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From inclusive innovation to inclusive research: A reflexive journey toward transforming academia *Editorial for the Special Issue “Advancing empirics and theory on inclusive innovation and research”*

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive innovation and research involves mechanisms by which marginalized consumers, users, and scholars are involved in producing innovation and research outcomes. In this special issue, we collect empirical studies that (1) shed light on the benefits of inclusion of marginalized groups in innovation and research and (2) propose renewed vocabulary, bold policies, and specific interventions to eradicate systemic biases and inequalities in innovation and research. From these contributions, we outline an agenda for future research on inclusive innovation centered on interdisciplinarity, theory building by conceiving of inclusive innovation as a mechanism, and adopting intersectional perspectives. We also reflect on the editorial journey of the initiative that was to promote inclusive scholarship in business and management. Here, we offer numerous recommendations for transformation to a more inclusive management scholarship, including those to create welcoming spaces for epistemologically diverse and geographically dispersed scholarship, and we outline development paths for inclusion.

Advancing empirics and theory on inclusive innovation and research

While business research has increasingly addressed ethical issues, particularly regarding entrepreneurship for the public good (Vedula et al., 2022) and responsible research and innovation for industrial firms (Van de Poel et al., 2020), only little has been done regarding inclusive innovation and research (e.g. Mortazavi et al., 2021). Making innovation and research inclusive means that processes and outcomes of innovation and research should consider everyone potentially affected. In this context, inclusion potentially reflects the diversity of humans regarding characteristics such as gender, age, race, language, income, and disability. When innovation and research are not inclusive, this may have severe consequences, such as crash-test dummies still mirroring the body shape and composition of men in most cases (Ali et al., 2025). In fact, some innovations even risk increasing existing inequalities between mainstream groups and marginalized groups of users in the population,

illustrated by empirical evidence on digital innovation in healthcare (e.g. Visser, Benschop, Bleijenberg, and Van Riel, 2019).

Innovation and research are inherently interactive processes involving various actors whose communication and collaboration help combine different knowledge bases. To fully exploit the potential of these activities, it is crucial to involve individuals from all segments of society (gender, ethnicity, age, socio-economic background, etc.). Inclusivity can broaden the search horizon and lead to solutions that are more responsible, ethically sound, accessible, and socially acceptable. However, our understanding of how to overcome exclusionary practices in innovation and research is still in its infancy, presenting a significant research opportunity for business researchers with implications for theoretical, empirical, and practical research.

This special issue focuses on the role of inclusivity at the intersection of innovation and research in business and organization studies. It particularly considers how these activities can be organized and managed to result in inclusive and more broadly applicable outcomes,

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not limited to privileged subgroups of the population. Inclusive innovation is defined as “innovation that benefits the disenfranchised [and] is a process as well as an outcome” (George et al., 2012, p. 661). The problem of overlooking the importance of inclusivity is twofold. First, it affects the genesis of appropriate research questions and problems, as some problems will simply not surface and some questions will simply not be raised. Second, it affects the application of innovative results, as new products and services will be brought to market creating or increasing inequalities that might have been prevented if the innovation process leading up to their introduction had been more inclusive in the first place (Werker, 2021).

While several approaches seek to advance the inclusion of marginalized groups in research and innovation, we deliberately adopt *inclusive research and innovation* as the central focus of this special issue. This choice does not diminish the value of other complementary approaches. In the following, we discuss the three related approaches to inclusive research and innovation to clarify the distinction. First, responsible research and innovation (Taebi et al., 2014) and, second, participatory design (Ten Holter, 2022) are both “centred on inclusivity – the act of deliberately including those who would normally be outside a development process to improve the outcomes of that process” (Ten Holter, 2022, p. 275). While participatory design promotes democratization at the level of research and design practice through participatory knowledge production, responsible research and innovation primarily emphasizes the governance of research and innovation through inclusive and responsive policy processes. Third, work on epistemic justice draws attention to whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate and whose voices shape research agendas, knowledge production, and innovation outcomes, as well as addresses structural inequalities in the recognition, valuation, and use of knowledge. Thus, it ensures that marginalized groups are acknowledged as legitimate knowers and contributors, rather than merely beneficiaries of research and innovation, particularly in the Global South (Zhang, 2025). Inclusive research and innovation provides a pragmatic framework that can operationalize these principles through a focus on top-down, bottom-up, or hybrid processes, depending on the context. This flexibility is also reflected in the contributions to this special issue, which demonstrate diverse pathways for fostering more inclusive, equitable, and epistemically just research and innovation systems.

Despite the importance of inclusivity, the current literature on inclusive innovation and research suffers from three main problems. First, many studies employ narrow definitions of the concept, focusing solely on the inclusion of specific disenfranchised groups (Mortazavi et al., 2021; Kaplinsky and Kraemer-Mbula, 2022). This narrow focus obstructs the inclusivity of the scientific understanding of inclusive innovation and research itself. For example, extensive research has been conducted on groups in underdeveloped countries, focusing on concepts such as grassroots innovation and reverse innovation (Pansera and Owen, 2018; Tan and Zuckermann, 2021; Malodia et al., 2020), and has illustrated the bias and oversight with respect to research and innovation originating from these emerging economies (Pan, 2012; Harris et al., 2017). While this research is valuable, other marginalized groups within particular countries receive less attention, such as women, migrants, indigenous people, the elderly, people with disabilities, and children (UN, 2020). Although research exists on the inclusion of some of these groups in innovation and research (Bell et al., 2021; Van Hagen et al., 2020; Vida, 2020), a synthesis of such research through the lens of inclusive innovation and research is missing. Shifting the focus of the field to synthesis and the combination of different sources of marginalization is important in order to advance the field. That is, many scholars will argue that inequalities are intersectional in nature, i.e. the results of two or more sources of diversity (Woods, Benschop, and Van den Brink, 2022). This fragmented literature and focus on singular sources of marginalization is not very productive to scientific discourse on inclusive innovation and research.

Second, while many studies describe and map the problems of

inclusive innovation and research in detail, few explore approaches and processes to achieve inclusive innovation and research effectively (Andries et al., 2019; Mortazavi et al., 2021). This lack of focus on process aspects hampers our understanding of the factors and mechanisms that drive disenfranchisement. Instead, many of the existing studies focus on describing the extent of the problem of non-inclusive innovation and research (Kaplinsky and Kraemer-Mbula, 2022; Pansera and Owen, 2018; Van Hagen et al., 2020). Observations about the non-inclusive outcomes of innovation are relevant to spark and keep interest among science and practice. Yet these kinds of studies alone are neither enough to advance theorizing about mechanisms driving such outcomes nor actionable to practitioners interested in promoting more inclusive innovation processes and outcomes. To this end, we called for methods that would allow for theory building, such grounded theory or process research methods (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Langley et al., 2013).

Third, research on inclusive innovation and research is often siloed within disciplines (Breslin et al., 2020). The phenomenon of inclusive innovation is relevant to many disciplines, but the scientific discourse on this topic is fragmented across various journals and fields, leading to a lack of synthesis and integration of ideas. For example, discussions on inclusive research take place in innovation and technology management journals (Kaplinsky and Kraemer-Mbula, 2022), marketing management journals (Figueiredo, 2025), science and engineering journals (Mejlgaard et al., 2019), journals focused specifically on issues of inclusion (Bell et al., 2021), and even in quite different places such as Nature Human Behavior (Nielsen et al., 2018). Here, we called for inter- and transdisciplinary contributions, and also for contributions from other epistemological perspectives, such as those from critical management studies (Bell et al., 2020).

To address these issues, this special issue aims to collect contributions that advance our insight in inclusive innovation and research in one or more of the aforementioned ways. Specifically, we called for studies that looked into innovation and research for and by hitherto overlooked marginalized groups, perhaps including studies taking stock of the notion of intersectionality. Also, we sought papers that applied, extended, or developed theoretical perspectives on inclusive innovation and research. Finally and importantly, this special issue aimed to collect papers that would go beyond a focus on mapping the problem and corresponding non-inclusive innovation outcomes, and focussed on inclusivity in the process of innovation and research instead.

In this editorial, we outline the special issue contents, reflecting from an editorial standpoint on the ways in which the papers in this special issue contribute to the higher-level aims we set for the issue. There are several lessons to take from the diversity (conceptual, empirical, and epistemological) of the papers received and published for this special issue. At the same time, in keeping with the focus on inclusivity, we also use the editorial to reflect critically and constructively on the journey by which this special issue eventually took shape. Hence, we put forward numerous reflections on the editorial and review process, mapping our struggles and those of author teams in making a mark on that agenda of inclusive innovation and research, and identifying several hurdles and potential remedies along the process of academic publishing. To stimulate transformation toward inclusive scholarship, we also propose an agenda for transformation of parts of the academic publishing process, based on our reflections on the journey of the special issue. We end our editorial with an agenda for future research, taken from the studies in this special issue.

2. Inclusive innovation and research at the micro- and macro-level: special issue contents

The special issue on inclusive innovation and research collects seven empirical papers on the topic. In the following, we briefly describe the contributions in each of these papers, and we also provide an overview of the theory, research question, methods and findings in Table 1.

Two themes are reflected in the articles from this Special Issue. First,

Table 1

Summary of articles in the Special Issue.

Title	Authors	Theory	Research Question	Method	Setting	Summary of findings	Conceptualization of inclusion
Digital Technologies for Inclusive Innovations in Humanitarian Response	Barrios, Camacho and Reficco	Inclusive innovation	What role do digital technologies play in facilitating inclusive innovation processes?	Qualitative- case studiesInterviews, observation	Colombia	The study indicates that digital technologies are used to support real time evaluations of humanitarian programs and the inclusive innovations that arise from those programs. Digital technologies manage information gathering, enhance data quantity and quality, provide transparency in analysis, transform tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge, and provide an ongoing flow of information among refugees, non-profit organizations, and donors.	Setting and mechanism
Racial and Gender Inequality as a (non) Crisis: The Discursive Strategies of Academic Managers in Belgian and Dutch Universities	Bourabain	Social construction of crisis	Going beyond official university statements, this article investigates how the brick wall is constructed examining the discursive strategies of academic-managers concerning gender and racial inequality.	Qualitative – interviews Critical Discourse Analysis	Denmark and Belgium	Findings show that academic-managers build a brick wall by employing discursive strategies that normalize gender and racial inequality and divert and minimize any concerns about them, perpetuating a rosy ‘diversity’ culture. In particular, academic-managers do not identify, understand nor constitute gender and racial inequality as a crisis.	Setting
From Diversity to Distinction: Exploring the Role of Diversity and Inclusion Related to Consumer Perceptions of Company Innovativeness and Attractiveness	Jacobsen, Frank, Sondergaard, and Peschel	Social identity, Reference groups, Self-congruity	This study is based on the need for a better understanding of <i>how</i> companies’ D&I initiatives relate to general consumers’ perception of these companies, and <i>why</i> .	Quantitative- survey Structural equation modeling	Denmark	The findings show that D&I initiatives concerning product/service and experience offerings as well as marketing communications are valued by consumers. Consumers also value companies’ D&I engagement as it is perceived as both commercially and socially innovative, at least for product/service offerings and marketing communications.	Mechanism
Tokenomics: Challenges for All Female Founding Teams in Accelerator Cohorts	Kwapisz and Hechavarria	Tokenism	This article shows how accelerators create structural conditions that restrict funding access through tokenism mechanisms.	Quantitative – Secondary data from the Global Accelerator Learning Initiative (GALI) Negative binomial regression	United States	The study highlights how systemic biases and the mechanisms of tokenism within the accelerator environment can disproportionately disadvantage all-female teams. These dynamics lead to financial disparities that reflect the structural challenges	Setting

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Title	Authors	Theory	Research Question	Method	Setting	Summary of findings	Conceptualization of inclusion
From Outsider to Insider: A Western SME's Journey to Inclusive Innovation in a base-of-the-pyramid market	Mortazavi, Raatikainen, Hiltunen, Teplov and Vaatanen	Network approach to internationalization, Inclusive innovation	How can a Western SME overcome the liability of outsidership and enable successful BoP market entry with a product facilitating inclusive growth?	Qualitative – case study Focus groups, interviews, archival data	Kenya and Finland	and biases in entrepreneurial ecosystems centered on gender status beliefs, not the capabilities of the all-female teams. The study findings lead to a conceptual framework for SME internationalization through inclusive innovation. The model and subsequent propositions highlight the elements of becoming an insider and the antecedents of inclusion in order to grow.	Setting and mechanism
'It Just seems that they don't act like men': The Influence of Gender Role Stereotypes on Women's Entrepreneurial Innovation Activities	Sundermeier	Symbolic interactionism	How do women entrepreneurs perceive and respond to gender role stereotypes associated with their innovation activities?	Qualitative - Ethnographic field study Interviews, author participation in panel discussions, roundtables, networking, business plan competitions, startup fairs and conferences, Meetups®	Germany	The findings deconstruct the kinds of stereotypes that exist regarding the innovation potential of women entrepreneurs and how these stereotypes influence them. Specifically, the findings show that women use their agency to actively reflect on and combat existing stereotypes. Their actions, for example, in the form of the targeted formation of strategic alliances and the confrontation of third parties with stereotypical images, show that they are not willing to passively accept stereotypical perceptions of “their” gender, which could potentially impair their venture creation process.	Setting and mechanism
Towards an Evaluation Framework for Inclusive Technological Innovation in Social and Health Care Services	Wilson-Nash, Pavlopoulou, McCabe, and Gibson	Inclusive innovation, NASS-CAT framework	To what effect can a synthesis of the NASSS-CAT framework and ladder of inclusive innovation be used to evaluate the inclusivity of service innovations in the care home sector?	Qualitative and Quantitative Interviews, workshops with stakeholders, care home staff and residents Secondary data	Scotland	The authors map the seven NASSS-CAT domains (Greenhalgh et al., 2020) onto the six stages of the ladder of inclusive innovation (Heeks et al., 2013, 2014) demonstrating how this synthesis can be used to measure the inclusivity of technological innovation in social and health care services.	Setting and mechanism

on the micro-level of specific research and innovation initiatives, the inclusion of marginalized groups and other stakeholders in co-creating the innovation is essential to ensure the innovation meets the needs of those entities (e.g. Wilson-Nash et al., 2024; Barrios et al., 2025). This is the core element of marketing, i.e. creating offerings that address customer needs, that is still often ignored. Relatedly, in entering international markets (Mortazavi et al., 2025), it is important to include local entities who are more familiar with and can help organizations connect with local customers. Importantly, one of the studies in the Special Issue

goes on to show that there is a clear business case for firms to engage in inclusive innovation, and particularly one that can be built on more than just consumers from marginalized groups (Jacobsen et al., 2025). Second, to ensure equal opportunity for marginalized groups and to counter stereotypes and biases, superficial changes (e.g. adding new programs or policies) are not sufficient. Rather, on the macro-level, deep and fundamental changes of beliefs, norms, and policies are needed. Suggestions that follow from the papers in the Special Issue range from a much needed change in language and popular understanding of

concepts (e.g. Bourabain, 2024; Sundermeier, 2024) to interventions in organizational structures to get rid of the systematic biases these structures perpetuate (e.g. Kwapisz and Hechavarria, 2025).

Using a service ecosystem perspective, Barrios, Camacho and Reficco (2025) examine a “new humanitarianism” approach which includes non-profits (NPOs), private sector, and local stakeholders who collaborate through digital technologies to develop inclusive innovations. The digital technologies provide daily real-time evaluations from the beneficiaries (called clients in this new approach), which lead to quick responses from the NPOs and innovations that better serve client needs. NPOs become more accountable to their clients, steering them to focus more on “service quality” than “aid delivery”. In sum, the authors find that a dialogical approach among multiple entities can, through the use of digital technologies, result in inclusive innovations.

Bourabain (2024) uses the crisis concept as a rhetorical construct to examine whether or not academic-managers make use of crisis claims to explain gender and racial inequality within their university. In their discourse, interviewees view this inequality as normal in academia and believe that achieving equality is the responsibility of those that ‘embody’ diversity. Academic managers also argue that they lack the power to do anything about racial and gender inequality because it depends on senior management. Finally, they speak of the progress being made at their university and that it is a “matter of time” before equality becomes reality. Bourabain argues that this language, which is closely aligned with the dominant diversity management discourse, lacks performativity and is therefore unlikely to produce substantive change. Instead of challenging existing power relations, it normalizes inequality and shifts responsibility away from those in positions of authority. For this reason, a shift in the university’s language from “diversity” to “crisis” is presented as necessary and critical to advancing equality in academia.

Using social identity and self-congruity theories, Jacobsen, Frank, Sondergaard, and Peschel (2025) show that consumers respond positively to company diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives manifested in their product/service and experience offerings, as well as marketing communications. Overall, engaging in D&I initiatives enhances the company’s relative attractiveness to general consumers, not just those who are under-represented. Surprisingly, results also indicate that innovative commercial offerings are more strongly related to firm attractiveness than social innovations. This result aligns with social congruity theory which argues that consumers purchase from companies that align with their self-perceptions. In sum, companies can create value by developing innovative D&I offerings that cater to both under-represented and general consumers.

Tokenism theory (Kanter 1977a, 1977b) states that organizational structure - and not just individual characteristics - influence outcomes for minority groups. Applying this theory, Kwapisz and Hechavarria (2025) find that a higher proportion of all-female teams in accelerator cohorts exacerbates funding disadvantages, contrary to popular belief. Further, all-female teams raise significantly less equity and philanthropic support post-acceleration compared to all-male and mixed-gender teams. The study highlights that organizational structures within accelerators, rather than individual biases, create systemic barriers for all-female teams. Overall, it challenges the notion that increasing representation alone can mitigate gender disparities.

Mortazavi, Raatikainen, Hiltunen, Teplov and Vaatanen (2025) explore how “outsiders” (i.e. a Western SME) can become “insiders” in a base-of-the-pyramid (BOP) market through inclusive innovation. Companies trying to enter a BOP market often face challenges including lack of trust, market knowledge, operational flexibility and financial constraints. Collaboration with an NGO in the BOP market is essential for outsiders to gain legitimacy, ‘insidership’, and access to local networks. This can then lead to inclusive innovations that meet the needs of the marginalized communities and empower the community.

In another study focused on women, Sundermeier (2024) finds that female entrepreneurs are often stereotyped as exploring innovations of

limited scope, being risk-averse, focusing on niche markets, and employing emotionally-driven leadership styles. These stereotypes can undermine their confidence, hinder their access to resources, and create challenges in scaling their ventures. The findings indicate that female entrepreneurs actively counter and challenge these stereotypes. On the whole, the study challenges the notion of entrepreneurship as meritocratic and inclusive, emphasizing the need to address systemic biases (similar to Kwapisz and Hechavarria, 2025) rather than focusing solely on women-specific support programs.

Wilson-Nash, Pavlopoulou, McCabe, and Gibson (2024) develop an evaluative framework which can be used to assess the inclusivity of technological service innovations. They do so by linking the seven dimensions of the ‘non-adoption, abandonment, and challenges to scale-up, spread, and sustainability-complexity assessment toolkit’ (NASSS-CAT, Greenhalgh et al., 2020) with the six stages of the ladder of inclusive innovation (Heeks et al., 2013, 2014). This framework includes both qualitative and quantitative data that can be used before, during and after the implementation of the innovation. It also focuses on co-creation of the innovation with residents and staff.

Altogether, the special issue papers put forward various empirically-informed perspectives on how the involvement of marginalized groups in research and innovation initiatives is to the benefit of those initiatives, the organizations and firms who run them, and marginalized groups themselves. Also, another set of papers in the special issue offers empirical work that shows how the use of language, bold policies, and specific interventions can help eradicate systemic biases and inequalities in innovation and research. We present an overview of the papers in Table 1, and move on to take lessons from the special issue journey itself in the following sections as to identify paths forward for the field.

3. The Journey of the Special Issue towards Inclusive Innovation and Research

Special issues often tell many intertwined stories. In the previous section, we have discussed the visible one, of accepted and published papers that form the final collection of articles in this Special Issue. Yet there are also the quieter, unseen stories: the stories of papers that did not make it through to being reviewed or those that almost made it to publication. All stories matter. While the accepted papers define the field’s state-of-the-art, the desk-rejected and rejected-but-reviewed manuscripts reveal the tensions, ambitions, and limitations shaping scholarly inquiry at a particular moment in time.

In the following, we look back at all 55 manuscripts we received. To better understand the overall patterns across the submissions, we conducted an exploratory text analysis of the titles and abstracts of all 55 submitted manuscripts. Specifically, we converted each title and abstract into semantic text embeddings using the text-embedding-3-large model. The semantic proximity of submissions was assessed from these embeddings, which were subsequently grouped into six thematic clusters using k-means clustering. The choice of six clusters was informed through iterative exploration of alternative cluster solutions, balancing meaningful thematic differentiation against overly fragmented or excessively broad groupings, and was corroborated through comparison with an HDBSCAN clustering solution. Within each cluster, we subsequently applied Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modelling to identify the dominant terms that informed our interpretation and labelling of the thematic groupings. The analysis was conducted in Python, primarily using scikit-learn for clustering, HDBSCAN for the robustness check, and standard topic-modelling and visualization packages for the LDA analysis. The computational procedures generated the cluster assignments and characteristic terms, while the editorial team reviewed these outputs alongside the substantive content of the titles and abstracts, interpreted the thematic patterns, and assigned the thematic labels. This exploratory analysis was intended to provide a systematic overview of recurring themes across the submissions and to support our reflections on the editorial journey, rather than to evaluate

or justify editorial decisions concerning individual manuscripts. Based on these results, we asked ourselves whether there are broader lessons to be learned from all of the submissions and the journey they endured: what unites them thematically, what methodological or conceptual barriers proved difficult to overcome, and what these patterns might tell us as editors, reviewers, and scholars about how the academic field approaches inclusion in innovation and research. This also allows to reflect critically on the editorial and review process itself, acknowledging what might have been done differently to support authors while safeguarding quality and fit.

3.1. *Thematic fit and conceptual, methodological and analytical misalignment*

The *desk-rejected manuscripts* were the majority of submissions to the Inclusive Innovation SI. They covered an enormous thematic range from artificial intelligence, sustainability, and digitalization, to financial inclusion and collaborative innovation. These papers often mobilized ‘inclusion’ in broad or aspirational ways, rather than engaging with it as a clearly specified analytical construct. We identify several clusters of papers that are characterized by two main problems that led to their desk rejection: (1) no or surgically-added thematic fit and (2) a systematic misalignment with the conceptualization of inclusive innovation that was central to the special issue.

Regarding the first main problem, many papers were not thematically related at all (on cooking for example). As editors we saw early on that “inclusive innovation” had become an umbrella term into which many scholars poured pre-existing research agendas. Others seemed to have submitted their papers under broader interpretations of the call and thematic fit. This pattern suggests that, while inclusion has entered mainstream management vocabulary, the field is still searching for -conceptual coherence. Desk rejection was often a matter of topical misfit. The papers were not “bad,” but they were not about inclusive innovation in the sense the issue sought to explore. It was here that we also identified many manuscripts clearly written for other purposes or journals and reframed late in the submission process to the special issue’s theme. They had minimal references to inclusion or innovation theory (sometimes a single paragraph in the introduction if at all). In several cases, the framing of titles or abstracts emphasized ‘inclusive’ or ‘innovation’ language more strongly than was reflected in the core theoretical or empirical focus of the manuscript. Others had discussion sections that reiterated managerial implications unrelated to inclusion. This reflects a common pattern in high-visibility special issues: authors perceive the theme as broad enough to accommodate almost anything. As editors, you likely face the tension between inclusivity (encouraging diverse contributions) and thematic rigor. Desk rejections in this category helped maintain the latter.

Regarding the second main problem, there was a sizable subset of desk-rejected papers with which we engaged more deeply as editors because at first glance they appeared to align with the topic of inclusive innovation. However, upon further inspection, these manuscripts (a) showed methodological or analytical limitations too fundamental to overcome in a review process, (b) struggled to align with prevailing Western-centric publication conventions in framing, positioning, writing, and methodological transparency in spite of these manuscripts holding valuable contextual insight, and (c) conflated inclusive innovation with social innovation more broadly.

Common problems with methods and analysis were diverse in nature. In some studies we found small or very convenience samples with supposedly low reliability. Furthermore, many submissions replicated well-known relations, such as links between diversity and performance, and did so without contextual or theoretical innovation. Others did not have identifiable contributions beyond descriptive reporting for which it would be devilishly tricky to tease out theoretical contributions. Our decisions to desk-reject those papers reflect a broader trend in management journals: a shift from valuing incremental correlation findings

to prioritizing novel mechanisms, context awareness, and transparency.

Some manuscripts struggled to align with dominant international scholarly conventions in framing, positioning, writing, and methodological transparency. These challenges were not randomly distributed but rather reflect broader structural inequalities in global knowledge production. A substantial share of these manuscripts originated from research contexts that are structurally underrepresented in leading business and management journals, including several emerging and middle-income countries (China, India, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Indonesia). Many of these submissions contained rich contextual insights yet differed from the conventions typically privileged in mainstream innovation and organization research. These differences reflect broader inequalities in access to training, publishing infrastructures, language resources, and reviewer networks, rather than shortcomings on the part of authors themselves. Common challenges included literature reviews that drew primarily on locally circulating or non-indexed sources, limited engagement with debates currently shaping mainstream innovation or organization research, and varying degrees of alignment with the call for papers and the positioning of the Journal of Business Research. In several cases, this made it difficult to clearly situate contributions within the theoretical conversations privileged by the journal, occasionally leading to conceptual ambiguities. Importantly, this pattern reveals a core tension within the inclusive innovation agenda itself: while the field aspires to be inclusive in topic and geography, prevailing publication standards continue to reflect historically Western-centric methodological and theoretical norms. This observation resonates earlier findings on how scholars and practitioners tend to place higher value in high-income country research (e.g. [Harris et al., 2017](#)). Among the desk-rejected papers, these particular ones thus highlight a structural barrier to epistemic inclusion in management scholarship. In their quantity and diversity, these manuscripts remind us that inclusion is not just a topic of research but also a challenge in academic practice. They reflect the eagerness of a global community to engage with questions of fairness, participation, and access, even if their initial attempts exceeded what could reasonably be addressed through revision. By periodically analyzing submissions collectively rather than continuing to dismiss them individually, editors can better understand where conceptual clarification, methodological support, and reviewer diversity are most needed and alter journal practices. In that sense, we consider the desk-reject story as one of ongoing dialectical tensions between exclusion and inclusion. Even when a research field explicitly strives to be inclusive, (unintended) forms of exclusion may still emerge. This resonates with a broader body of literature that highlights how diversity initiatives may also (unintentionally) reproduce inequality ([Hellerstedt et al., 2024](#); [Zanoni et al., 2010](#)).

Finally, a subset of the desk-rejected papers equated inclusivity with the social goal of innovation (benefiting marginalized groups) rather than the processual question of who participates and how. With hindsight we would even more explicitly communicate this distinction which would possibly have refined submissions. In particular, including a few examples of what is and is not considered inclusive innovation could have reduced topical misfit. At the same time, we acknowledge that with every special issue there are bound to be some submissions that were mainly responding to the visibility of the theme.

In sum, the desk-reject story here also carries an optimistic subtext. It shows that inclusive innovation has become a magnet for scholars from a wide range of contexts and disciplines far beyond the traditional innovation management core. This diversity of interest could be a strength. The challenge is to channel it into cumulative knowledge. Our findings and experience holds several potential lessons in that respect. The struggle for some papers to fit the convention as well as the large number of early-stage or developmental submissions also present opportunities for developmental inclusion. Rather than simple rejection, some of these cases could be routed toward developmental outlets (conference workshops, paper development workshops, or collaborative mentorship schemes for early-career, non-mainstream authors). Additionally,

journals could adopt aims and policies that are simply more open to accept knowledge that follows non-Western epistemologies, methodologies, and theories.

3.2. Inclusive innovation as a focal point or a backdrop?

Among those submissions that *advanced to full review but were ultimately rejected*, a striking diversity of topics was evident. The manuscripts collectively reflected the vibrancy of current debates around inclusion, equity, and technological change. Taken together, these submissions illustrated the multidimensionality of inclusion spanning gender, culture, leadership, access to finance, digital participation, and more. The editors initially saw great potential in this diversity and thus advanced these papers to review and major revisions, because these manuscript offered situational knowledge on inclusion, large datasets or original contexts (e.g., Chinese listed firms, indigenous people, Latin American entrepreneurship). In addition, they had credible author teams with interesting emerging economy or interdisciplinary backgrounds. Some of these manuscripts were ultimately rejected for relatively common reasons (i.e. cumulative difficulties where revisions were mostly additive and not transformative), but other rejects tell a story relevant to understanding inclusive innovation and research itself.

The most consistent problematic issue across these papers was conceptual: inclusion was treated as a backdrop, not as an active mechanism within innovation processes. For example, many authors stopped short of explaining how inclusion operated what resources, capabilities, or participation channels it enabled that might causally enhance innovation. Many manuscripts approached inclusion primarily as a contextual condition, whereas the call had emphasized its role as an integral process variable for theoretical advances. Similarly, while various manuscripts did examine inclusion-related constructs (gender or diversity representation, perceived fairness), they did not link them tightly to innovation mechanisms, such as ideation, selection, implementation, or diffusion. Here, inclusion remained an independent variable with symbolic importance rather than an operational concept influencing the structure or outcomes of innovation.

Given this issue, we propose to distinguish more clearly between ‘*inclusion as setting*’ and ‘*inclusion as mechanism*’. These are two distinct but interdependent dimensions. *Inclusion as a setting* deals with to the contextual and structural conditions that make inclusive processes possible in the first place. These could be power relations, institutional norms, access to resources, and openness to epistemic diversity. *Inclusion as a mechanism* refers to the active processes through which these conditions are utilized and generate outcomes. For example, through participatory processes, co-creation, recognition of marginalized voices, methodological diversity, and plural forms of knowledge production. The two are not merely sequential, such that the setting enables the mechanism to work (or obstructs it to work), but interdependent. That is, inclusive settings create the conditions under which inclusive mechanisms can unfold, and over time these mechanisms can also reshape the setting itself. To illustrate the workings of these dynamics going forward, let us consider an example of how this work in innovation processes and in processes of scientific knowledge production. Regarding scientific knowledge production, if we were to enable greater involvement of researchers from emerging contexts (mechanism), this should gradually improve the quality and visibility of research from and about those contexts in management journals and also extend the pool of knowledgeable reviewers able to review such research (setting). Similarly, while increased publication of such work (also a change in the setting) signals that this research is valuable, potentially enriching research collaboration and participation (mechanism). Regarding innovation processes, dynamics in the decolonization of (reverse) innovation offer a clear parallel: innovating from and for emerging markets (mechanism) has progressively reshaped the global innovation setting itself (setting), as R&D relocates to developing economies and reverse innovation is shown to improve the international standing of

multinational companies from emerging markets (Von Zedtwitz et al., 2015; Hashmi et al., 2025). Research shows how emerging market innovators first aim survive institutional voids at home, then use that capability, cash positions, and partnerships with developed-country firms to shed the “liability of emergingness” (i.e. the stigma of their origin), thus reshaping their own competitive standing (Kotabe & Kothari, 2016; Irfan et al., 2026). Finally, it is worth noting that although setting and mechanism appear to be interdependent, in this issue we also find evidence that the setting (top-down policy) can promote inclusion without the assumed mechanism (participation) doing its work (Wilson-Nash, Pavlopoulou, McCabe, and Gibson, 2024).

Generally, this distinction between ‘inclusion as setting’ and ‘inclusion as mechanism’ lies at the heart of why some otherwise sound studies could not be accepted, and explains why most studies in this special issue deal with both (see Table 1). It marks the difference between papers about inclusion and papers that explain inclusive innovation.

The second pattern in the manuscripts involved conceptual stretching. Authors often sought to connect inclusion to fashionable topics (i.e. sustainability, digitalization, AI, or leadership diversity), but the causal logic was thin. Inclusion became a broad label rather than a specific construct with measurable levers. This was evident in studies where sustainability was treated as inherently inclusive, without unpacking who benefits or participates. Likewise, other work introduced culturally rich concepts but struggled to map them to recognized theoretical frameworks in management and innovation studies. In such cases, the ambition to bridge disciplines was commendable, yet the translation into a coherent theoretical contribution proved challenging. Some manuscripts also faced practical constraints that hindered progress. For a few it proved extremely difficult to find multiple reviewers with both topical expertise and methodological familiarity. Interdisciplinary and cross-cultural work often sits at the margins of established review infrastructures, which are shaped by disciplinary silos, methodological specialization, and existing reviewer networks. As editors, we sought reviewers willing to engage constructively with emerging-economy contexts and unconventional methods, but several either declined or withdrew after the first round.

Considering these two issues, one clear takeaway for the editorial team is the need to define the focal construct more explicitly at the outset. While the call for papers outlined inclusion as both process and outcome, it may not have fully conveyed that the emphasis was on inclusion as a mechanism within innovation. Many authors interpreted “inclusive innovation” broadly as innovation occurring in inclusive contexts, or as innovation serving inclusive goals.

Again, several rejected-after-revision papers came from emerging economy scholars or interdisciplinary teams unfamiliar with the methodological conventions of business and management research. Some papers were rich in originality but difficult for conventional reviewers to evaluate due to their epistemic diversity. This points to a structural challenge in the field, i.e. the scarcity of reviewers who can engage constructively with epistemic diversity. One possible remedy is for journals to establish cross-review teams who work collaboratively by sharing and discussing their reviews and deciding how the authors should proceed (Barczak & Griffin, 2021). Senior scholars could mentor emerging reviewers to evaluate non-traditional work more effectively. Likewise, editors might consider offering optional pre-submission clinics or online workshops for authors tackling interdisciplinary themes, clarifying expectations around theory building, transparency, and methodological rigor.

While authors may consider the rejections as failures, these manuscripts contributed to defining the field’s contours by testing the boundaries of what counts as inclusive innovation research. The author’s attempts even though incomplete revealed how scholars are beginning to grapple with questions of participation, fairness, and access in innovation systems. In that sense, the rejected papers illuminated the conceptual gaps and methodological frontiers that future scholarship

must address.

3.3. A word on theorizing, conceptualization and epistemic diversity

Another one of the untold stories of the special issue is the story of contributions that the editors had anticipated in their call for papers, but did not materialize among the manuscripts that were eventually submitted. The call was centered on three overarching themes in which we anticipated inclusive innovation could make important marks still: (1) studying innovation for hitherto overlooked marginalized groups, (2) applying, extending or developing theoretical perspectives on inclusive innovation, and (3) studying processes of inclusive innovation rather than just mapping the problem and studying the disenfranchising nature or effects of innovation outcomes. When reflecting critically on all of the submissions to the special issue, we find that the contributions in the special issue do cover all three of these thematic areas. Papers that were submitted to the issue (aspired to) make numerous deep dives into innovation for specific marginalized groups and extend or develop theoretical perspectives on processes of inclusive technology adoption. At the same time, however, we find that all of the contributions are empirical in nature, and thus the special issue did not receive any theoretical or conceptual papers on inclusive innovation mechanisms nor any systematic attempts to synthesize dispersed findings across existing literature about inclusive innovation.

The absence of theoretical and conceptual works could be explained simply by the extent of fragmentation and siloed nature of existing works that we had noted at the outset of this special issue journey. From a limited, diverse and fragmented literature, with advances published in different disciplinary siloes, it is probably very difficult for scholars to conceive of ways to find synergies and identify outlets for their research, specifically when it exceeds disciplinary boundaries. A single opportunity in terms of a special issue like this one is not sufficient for authors to undertake this high-gain but high-risk endeavor.

Among the empirical manuscripts we received, there were some interdisciplinary manuscripts as well as some works with grounded theory approaches or similar attempts to build theory from empirics, but ultimately none of these submissions managed to withstand the test of reviewers. Another very striking observation is that the editors had envisioned important theoretical advances could have come from empirical studies into inclusive innovation adopting an intersectional perspective (cf. [Rodríguez et al., 2016](#)), but that only one of the accepted papers considers more than a single source underlying the inequalities in innovation and research ([Bourabain, 2024](#)). This leaves ample room for further theoretical advances still, as present theorizing is unable to grasp any inequalities in innovation and research that are inherently intersectional in nature.

The absence of more empirical works taking intersectional perspectives on inclusive innovation and research is likely explained by the relative difficulties of adopting an intersectional or theory building approach, and the issue may have been exacerbated by the short lead time between publication of the call for papers and the final manuscript submission deadline. Methodological approaches that allow for theory building (such as grounded theory, process approaches, and ethnographies) require considerable time and effort, and come with considerable risk of failure, all of which is at odds with the time-critical process tied to publishing a special issue. On a positive note, some believe that technology may soon become the much-needed “research companion” for researchers using these methods in order to address some of these issues (e.g. [Crosina et al., 2025](#)). Similarly, the methodological demands placed on studies aspiring to adopt an intersectional perspective are likely greater than those placed on studies dealing with any single source of inequality. First, the scope of relevant research populations is likely reduced. As a result, the research requires a more specific sample, and accessing that sample becomes increasingly difficult. Second, to deal with intersectionality probably entails adopting some higher level of abstraction in understanding the sources of marginalization, enabling

one to gauge all dimensions interacting in creating the distinctive inequalities facing a certain user/consumer ([Rodríguez et al., 2016](#)). Marginalization due to an interrelated set of factors may occur in case of stigmatization or taboo (e.g. [Werner et al., 2023](#)). Again, scholars may run into considerable difficulties when they want to access and run in-depth investigations of these kinds of populations, because of the covert, restrictive, time-specific, and culturally-specific nature of these phenomena.

Zooming in on one more particular omission in the submissions we received and accepted for the special issue, we note our goal was to foster dialogue between mainstream and other epistemic perspectives on inclusive innovation and research. In this respect, we explicitly welcomed contributions from scholars working within Critical Management Studies (CMS), we called for interdisciplinary works, we hoped to potentially attract indigenous studies, and other more contextualized contributions, and so on. All the while hoping to enrich the field with pluralist voices that challenge dominant assumptions about inclusion and innovation. Yet, despite this invitation, submissions from epistemically diverse scholars were strikingly limited (e.g. two submissions from critical management studies). The final selection reflects a narrower range of epistemological positions than we had hoped for. This outcome reveals a paradox: an initiative devoted to inclusion has itself reproduced subtle forms of exclusion.

Reflecting on this paradox, we have considered some mechanisms that might explain why these other voices remained largely absent. The first relates to the composition and positioning of our editorial team. While we represented a range of epistemological backgrounds, the overall balance leaned toward the mainstream. This inevitably influenced how the call for papers circulated and to whom it resonated, a limitation we recognize as part of the broader power dynamics of academic gatekeeping. In this sense, our special issue may have appeared as an opportunity for dialogue, but perhaps not as a genuinely safe or welcoming space for atypical scholars whose work fundamentally questions mainstream perspectives ([Faiz & Özbilgin, 2025](#)). Inclusion depends not only on extending invitations but also on creating a sense of belonging and trust that contributions affiliating with other epistemic positions will be engaged with on equal terms. We may not have been able to instill this trust sufficiently.

A second mechanism concerns self-exclusion among epistemically diverse scholars. For example, mainstream journals continue to occupy institutional spaces that privilege particular epistemologies ([Bell et al., 2020](#)), and scholars who do not affiliate with these epistemologies may thus encounter rejections related to their epistemic roots or hold a skeptical stance toward submitting at such journals in the first place. Over time, this experience fosters a collective withdrawal from mainstream publication spaces. Scholars choose to submit to outlets where their theoretical and methodological commitments are recognized and respected, such as outspokenly critical outlets, outlets with explicit (non-Western) geographical foci, or outlets with explicitly interdisciplinary journal aims. These forms of self-exclusion, self-silencing, self-censoring, and conformity are not uncommon, and also extend beyond the publishing process to other less visible spaces and process in academia ([Täuber, 2026](#)). Self-exclusion is not a sign of indifference but a strategy of self-preservation - a rational response to repeated experiences of epistemic misrecognition. Even subtle cues such as the framing of the call or the composition of the editorial board can signal to potential contributors that their work may not be taken seriously.

A third mechanism is the broader political climate in which this special issue was produced. Since 2020, and increasingly in the period following the Trump administration, there has been a growing backlash against Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) scholarship ([Prasad & Śliwa, 2024](#); [Aguinis et al., 2025](#)). Our societies have been drawn into a culture war that positions this type of scholarship as ideological or divisive. In this environment, editors and reviewers may exercise caution toward politically sensitive topics, while scholars may hesitate to submit their work to mainstream venues for fear of exclusion.

Altogether, these are broader pressures that shape what counts as legitimate knowledge in contemporary academia and determine the wiggle room needed for epistemic diversity to be appreciated for its contribution to science at large.

Taken together, these mechanisms help explain why a special issue devoted to inclusive research and innovation could inadvertently reproduce exclusionary outcomes. The paradox is instructive because it demonstrates that inclusion cannot be achieved through procedural openness or goodwill alone. It requires sustained reflection on the societal and political structures that define legitimate scholarship. At the same time, one of the strongest contributions in this special issue comes from a position of epistemic diversity, that is, Dounia Bourabain's contribution that reminds us that inclusion is not merely about broadening participation but about confronting the crisis of epistemic inequality that continues to shape academic publishing. This paper demonstrates how critical inquiry deepens our understanding of inclusion, not as a managerial problem to be solved, but as a deeply political issue.

From this experience, several insights emerge. Inclusion in academic publishing cannot be achieved simply by diversifying topics or methods. It requires active engagement with different epistemic communities, also by reflecting on the positionalities of editors and reviewers. In Sections 3.1 and 3.2 we detailed how submissions with considerable contextual relevance sometimes were grounded in alternative conventions of academic publishing. We presented several remedies to address this problem in future endeavors like ours. True inclusivity also requires defending epistemic diversity as a public good. In an era when critical thought is increasingly politicized, the academic community must take a principled stance in support of pluralism. Truly inclusive research and innovation depends on the coexistence of multiple ways of knowing and the willingness to engage with perspectives that challenge the status quo. The limited number of epistemically diverse submissions to this special issue serves as a reminder that inclusion is not simply about representation, but about creating spaces where non-mainstream voices feel that their presence matters and their work can be fully heard. These reflections underscore that inclusion in academic publishing remains an unfinished and contested process, requiring continuous scrutiny of how editorial practices, review infrastructures, and epistemic norms shape what counts as legitimate knowledge.

If inclusive research and innovation are to live up to their promise, they must go beyond rhetoric and procedural measures. They must actively engage with those who question foundational assumptions and create environments in which epistemic diversity is nurtured. Only by confronting these paradoxes openly can we move toward a scholarly community that truly embodies the principles it seeks to advance.

4. An Agenda for Inclusive Innovation and Research

Our special issue appears at a time when the playing field for inclusive innovation and research is in the midst of its own journey beyond the horizon. The special issue contents and the editors' reflections on the contents and process of academic publishing make for an agenda that can help move the field and academic publishing in general closer to that horizon. In Tables 2 and 3, we outline a research agenda based on several themes that emerged from reflections on this special issue and a transformation agenda for academic publishing to be more inclusive. Some of these emerging themes may guide scholars to novel research questions and approaches that can help to advance our understanding of inclusion as mechanism in innovation and research. Other emerging themes rather hold implications for the scholarly community at large, and offer recommendations in order to make academic publishing more inclusive itself. Thus, these recommendations should also – albeit indirectly – contribute to inclusive research processes. All of the emerging themes on this research agenda signify a call to transition from the current *status quo* and envision what should come in its place in order for advances in and on inclusive innovation and research to happen.

Table 2
Future Research Agenda.

Emerging theme	Moving on from	Recommendations for future research
<i>Interdisciplinary synthesis of existing research</i>	Fragmented, siloed approaches	● Conceptual coherence and awareness - Engaging with and synthesizing conceptual vocabulary across disciplines - Mapping and comparison of findings across disciplines ● Conceptual clarity regarding vantage point - Inclusive innovation 'as a setting' versus 'as a mechanism'
Building theory by focusing on “ <i>inclusion as a mechanism</i> ” as well as the <i>interdependence between mechanism and setting</i>	“Inclusion as a setting” in isolation	● Define inclusive innovation and research 'as a mechanism' and account for <i>interdependencies</i> with inclusive innovation and research 'as a setting' ● Apply methods that allow for studying inclusive innovation 'as a mechanism' for theory building, e.g.: - process research - grounded theory - ethnographies ● Apply methods that allows for understanding the interdependencies between inclusive innovation 'as a mechanism' and 'as a setting', e.g.: - system dynamics - process research - agent-based modelling
Inclusive innovation as addressing <i>intersectional</i> and <i>distinctive</i> needs of consumers/users	Inclusive innovation as addressing isolated needs of consumers/users	● Focus on higher-order sources of marginalization in which intersectionality is often at play, and may allow for understanding the distinctive innovation opportunities and needs for these consumers/users: - Stigmatized and tabooed consumers/users - Stereotyped consumers/users (e.g. ageism, ableism) ● Focus on also on contingencies that may affect 'inclusion as a mechanism', such as <i>context-dependence</i> and <i>power structures</i> as conditions for innovation opportunities and needs

4.1. Future research on inclusive innovation and research

With regard to future research seeking to advance the field of inclusive innovation and research, we call for interdisciplinary synthesis of existing research to augment the existing fragmented and siloed approaches. Integrating knowledge from across different disciplines will help to find conceptual coherence and develop a more common vocabulary now that studying inclusion has become mainstream.

More specifically, we believe that the field stands a lot to gain from explorations of “*inclusion as a mechanism*”, as this could help to build theory. This requires a definition of inclusive innovation conceptualizing it as a mechanism, and calls for specific methodological

Table 3
Transformation Agenda for Inclusive Scholarship

Emerging theme	Moving on from	Recommendations for transformation
Taking aggregate level lessons from non-Western manuscripts	Handling individual submissions in isolation	● Conduct periodic analysis of submissions collectively to inform redesign of editorial and review processes and procedures. This may lead to: - Specific support and instruction for conceptual clarification - Specific support and instruction for methodologies - Identification of gaps in editorial expertise (expertise in alternative ways of knowing, alternative methodologies) - Specific measure to ensure reviewer diversity
Remove structural institutional barriers within academia	Journal ranking lists and preferred (hot) topics; Western centric methodologies and theoretical norms	● Create performance metrics for reviewers that go beyond simple measures (e. g. review was on time; review was poor, good, very good) ● Shift academic promotion criteria to include: good quality research regardless of journal and reviewing activity ● Promote journals by focusing on diversity of topics, editorial board, theories, methods, and societal impact rather than journal rankings ● Alter language to avoid speaking of “A, B, etc.” journals into language about diversity of topics, editorial board, theories, and methods, and societal impact
Create paths for inclusion in review and publishing	Applying one-size-fits-all approaches to the academic publishing process	● Create guidelines for evaluating and reviewing inclusive research and how it might be different from mainstream Western research ● Develop trainings and workshops for reviewers and editors in how to evaluate and review inclusive research (building on existing initiatives such as <i>Academy of Management Review</i>’s Idea Development Workshops, <i>Journal of Management Studies</i>’ workshops hosted in non-Western countries, as well as independent initiatives and networks that open up access to important resources for aspiring management scholars, such as the <i>New Scholars</i> workshop series and the <i>Ethnography Atelier</i> resources). ● Build inclusive cross-review teams “in which the reviewers have access to each

Table 3 (continued)

Emerging theme	Moving on from	Recommendations for transformation
		other’s independently developed review report prior to having the reports and editor decision sent to the authors. Reviewers discuss their comments, essentially coaching each other, and come to a joint decision as to what to say to the authors and how to proceed” (Barczak and Griffin, 2021, p.112). These teams could include early career and emerging economy scholars. ● Incentivize reviewers to engage with inclusive research by giving and counting credit for reviewing (i.e. ORCID) ● Create designated spaces within existing journals (specific sections or submission formats) for inclusive research ● Offer conference workshops, paper development workshops and/or collaborative mentorship schemes for non-mainstream early career authors ● Design journal aims and policies that encourage and are open to non-Western epistemologies, methodologies, and theories ● Offer optional pre-submission clinics and/or online workshops for author tackling inclusive/ interdisciplinary themes, clarifying expectations around theory building and methodological rigor
Create and signal welcoming and safe spaces for epistemic diversity: Go beyond the mainstream to include diverse authors and reviewers	Isolated initiatives and partial solutions that may inadvertently reproduce exclusion	● Avoid subtle exclusion by signaling an even playing field for epistemic diversity: - Editorial team composition and information on positionality - Explicate procedures in the review processes - Direct, active invitations to epistemologically diverse scholars(s) - Adapt vocabulary (i.e. similar to the change to crisis language recommended by one of the papers in the special issue) ● Moving beyond procedural inclusion toward epistemic transformation - Recognize that inclusion is not only about adding diverse scholars to existing structures, but also about questioning the dominant assumptions about what counts as legitimate knowledge

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Table 3 (continued)

Emerging theme	Moving on from	Recommendations for transformation
		- Critically reflect on how dominant epistemological norms privilege certain theories and methods - Encourage editors and reviewers to distinguish between lack of familiarity and lack of scholarly quality when evaluating unconventional theories and methods - Recognize that innovation often emerges from perspectives that initially appear marginal or unconventional - Support publications that critically examine coloniality and inequality in knowledge production, including research on the dominance of Western epistemologies, the marginalization of Indigenous and non-Western knowledge systems, racialized and gendered patterns of knowledge production, unequal access to academic publishing, the geopolitics of citation practices, and the ways in which academic institutions reproduce existing social hierarchies. ● Counteracting self-exclusion by continuous reflection on outcomes: - Report on and critically reflect on processes and outcomes of academic publishing (cf. this editorial) - Engage in continuous general reflections by the scholarly community on what qualifies as legitimate scholarly contributions - Engage in continuous general reflections by the scholarly community on what qualifies as legitimate scholarly contributions

approaches to future empirical studies that allow for theory building. We see opportunities for process research (Langley, 2007) and ethnographies (Crosina et al., 2025), or grounded theory approaches more generally (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), for their ability to gain in-depth insights of processes that may unfold in unexpected ways.

Furthermore, theorizing from empirical research on inclusive innovation requires future research to better encompass the intersectional nature of marginalization, or put differently, to account for how the interrelated needs of marginalized consumers and users play a role in inclusive innovation and research. The present state-of-the-art uses a rather reductionist empirical approach, studying mostly specific, isolated exclusionary mechanisms, which is hampering theorizing about inclusive innovation and research. We suggest that a potentially useful

avenue for such future research is to consider inclusive innovation and research in relation to higher-order sources of marginalization that often inherently reflect the intersectional nature of inequalities (Rodriguez et al., 2016). For example, stigmatized or tabooed users and their problems may prove to be fruitful empirical settings for theorization, for reasons of the extreme interplay of certain dimensions of exclusion in these situations. Stigma deals with what is regarded as an abnormality or a social transgression (Goffman, 1963), and relatedly, taboo is about “strong cultural norms that are taken for granted and carry behavioral and communicative prohibitions” (Werner et al., 2023, p.2). Almost by default, these are intersectional problems, because both social or cultural norms and certain other characteristics of consumers or users drive their exclusion. One example thereof is that innovative menstrual products, where gender as well as cultural and social norms interact in creating stigma around these products and their use/users (Werner et al., 2023). Similarly, stereotypes often are multifaceted in their origin, and may therefore also offer a fruitful vantage point for studies into inclusive innovation and research. A prime example is that of ageism, where e.g. “Baby Boomers” are stereotyped for many other (unrelated) characteristics beyond their age, such (assumptions about) their health, technological literacy, and socioeconomic status (Franco, 2023). That empirical setting is all the more interesting for this the fastest growing consumer group in many Western markets (Figueiredo, 2025), rendering the exclusion of this group in innovation processes all the more extraordinary. Yet there are many other stereotypes that could also offer a space for empirical inquiry. Another setting that was discussed in this editorial is stereotyping of what happens in and comes from emerging markets, where colonized perceptions drive our current thinking on things such as the value of scientific research originating from high- versus low-income countries country research (Harris et al., 2017) and innovations (Hashmi et al., 2023). Finally, beyond fathoming the impact of intersectionality in terms of different dimensions that serve as interactive sources of inequalities and exclusion, we must not overlook further factors and mechanisms that play into such processes. The literature on intersectionality conceptualizes mechanisms that – in the case of innovation – may further affect how certain users and consumers are included in innovation processes whereas others continue to be left out. These mechanisms include power dynamics, that affect users’ and consumers’ agency (e.g. Walker et al., 2019) in innovation process such as ideation, selection, implementation, or diffusion, and also include contextual factors beyond social and cultural norms, such as historical processes shaping present dynamics (as in the aforementioned of colonized perceptions on the value of scientific research). We summarize our recommendations for future research in Table 2.

4.2. Inclusive publishing as a transformative journey

As guest editors of this special issue, identifying directions for future research is part of the editorial craft (see Section 4.1). However, throughout the editorial process we were confronted by an uncomfortable reality: the process proved to be far more exclusive than we had intended it to be. Rather than leaving these challenges implicit, we decided both to make them explicit (see Section 3) and to reflect on them here.

We do so because we believe that genuinely inclusive research and innovation cannot be expected to emerge – even when research itself is conducted successfully – if the editorial and publication processes at scientific journals fail to accommodate the very groups whose knowledge and lived experiences are essential for understanding issues of inclusion. As our recommendations illustrate, creating a more inclusive editorial process is far from straightforward and requires deliberate attention to structural and practical barriers.

Considering our reflections on the process of academic publishing, we recognize the value of the journey for this special issue, in spite of potential stories that never really materialized as a final part of it. The

major revision opportunities we extended were not wasted. They helped authors refine their thinking, even if final acceptance proved out of reach. They also helped us, as editors and reviewers, to clarify our own understanding of inclusive innovation. The experience reinforced that inclusivity is not simply a descriptive adjective attached to innovation; it is a causal process that determines who participates in creating and benefiting from innovation. Studying it demands methodological creativity, conceptual discipline, and often, interdisciplinarity.

Going forward, we can take several steps to turn future “near misses” into strong contributions, ensuring that the next generation of inclusive innovation research not only studies inclusion but practices it in how we design studies, build review communities, and share credit for knowledge creation. Table 3 outlines numerous actionable strategies for publishers, editors and reviewers to create suitable paths for epistemically diverse contributions, and also a path for learning. Finally, we envision what a safer and more welcoming space for epistemologically diverse scholars should look like. We consider signals in the academic publishing process that could counteract or prevent subtle form of exclusion, such as careful editorial team composition and then communicating transparent information on editors’ positionality. We also advise on several ways in which self-exclusion could be prevented, including opening a continuous public debate on what qualifies as legitimate scholarship. We summarize our recommendations for more inclusive scholarship in Table 3.

5. Concluding remarks

This editorial has reflected not only on inclusive innovation and research as objects of scholarly inquiry, but also on the practices through which such knowledge is produced, evaluated, and legitimized. Rather than offering closure, it highlights inclusion as an ongoing scholarly practice shaped by evolving norms, infrastructures, and institutional power dynamics. The experience of this special issue and the reflexive journey we have documented in this editorial underscores a central paradox: initiatives devoted to inclusion can themselves reproduce exclusion when dominant epistemic standards and publishing routines remain insufficiently scrutinized. Addressing this paradox requires more than thematic openness or procedural goodwill. It calls for sustained reflexivity regarding editorial positionality, review infrastructures, and the epistemic norms through which scholarly contributions are rendered visible and valuable. If inclusive innovation and research are to live up to their promise, they must be accompanied by equally inclusive scholarly practices—ones that remain attentive to epistemic plurality and to the unintended exclusions that may arise even from well-intended efforts.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ward Ooms: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Christian Hopp:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Jelle Mampaey:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Claudia Werker:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Gloria Barczak:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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