Marginson (2009), McLoughlin et al. (2005), Rosenthal (2004), Welch & Welch (2006)

Psychosocial risks	Bardon et al. (2021), Costas & Fleming (2009), Fleming (2013), Garrety (2008), Harris & Ogbonna (2011), Resch et al. (2021)
Ethical concerns	Alvesson & Kärreman (2007), Barker (1993), Carls (2009), Fleming & Sturdy (2009, 2011), Fleming (2014), Grugulis et al. (2000), Kunda (1992), Morris et al. (2016), Peticca-Harris et al. (2015), Sundberg (2016), Willmott (1993)
<i>Operational side-effects</i>	
Out-of-pocket costs	Costas (2012), Grugulis et al. (2000), Leifer & Mills (1996), Ouchi (1979)
Rigidity	Endrissat et al. (2017), Fleming (2013), Fleming & Sturdy (2009), Welch & Welch (2006), Willmott (1993)
Negative management attention	McLoughlin et al. (2005), Sisaye (2005a), Weiskopf & Munro (2012)

5. Synthesizing analysis

Providing a synthesis of the opportunities and threats of normative control (Figure 6) enables a comprehensive appreciation of the potential effects of normative control. However, this static view cannot be separated from a more dynamic view of how these highly interconnected elements flow together, but also sometimes conflict. We summarize these dynamics in an integrative model, presented in Figure 8, in which we show interactions with solid arrows and tensions with dotted lines topped by lightning bolts. The present section details the different elements of the model and their interrelations, moving from the opportunities (section 5.1) to the threats (section 5.2) identified in the literature.

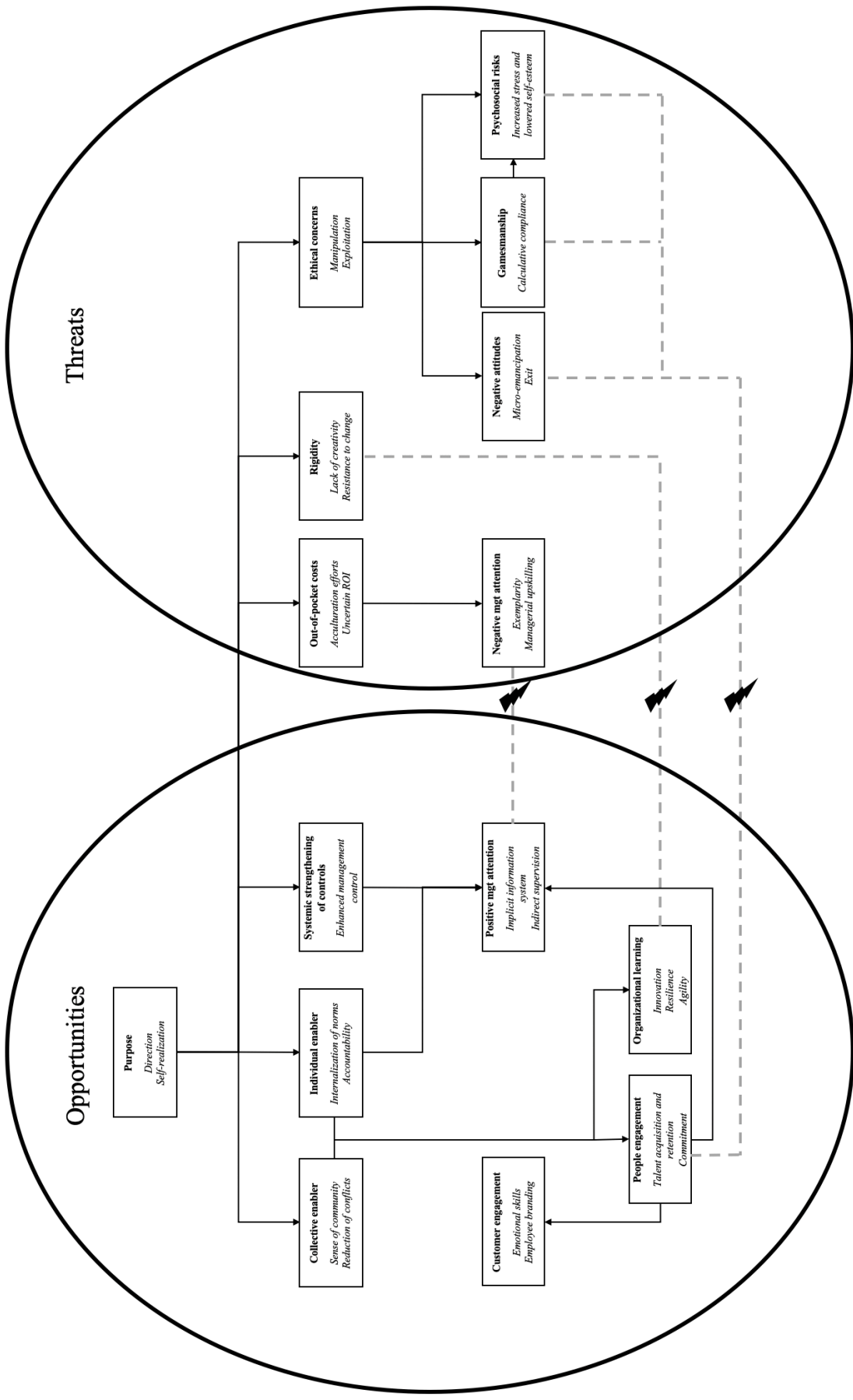


FIG. 8: INTEGRATIVE MODEL OF THE OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS OF NORMATIVE CONTROL

5.1 Opportunities of normative control

Achieving a strengthened direction and purpose for the organization is a foundational element of normative control, as it triggers further opportunities and threats. We, therefore, detail this important element of the model first, and then follow the flow of the interactions between the different opportunities of normative control (see Figure 8, left-hand side of the integrative model).

Purpose. Normative control reinforces the organizational direction because it enables strategy diffusion and alignment by reducing ambiguity through the internalization of values and social norms by the employees (Cushen, 2009). In their survey of 294 German companies, Kleine & Weißenberger (2014) identify indeed an important mediating role of normative control for supporting a leadership attentive to objectives, processes and results. However, we renamed the “direction” element from the initial conceptual framework to *purpose*, as normative control goes beyond a simple clarification of the vision and provision of a direction as found in other coercive types of control (Ray, 1986; White, 1984). Normative control transcends this role through the provision of a purpose (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982). The organization aligns its culture with the standards and values of the larger society, with the advantage of facilitating acculturation of new members, offering a direction that makes sense to them (Ouchi & Price, 1978; Welch & Welch, 2006). Earlier authors show how normative control initially supports the business objectives for customer service and quality (Daniel et al., 1995; Peters & Waterman, 1982). As the sustainability imperative grows, cultural control is also becoming an increasingly relevant tool for bridging individual, organizational and societal purpose. An example of this can be found in Morsing and Oswald (2009), who confirm the need for cultural-type control mechanisms to genuinely and effectively integrate sustainability into the strategy. Normative control can thus contribute to reinforcing corporate social responsibility (Sundrum, 2004).

As shown in our integrative model (Figure 8), the foundational opportunity of *purpose* gives lead to two behavioral levers (*individual enabler* and *collective enabler*), as well as to an organizational accelerator (*systemic strengthening of controls*). These opportunities, in turn, trigger other organizational accelerators (*organizational learning*, *positive management attention* and *customer engagement*), and one behavioral lever (*people engagement*), as explained below.

Individual enabler. The strengthened *purpose* through normative control eases the internalization and endorsement of social norms by individuals who prove to be more empowered and accountable. Under normative control, individuals are provided with the knowledge necessary to perform their function through an empowering environment, rather than through the provision of tools or direct controls (e.g., information systems, processes). Individuals can rely on common and shared culture to make decisions - sometimes unconsciously, leading to natural consensual decision making (Ouchi & Price, 1978; Sundberg, 2019). This notion of “knowing what is right and proper” (Welch & Welch, 2006, p. 22) contributes not only to nudging desired behavior but also to reinforcing self-discipline and accountability (Leifer & Mills, 1996). Indeed, Ouchi & Price (1978, p. 67) put forward a reduction of the “need for explicit supervision, coordination, and evaluation” in the context of normative control. Sundrum (2004) refers to this principle of individual accountability to convey that cultural control is the more effective guarantee to prevent financial fraud, where international laws and regulations are deemed not sufficient. Other examples are Barker (1993), McLoughlin et al. (2005) and Ainsworth & Cox (2003), who provide empirical evidence of improved employee competence and a heightened sense of responsibility under normative control.

Collective enabler. The direction and meaning conveyed through the organizational culture (*purpose*) equally allow the collective to refer to them in order to develop a sense of community and prevent conflicts. We find evidence in the literature of increased cooperation and reduced conflict in circumstances where normative control is implemented. Indeed, strong identification with the values and social norms of the organization reinforces the cohesion between employees (Kleine & Weißenberger, 2014; Krajcsák, 2021). In his empirical study, Marginson (2009) confirms the ability of normative control to enhance value congruence and thus collaboration at the organizational level, but warns that strong subgroups cultures may moderate this effect. Krajcsák’s (2021) study also demonstrates how a high level of normative commitment results in a reduction of intra-group conflicts. He attributes this to the fact that individuals feel more valued and considered by the organization and feel less of a sense of injustice. According to Resch et al. (2021) and Toraldo et al. (2019), normative control or “affective control” can be used to reinforce the dedication of individuals to the collaborative

community and its constituents. The same principles apply, by extension, to strengthen the organization's relationships with its subsidiaries and key partners. As one example, Holtgrave et al. (2017) demonstrate how the use of normative control to manage the relationship between an organization and its supplier network builds trust from the beginning and creates a robust bond, unlike more direct forms of control. Patel et al. (2019) confirm that normative control over subsidiaries, mainly through job transfers from the headquarters and the promotion of the parent company's organizational culture, strengthens ties and reduces the need for direct control.

Systemic strengthening of controls. The values and vision shared through a reinforced organizational *purpose* also constitute a foundation on which other management controls are based, thus contributing to their greater effectiveness (Lebas & Weigenstein, 1986; Simons, 1995; Widener, 2007). Systemic management control studies (Simons, 1995; Widener, 2007) teach us that management control systems function in interaction with and reinforcement of each other. Widener (2007) demonstrates how the scope of individual control systems (beliefs systems, boundary systems, interactive control systems, diagnostic control systems) are indeed lessened when they are isolated, and reinforced when they coexist with the other forms. Several authors have demonstrated that cultural controls, including beliefs systems, can be considered the root of the other forms of control (Heinicke et al., 2016; Widener, 2007), can encompass and direct the other control systems (Lueg & Radlach, 2016), or can reinforce them even if they are not used as the primary approach (Lebas & Weigenstein, 1986). This cross-reinforcement of controls stemming from normative control contributes to greater fluidity and efficiency and therefore alleviates managerial efforts (*positive management attention*).

Organizational learning. Employees who have embraced the organization's *purpose* tend to feel empowered (*individual enabler*) and develop a stronger sense of the collective (*collective enabler*), thereby supporting their ability to innovate and navigate uncertainty. Normative control provides a framework for employees to experiment freely within the limits set by social norms (White, 1984). Values and social norms act as sources of inspiration and constitute a form of positive control encouraging organizational learning (Simons, 1995; Widener, 2007). For example, Janka et al.'s (2020) and Ismail's (2016) empirical studies, both based on a survey, confirm that an emphasis on cultural

controls can be positively associated with a competitive advantage of innovation and creativity. Moreover, normative control at the service of innovation is alleged to reconcile the needs for individual autonomy, team coordination and customer needs inherent in creative work due to the presence of strong shared core values aligned with the business strategy (Grabner et al., 2022; McDonough & Leifer, 1986). However, critics of normative control point out that this space cultural control provides for free experimentation can nevertheless be filled with the same ideas emanating from a uniformizing acculturation (Endrissat et al., 2017; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Welch & Welch, 2006; Willmott, 1993). We, therefore, positioned this opportunity of *organizational learning* in direct tension with the threat of *rigidity*.

Normative control also adapts to environmental complexity and provides a structure for navigating uncertainty, for example, as the reinforcement and internalization of social norms helps reduce ambiguity (Cushen, 2009; Leifer & Mills, 1996). In their study of a Swedish bank, Andersson et al. (2019) show how relying on normative control helps to empower employees, while maintaining overall coherence and avoiding the creation of fully autonomous branches. Similar conclusions were reached by Moskovich (2018), who demonstrates how normative control was the key success factor for developing a profit-based logic in a kibbutz marked by a strong, yet contradictory, foundation of social values that was further applied through beliefs systems. Though considered as cultural critics, Alvesson & Willmott (2002) also recognize that normative control is more effective in supporting agile and resilient organizations in the face of increasing competition. Normative control is also leveraged for building confidence in technological changes, as Prichard et al. (2014) demonstrate in their study of three call centers who successfully introduced automation.

Normative control, therefore, better adapts to more recent types of organizations (e.g., knowledge-intensive firms, agile organizations, network-based firms, flat hierarchies, collaborative work, hybrid organizations mixing for- and non-profit logics) (Carls, 2009; Heinicke et al., 2016; Janka et al., 2020; Lebas & Weigenstein, 1986; Morris et al., 2016, 2021; Moskovich, 2018; Ray, 1986; Weiskopf & Loacker, 2006), thus indirectly fostering a certain modernization of organizations. Morris et al. (2016) illustrate this phenomenon in the increasingly flexible world of broadcasting, where normative control

keeps a lid on an expanded network of independents bound by temporary contracts. Heinicke et al. (2016) confirm in a survey of 267 top managers that beliefs control is predominant in organizations that emphasize a flexible structure.

People engagement. Individuals satisfied in their needs for self-realization (*purpose, individual enabler*) and belonging (*collective enabler*) tend to be more strongly and sustainably committed to their organization. In their survey of 105 employee-supervisor dyads in Singapore, Verburg et al. (2018) validate a cause-effect relationship where normative control creates trust and bonding around shared values directly enhancing task performance. People engagement is the most prevalent opportunity in the normative control literature (see Figure 7) and is therefore a main resulting factor of our integrative model (together with second-order opportunity *organizational learning*, which is presented above).

Organizations rely on a strong culture to enhance their employee value proposition and attract new talent, hire and retain them within the organization (Krajcsák, 2021; Welch & Welch, 2006). This enhanced value proposition in the context of normative control is filled with benefits linked to liberation management, such as a sense of belonging (Ainsworth & Cox, 2003; Costas, 2012; Daniel et al., 1995), the valorization of individuality (Ray, 1986), a more flexible, authentic, friendly, and diverse environment (Fleming, 2014; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015), a self-actualization and personal empowerment proposition (Bardon et al., 2021), or identity incentives such as the identification with the organization's social responsibility (see *purpose*) (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Endrissat et al., 2017). For example, in their study of a retail organization in the United States, Endrissat et al. (2017) discuss how the organization manages to attract creative workers by offering values linked to social and environmental responsibility. The employees freely choose to “embrace the brand and use the organization (...) to build and validate the identities they aspire to” (Endrissat et al., 2017, p. 508). Another advantage of normative control for employees is the proposal of an invisible (Husted, 2021), or at least a less obstructive form of control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), presented as less alienating and more respectful of individual freedoms (Grugulis et al., 2000).

The enhanced employee value proposition contributes above all to strengthening loyalty to the organization (Krajcsák, 2021), enthusiasm and commitment (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters &

Waterman, 1982; Ray, 1986; Sisaye, 2005b), what Welch & Welch (2006, p. 22) refer to as an “affective commitment”. Normative control allows energies to be channeled towards greater efficiency, sometimes supporting higher performance requirements, such as overtime hours (Carls, 2009; Harris & Ogbonna, 2011; Krajcsák, 2021; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015; Sisaye, 2005a; Verburg et al., 2018). While more coercive forms of control stifle the commitment of individuals under control systems and procedures (White, 1984), normative control makes it possible to keep individuals engaged by providing a balance between autonomy and control. In their study of a consulting firm, Robertson & Swan (2003) show how normative control based on a culture of elitism produces greater company loyalty and more innovation and successful project completion. Fleming & Sturdy (2011) report a low turnover rate (19% compared to the 29.5% industry standard), and higher levels of job satisfaction and performance in the call center analyzed for their study. Engagement and exploitation are, however, two sides of the same coin with a blurred boundary. In their study of the video game industry, Peticca-Harris et al. (2015) show how neo-normative control reinforces engagement but also submits workers to extreme working conditions leading to resistance, gamesmanship and psychosocial risks. We highlight this tension in our integrative model.

Positive management attention. Better informed, accountable (*individual enabler*) and committed individuals (*people engagement*) contribute to reducing the need for direct management supervision. In connection with these behavioral levers, we understand that management attention is lowered under normative control, by reducing the need for guidance, directives, information, and direct hierarchical supervision. The increased efficiency, fluidity and coherence of control systems (*systemic strengthening of controls*) as a result of the use of normative control further contributes to reducing managerial attention. As one illustration of *positive management attention*, Birnberg and Snodgrass (1988) compare Japanese and US companies and show how normative control present in Japanese companies saves management effort and costs. Japanese companies devote modest resources to communication efforts to help decision-making, while their US counterparts face additional efforts and investments to enforce bureaucratic rules and reward systems.

In normative control, enforcement efforts and costs are mostly transferred to self-discipline (Welch & Welch, 2006), peer control (Barker, 1993), and control by external stakeholders (Mills & Owens, 2021; Müller, 2017). These multiple and extended forms of control offer an advantage in the face of the increasing complexity of jobs as well as of direct supervisory work (Ouchi, 1979). Self-discipline requires the internalization of standards before the organization can cut formal controls such as auditing and surveillance of workers (Ouchi, 1979; Ray 1986). Beyond self-discipline, control can be taken over by peers, through social control (Ouchi, 1979) or concertive control (Barker, 1993); potentially with a more coercive character. In his presentation of clan control, Ouchi (1979, p. 839) argues that an “implicit information system often ‘grows up’ as a natural by-product of social interaction”, thereby reducing the cost and time of developing a more formal information system. In addition to self- and peer control, Müller (2017) proposes an extension of normative control to external stakeholders (friends, strangers, customers, fan communities, and the wider public) by introducing brand-centered control. By mixing corporate culture and external branding, the organization positions its employees as brand ambassadors, and makes them externally accountable, in their professional and personal lives.

This opportunity of *positive management attention* comes into direct tension with the threat to waste *managerial attention (negative)*, namely, questioning whether there is a return on investment for the significant managerial effort invested in acculturation, ultimately reducing the need for supervision and guidance.

Customer engagement. The presence of motivated employees driven by the values of the organization (*people engagement*) allows to offer a unique experience to the customers and to better convey the brand image. Improved customer engagement is the last opportunity of our integrative model. In the view of neo-critics, new forms of normative control encourage the individual to put their entire personality and social skills at the service of the organization. One of the assets of these so-called emotional workers is their ability to personalize the relationship with customers, by making it more unique and authentic (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, 2011), or by showing more empathy (Bardon et al., 2021). These subtle and often implicit new forms of control are particularly noticeable in the service industry (Husted, 2021). In their study of a call center, Fleming & Sturdy (2011) illustrate how

counselors personalize the relationship with customers by breaking away from their script and telling jokes. Bardon et al. (2021) describe how airport employees are encouraged to freely express their unique personalities, while at the same time being provided with typical examples of what constitutes good and bad behavior toward customers.

New forms of normative control also strengthen the brand through brand-identified employees. Organizations align employees' behaviors to an organizational culture merged with brand image, thereby turning their employees into living brand ambassadors (Müller, 2017). In their study of a retail organization, Endrissat et al. (2017) explain how employees are recruited for their identification with the brand and its values, which they can then convey to customers. In Müller's (2017) study on brand-centered control at IKEA, employees are referred to as 'brand managers'. The author claims that IKEA's strong culture and identification processes commit employees to represent the brand in their interactions with customers, but also in their personal lives.

5.2. Threats of normative control

Besides offering a set of opportunities, the purpose provided by normative control is also a source of potential threats. We find them on the right-hand side of our integrative model (Figure 8) and will also discuss them by following the flow of their interactions. We first elaborate on the behavioral inhibitors (*ethical concerns, negative attitudes, gamesmanship, psychosocial risks*), as they are most salient in the literature (see Figure 7). Afterwards, we move to the less prevalent operational side-effects (*out-of-pocket costs, negative management attention, rigidity*).

Ethical concerns. The main threat posed by the strong sense of *purpose* is the potential use of normative control as a manipulative tool for exploitation purposes. Ethical concerns are particularly developed by cultural critics who denounce the deliberate creation of a totalitarian system for the exploitation of individuals by the organization. Normative control is compelling because individuals participate in the creation of the social norms to which they then submit (Barker, 1993). The self-discipline and peer control associated with normative control are also more restrictive than hierarchical

control because they are omnipresent and affect the recognition of the individual as a member of the group, or as a good worker with regard to the norms in force (Barker, 1993). Sundberg (2019) names ascetic accountability the mechanism by which monks who choose to embrace the life and ideology of a monastery must submit to rules they can not oppose, maintaining a highly hierarchical *status quo* at the backstage. To question the rules is to oppose the principle of self-reflection and glad obedience, as it reflects poor conversion. Normative control further intensifies in combination with technology (“info-normative control”), offering more individual reporting, accountability and exposure, thereby reinforcing self-discipline and peer control (Frenkel et al., 1995; Kamoche et al., 2014; Sewell, 1998). Kamoche et al. (2014) illustrate how offering R&D professionals to reaffirm their identity and professionalism in a knowledge management portal is a way to ensure their productivity and the captation of their findings by the organization.

Cultural critics and neo-critics denounce the hypocrisy of normative control, built on flexibility and liberation management discourses (e.g., autonomy, trust, absence of control, decentralized decision making, recognition of individual characteristics), while it is paradoxically constraining and exploitative (Fleming, 2014; Grugulis et al., 2000; Kunda, 1992; Morris et al., 2016; Prichard et al., 2014; Sewell, 1998; Willmott, 1993). They claim that organizations take advantage of its association with liberation management to give the illusion of freedom and enforce a subtle control at the background (Barker, 1993; O’Reilly, 1989; Willmott, 1993). In reality, they find that it offers “freedoms *around* control” (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011, p. 190) or “structured flexibility” (Morris et al., 2016, p. 2293), where individuals perceive increased freedom within a framework that is nonetheless restrictive and serves business objectives (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Grugulis et al., 2000). Moreover, the context of the gig economy or hyper flexibility characterized by project-based work, mobilizing networks of isolated freelancers, makes it possible to demand more from ever more precarious workers (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Carls, 2009; Morris et al., 2016, 2021; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015), based on mechanisms of neo-normative control, such as “family spirit and employee voice” (Carls, 2009, p. 89) or “deadlines and individualized angst about career prospects and employability” (Morris et al., 2021; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015, p. 11).

More recent critiques denounce the practice of capturing identities for production purposes, under the guise of authenticity, recognition of individuality, and personal contribution to the community, particularly in new forms of normative control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, 2011; Resch et al., 2021; Toraldo et al., 2019). Organizations take advantage of their power to affirm desired identities to increase self-discipline and commitment (Endrissat et al., 2017). Indeed, Alvesson & Kärreman (2007) describe this type of situation by showing how a consulting firm recruits members with an ambitious nature, places them at the very bottom of the hierarchy and maintains a culture of elitism (to increase their productivity), and positivism (to eliminate criticism). With these newer forms of normative control, individuals expressing their true identity at work and linking it to the organization are more exposed and thus potentially more fragile (Fleming, 2014) (*psychosocial risks*). Control is considerably strengthened by this exposure of the individual to personal embarrassment or shame, since cases of individual failure tend to be considered as problems with the individual's values, personality or identity (Butler, 2015; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Butler (2015) further explains how the use of humor and joking serves as a normative form of control to rectify deviant behaviors (those who are laughed at) via the collective (those who are encouraged to laugh).

Gamesmanship. The aforementioned manipulation and exploitation that can be experienced with normative control (*ethical concerns*) may push employees to distance themselves from the organization and show calculative compliance. Merchant & Van der Stede (2007, p. 184) define gamesmanship as “actions that employees take to improve their performance indicators without producing any positive economic effects for the organization”. The normative control literature conceptualizes and further specifies this type of phenomenon in relation to cultural controls by discussing resistance through distance (Ainsworth & Cox, 2003; Carls, 2009), dis-identification (Costas & Fleming, 2009), calculative compliance (Willmott, 1993), and pragmatic distancing (Müller, 2017). They consist of instrumental adaptations of one's behavior to fit cultural and social norms of the organization (Bardon et al., 2021; Marginson, 2009). It can be considered a sort of voluntary splitting of identity on the part of the employee to “distance oneself from managerial domination” (Costas & Fleming, 2009, p. 353) and

“enjoy the material and symbolic benefits of occupying the role without feeling that one's identity is defined by it” (Willmott, 1993, p. 537).

Distancing can be accompanied by a certain form of skepticism or even cynicism about the genuineness of the prevailing cultural norms (Willmott, 1993; Costas & Fleming, 2009; see *negative attitudes*), which can ultimately be damaging to the organization. In their study of a not-for-profit organization, O’Toole & Grey (2016) describe how volunteer teams prepare for management inspections to give the impression that they are complying with the requirements when they do not comply the rest of the time. Toraldo et al. (2019) illustrate this phenomenon by studying the responses of volunteers at a festival marked by deliberate references from management to meaningful work, fun techniques and the sense of community; previously related to neo-normative control. They find that volunteers are savvy and able to navigate between different frameworks of transactional, fusional relationships and distancing through cynicism (Toraldo et al., 2019).

Negative attitudes. Unethical behaviors in the use of normative control (*ethical concerns*) may also generate different forms of non-frontal resistance, ranging from micro-emancipation to exit. Cultural skeptics warn about the complexity of identity work (Weiskopf & Loacker, 2006) and how normative control generates unpredictable and varied responses within individuals (Carls, 2009; McLoughlin et al., 2005), undermining the very unity promised by cultural optimists (Marginson, 2009; Weiskopf & Munro, 2012). Welch & Welch (2006) identify three categories of responses to normative control: (1) supporters, who embrace and internalize the value system and convert colleagues, (2) good actors, who show surface adherence without having internalized the values (see *gamesmanship*), and (3) resisters, who resort to cynicism, sabotage, open dissent and convert colleagues. The literature does not report on frontal resistance to normative control but rather various forms of micro-emancipation, such as the use of humor, time-wasting, repeated failure to meet requirements and deadlines, foot-dragging, etc. (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Carls, 2009; Fleming, 2013; Knights & Willmott, 1987). In their study of an industrial organization in the US, Ezzamel et al. (2001) relate how employees resist the implementation of normative control by showing apparent interest in proposed changes and openness to discussion, yet the endless discussions about the objectives and conditions of the project contribute

to its continuous postponement. Social networks offer an additional platform for the expression of a soft resistance by employees or their relatives, as in the study by Peticca-Harris et al. (2015), where wives raise awareness on the exploitation of their husbands in the video game industry.

Cynicism also fits into this category of micro-emancipation. In their study of an insurance firm, Knights & Willmott (1987) show how resistance is achieved through a lack of participation and reaction to strategic presentations by senior management. Humor is mentioned in the line of micro-emancipatory forms of resistance, as it is used to expose the “arbitrariness, paradoxes and inconsistencies of a reality” (Westwood & Johnston, 2012, p. 802). In the context of brand-centered control (Müller, 2017), resistant employees can use their role as a brand ambassador in a negative way, consequently posing a risk to the brand image. Another form of resistance is the use of existing social and cultural norms to confront management with its contradictions and thus weaken the credibility of normative control (Cushen, 2009; Parker, 1997; Rosenthal, 2004), to “ask the father to eat his greens too” as framed by Parker (1997, p. 86). Nevertheless, Fleming (2013), Carls (2009) and Ainsworth & Cox (2003) question the real effectiveness of micro-emancipation and more specifically its capacity to affect the organization, when in fact it diverts attention from a reality that employees ultimately embrace. Resistance can also come from the middle management as they feel their social standing is reduced when hierarchical control turns into normative control, relying on self- and peer regulation (Marginson, 2009).

The main strategy applied by organizations for weakening resistance is precisely through normative control and, more specifically, by promoting specific values and social norms that undermine resistance, i.e., pushing universal values oriented towards others that are difficult to oppose to, encouraging criticism, or on the contrary, self-reflection, professionalism and positivity (Costas, 2012; Fleming, 2013; Husted, 2021; Kamoche et al., 2014; Kunda, 1992; Morris et al., 2016; Sundberg, 2019). Neo-normative control also weakens the possibilities of resistance. Where individuals could resort to distancing and cynicism under types of normative control based on conformity and standardization, it is more difficult for them to protect their personalities or selves in an organization that encourages diversity and authenticity. Hence, a new form of ultimate resistance is emerging as employees decide to resign from their organization (Costas, 2012; Fleming, 2013; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015).

Psychosocial risks. In proven cases of work intensification and exploitation (*ethical concerns*), or when dis-identification (*gamesmanship*) turns into self-alienation, employees may face an increased stress level and lowered self-esteem. As opposed to the above section on *negative attitudes*, the topic of psychosocial risks refers to specific situations in which employees “are unable or unwilling to express their opposition” (Harris & Ogbonna, 2011, p. 440). Scholars refer indeed to the “psychological costs of normative control” (Harris & Ogbonna, 2011, p. 439), the “demoralization and degradation” (Willmott, 1993, p. 539) it engenders. More specifically, this manifests in cases of burn-out, increased stress, hypertension, anxiety, anomie, addictions, family conflicts and other psychological and existential disturbances (Fleming, 2013; Garrety, 2008; Harris & Ogbonna, 2011; Husted, 2021; Morris et al., 2016; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015; Westwood & Johnston, 2012). In their survey of over a thousand hospitality sector firms, Harris & Ogbonna (2011) find strong links between the extent of cultural control and the level of stress and decreased self-esteem of workers. Bardon et al. (2021), however, discover that these situations of psychological distress are not experienced equally by employees, depending on their ability to express their authentic self in the workplace and distance themselves if needed.

Several drivers, often intertwined, generate psychosocial risks in a context of normative control. An important driver is the alienation of individuals caused by normative control. Costas & Fleming (2009) argue that individuals who are no longer able to distance themselves and perform dis-identification (see section on *gamesmanship*) risk falling into self-alienation, a state where the normative self colonizes the authentic self. This is the case in situations where the individual spends more time in the skin of their normative self, as the barriers between personal and professional life are removed (Costas & Fleming, 2009). Garrety (2008) confirms this phenomenon, particularly for employees with representative functions (e.g., management, customer relations). However, she adds nuance by insisting that normative controls only affect the superficial layers of the individual's identity, with limited implications for the true and deeper authentic self.

Another driver of psychosocial risks is the vicious circle between work intensification and progressive isolation. A normative control system can indeed tap on the intrinsic motivation (see *purpose*) and self-accountability (see *individual enabler*) of individuals to intensify work (Harris &

Ogbonna, 2011). The professional sphere is gradually colonizing the private sphere, through the intensification of work and also through social activities organized by the organization outside working hours, remote work, the removal of spatial and mental work/non-work boundaries, the promotion of a culture of friendship at work, and brand-centered control (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Costas, 2012; Fleming, 2013, 2014; Grugulis et al., 2000; Müller, 2017). In their study of LGBT workers in low-wage services, Mills & Owens (2021) show how a highly customer-oriented culture intentionally allows for increased control of employees by customers. Management turns a blind eye to instances of customer harassment when they allow workers to remain within the behavioral and aesthetic norms expected by the organization, thereby exposing them to psychosocial risk. These practices tend to intensify with new forms of normative control that seek precisely to leverage the unique characteristics of individuals that are more easily expressed in the private sphere (Fleming, 2013, 2014). They are also found in the new collaborative work organizations where strong identification and involvement with the group lead to negation of the self and psychological distress (Resch et al., 2021).

Finally, normative control can also be a source of exclusion driving situations of employee malaise. Early forms of normative control based on standardization often led to situations of low self-worth, punishment, peer pressure or exclusion for employees who deviate most from the group norm (Barker, 1993; Ouchi & Price, 1978). In more recent forms of normative control based on individualization, relational insecurity and dependency on others becomes more important and may push individuals towards self-alienation to avoid exclusion (Costas, 2012).

Turning to the operational side-effects induced by the foundational sense of purpose with normative control, we uncover three secondary threats, given their moderate salience in the literature (see Figure 7): *out-of-pocket costs*, *negative management attention*, and *rigidity*. Nevertheless, they are complementary in that they uncover operational implications of normative control for organizations.

Out-of-pocket costs. Cultural optimists present normative control as a form of control that is less costly than more direct types of controls (Birnberg & Snodgrass, 1988; Husted, 2021; Ouchi, 1979). The enforcement costs traditionally borne by the organization and its management in a coercive type of

control (internal audit team, organization of reviews, reporting) are transferred informally and inexpensively to employees, via self-control and peer control (*positive management attention*). However, this does not mean that these costs have been eliminated, but rather that they have been transferred upstream, to ensure an anticipated and shared understanding of appropriate values and behaviors (*individual enabler*). One of the key success factors for providing this direction and *purpose* lies precisely in the ability to select the appropriate individuals, acculturate them, build “trust and bonds of attachment”, which cannot be considered without a substantive investment by the organization and its management (Leifer & Mills, 1996, p. 134). Ouchi (1979) describes the process of establishing social norms as more demanding than other forms of control. The efforts start with a selective recruitment based on a thorough, participative and progressive peer assessment (Costas, 2012; Grugulis et al., 2000; Ouchi, 1979; Robertson & Swan, 2003). Once recruited, new members are subjected to a costly and time-consuming acculturation and socialization process (Leifer & Mills, 1996; Ouchi, 1979), including activities such as training, buddy initiatives, fun events or job rotations (Costas, 2012; Ouchi & Price, 1978; Patel et al., 2019).

Cultural critics and cultural skeptics even question the return on investment of normative control, given its complexity and ambiguity (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). According to Welch & Welch (2006), it is indeed very complicated to instrumentalize culture and then measure its effects. It would also be appropriate to analyze in more detail what normative control implies in terms of risk management and risk provisions, or whether implicit social norms and self-control increase operational risks as responsibilities and interpretations remain open (Marginson, 2009). For example, in McLoughlin et al.'s (2005) study, employees report a major environmental incident that went unnoticed and unaddressed for several weeks because of a greater ambiguity around standards and responsibilities. Another limitation to the return on investment of normative control is that, despite being presumably less costly, it does not necessarily replace more direct controls that continue to operate and generate additional costs in parallel (Ainsworth & Cox, 2003; Harris & Ogbonna, 2011; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004).

Negative management attention. The efforts of appropriate selection of members, their socialization and acculturation are measured in money but also in time (*out-of-pocket costs*). It is mainly

the managers who must not only assume these time-consuming actions but also show themselves to be invested, qualified and exemplary with regard to cultural norms. The investment of management is a key success factor for developing and conveying the culture. These processes are inevitably made up of trials, errors, and adjustments, resulting in a form of ambiguity that can be a source of resistance from employees, requiring even more persuasive efforts by managers (McLoughlin et al., 2005). There is also an underlying effort on the part of management to display culture by setting an example. Normative control relies indeed on charismatic leaders, who are strongly involved, both morally and affectively, in their interpersonal relations with their employees (Sisaye, 2005a). Costas (2012, p. 392), however, nuances the moral and affective involvement of managers in new forms of normative control based on a “culture of friendship” which “places managers in the comfortable position of not having to represent the guarantor of protection and security”.

Moreover, the logic of investing in human capital, proposed in new forms of normative control, changes the role of management as it requires the monitoring of indicators related to people engagement and extensive investments in talent development (Weiskopf & Munro, 2012). This paradigm shift means that managers need to take on a new role and upskill, introducing uncertainty and leading to self-doubt. In their study of an industrial organization, McLoughlin et al. (2005) show how managers become more self-critical and question their ability to manage in a context of normative control. Finally, as stressed in *out-of-pocket costs*, there is a need for different and simultaneous forms of managerial attention (coaching, supervising), as normative control does not free itself from other forms of control (Ainsworth & Cox, 2003; Harris & Ogbonna, 2011; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004).

Rigidity. Lastly, the diffusion of a strong direction and *purpose* also contributes to a standardization of behaviors and practices with further resistance to change among employees. Rigidity is a longer-term side-effect of normative control, which bears consequences for the capacity of organizations to innovate and adapt (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009), and is therefore in direct tension with the opportunity for *organizational learning*. By recruiting individuals predisposed to a certain organizational culture and selected by peers, employee diversity is limited at the grassroots (Endrissat et al., 2017; Grugulis et al., 2000). In addition to a selective sourcing of employees, the processes of socialization and identification

reinforce this homogeneity. As normative control is fundamentally based on uniformity of values and behavior, it risks to “smother the creative, innovative, and entrepreneurial capabilities of employees” (Fleming, 2013, p. 486). Willmott (1993) reports an elimination of deviant views, “including those that may be important for future adaptation and survival” (Ouchi & Price, 1978, p. 67). This is done through human resources processes of promotion and compensation and benefits which aim to reward conformists (Barker, 1993; Willmott, 1993), while under-achievers are openly discredited (Mulholland, 2002). For an organization that nevertheless wishes to evolve, there is a risk that employees who have deeply adhered to the old values will resist to change and reconsider their loyalty and commitment (Welch & Welch, 2006).

To circumvent this threat, several avenues have been considered in the literature, such as the presence in the organizational culture of values that support innovation and change (Welch & Welch, 2006) or new forms of normative control based on the celebration of diversity (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, 2011). Nevertheless, Costas (2012) questions the actual diversity generated by new forms of normative control, by highlighting the inevitable uniformization of employees’ identity to secure their belonging to the organization.

6. Concluding discussion

In this article, we offer a holistic view of the opportunities and threats of normative control that moves beyond the traditional oppositions of the existing streams of the literature. Based on the seminal work of Merchant & Van der Stede (2007), Widener (2007) and Simons (1995), through our comprehensive literature review, we transform a general conceptual framework of the costs and benefits of management control systems into a synthesis of opportunities and threats of normative control. As to answer our first research question, we synthesized the opportunities and threats of normative control, while distinguishing between behavioral levers and inhibitors, as well as organizational accelerators and operational side effects (see Figure 6). Moreover, to answer our second research question, we considered the dynamics between these opportunities and threats to provide a holistic vision based on the literature.

Our analysis resulted in an integrative model (Figure 8) that reveals its key themes, interconnections and tensions, which are explained in the synthesizing analysis (section 5).

6.1 Trends and gaps in the literature on normative control

Through this study, we aim to show that the fragmented and diverse literature on normative control offers insights into a variety of positions and potential opportunities and threats of the topic. In doing so, we emphasize the importance of the interactions and tensions between the different elements, as to highlight that normative control is a rich concept, that merits an analysis drawing on nuanced perspectives (including both opportunities and threats), thus stepping away from the traditional antagonistic perspectives taken up in the literature. Our analysis revealed several trends and gaps found in the literature that we discuss further here.

Since the 1970s, the literature on normative control has approximately given rise to a new stream every decade, going from cultural optimists over cultural critics, cultural skeptics to neo-critics. We identify the main thesis of each stream, as well as its related concepts and leading authors. We find that the streams are often presented in opposition to one another, focusing mostly on one specific opportunity or threat, rather than providing a more holistic view. The diversity of positions found in articles published since 2020 suggests an evolution to a more nuanced view on the concept. From 2016 onwards, we also identify the emergence of articles focusing on normative control in the context of community and networked organizations (Krajcsák, 2021; Morris et al., 2016; Moskovich, 2018; Resch et al., 2021; Sundberg, 2019; Toraldo et al., 2019). These studies articulate normative control with specific theories from psychology and sociology, such as a Lacanian framework in Resch et al. (2021), the “communitas” in Toraldo et al. (2019), and refer to derivative concepts such as “affective control” (Resch et al., 2021). It is likely that the next literature stream will move away from the “individualization” perspective that has marked neo-normative control, to focus, once again, more strongly on the community (in line with Ouchi, 1979).

By progressively replacing conceptual articles with predominantly qualitative methods, researchers have provided evidence to support theoretical claims on normative control, which we believe is essential in view of the controversies it raises. However, quantitative studies involving a larger and more diversified panel of organizations are still in the minority and may be of interest in identifying attributes of normative control that are generalizable to all types of organizations. We lack studies that offer nuanced positions on the topic of normative control (focusing on more in-depth interactions between the different elements of normative control), as well as quantitative studies that confirm or contradict the traditional opportunities and threats highlighted in qualitative research.

In our integrative model, we synthesize the main opportunities and threats of normative control and highlight their interconnections and tensions. We identify *people engagement* and *organizational learning* as the overarching opportunities of normative control, because of their prevalence in the literature (see Figure 7) and the numerous interactions with the other opportunities of the framework. Their use can only be considered in tension with some major threats that are respectively opposed to them. The opportunity of *people engagement* is balanced by the threats of *negative attitudes*, *gamesmanship* and *psycho-social risks*. These threats all emerge from the foundational threat of *ethical concerns*, which is, together with *negative attitudes*, among the most salient in the literature on the threats side (Figure 7). The opportunity for *organizational learning* is threatened by the *rigidity* attributed to normative control. This duality of normative control and especially the interweaving of opportunities and threats makes its application both promising and risky, and leads to further research avenues in the contingency tradition (see section 6.2).

We find that studies on normative control primarily focus on the behavioral inhibitors, thereby studying one specific inhibitor in detail, without a stronger articulation of potential connections or tensions arising with certain opportunities. Among the behavioral levers, the opportunity of *collective enabler* has been underexplored, while the recent shift to community and networked contexts makes it a rising and promising area for further investigation (see section 6.2). In addition, we identify a lack of focus on opportunities and threats emanating from the structure and management of the organization (Figure 7): organizational accelerators (*positive management attention*, *systemic strengthening of*

controls, customer engagement) and operational side-effects (*out-of-pocket costs, negative management attention, rigidity*) are less prevalent in the literature and warrant further investigation. Most studies of our dataset do not establish a causal link between one or more opportunity or threat of normative control with organizational performance. Widener (2007), Verburg et al. (2018), and Fleming & Sturdy (2011) are exceptions, respectively linking the opportunity for systemic strengthening of controls and people engagement to better organizational performance. However, they focus on just one element of the integrative model, while a holistic approach would allow for a more realistic and nuanced view on normative control.

In this study, we were also challenged by the initial absence of several fundamental articles of normative control in our systematic search, which were ultimately reintegrated by the backward search. The use of synonyms or derivatives of normative control complicates the referencing and is in part the reason for the fragmentation observed in the literature. More concretely, Ouchi refers to *clan control*, Simons (1995) to *beliefs systems of control*, Barker (1993) to *concertive control*, Willmott (1993) to *corporate culturalism*, Alvesson & Willmott (2002) and Costas & Fleming (2009) to *identity management*, Weiskopf & Munro (2012) and Fleming (2014) to *biopower*, and finally Resch et al. (2021) to *affective control*. Our study helps to better harmonize and structure the normative control literature, while officially connecting to this literature some seminal articles on normative control that would risk exclusion based on the terminology used. Therefore, we advise authors whose aim is to engage with the existing literature on normative control, to refer to the traditional terminology of “normative control” or “cultural control”, at least in the keywords of the article. As one example, Müller (2017) refers to *brand-centered control*, but she references normative control as one keyword of the study and therefore appears in our systematic search.

6.2 Main contributions, avenues for further research and limitations

Our study makes two main contributions to the management control literature. First, we take a step back from the abundant and diverse literature to identify trends and gaps in the normative control literature. We identify four main streams in the literature on normative control (cultural optimists, critics, skeptics

and neo-critics, see Table 1), whose chronological study allows us to map and contextualize the different opportunities and threats of normative control in a holistic synthesis (Figure 6). We study the salience of each opportunity and threat in the literature (see Figure 7), and derive elements that are relevant to further investigate in the face of current organizational challenges. We thereby allow scholars to make better sense of the fragmented literature and catalyze their efforts for more impactful research. Second, while the literature streams have so far succeeded one another and have sometimes been built in opposition to the previous stream, the prospects for the coming years (see Figure 5) may suggest a greater coexistence of the different points of view. Research on normative control could thus favor a more nuanced and integrated view, as is provided in our study. Our integrative model (Figure 8), detailing the interactions and tensions between the opportunities and threats of normative control, takes this holistic perspective. From a contingency standpoint, we know, however, that each opportunity and threat, their interconnections and tensions, are exercised differently depending on their context of application. Our synthesis, therefore, provides an initial framework for scholars to investigate the opportunities and threats of normative control in relation to different contextual variables, to establish the tipping points between a beneficial or detrimental normative control for organizations.

In terms of future research avenues, we suggest to re-anchor research on normative control in practice, to serve current organizational challenges. More specifically, we refer to the usage of the concept in response to the challenges related to the 2021 Great Resignation, namely the high expectations of employees regarding purpose, wellbeing and workplace culture (Chopra & Bhilare, 2020; Fuller & Kerr, 2022; Gulati, 2022; Sull et al., 2022). Normative control has a widely recognized *purpose* opportunity in the literature (Figure 7), reinforced when organizational values are aligned with societal values (Ouchi & Price, 1978). These initial elements, therefore, encourage organizations concerned with retaining talent to apply normative control based on crucial societal values such as sustainability. While *purpose* is an opportunity that has received attention in the literature, the articles concerned are mainly conceptual. Research could benefit from empirical studies to investigate the impact of normative control as a purpose lever, particularly in relation to sustainability issues. Since the opportunity of *purpose* underlies all interactions in our integrative model (Figure 8), these studies could

also investigate how a purpose, based on societal values such as sustainability, has the potential to strengthen the opportunities and mitigate the threats of normative control. As one example, a strong and universal purpose may push employees to exceed their personal limits for the benefit of the cause, giving rise to “disillusionment” and “emotional exhaustion” (Resch et al., 2021) (see Figure 8, *people engagement, psychosocial risks*).

Employee wellbeing has not been identified as a direct opportunity of normative control and remains underexplored. It could be further studied through a proxy composed of specific threats and opportunities of our synthesis (see Figure 7). We hypothesize that normative control positively influences employee wellbeing through the opportunities it offers in terms of self-realization (*purpose*), the reinforced sense of community, reduction of conflicts (*collective enabler*), and empowerment (*individual enabler*). On the contrary, normative control may negatively influence employee wellbeing through the *psychosocial risks* it entails.

Finally, normative control can respond to employees' expectations of an enhanced workplace culture, in terms of allowing more autonomy, flexibility and cooperation. These notions call for specific opportunities and threats of normative control, many of which need to be better explored empirically in the literature. This research is particularly relevant to the concern for community work recently identified in the normative control literature (see section 6.1). Normative control is indeed more compatible with flexible and collaborative forms of governance (*organizational learning*) favored by digital natives (Mustafa et al., 2022), as it reinforces cooperation and commitment to the collective (*collective enabler*) and leverages liberation management techniques praising the autonomy and accountability of employees (*individual enabler*). However, normative control is no longer synonymous with flexibility when it hinders innovation by standardizing thinking and hence rather fosters resistance to change (*rigidity*). Again, building a proxy from these different elements and conducting a broader empirical study could provide insight into the impact of normative control on workplace culture. This research is especially interesting to deepen the opportunity for *collective enabler* and the threat of *rigidity*, which are still under-explored in the literature (Figure 7).

We also draw researchers' attention to a particular context of workplace culture exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic: hybrid work, characterized by a physical and psychological distance from the workforce (Hamouche, 2021; Kropp & McRae, 2022). It would be interesting to study the contributions of normative control in such a context, especially if acculturation efforts (*out-of-pocket costs*) increase with the distance and volatility of the workforce while, on the contrary, the opportunities of *purpose*, *people engagement* and *collective enabler* help to offset the undesirable effects.

We see several limitations to this study. Firstly, it relies on an interpretation of the work of Merchant & Van der Stede (2007), Widener (2007), and Simons (1995) to build and feed the conceptual framework. Secondly, the generalizations proposed in the synthesis may require further investigation, since the available articles are either conceptual or empirical and limited to single case studies, often in specific and similar fields (i.e., 'knowledge-intensive firms'). Furthermore, the opportunities and threats identified in the synthesis are subject to other factors that are only addressed tangentially in this study, such as contingency factors and the interaction with other controls in a more systemic approach. Finally, we emphasize that this study does not aim to establish a link between normative control (including its opportunities and threats) and organizational performance, and no conclusions can be drawn in this respect.

Data availability statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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Appendix: Data extraction form

Article	Research outlet	Basic methodology	Data
Ouchi & Price (1978)	Organizational Dynamics	Conceptual	n.a.
Peters (1978)	Organizational Dynamics	Conceptual	Findings derived from the author's experiences and experiments with large American and European corporations
Ouchi (1979)	Management Science	Conceptual	n.a.
Deal & Kennedy (1982)	Addison-Wesley Publishing Company	Conceptual	Findings derived from the authors' experiences and experiments as consultants
Peters & Waterman (1982)	Harper & Row	Conceptual	Findings derived from the authors' experiences and experiments with large American and European corporations
White (1984)	Management Decision	Conceptual	n.a.
Lebas & Weigenstein (1986)	Journal of Management Studies	Conceptual	n.a.
McDonough & Leifer (1986)	Journal of Product Innovation Management	Qualitative	Case studies on 12 new project developments in three organizations, interviews
Ray (1986)	Journal of Management Studies	Conceptual	n.a.
Knights & Willmott (1987)	International Studies of Management and Organization	Mixed - Conceptual and Qualitative	Case study in a medium-size U.K. life insurance company, observation
Birnberg & Snodgrass (1988)	Accounting, Organizations and Society	Quantitative	Survey, data collected from 1051 respondents working in 22 large manufacturing and construction firms in Japan and US
O'Reilly (1989)	California Management Review	Conceptual	n.a.
Kunda (1992)	Temple University Press	Mixed - Conceptual and Qualitative	Ethnographic study in a hi-tech company in the US
Barker (1993)	Administrative Science Quarterly	Qualitative	Ethnographic study in a US manufacturing company, enriched with interviews

Willmott (1993)	Journal of Management Studies	Conceptual	n.a.
Daniel et al. (1995)	Management Accounting Research	Quantitative	Survey, data collected from 1487 employees in Japanese and US firms
Frenkel et al. (1995)	Work Employment & Society	Conceptual	n.a.
Simons (1995)	Strategic Management Journal	Qualitative	Longitudinal case study with newly-appointed managers, interviews
Leifer & Mills (1996)	Journal of Management	Conceptual	n.a.
Parker (1997)	Organization	Conceptual	n.a.
Sewell (1998)	Administrative Science Quarterly	Mixed - Conceptual and Qualitative	Illustrative case studies
Gabriel (1999)	Human Relations	Conceptual	Extracts from existing case studies by other authors
Grugulis et al. (2000)	Work Employment & Society	Qualitative	Case study in an IT & Security consulting firm in the UK, observations, interviews and secondary data
Ezzamel et al. (2001)	Journal of Management Studies	Qualitative	Case study in a UK manufacturing industry, participant observation and interviews
Alvesson & Willmott (2002)	Journal of Management Studies	Mixed - Conceptual and Qualitative	Two illustrative case studies from the authors' own research
Mulholland (2002)	Personnel Review	Qualitative	Case study in a UK call center, participant observation, observation, interviews
Ainsworth & Cox (2003)	Organization Studies	Qualitative	Case study in two family-owned businesses, case records, document analysis, participant observation, site visits and interviews
Robertson & Swan (2003)	Journal of Management Studies	Qualitative	Longitudinal case study in a small innovation consultancy, observation, interviews
Kärreman & Alvesson (2004)	Organization	Qualitative	Case study in a large multinational IT/management consulting firm, participant observation, observation, secondary data, interviews

Sundrum (2004)	International Journal of Business Governance and Ethics	Conceptual	n.a.
Rosenthal (2004)	Journal of Management Studies	Conceptual	n.a.
McLoughlin et al. (2005)	Work Employment & Society	Qualitative	Ethnography in a coke-making plant, enriched with semi-structured interviews
Sisaye (2005a)	Leadership and Organization Development Journal	Conceptual	n.a.
Sisaye (2005b)	Leadership and Organization Development Journal	Conceptual	n.a.
Welch & Welch (2006)	International Business Review	Conceptual	n.a.
Weiskopf & Loacker (2006)	Management Revue	Conceptual	n.a.
Widener (2007)	Accounting, Organizations & Society	Quantitative	Survey to test a structural equation model, data collected from 122 Chief Financial Officers
Alvesson & Kärreman (2007)	Organization Science	Qualitative	Case study in a large consulting firm, interviews and observations
Garrety (2008)	Journal of Business Ethics	Conceptual	n.a.
Costas & Fleming (2009)	Human Relations	Mixed - Conceptual and Qualitative	Case study in a global management consulting firm, interviews
Carls (2009)	Qualitative Research in Accounting & Management	Qualitative	Case studies in four large-scale retailing companies in Italy, interviews
Cushen (2009)	Qualitative Research in Accounting & Management	Qualitative	Ethnographic study in an Irish high-tech large company, enriched with interviews and secondary data
Fleming & Sturdy (2009)	Employee Relations	Qualitative	Case study in a US-owned call center in Australia, interviews and observations

Marginson (2009)	Journal of Accounting & Organizational Change	Qualitative	Case study in UK based organization in global communications industry, interviews, questionnaire, observations and secondary data
Morsing & Oswald (2009)	Corporate Governance	Qualitative	Case study on Danish healthcare company
Fleming & Sturdy (2011)	Human Relations	Qualitative	Case study in a US-owned call center in Australia, interviews and observations
Harris & Ogbonna (2011)	Journal of Business Research	Quantitative	Survey, data collected from 259 respondents in the hospitality industry
Costas (2012)	Journal of Management Inquiry	Qualitative	Case study in the UK “human competences” team of a large, global consulting firm, interviews
Weiskopf & Munro (2012)	Organization	Conceptual	n.a.
Westwood & Johnston (2012)	Organization	Qualitative	Field study in an Australian state-owned lottery corporation, participant observation, observation
Fleming (2013)	Journal of Management Studies	Conceptual	n.a.
Kleine & Weißenberger (2013)	Journal of Management Control	Quantitative	Survey, data collected from 294 medium- to large-sized, cross-sectional German organizations
Fleming (2014)	Human Relations	Conceptual	n.a.
Kamoche et al. (2014)	Organization Studies	Qualitative	Case study in global confectionary maker, interviews in Australia and UK
Prichard et al. (2014)	Work Employment & Society	Qualitative	Ethnographic study in three emergency and urgent healthcare call centers, observations, interviews
Butler (2015)	Culture and Organization	Conceptual	n.a.
Peticca-Harris et al. (2015)	Organization	Qualitative	Narrative analysis of blogs and reader comments
Heinicke et al. (2016)	Management Accounting Research	Quantitative	Survey, structural equation model, data collected from 267 top managers of medium-sized firms

Ismail (2016)	Asian Review of Accounting	Quantitative	Survey, structural equation model, data collected from 270 owners and managers in creative industry
Morris et al. (2016)	Human Relations	Qualitative	Case study in UK television industry, interviews
O' Toole & Grey (2016)	Organization Studies	Qualitative	Case with the voluntary workers of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution in the UK, semi-structured interviews, participant observations, secondary data
Endrissat et al. (2017)	Human Relations	Qualitative	Case study in a North American grocery chain, non-participant observations, semi-structured interviews and secondary data
Holtgrave et al. (2017)	European Management Journal	Quantitative	Survey, data collected from 106 textile distributors and retailers in Germany
Müller (2017)	Organization Studies	Qualitative	Case study of an IKEA store in a German speaking country, interviews, observations, secondary data
Moskovich (2018)	Journal of Management Control	Qualitative	Longitudinal case study in an Israelian Kibbutz, ethnographic interviews, secondary data
Verburg et al. (2018)	Group and Organization Management	Quantitative	Survey, data collected from 105 employee - supervisor dyads in Singapore
Andersson et al. (2019)	Scandinavian Journal of Management	Qualitative	Case study in a Swedish bank, interviews and secondary data
Toraldo et al. (2019)	Journal of Management Studies	Qualitative	Exploratory ethnographic study on three UK music festivals
Patel et al. (2019)	Personnel Review	Qualitative	Case study in Indian information technology sector, interviews
Sundberg (2019)	Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion	Qualitative	Case study in French Cistercian monasteries, interviews, observations and document analysis
Janka et al. (2020)	Review of Managerial Science	Quantitative	Survey, data collected from 260 large German firms

Bardon et al. (2021)	British Journal of Management	Qualitative	Case study in a medium-sized European airport, non-participant observations, semi-structured interviews, secondary data
Resch et al. (2021)	Organization Studies	Qualitative	Field study in a New-Zealand social-entrepreneurial network, interviews, participant observation, book analysis
Husted (2021)	Culture and Organization	Qualitative	Ethnographic study in an alternative 'minor party' in Southwest England, enriched with interviews
Krajcsák (2021)	International Journal of Organizational analysis	Mixed - Conceptual and Qualitative	Three independent case studies within a single multinational company, interviews
Mills & Owens (2021)	Work Employment & Society	Qualitative	Field study in Canada with LGBT community members in low-wage service sector, interviews
Morris et al. (2021)	Human Relations	Qualitative	Field study on new organizational forms in UK television, interviews
Grabner et al. (2022)	Accounting, Organizations and Society	Quantitative	Survey, data collected at different organizational levels (team members, team leaders, and agency heads) within 53 advertising agencies
Islam & Sferrazzo (2022)	Journal of Management Studies	Qualitative	Case study in a French multinational retail company, semi-structured interviews