

Corporate social innovation through the lens of organizational identity: a theoretical framework for hybrid organizations

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Abstract. Hybrid organizations that combine multiple institutional logics face unique challenges in pursuing Corporate Social Innovation (CSI), yet existing literature lacks an integrative framework explaining how organizational identity drives innovation in these contexts. This paper develops a theoretical framework linking organizational identity configurations to CSI through the mediating mechanism of Organizational Learning Capability (OLC). Drawing on institutional logic theory, paradox theory, and organizational learning literature, the framework conceptualizes hybrid organizational identity along two dimensions—logic centrality and logic compatibility—yielding four identity archetypes: aligned, dominant, estranged, and contested. Eight formal propositions are advanced, arguing that tension-laden identity configurations (estranged and contested) stimulate greater social innovation through enhanced organizational learning, whereas harmony-driven configurations (aligned and dominant) suppress innovation through learning complacency. The framework contributes to management theory by bridging fragmented literatures on organizational identity, institutional complexity, and social innovation, offering a paradox-based explanation of why internal tensions can serve as catalysts rather than impediments to innovation in hybrid organizations.

Keywords: corporate social innovation, organizational identity, institutional logic, organizational learning capability, hybrid organizations

1. Introduction

Corporate Social Innovation (CSI) has emerged as a critical concept in management research, reflecting the growing expectation that organizations not only generate economic value but also address pressing societal challenges through innovative solutions [1, 2]. Unlike conventional corporate social responsibility, which often involves philanthropic or compensatory activities peripheral to core business operations, CSI entails the development of novel products, services, processes, or business models that simultaneously create social and economic value [1]. As global challenges such as inequality, climate change, and public health crises intensify, understanding how organizations innovate for social impact has become an urgent scholarly agenda.

Hybrid organizations—entities that combine institutional logics from different societal sectors, such as social welfare and commercial enterprise—occupy a particularly important position in this discourse [3, 4].

These organizations inherently embody the dual imperatives of social mission and commercial viability, making them natural sites for CSI. Examples range from certified B Corporations and social enterprises to state-owned enterprises that simultaneously pursue public policy mandates and market competitiveness. Yet the very hybridity that positions these organizations as potential engines of social innovation also subjects them to persistent internal tensions arising from the coexistence of competing institutional logics [5, 6].

Despite growing scholarly attention, the existing literature on CSI in hybrid organizations suffers from significant theoretical fragmentation. Research on organizational identity has demonstrated that the configuration of multiple institutional logics within an organization profoundly shapes its goals, strategies, and behaviors [5]. Studies on organizational learning have established that learning capability is a critical enabler of innovation [7, 8]. And paradox theory has illuminated how organizations navigate competing demands [9, 10]. However, these streams of research have largely developed in isolation, leaving a fundamental question unanswered: How does organizational identity drive CSI in hybrid organizations, and through what mediating mechanisms does this influence unfold?

This paper addresses this gap by developing an integrative theoretical framework that connects organizational identity, organizational learning capability, and CSI in the context of hybrid organizations. Drawing on institutional logic theory [11], paradox theory [10], and organizational learning theory [8], the framework advances eight formal propositions explaining how different configurations of identity—characterized by varying levels of logic centrality and logic compatibility—differentially influence CSI through the mediating mechanism of organizational learning. The framework is deliberately conceptual rather than empirical, employing theoretical reasoning and literature synthesis to develop testable propositions that can guide future research. By constructing a parsimonious yet comprehensive model, the paper aims to provide the theoretical scaffolding that the field currently lacks for explaining the identity-innovation nexus in hybrid contexts.

The paper makes three primary contributions. First, it bridges the fragmented literatures on institutional complexity, organizational identity, and social innovation by providing a unified theoretical architecture. Second, it reconceptualizes organizational learning capability not as a generic management tool but as a paradox navigation mechanism through which hybrid organizations translate identity-based tensions into innovative outcomes. Third, it challenges the prevailing assumption that internal harmony is conducive to innovation, offering instead a paradox-based explanation of why creative tensions can serve as catalysts for CSI. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature, Section 3 develops the theoretical framework and propositions, Section 4 discusses the implications for theory and practice, and Section 5 concludes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Corporate social innovation

Corporate social innovation refers to the development and implementation of novel solutions by firms that address social needs while creating business value [1]. Distinct from corporate social responsibility and social entrepreneurship, CSI emphasizes the integration of social purpose into the core innovation processes of the firm rather than treating social contributions as ancillary activities [2]. Recent scholarship has identified CSI as a multidimensional construct, encompassing both exploitative forms—incremental improvements to existing products and services that enhance social welfare—and explorative forms—the development of fundamentally new solutions to previously unaddressed social problems [12, 13].

Research on CSI has expanded considerably in recent years. Tabares et al. [4] explored how hybrid organizations such as B Corporations leverage CSI through transactional, iterative, and systemic strategic orientations. Saka-Helmhout et al. [2] proposed a framework for understanding CSI by multinational enterprises, highlighting the role of institutional contradictions and organizational capabilities. Erdiaw-Kwasie and Abunyewah [14] examined the determinants of social innovation in hybrid organizations, emphasizing the moderating role of technology readiness. Despite these advances, a comprehensive theoretical framework explaining how the internal identity structure of hybrid organizations shapes their CSI outcomes remains absent from the literature. Most existing studies treat the hybrid organization as a monolithic category without differentiating among the diverse configurations of logic multiplicity that exist within it. This lack of differentiation obscures the distinct mechanisms through which different types of hybridity influence innovation outcomes, representing a critical gap that the present paper seeks to address.

2.2. Organizational identity and institutional logics

Organizational identity—the central, distinctive, and enduring attributes of an organization as perceived by its members—is fundamentally shaped by the institutional logics the organization embodies [5]. Institutional logics are the socially constructed patterns of symbols, beliefs, and material practices that provide organizing principles for a given institutional order [11]. In hybrid organizations, multiple logics coexist, creating varying degrees of internal alignment or tension.

Besharov and Smith [5] proposed a seminal framework that categorizes hybrid organizational identities along two dimensions: logic compatibility (the extent to which logics provide consistent prescriptions for action) and logic centrality (the extent to which multiple logics are core to organizational functioning). The interaction of these two dimensions yields four ideal-type identity configurations: aligned (high centrality, high compatibility), dominant (low centrality, high compatibility), estranged (low centrality, low compatibility), and contested (high centrality, low compatibility). Each configuration implies distinct patterns of internal conflict and coherence that have been shown to influence organizational strategies and outcomes [15, 16].

Recent research has begun to explore how these identity configurations relate to innovation. For instance, scholars have found that organizations can realize innovation through blending dual identities, advancing research on the intersection of hybrid organizing, organizational identity, and social innovation [17]. Siwale et al. [15] examined the failure of hybrid organizations from a legitimation perspective, demonstrating that the inability to effectively manage multiple logics can lead to organizational collapse, underscoring the high stakes of identity management in hybrid contexts. Furthermore, the emerging literature on hybrid organizing in the public sector has highlighted how different governance arrangements shape the way organizations combine commercial and social logics, with important implications for innovation outcomes [16]. Nevertheless, the specific mechanisms through which different identity configurations drive or inhibit CSI remain undertheorized, and no existing framework systematically links the full typology of hybrid identity configurations to innovation outcomes through a specified mediating pathway.

2.3. Organizational learning capability

Organizational Learning Capability (OLC) refers to the organizational and managerial characteristics that facilitate the learning process or allow an organization to learn [8]. Building on the learning organization framework, Marsick and Watkins identified key dimensions of OLC, which can be synthesized into four organization-level capabilities: establishing systems to capture and share learning, empowering employees toward a collective vision, connecting the organization with its external environment, and providing strategic leadership for learning [8].

Extensive empirical evidence has established OLC as a significant predictor of innovation and organizational performance [7]. Research demonstrates that the relationship between OLC and performance is typically mediated by innovation capability—organizations with stronger learning capabilities generate more innovative outputs, which in turn enhance performance [18, 19]. Recent bibliometric analysis of 773 research articles confirmed that organizational learning and innovation research has grown substantially, with OLC increasingly recognized as a dynamic capability that enables organizations to adapt to changing environments [7].

However, most OLC research implicitly assumes organizations pursue a single, coherent set of goals. In hybrid organizations where multiple—and potentially conflicting—institutional logics coexist, the relationship between organizational identity, learning, and innovation is likely to be far more complex. When organizational members are exposed to contradictory institutional prescriptions, the processes of knowledge creation, sharing, and application are likely to be qualitatively different from those in organizations guided by a single coherent logic. The type of learning that occurs—whether single-loop adaptation within existing frameworks or double-loop transformation of underlying assumptions [20]—may depend critically on the specific configuration of logics within the organization. The present paper addresses this gap by theorizing how different identity configurations shape OLC and, consequently, CSI.

2.4. Paradox theory and hybrid organizations

Paradox theory provides a conceptual lens for understanding how organizations navigate competing demands that are contradictory yet interdependent and persistent over time [10]. In their comprehensive review, Schad et al. [9] identified six key themes constituting a meta-theory of paradox, emphasizing the importance of understanding relationships within paradoxes, individual and collective approaches, and dynamic processes of paradox management.

Applied to hybrid organizations, paradox theory suggests that the tensions arising from multiple institutional logics need not be resolved through elimination or compromise but can instead be embraced and leveraged as sources of creative energy [6, 21]. This perspective challenges the conventional assumption that organizational effectiveness requires internal coherence and alignment, proposing instead that productive tensions can stimulate learning, adaptation, and innovation. Recent research has further explored how organizations combine differentiating and integrating strategies over time to sustain multiple institutional logics, demonstrating the dynamic and paradoxical nature of hybrid organizing [16].

3. Theoretical framework and propositions

This section develops an integrative theoretical framework linking organizational identity configurations in hybrid organizations to CSI through the mediating mechanism of OLC. The framework draws on institutional logic theory to characterize organizational identity, paradox theory to explain the dynamics of tension and innovation, and organizational learning theory to specify the mediating pathway.

3.1. Organizational identity dimensions and CSI: direct effects

Building on Besharov and Smith [5], the framework begins with the two foundational dimensions of hybrid organizational identity: logic centrality and logic compatibility. Logic centrality reflects the degree to which multiple institutional logics permeate the core mission, strategy, and daily operations of the organization. Logic compatibility captures the extent to which the prescriptions of coexisting logics are mutually consistent and reinforcing.

Counterintuitively, the framework proposes that both high centrality and high compatibility may suppress rather than promote CSI. When both social and commercial logics occupy equally central positions within an organization (high centrality), decision-making becomes complex and may lead to a form of cognitive paralysis in which managers, unable to prioritize one logic over the other, default to conservative, incremental strategies rather than pursuing risky social innovations [10]. Similarly, when coexisting logics are perceived as highly compatible (high compatibility), the organization may experience a false sense of harmony that reduces the cognitive dissonance necessary to motivate departure from established routines [20]. Under conditions of high compatibility, organizations are prone to what organizational learning scholars term single-loop learning—adapting within existing frameworks rather than questioning the frameworks themselves.

These arguments can be formalized as follows:

Proposition 1a: Logic centrality is negatively associated with CSI in hybrid organizations.

Proposition 2a: Logic compatibility is negatively associated with CSI in hybrid organizations.

3.2. Four identity archetypes and CSI

The interaction of centrality and compatibility yields four identity archetypes, each with distinct implications for CSI:

Aligned organizations (high centrality, high compatibility) embody multiple logics at their core, but because these logics provide consistent prescriptions for action, internal tension is minimal. While these organizations may appear well-positioned for CSI, the theoretical framework predicts that the absence of creative friction leads to exploitative learning patterns and incremental innovation at best. Members share a unified vision, but this consensus can become a liability when breakthrough social innovation requires challenging existing assumptions [13].

Dominant organizations (low centrality, high compatibility) privilege one logic as core while accommodating others at the periphery. The peripheral logics are compatible with the dominant logic, resulting in minimal conflict but also limited impetus for transformative innovation. The organization channels its learning and innovation capacity predominantly toward reinforcing the dominant logic, leaving little space for the alternative logic to inspire novel CSI initiatives.

Proposition 3a: Aligned organizational identity is negatively associated with CSI.

Proposition 4a: Dominant organizational identity is negatively associated with CSI.

Estranged organizations (low centrality, low compatibility) feature a peripheral logic that is incompatible with the dominant logic. This configuration generates moderate but persistent tension. Unlike aligned or dominant organizations, estranged organizations face continuous pressure from a misaligned peripheral logic that acts as a constant source of cognitive disturbance. This sustained tension drives the organization to actively scan its environment, seek new knowledge, and experiment with novel approaches to address the demands of the incompatible logic—conditions favorable to CSI [22].

Contested organizations (high centrality, low compatibility) represent the most tension-laden configuration, with two core logics that offer contradictory prescriptions for action. Members holding competing expectations repeatedly clash over issues of mission, strategy, resources, and identity [5]. While this configuration carries risks of organizational paralysis, paradox theory suggests that when such tensions are managed productively, they can become powerful drivers of double-loop learning and transformative innovation [10, 21]. The absence of a clear hierarchy between logics forces the organization to continually develop creative syntheses—the essence of social innovation.

Proposition 5a: Estranged organizational identity is positively associated with CSI.

Proposition 6a: Contested organizational identity is positively associated with CSI.

3.3. Organizational learning capability as a mediating mechanism

The framework posits that the effects of organizational identity on CSI are transmitted through OLC. Specifically, different identity configurations create different conditions for organizational learning, which in turn shape innovation outcomes. The four dimensions of OLC operate as the micro-mechanisms of this transmission.

First, establishing systems to capture and share learning functions as a structured dialogue platform that enables cross-logic sensemaking. In tension-laden identity configurations (estranged, contested), the presence of incompatible logics creates a strong organizational incentive to build systems that facilitate knowledge exchange across logically divided groups. These systems enable the translation and synthesis of divergent perspectives, a process Zilber [23] described as institutional translation. In harmony-driven configurations (aligned, dominant), by contrast, the absence of cognitive friction reduces the perceived need for such systems, potentially leading to knowledge stagnation.

Second, empowering employees toward a collective vision serves to embed paradoxical cognition within the organization. In hybrid organizations facing identity-based tensions, empowerment involves cultivating the capacity among employees to embrace both-and thinking rather than either-or reasoning [10]. When employees are empowered to navigate competing logics, they can identify innovative solutions that transcend the boundaries of any single logic. Edmondson's [24] research on psychological safety supports this proposition, demonstrating that team learning behaviors flourish when members feel safe to voice dissent and experiment.

Third, connecting the organization with its environment enables dual-legitimacy scanning. Hybrid organizations must simultaneously maintain legitimacy in multiple institutional domains. The environmental scanning dimension of OLC equips organizations to monitor and respond to the expectations of diverse stakeholders, including those associated with different institutional logics. In tension-laden configurations, the urgency to maintain multiple forms of legitimacy drives more intensive environmental engagement, which in turn exposes the organization to diverse knowledge inputs that fuel CSI [25].

Fourth, providing strategic leadership for learning reflects the capacity of senior leaders to practice paradoxical leadership—the deliberate maintenance and utilization of productive tensions rather than their premature resolution [26]. Leaders in tension-laden hybrid organizations who embrace paradoxical leadership can dynamically allocate attention and resources across competing logics, preventing path dependency and fostering explorative innovation.

Proposition 1b: OLC mediates the negative relationship between logic centrality and CSI.

Proposition 2b: OLC mediates the negative relationship between logic compatibility and CSI.

In the aligned and dominant configurations, the absence of sustained tension reduces organizational motivation to invest in deep learning processes. Aligned organizations, experiencing minimal conflict, tend toward exploitative learning that reinforces existing routines. Dominant organizations, guided by a single core logic, channel learning toward maintaining the status quo. In both cases, OLC is underutilized as a mechanism for transformative innovation, resulting in suppressed CSI.

Conversely, in estranged and contested configurations, the persistent tensions between logics stimulate all four dimensions of OLC. The incompatibility between logics drives organizations to build more robust learning systems, empower broader organizational participation, strengthen external connections, and cultivate paradoxical leadership—all of which enhance the organization's capacity for CSI. In estranged organizations, the tension between a dominant and a peripheral incompatible logic creates a sustained source of cognitive disturbance that motivates the organization to actively seek new knowledge and experiment with novel integrative approaches. The peripheral logic, although not central to daily operations, continuously surfaces

alternative perspectives that prevent organizational complacency. In contested organizations, the even more intense confrontation between two core but incompatible logics generates the strongest impetus for transformative learning, as neither logic can be subordinated to the other, forcing the organization to develop genuinely novel syntheses.

Proposition 3b: OLC mediates the negative relationship between aligned identity and CSI.

Proposition 4b: OLC mediates the negative relationship between dominant identity and CSI.

Proposition 5b: OLC mediates the positive relationship between estranged identity and CSI.

Proposition 6b: OLC mediates the positive relationship between contested identity and CSI.

4. Discussion

4.1. Theoretical implications

The proposed framework makes several important contributions to management theory. First, it bridges the currently fragmented literatures on institutional complexity, organizational identity, and social innovation by providing a unified theoretical architecture that traces the causal chain from identity configuration through learning to innovation. Whereas prior studies have examined these constructs in isolation or in pairwise relationships, the present framework offers a comprehensive, multi-level explanation of CSI in hybrid organizations.

Second, the framework reconceptualizes OLC in the context of institutional complexity. Traditional applications of the learning organization framework [8, 27] implicitly assume a unitary organizational purpose. By theorizing OLC as a paradox navigation capability, this paper extends learning theory to accommodate the distinctive challenges faced by hybrid organizations. Each dimension of OLC is reinterpreted as a micro-mechanism for managing identity-based tensions: learning systems become cross-logic dialogue platforms, employee empowerment becomes paradoxical cognition building, environmental connection becomes dual-legitimacy scanning, and strategic leadership becomes dynamic balancing across competing demands. This reconceptualization responds to recent calls for more nuanced theories of organizational learning that account for institutional complexity [28, 29].

Third, the framework challenges the prevailing assumption in both identity and innovation literatures that internal coherence and harmony are conducive to innovation. The propositions suggest that tension-laden identity configurations—estranged and contested—may actually generate more CSI than harmony-driven configurations—aligned and dominant. This counterintuitive finding aligns with paradox theory [10] and the emerging literature on navigating paradox in hybrid organizations [16], but extends these insights by specifying the learning-based mechanism through which tension translates into innovation.

4.2. Practical implications

For practitioners, the framework offers several actionable insights. First, leaders of hybrid organizations should resist the temptation to eliminate or suppress internal tensions between competing logics. Instead, they should cultivate organizational structures and processes that channel these tensions productively—particularly through the four dimensions of OLC identified in the framework. This implies investing in cross-functional dialogue platforms, fostering paradoxical cognition among employees, maintaining diverse external stakeholder connections, and developing paradoxical leadership capabilities among senior managers.

Second, the framework suggests that policymakers and organizational designers should be cautious about prescribing organizational alignment as a universal remedy for hybrid organizations. While alignment may reduce internal conflict, it may simultaneously undermine the creative tensions necessary for transformative

social innovation. Policies aimed at promoting CSI should therefore consider the specific identity configuration of the target organization and tailor interventions accordingly.

Third, for state-owned enterprises and other organizations that simultaneously pursue public policy mandates and market objectives, the framework provides a diagnostic tool for understanding how their particular configuration of logics influences their innovation capacity. Organizations classified as contested or estranged may already possess latent innovation potential that can be unlocked through targeted investments in OLC. Leaders of such organizations should recognize that the internal tensions they experience are not merely managerial problems to be solved but potential sources of competitive advantage in social innovation. Developing the capacity to harness these tensions productively—through all four dimensions of OLC—represents a strategic priority for organizations seeking to maximize their social innovation impact.

4.3. Limitations and future research directions

This paper is subject to limitations inherent in purely theoretical work. The propositions advanced here require empirical testing across diverse organizational types, industries, and institutional contexts. Future research should operationalize the constructs of logic centrality, logic compatibility, and the four identity archetypes using validated measurement instruments such as those derived from Besharov and Smith [5], and assess OLC using established scales such as the Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ) [8].

Additional avenues for future research include examining potential moderating conditions that may strengthen or weaken the proposed relationships. For example, environmental dynamism, organizational size, industry type, and national institutional context may all influence how identity configurations shape learning and innovation. Longitudinal research designs would be particularly valuable for capturing the dynamic processes through which identity tensions evolve and are managed over time [17].

Furthermore, while the present framework treats the four identity archetypes as relatively stable configurations, future research should explore how organizations transition between archetypes and how such transitions affect CSI trajectories. The integration of process-oriented approaches, such as grounded theory or longitudinal case studies, would enrich the understanding of identity dynamics in hybrid organizations. Additionally, comparative studies across different institutional environments—for instance, contrasting the CSI dynamics of state-owned enterprises in transitional economies with B Corporations in liberal market economies—would illuminate how macro-institutional context shapes the micro-level mechanisms proposed in the framework. Such cross-contextual research would be particularly valuable for testing the boundary conditions of the propositions advanced here and for assessing the framework's generalizability across diverse organizational populations and institutional settings.

5. Conclusion

This paper has developed an integrative theoretical framework that explains how organizational identity drives corporate social innovation in hybrid organizations through the mediating mechanism of organizational learning capability. By synthesizing insights from institutional logic theory, paradox theory, and organizational learning theory, the framework offers a nuanced explanation of why some hybrid organizations are more innovative than others in addressing societal challenges.

The core argument is that tension-laden identity configurations—characterized by low compatibility between coexisting logics—stimulate organizational learning and, consequently, CSI, while harmony-driven configurations tend to suppress both learning and innovation through complacency and single-loop learning patterns. This paradox-based perspective challenges conventional wisdom about the desirability of internal

alignment and offers both scholars and practitioners a more realistic and actionable understanding of innovation in hybrid organizations.

As hybrid organizations continue to proliferate across sectors and geographies, understanding the conditions that enable them to fulfill their dual mandate of social and economic value creation becomes increasingly important. The framework presented here provides a theoretical foundation for this understanding and invites further empirical investigation to validate and refine its propositions. In an era where organizations are increasingly expected to contribute to addressing grand societal challenges while maintaining financial viability, the ability to transform internal identity tensions into innovative solutions is not merely an academic curiosity but a practical imperative. This paper has offered one pathway toward understanding this transformation, centered on the paradoxical insight that creative friction, rather than harmonious alignment, may be the key to unlocking the full social innovation potential of hybrid organizations.

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