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One name for two concepts: A systematic literature review about meta-organizations

Philippe Coulombel¹  | Héloïse Berkowitz^{2,3} 

¹IDRAC Business School, Balma, France

²CNRS, LEST, Aix-Marseille Univ, Aix-en-Provence, France

³Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals (IBEI), Barcelona, Spain

Correspondence

Philippe Coulombel, IDRAC Business School, Balma, France.
Email: philippe.coulombel@idrac-bs.fr

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Abstract

Existing literature on meta-organization is divided into two distinct streams in organizational and management studies, with different definitions and boundaries, potentially leading to inconsistencies and theoretical misalignment. Can we disambiguate the conceptualizations of meta-organizations, and what insights can be gleaned from this clarification? Using a systematic review of the meta-organization literature, we propose a novel classification, distinguishing between meta-organizations as 'meta-level actors', rooted in the organizational perspective, and meta-organizations as 'orchestrated systems', grounded in the management perspective. While synthesizing current knowledge about meta-organizations, we highlight the commonalities, divergences and specificities of both perspectives. We contribute to the literature on meta-organizations by bringing greater clarity to the field, by disambiguating the uses of meta-organization, by outlining a state of the art for both new categories and by providing a detailed research agenda. We also provide fundamental insights about two distinct ways of meta-organizing, that is creating order among and beyond single organizations through *collectively decided* social orders and *orchestrated* social orders.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of meta-organization is gaining traction in management and organization studies as a key to analysing a growing phenomenon in contemporary societies: organized collective action among organizations. The concept was first coined by Ahrne and Brunsson (2005), who defined it as organizations, the members of which are themselves organizations. Typical examples include standard organizations like International Standard Organization (ISO), confederations like FIFA and intergovernmental organizations like the European Union (EU). But Ahrne and Brunsson argue that there are likely

thousands and thousands of other meta-organizations worldwide. Since 2005, the term 'meta-organization' has been used repeatedly to describe an array of phenomena ranging from industry associations to multi-stakeholder groups (Berkowitz et al., 2017), entrepreneurial ecosystems (Du et al., 2018), umbrella associations (Karlberg & Jacobson, 2015), digital platforms (Gawer, 2014) and even global value-chain arrangements (Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019). The common denominator in these examples is that meta-organizations enable autonomous organizations to achieve collective goals (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Gulati et al., 2012). The literature has shown that this concept is crucial for understanding social mechanisms associated with

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collaborations among businesses, administrations, countries and so on, as well as globalization processes (Berkowitz et al., 2022; Gulati et al., 2012; Kerwer, 2013).

However, the literature is at a turning point. Two different streams of meta-organization research have emerged: one mostly in organization studies, which draws on Ahrne and Brunsson (2005), and the other centred more on management and strategy, using Gulati et al. (2012). These two foundational papers use distinct definitions of meta-organization. Ahrne and Brunsson circumscribe meta-organizations to formal organizations of organizations, whereas Gulati et al. include loosely organized networks of organizations and individuals. Ahrne and Brunsson can be credited with the prior use and definition of 'meta-organization', as they published their seminal article in 2005, that is 7 years before Gulati et al. introduced their conceptualization without reference to the Swedish sociologists' work. Yet, two parallel research streams are now developing, with unclear boundaries and potentially conflicting conceptual implications (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018; Berkowitz et al., 2022). These developments may introduce inconsistencies and threaten the concept's analytical effectiveness. Consequently, we seek to address two questions: (1) *How can we bring clarity to the differences and similarities between these two bodies of scholarship*, and (2) *can these two approaches mutually enrich each other, and if so, how?* In answering these questions, we aim to map the expanding literature on meta-organizations and refine the concept to prevent fragmentation and redundancy risks.

In their pioneer article and book, Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008) defended the need for a dedicated theory for meta-organizations.¹ Their argument revolved around the idea that organization studies predominantly addressed organizations made of individuals: firms, associations, social movements, bureaucracies and so on. However, organizational scholars often applied the same theoretical frameworks to organizations composed not of individuals but of other organizations. On this premise, Ahrne and Brunsson proposed the concept of meta-organization, asserting that such phenomena required distinct theoretical attention. In meta-organizations, the members themselves are organizations, each with their own resources, identities and objectives. This distinctive aspect of membership has important theoretical implications for the functioning of meta-organizations that, Ahrne and Brunsson argue, most other approaches have neglected. Works using this definition have looked at a variety of empirical phenomena, from international organizations to trade associations, business groups and multi-stakeholder initiatives. However, this concept excludes informal inter-

organizational relations like networks (ibid.). Later, Gulati et al. (2012) also acknowledged the special nature of meta-organizations, emphasizing that what sets them apart from traditional organizations is the fact that their members are not bound by traditional employment relationships but rather by overarching system-level goals. Works using this definition have predominantly looked at the business field, focusing, for instance, on digital platforms, Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM)-suppliers networks or entrepreneurial ecosystems (e.g. Kretschmer et al., 2022; Roundy, 2020). Within this research stream, there is a consensus that entities like business groups, multinationals and their subsidiaries, strategic alliances and other bilateral relationships do not qualify as 'meta-organizations'.

The two definitions, by Ahrne and Brunsson and by Gulati et al., diverge in their boundaries. Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008) adopt a clearly bounded approach, confining meta-organizations to those with organizational members exclusively. In contrast, Gulati et al. (2012) introduce a minor yet significant shift in the composition of meta-organization membership. They propose that meta-organizations can consist of both organizations and individuals. Yet a deeper conceptual difference lies in the nature of the collective itself. Based on Ahrne and Brunsson's work, a growing organizational perspective focuses on meta-organizations as overarching, formally organized social actors. In contrast, the developing management perspective using Gulati et al. emphasizes the system-level goal that unites different actors without necessarily implying the existence of a newly formed social actor.

We argue that this divide in the conceptual boundaries of meta-organization creates a conceptual dissonance, posing risks for further analysing and theorizing around meta-organization. The first risk is the one of knowledge fragmentation, where research evolves in silos and produces non-cumulative, redundant or contradictory knowledge. The second risk is the one of conceptual irrelevance, where meta-organization no longer constitutes a useful conceptual tool to understand social phenomena. The third risk is the one of theoretical misfit, where one insight borrowed from one stream is actually inapplicable or inappropriately transposed to the other.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to systemically review the literature on meta-organization to identify theoretical foundations, potential similarities and divergences in the concept of meta-organization. We propose a new conceptual categorization. We distinguish between meta-organizations as 'meta-level actors', rooted in the organizational perspective, and meta-organizations as 'orchestrated systems', grounded in the management perspective. We synthesize the commonalities and differences between these two constructs. Our key contribution lies in this introduction of clear and distinct categories

¹ The first mention of meta-organization as organizations of organization dates back to Van der Plas (1995) symposium paper.

that enable us to address the conceptual dissonance about meta-organization. In so doing, we further reveal two fundamental and distinct ways of meta-organizing, that is creating a decided social order among and beyond single organizations. Meta-organizing can happen either through *collectively decided or orchestrated* social orders.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we detail our review methodology. Then we review and contrast key attributes of meta-level actors and orchestrated systems, before analysing their relative meta-organizational effects, structure and functioning and evolutionary dynamics over time. We build on this analysis to outline a research agenda based on common lines of enquiry and comparison between the two approaches, areas of cross-pollination and export and specific research venues.

METHODS

Systematic literature review serves to map out and synthesize the knowledge landscape related to a phenomenon, and to mark out the contours of within-literature inconsistencies, which can help generate purposeful research avenues (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). As such, systematic literature reviews appear relevant to our research and bring clarity to the concept of meta-organization by providing state-of-the-art knowledge and theoretical extension on this phenomenon. We used the *Web of Science* and *Scopus* databases to search for articles published in English between 2005, that is the year of Ahrne and Brunsson's seminal paper's publication, and 2022. We searched for the following string in articles' titles, abstracts and keywords: 'meta-organiz*' OR 'meta-organis*' OR 'metaorganiz*' OR 'metaorganis*' (combined results: 548). We limited the search to peer-reviewed articles—excluding references to books and conference proceedings—as they can be considered the main vehicle for knowledge diffusion today (Gond et al., 2020) and help ensure a baseline degree of quality (Mainela et al., 2014). We made an exception for Ahrne and Brunsson's (2008) seminal book, due to its importance to the concept's emergence and theoretical development. Results were then limited to articles published in management and organization studies journals, and we withdrew duplicates (article sample: 90).

The next step was dedicated to reviewing all the abstracts to exclude papers that were inconsistent with the research objectives. First, we excluded articles that referred to technically specific issues unrelated to the organization of collective action, for instance, in computer sciences or biology. Second, we removed articles mentioning concepts labelled with wording that was close to 'meta-organization' but referring to unrelated individual-level phenomena (e.g.

meta-organization relating to women's arrangements for handling the home-work tensions (Vachhani & Pullen, 2011)) (remaining sample: 78).

The last step consisted of reading and assessing the relevance of the remaining articles. We kept papers that presented meta-organization as a significant concept for the study's question, theoretical framework or results, thus ensuring that the word was used intentionally and associated with meanings that were consistent with our research objectives. This process enabled us to discard papers that were marginally referring to the concept or using it in single sentences (remaining article sample: 69). This step also allowed to identify and include relevant references quoted in the sampled papers but absent from the corpus. By this snowballing process, 15 papers were added to give a final set of 84 papers.² Figure 1 summarizes our data-collection procedure, and Supporting Information Appendix 1 lists the excluded articles.

Figure 2 shows the rise in the pace of publications on meta-organization between 2005 and 2022. There has recently been a sharp increase, starting with 7 papers published in 2017 and reaching up to 15 papers in 2022. Looking at the methods applied, although empirical papers represent 62% of the corpus, conceptual papers still represent a substantial 38%. Practically, all published empirical studies are qualitative papers, using methods such as a single-case-study (24) (e.g. Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019) or multiple case-studies (19) (e.g. Chaudhury et al., 2016), ethnography (1) (Webb, 2017), interviews (3) (e.g. Čada et al., 2022), historical research (1) (Kaplan, 2024) or mixed qualitative methods (1) (Corazza et al., 2021). The emergent nature of the literature and the required exploration of the phenomenon may explain the dominance of qualitative research (Yin, 2003). Three quantitative studies use surveys (Furåker, 2020; Zyzak & Jacobsen, 2020) and statistical regression (Zapp et al., 2021).

Analysis

The first step of the analysis consisted of evaluating the extent of the divide between organization studies and management approaches. We coded each paper in the database based on its main definition of meta-organization and on the references used: only Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008) (organization), only Gulati et al. (2012) (management) or a combination of both (hybrid). Figure 3 illustrates the evolution of the three categories. The organizational perspective is clearly dominant and growing over the period,

² Among these references, two have been published in 2023: Bor and Cropper (2023) and Alo and Arslan (2023). For consistency reasons, these papers are not included in the datasets used for Figures 2 and 3.

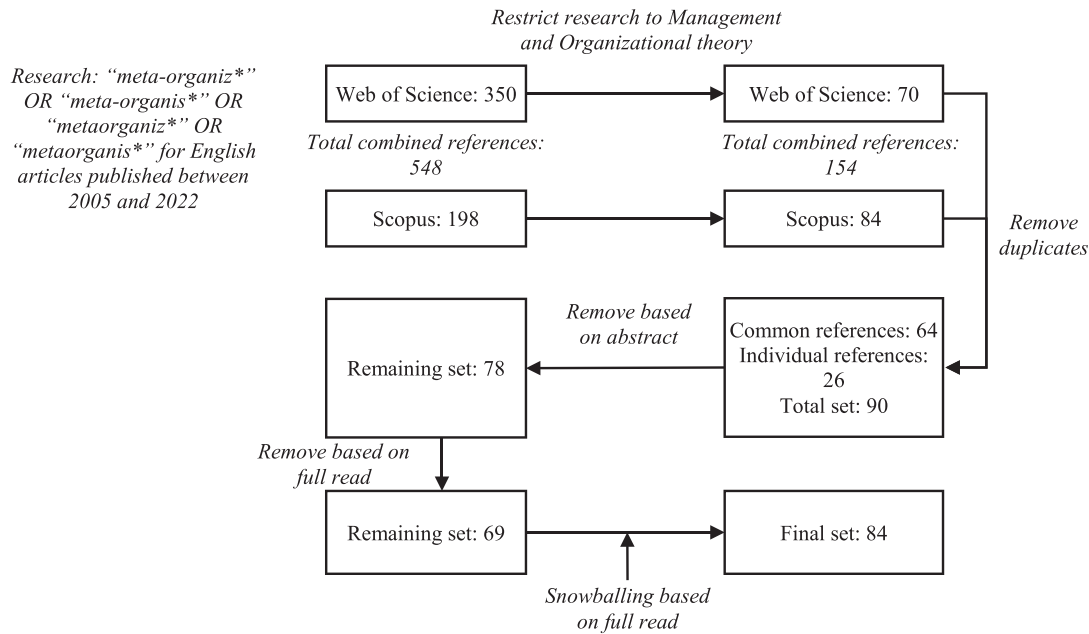


FIGURE 1 Procedure for data collection.

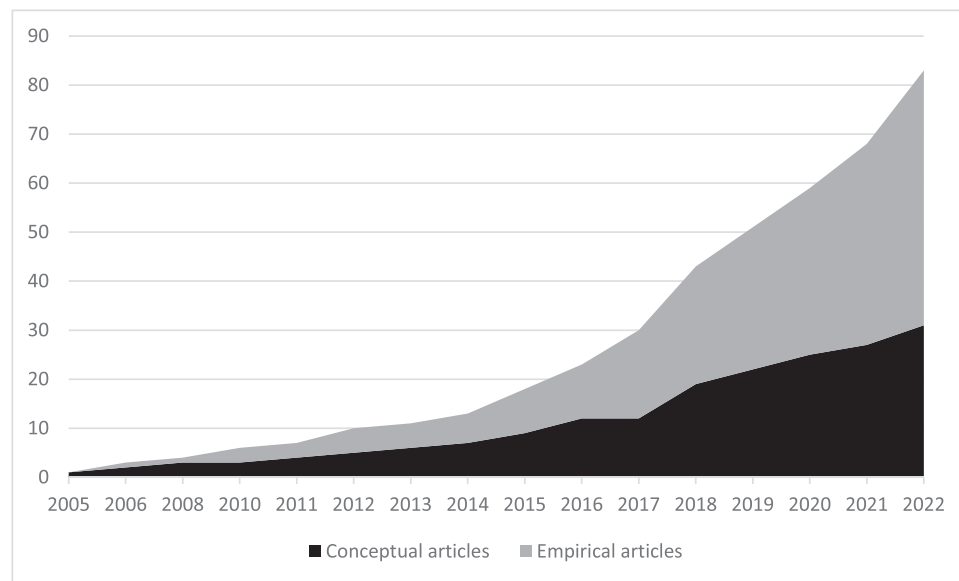


FIGURE 2 Evolution in the number of papers on meta-organization by type of study (2005–2022).

with a corpus of 50 studies (e.g. Frandsen & Johansen, 2018; Laurent et al., 2020). The management and strategy perspective is also growing, with 23 studies overall (e.g. Du et al., 2018; Radnejad et al., 2017). An increasing number of studies build on both perspectives (e.g. Matinheikki et al., 2017; Valente & Oliver, 2018), demonstrating a potential hybridization between the streams that might lead to risks of fragmentation and inconsistencies.

To map out the knowledge landscape of meta-organizations, we combined a theory-driven approach that

differentiated between works drawing on organizational and management perspectives on meta-organizations, with a more inductive approach designed to explore transversal themes. This method allowed us to identify key theoretical streams across multiple studies and to construct an understanding of the topic that reflected the diversity in the literature surrounding the nature, outcomes, internal processes and evolution of meta-organizations (see Supporting Information Appendix 2). We then synthesized insights from the literature while

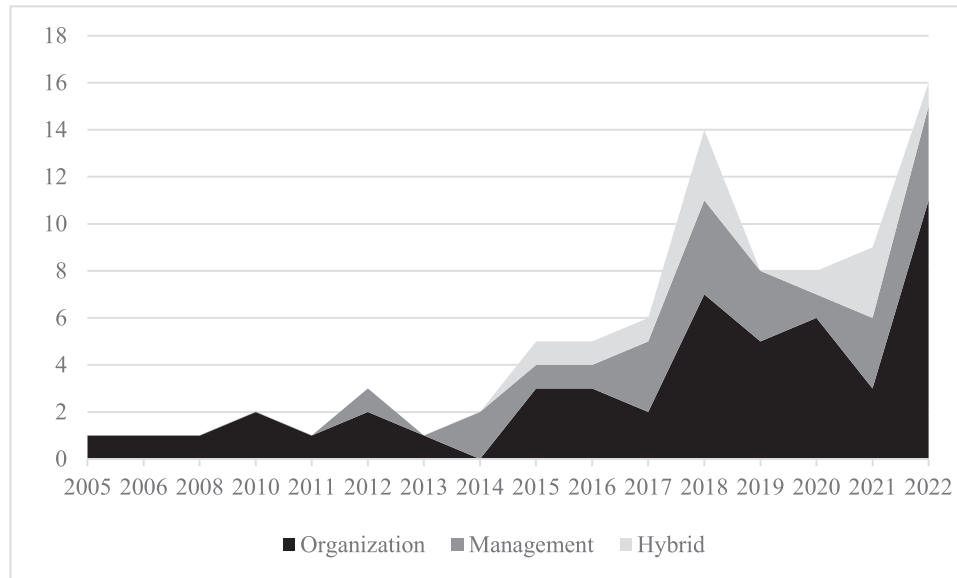


FIGURE 3 Evolution in the number of papers by approach (2005–2022).

simultaneously paying careful attention to anomalies, dissimilarities, convergences and divergences among the reviewed papers in order to capture useful conceptual boundaries and leverage insightful directions for future research (Hoon & Baluch, 2020). The next section maps out the current knowledge of meta-organizations' natures and offers a new categorization likely to clarify divergences within the field. Then, we use the categories to synthesize and classify insights of meta-organizational scholarship, before outlining a research agenda in the last section.

ON THE DISTINCT NATURE(S) OF 'META-ORGANIZATIONS'

In this section, we describe the specific nature of meta-organizations according to both the organizational and management perspectives and we attempt to clarify their respective boundaries by providing a new categorization.

Distinguishing 'meta-organizations' from other forms of organizations

The key endeavour of both the organizational theory perspective on meta-organizations and the management perspective consists in distinguishing meta-organizations from other forms of organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Gulati et al., 2012). Meta-organizations then appear as devices enabling collaborations, but under unconventional forms of organizations (Brès et al., 2018). However,

the two perspectives diverge in their understanding of the essence of meta-organizations and, consequently, the organizational phenomena they associate with.

The organizational theory perspective argues that meta-organizations present three characteristics. First, they are associative, which means members voluntarily join forces and collaborate. Second, they are formal organizations, which means their structural organizational — that is membership, authority, rules, monitoring and sanction — and entitative organizationality — that is actorhood, collective identity, systems of decision-making — are decided rather than emergent. And third, meta-organizations' members are themselves autonomous organizations, which means there is a layering and an intertwining of social orders, thus affecting the functioning, dynamics and decision-making of meta-organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Grothe-Hammer et al., 2022). In this approach, meta-organizations differ from both traditional organizations constituted of individuals (e.g. firms, associations, clubs and administrations) and networks or institutions (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Berkowitz et al., 2022). ISO, trade associations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008), the EU (Kerwer, 2013) or co-management committees (Berkowitz et al., 2020) are cases of meta-organizations from the organizational perspective.

From the management and strategy perspective, meta-organizations are defined as networks of organizations and/or individuals that are bound by system-level goals rather than by authority relationships typically associated with employment contracts (Gulati et al., 2012). Such meta-organizations are conceived as systems of actors that co-evolve together and that are orchestrated by an architect (Chen et al., 2022; Gulati et al., 2012; Matinheikki et al.,

2017). That research stream contrasts meta-organizations with organizations that develop subordination relationships, such as business groups, multinationals and their subsidiaries or strategic alliances (Gulati et al., 2012). This strand considers franchising networks, the Android Operating System (Gulati et al., 2012), port authorities (Vale et al., 2016) or entrepreneurial ecosystems (Roundy, 2020) as cases of meta-organizations.

Both perspectives share some commonalities. For instance, both stress the importance of studying meta-organizations as a special form of organization. They also argue that meta-organizations are driven by and meant for collaboration, despite divergences regarding the notions of collectively decided goals (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008) and system-level goals (Gulati et al., 2012). And lastly, both perspectives show the importance of members being autonomous and having their own motivations and identities (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Gulati et al., 2012). However, the organizational perspective fundamentally differs from the management one by considering meta-organizations as social entities in their own right (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). Consequently, meta-organizations can present structural and entitative organizationalities (Grothe-Hammer et al., 2022). Structural organizationalities refer to the structure and definition of membership, authority, rules, systems of monitoring and sanctions. Entitative organizationalities refer to the defining features of the entity itself. It relates to integrating a system of decision-making, being perceived by external audiences as an actor that can be made accountable (i.e. having actorhood), and generating a sense of collective identity (Grothe-Hammer et al., 2022). Conversely, meta-organizations that only belong to the management perspective are not social actors per se. While they can disclose some elements of structural organizationalities (Järvi et al., 2018), they seem to have limited entitative organizationalities.

Variations within ‘meta-organizations’

Both perspectives have worked to stress the specificities and significance of meta-organizations in comparison with other forms of organizations. However, both approaches have also demonstrated the existence of a variety of phenomena falling under the umbrella of meta-organizations, and they have dedicated efforts to categorize and pinpoint distinguishing factors among them.

The organizational perspective has a larger base of empirical cases than the management perspective (32 vs. 11 studies). Much effort in this research stream has consisted in reconceptualizing existing, empirical forms of organizations as meta-organizations. For instance, meta-

organizational scholars have studied standard-making organizations (Boström, 2006), confederations (Le Bianic & Svensson, 2010; Winand et al., 2019), international organizations (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Malcourant et al., 2015), public institutions (Murdoch, 2015; Zyzak & Jacobsen, 2020), university associations (Brankovic, 2018; Ferencz & Rumbley, 2022; Maassen et al., 2023), transnational actors (Fumasoli et al., 2018), partnerships (Cropper & Bor, 2018) and trade associations (Reveley & Ville, 2010).

Taking stock of this diversity, some organizational scholars have attempted to theorize these variations in meta-organizations, based, for instance, on membership composition and issue-specificity, leading to specialized business meta-organizations or multi-stakeholder meta-organizations (Alo & Arslan, 2023; Berkowitz et al., 2017). Researchers often connect this view with the notion of ‘mandate’, which underlines that members commission the meta-organization to handle some missions on their behalf (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). Places and spatial proximity can also drive variations in the case of clusters that can be called ‘context-embedded’ (Lupova-Henry et al., 2021b) or the Italian ‘Contratto di rete’ model (Corazza et al., 2021). Families of meta-organizations can also be based on a combination of specific membership criteria associated with a mandate, for instance, political-administrative meta-organizations that manage public issues (Zyzak & Jacobsen, 2020), entrepreneurial meta-organizations for fablabs or startup incubators (Berkowitz, 2018) or governance meta-organizations that tackle grand challenges (Berkowitz et al., 2020). In fact, meta-organizations present a similar if not even higher variety of categories than organizations themselves (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008).

The management perspective, on the other hand, has largely focused on for-profit and economic players as members of meta-organizations. Gulati et al. (2012) present a categorization of meta-organizations rooted in their level of stratification (high or low) and their boundaries (open or closed), which encompasses extended enterprise, managed ecosystems and closed and open communities. In this perspective, meta-organizations can therefore span a broad spectrum, ranging from highly structured enterprise configurations or ecosystems to those that are less organized (Radnejad et al., 2017). With exceptions devoted to formal organizations like trade associations (Barnett, 2018; Lawton et al., 2018), most management studies use the concept of meta-organization to analyse more emergent systems, such as platforms (Gawer, 2014), events (Bazzanella et al., 2022) and ecosystems, sometimes referring to ecosystems as a specific type of meta-organization (Gomes et al., 2021; Järvi et al., 2018). Similarly, from the organizational perspective, membership composition produces differentiation, with entrepreneurial ecosystems in partic-

ular being studied as specific kinds of meta-organizations, setting them apart from business ecosystems like industrial clusters or regional innovation systems (Du et al., 2018; Roundy, 2020; Roundy & Bayer, 2019). The literature also studies platform ecosystems as meta-organizations that offer a blend of organizational and market characteristics, encompassing power and incentive dynamics (Kretschmer et al., 2022), or technological and digital platforms presenting a modular architecture that federates and coordinates market players (Battisti et al., 2022; Bosch-Sijtsema & Bosch, 2015; Calabrese et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2022).

Here again, both approaches share commonalities in the way they differentiate among the phenomena they study, particularly regarding membership composition. However, the organizational approach appears broader in the kind of phenomena it investigates and considers dimensions of variations that go beyond membership, like spatiality or mandate.

Proposed conceptual categorization: meta-level actor versus orchestrated system

Taking stock of the broad use of the word meta-organization to describe organized social phenomena with different attributes and fields of applications, we propose a new conceptual categorization to avoid the risks of fragmentation, conceptual dissonance and theoretical misfit. Previous analyses have identified key elements providing the basis for a new conceptual categorization. We use the defining features of each approach to differentiate between the concept of ‘meta-level actor’, that is the organized actor at the meta-level (Berkowitz et al., 2022), and the concept of ‘orchestrated system’, that is a system of co-evolving actors orchestrated by architects (based on Gulati et al., 2012). Both categories’ characteristics are synthesized in Table 1 and are represented in Figure 4.

The meta-level actor is the formal organization itself, constituted of other organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). It aims to facilitate collaboration among its members who collectively decide on common goals and other issues (see Figure 4). As such, members vest their authority in the meta-level actor who, as a social actor in its own right, displays features of entitative organizational-ity, that is collective actorhood, collective identity and interconnected systems of decision-making. The meta-level actor can encompass phenomena explored within both organizational and management contexts, spanning a diverse range of fields of application, including governance and regulation, international relations, civil society, trade associations, sustainability transitions and more.

Conversely, the orchestrated system represents a less structured, informal form of meta-organization charac-

terized by the absence of an organized collective actor. Drawing on an open system perspective (Gulati et al., 2012), the orchestrated system brings together autonomous organizations and/or individuals that co-evolve and are orchestrated by one or several architects—often the leading firms—who have the authority to determine the system-level goal. As such, instead of being linked to a form of collective actorhood, orchestrated systems relate to a form of actorhood centred around the architects that we call *orchestrated actorhood* (see Figure 4). The application areas primarily pertain to business collaborations, encompassing business ecosystems, franchising networks and technological and digital platforms. Another illustrative example could lie in seaports as described in Vale et al. (2018). There, a seaport authority is in charge of setting the rules that will constrain the behaviour of other independent actors performing tasks within the seaport (e.g. customs offices, terminal operating companies, shipping agents and marine police) and direct them towards a common goal of collective efficiency.

CONTRASTING BETWEEN META-LEVEL ACTORS AND ORCHESTRATED SYSTEM RESEARCH

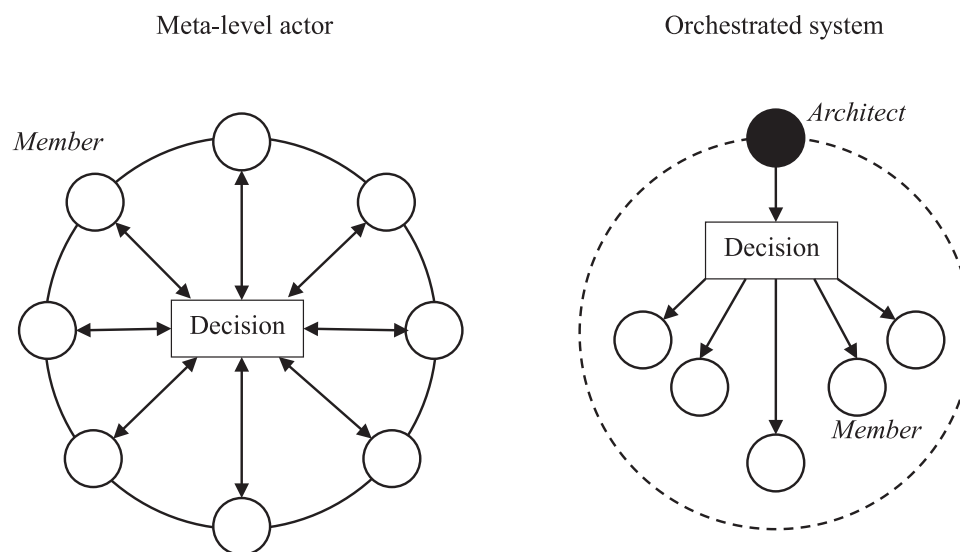
Using the distinction between meta-level actors and orchestrated systems, we now conduct a comparative analysis of insights from both categories using the different dimensions that emerged from the literature. Specifically, we investigate (1) these forms’ meta-organizational effects (‘what do meta-organizations do?’), (2) their structural and operational mechanisms (‘how do they do it?’) and (3) their evolutionary aspects (‘how do they evolve?’). For each dimension, we examine theoretical or empirical similarities shared by both categories; we also delineate divergences between the two and pinpoint distinctive attributes unique to each category that have not been explored in the other. In so doing, we further highlight the characteristics of the underlying processes of meta-organizing, that is creating organized order among and beyond single organizations (via collectively-decided social order or orchestrated social order).

What do meta-organizations do?

First, we analyse the different effects that meta-level actors and orchestrated systems generate. Specifically, we review the explicit purposes of meta-organizations, in terms of organizing their own members and influencing non-members. Next, we investigate their ‘latent effects’, that is to say, the effects or impacts of meta-organizations

TABLE 1 New categorization of 'meta-organizations' and their defining features: meta-level actors versus orchestrated systems.

Meta-organizations as ...	Meta-level actor	Orchestrated system
Theoretical perspective	Organizational perspective and management and strategy perspective	Management and strategy perspective
Nature	Formal organization	Open system
Type of member	Organizations only	Organizations (and potentially individuals)
Membership composition	Broad variety (e.g. business only and multi-stakeholder, for-profit and not-for-profit, civil society)	Variations within business sectors
Purpose of formation	Collectively decided goals	System-level goals decided by the architect(s)
Entitative organizationality	Collective actorhood, collective identity and an interconnected system of decision-making	Orchestrated actorhood, identity and an interconnected system of decision-making
Decision-making process	Mostly collective	Led by the architect(s)
Autonomy of members	Yes	Yes
Authority	Vested from members to the meta-level actor	Held by the architect
Characteristics of social order	Collectively decided social order	Orchestrated social order
Fields of applications	International relations, governance and regulation, business collaborations, sustainability transition, civil society	Mainly business collaborations
Examples of empirical phenomena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standard making organizations (Boström, 2006) Trade association (Spillman, 2018) Intergovernmental organizations (Kerwer, 2013) Civil-society confederations (Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Platform ecosystems (Gawer, 2014) Entrepreneurial ecosystems (Roundy, 2020) Port authority (Vale et al., 2017) Franchising networks (Gulati et al., 2012)




**FIGURE 4** Visualization of the *meta-level actor* and *orchestrated system* decision-making process.

that are not immediately apparent or visible but can still have significant implications. By latent effects, we mean the more subtle or indirect impacts of what meta-organizations concretely do: effects that are non-decided rather than decided. Table 2 synthesizes the similarities, divergences and specific lines of inquiry regarding both forms' purposes and effects.

Purpose directed at organizing members

A first similarity is that both forms exist to internalize a part of their members' environment to make it more manageable (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Gulati et al., 2012; Valente & Oliver, 2018). Indeed, they connect spatially—and socially—differentiated actors (Garaudel, 2020; Reve-

TABLE 2 Comparative analysis of meta-organizational effects regarding meta-level actors and orchestrated systems.

	Meta-level actor	Orchestrated systems
Similarities among concepts 	<i>Organizing members:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizing and coordinating members around a common purpose Internalizing the environment of organizations Manage behaviours of members Pooling resources <i>Latent effects:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members' resource and capability fostering 	
Divergences between concepts 	<i>Organizing members:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on co-management and sustainability <i>Latent effects:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on borrowing from members or from meta-level actor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on control mechanisms over members Focus on interactions within the system
Research insights specifically developed in the literature 	<i>Organizing members:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support functions: members' capacity building and collective identity <i>Influencing non-members:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to represent members, conduct advocacy work, boundary and category work <i>Latent effects:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Induce members' transformation Alter fields' dynamics and cultural norms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on value creation Create collective intellectual capital

ley & Ville, 2010) with the aim of organizing them around a common purpose (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Gulati et al., 2012). To do so, meta-level actors and orchestrated systems may shape, regulate, build capacity, control and manage the behaviour of their members (Berkowitz et al., 2022; Gawer, 2014; Gulati et al., 2012). This can result in eased interaction and coordination among members, resource pooling and risk reduction (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016; Chen et al., 2022; Lawton et al., 2018). However, this similar objective translates into very different tasks or targets for each type of meta-organization.

Meta-level actors also tend to focus on governance and co-management functions or activities (Berkowitz et al., 2022). Several studies have investigated how meta-level actors enable members to collectively manage an issue, such as through local development projects (Valente & Oliver, 2018). This approach is notably efficient because of the voluntary membership and consensual decision-making of meta-level actors (Vifell & Thedvall, 2012). In so doing, meta-level actors appear as protected spaces able to internalize and neutralize conflicts among members (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016). They tend to organize members through joint self-regulation (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019; Berkowitz et al., 2020), for instance, by defining non-binding standards (Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019; Lawton et al., 2018) or guiding principles and reporting standards (Berkowitz et al., 2017). In that perspective, a growing body of literature investigates the role of meta-level actors in addressing sustainability issues and diffusing new practices (e.g. Alo & Arslan, 2023; Berkowitz & Grothe-

Hammer, 2022; Callagher et al., 2022; Chaudhury et al., 2016).

Meta-level actors can affect their members and their collaboration through supporting functions. First, they can build their members' capacities by providing and diffusing information through reports and training, but also by encouraging collective peer-learning to take advantage of members' diversity (Berkowitz, 2018; Lupova-Henry et al., 2021b; Webb, 2017). Second, meta-level actors can build a collective identity as members take part in joint activities and act on behalf of the collective (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Spillman, 2018). Laviolette et al. (2022) show how meta-level actors affect this collective identity through the combination of practices directed towards their members and their environment. The development of a collective identity appears to reinforce the meta-level actors' actorhood (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Berkowitz et al., 2020; Garaudel, 2020).

Orchestrated systems tend to focus on enhancing value creation by orchestrating actors throughout the supply chain, such as in the case of port authorities (Vale et al., 2018) or technological platforms (Chen et al., 2022; Gawer, 2014), although rare studies illustrate how this core aim can be associated with sustainability issues (Battisti et al., 2022; Blackburn et al., 2023; Radnejad et al., 2017). In this approach, co-governance is not inherently a goal in itself, nor is it characterized by collaboration. Instead, architects are perceived as exerting a form of authoritative regulation, control and management over the members (Chen et al., 2022; Gawer, 2014; Kretschmer et al., 2022).

Purpose directed at influencing non-members

Thanks to their collective actorhood, identity and interconnected system of decision-making, meta-level actors appear well suited to conduct advocacy work and exert influence on external entities or their non-members (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Berkowitz et al., 2022). This perspective, exemplified by trade associations and interest groups, has played a central role in research concerning meta-level actors but has not been explored in the literature on orchestrated systems.

Meta-level actors represent their members' multiple views and can engage with third parties in an attempt to defend their interest, to transform and shape their field (e.g. Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015; Lupova-Henry et al., 2021a; Rajwani et al., 2015). Influencing non-members and, in particular, political actors can contribute to reduce environmental uncertainty (Garaudel, 2020; Lawton et al., 2018) and attract additional resources through public subsidies (Vähä-Savo et al., 2019). As such, meta-level actors must manage simultaneously their relationship with their members, but also with external stakeholders (Frandsen & Johansen, 2018). Meta-level actors can even anticipate and preconfigure new markets (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019; Peixoto & Temmes, 2019), notably acting as institutional entrepreneurs purposefully changing their field (Lupova-Henry et al., 2021a) and ultimately doing boundary and category work (Berkowitz et al., 2022).

Latent effects

Finally, both categories have important latent effects, that is to say, effects or consequences that are non-decided, that may not be immediately apparent or visible but can still have significant implications. The nature of meta-organizations might explain the importance of these latent effects, as both research about meta-level actors and orchestrated systems provide convergent insights, in particular regarding the development of resources.

Research focused on meta-level actors focuses on borrowing dynamics as latent effects. Works show that membership serves as a signal to external entities, lending member organizations a social status that brings both legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of third parties (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Laurent et al., 2020). For example, Zapp et al. (2021) study how universities gather in different meta-organizations. Some come together in exclusive clubs, signalling their status as top-tier institutions, whereas others opt for more inclusive associations. Belonging to a meta-organization might enable members to leverage the authority of the meta-level actor for their own benefit when engaging in interactions and negotiations with third parties (Vähä-Savo et al., 2019). Over time and

through repeated interactions, members' active engagement is likely to cultivate a form of meta-level social capital that fosters trust and reciprocal support among participants (Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019; Reveley & Ville, 2010). Such effects can prove beneficial to member organizations, but also to individual representatives who get to strengthen their networking capabilities (Zyzak & Jacobsen, 2020).

Studies focused on orchestrated systems, on the other hand, indicate that interactions within such systems enhance the absorptive capacities of their members (Rizzi & Frey, 2014). Interactions also enhance the dynamic development of both the individual members' intellectual capital and the collective's intellectual capital (Vale et al., 2016, 2017, 2018).




However, research dedicated to meta-level actors has addressed specific topics, underdeveloped in the other streams. Works on meta-level actors have explored their capacity to shape and transform their members. In inter-governmental organizations like the EU, Ahrne, Brunsson, and Kerwer (2016) illustrate how meta-level actors might initially seem weak because they may lack the authority to impose decisions. However, the accumulation of layered collective decisions ultimately restricts and guides members' behaviour. Frequent interactions, conflicts and negotiations also contribute to enhancing members' mutual adaptation and intensifying their interdependence.

The second line of research exclusive to scholars interested in meta-level actors revolves around their indirect impact on non-members. For instance, although members may initially adopt standards to align their own efforts, these same standards can gradually evolve into cultural norms that also influence non-members (Le Bianic & Svensson, 2010; Spillman, 2018; Vähä-Savo et al., 2019; Vifell & Thedvall, 2012). Furthermore, the establishment of meta-organizations can alter the dynamics within a field by formalizing interactions. For instance, when a meta-organization was formed to represent Swedish women's movement associations in the EU, it had the unintended consequence of reducing the previously informal interactions among its members and between members and non-members (Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015).

How do meta-organizations do what they do?

We now consider how meta-organizations do what they do: that is how they are managed daily, how they are themselves organized to conduct their activities, what kind of structural mechanisms and resourcing are implemented and what kind of specific challenges they face. Table 3 synthesizes similarities, divergences and developments specific to meta-level actors and orchestrated systems.

TABLE 3 Comparative analysis of internal processes of meta-organizations as meta-level actors and orchestrated systems.

	Meta-level actor	Orchestrated systems
Similarities among concepts 	<i>Structure: the organizational components</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership management to avoid interest misalignment <i>Resources for performing activities:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership as a leverage for resource access <i>The autonomy–authority tension:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The autonomy–authority tension results in members' departure or competitive behaviours 	
Divergences between concepts 	<i>Daily management:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handled by members' staff or a dedicated secretariat <i>Structure: the organizational components:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision-making performed at the collective level • Consensus-based decision-making has an impact on meta-level actor legitimacy and members' commitment • Limits of consensus-based decision-making (inefficiencies and power imbalances) • Selective use of rules for monitoring and sanctions ('partial organizations') <i>Resources for performing activities:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Require limited resources • Ability to own resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handled by the architect • Decision-making performed at the architect(s) level • Sources of hierarchical power • Limits of hierarchical authority • Constraining rules, monitoring and sanctions • Require significant resources • Members remain in control of the committed resources
Research insights specifically developed in the literature 	<i>Structure: the organizational components:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A diversity of resourcing options: direct/indirect; internal/external <i>The autonomy–authority tension</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emerging autonomy- authority tension between members and the meta-level actor when their activities overlap • Emerging competition when members and the meta-level actor are accountable to different parties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure used to promote and regulate inter-member competition • Emerging competition regarding value appropriation

Daily management

To conduct the daily activities needed for organizing members, meta-level actors and orchestrated systems rely on different solutions. Meta-level actors' members sometimes devote their own staff to handle day-to-day activities for the collective (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018). Some meta-organizations can have enough resources to maintain a dedicated and fully staffed secretariat (Garaudel, 2020). Sometimes, the secretariat might even gain so much power that it becomes a 'necessary evil' within the meta-organization, in that it dominates the members but is needed for the meta-organization to successfully achieve its goals (Roux & Lecocq, 2022). Daily management tasks

may include preparing and drafting proposals to be discussed (Garaudel, 2020), coordinating input to the collective to ensure effective engaging (Rizzi & Frey, 2014) or managing marketing and communication activities (Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019; Frandsen & Johansen, 2018). Meta-level actors may also gather the expertise necessary to manage the relationship with third parties and conduct advocacy work efficiently (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018; Frandsen & Johansen, 2018). Čada et al. (2022) therefore argue that meta-level actors bear a substantive part of the transaction costs associated with collective action and its management tasks.

Unlike their counterparts, orchestrated systems do not have agency per se, and the necessary activities are han-

dled by the architect (Gulati et al., 2012). This special member ensures the good development of intra-collective relationships and actions through the definition and monitoring of certain structural elements (Chen et al., 2022; Mukhopadhyay & Bouwman, 2019).

Structures: the organizational components of meta-organizations

How are meta-organizations themselves structured? This question has attracted significant scholarly attention (e.g. Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019; Chaudhury et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2022; Gulati et al., 2012). Here we review the structure of meta-organization through their five key organizational components (membership, authority, rules, monitoring and sanctions) (see Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011).

Membership. Interestingly, both perspectives on meta-level actors and orchestrated systems consider membership as a central dimension of meta-organization governance and a means to ensure members' convergence (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Gulati et al., 2012). Member selection can be based on different forms of similarity, such as nature (e.g. meta-organization of universities (Zapp et al., 2021)), focus on a specific issue (e.g. multi-stakeholder, sustainability-oriented meta-organizations (Berkowitz et al., 2017)), prestige or size (Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018) or business interest (e.g. digital platforms federating complementors (Bosch-Sijtsema & Bosch, 2015)). Some collectives benefit from an inclusive membership policy, such as standardization organizations (Boström, 2006), and may even rely on membership self-selection. However, most meta-organizations define restrictive criteria that shape what members should look like (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Gulati et al., 2012; Vähä-Savo et al., 2019).

Authority. Reflecting the distinction between meta-level actors and orchestrated systems, the literature outlines two fundamentally divergent approaches to authority and the organization of decision-making processes within meta-organizations. The first approach entails the establishment of a collective where, in theory, all members' voices carry equal weight, often conceptualized as a heterarchy (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016) or a pluralist organization (Brès et al., 2018). In contrast, the second approach involves members operating within a hierarchy where one or a few members assume the role of guiding—and at times, constraining—other members' actions (Chen et al., 2022; Gulati et al., 2012).

In the context of meta-level actors, although authority may be organized through elections, rotation in responsibilities and other modes of delegation (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019), the decision-making process typically relies on achieving consensus, which is instrumental

in preserving the autonomy of each member (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016). In certain instances, especially in multi-stakeholder contexts, this approach may necessitate the implementation of specific checks-and-balance mechanisms in self-governance decision-making (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019). Consensual decisions appear more legitimate and thus foster greater engagement and commitment from members (Malcourant et al., 2015). However, this mode of decision-making can sometimes be slow and less efficient (Le Bianic & Svensson, 2010). Scholars have also observed that the pursuit of consensus can lead to proposals that are watered down and fail to satisfy opposing factions within the collective (Furåker, 2020), result in decisions that appear hypocritical (Malcourant et al., 2015) or lead to inconsistent implementations (Peixoto & Temmes, 2019). Although consensual decision-making may aspire to provide every member with an equal say, it does not always prevent power imbalances or conflicts of interest within the collective (Alo & Arslan, 2023; Carmagnac et al., 2022). In the context of a sustainable supply chain, Carmagnac et Carbone (2019) show how small palm oil producers became reliant on large manufacturers, resulting in a power imbalance that left them relatively voiceless during collective decision-making processes. Other studies reveal how meta-organizations' decisions can be influenced and shaped by powerful members (Kaplan, 2024; Lawton et al., 2018; Lupova-Henry et al., 2021b). Maintaining a balanced distribution of power within pluralist meta-level actors is a significant concern because these organizations need to be perceived as democratically representing the collective voice of their members (Boström, 2006; Hyman & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2020).

In the context of orchestrated systems, a more hierarchical perspective underscores the significance of one or a group of key members known as architects. These architects seek to exert control over other members despite lacking formal authority typically associated with employment relationships (Gulati et al., 2012). To achieve this, architects can rely on various methods, such as informal authority, leveraging power derived from asymmetric dependence or providing various forms of compensation (Gulati et al., 2012). For instance, architects may derive authority from their role as gatekeepers, controlling access to rare resources (Kretschmer et al., 2022). Alternatively, they can use their expertise and reputation to persuade members to collaborate through discussions (Vale et al., 2018). When power imbalances benefit architects, members may be coerced into collaboration. Finally, architects may offer material or symbolic incentives, such as the promise of increased collective revenue (Kretschmer et al., 2022) or elevated status (Gulati et al., 2012). However, that informal authority may not guarantee the long-term alignment of interests. For instance, in the context of digi-

tal platform ecosystems, the balance between cooperative innovation and competitive equilibrium can become disrupted over time. This imbalance can push members to exit the system and restrict platforms' openness (Gawer, 2014).

Rules, monitoring and sanctions. There are notable divergences in insights concerning rules, monitoring and sanctions between the two categories of meta-organizations.

Meta-level actors tend to selectively make use of rules, monitoring and sanctions (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016) and therefore can be conceived as a form of partial organization (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019). They tend to produce voluntary standards rather than binding rules and avoid strong monitoring and sanctions. This tendency is partly attributed to the meta-organizations' dependence on their members and their imperative to safeguard members' autonomy (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016; Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019). Similarly, implementing negative sanctions can be challenging, as members are often hesitant to apply them, and excluding members may weaken the collective as a whole. Nevertheless, there are exceptions where meta-level actors adopt more stringent regulations, such as in the case of the EU (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Kerwer, 2013), or when employing the threat of exclusion for coercively governing certain members (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019). Moreover, certain meta-level actors may designate specific key members to oversee the implementation of collectively decided standards, as seen with Google's role in the Coalition for Better Ads (Megali, 2022). Interestingly, Lupova-Henry et al. (2021b) describe how an increased degree of organizationality can improve a meta-level actor's ability to act, albeit at the cost of reduced member engagement and commitment.

For an orchestrated system which often consists of collectives aimed at generating economic value, such as platform ecosystems or franchising networks, it is common for members to establish contracts and agreements. Within these systems, the architect takes on the role of defining rules, particularly concerning aspects like value creation and value appropriation. They also shape the framework for monitoring through the use of indicators and specify the system of sanctions, with exclusion being a frequently employed measure (Gulati et al., 2012; Mukhopadhyay & Bouwman, 2019). In digital contexts, rules can also manifest through the design of algorithms, which become structuring elements capable of influencing and controlling the behaviour of members (Calabrese et al., 2021). The system's structural design helps architects maintain and regulate a beneficial degree of inter-member competition (Chen et al., 2022; Mukhopadhyay & Bouwman, 2019). Generally, orchestrated systems tend to exert stronger control over their members, although some studies have noted that architects may sometimes be hesitant to employ coercive measures (Mukhopadhyay & Bouwman, 2019; Vale et al., 2017).

Resources for performing activities

In addition to adopting certain organizational structures, both types of meta-organizations, in order to fulfil their missions, require the consumption of resources. Interestingly, both perspectives coincide in recognizing membership as a significant resource pool, at times even influencing the acceptance of members (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018; Gulati et al., 2012). There can be a trade-off between the size of the membership and the coordination costs associated with it (e.g. Lawton et al., 2018; Mukhopadhyay & Bouwman, 2019). This arbitrage can be driven by different strategies: either mitigating risks when multiple members provide the same resource or fostering interdependencies when each member contributes a specific type of resource (Gulati et al., 2012). However, here again, some significant divergences between the two categories underscore the inherent distinctions between them.

On the one hand, meta-level actors appear as independent entities able to own resources, which gives rise to various questions. A substantial body of knowledge concerning this form tends to assume that they are relatively inexpensive to maintain, as their primary purpose often involves hosting discussions among members and organizing the implementation of their decisions (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016). Consequently, traditional meta-level actors, such as trade associations, typically operate on membership fees that are modest in comparison to the resources held by their members (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). However, the resourcing strategies of meta-level actors can be more intricate. For instance, they can rely on benevolent commitments from members, such as providing delegated staff or offering office spaces for meetings (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018). Additionally, they may actively seek external funding sources, such as public subsidies, either managed directly by the meta-organization itself or distributed among members to support collaborative endeavours (Bor & Cropper, 2023). Indeed, recent studies have documented instances of meta-level actors requiring significant resources, especially when they engage in concrete projects beyond the realm of establishing norms or standards (e.g. Roux & Lecocq, 2022; Valente & Oliver, 2018).

On the other hand, orchestrated systems—particularly within OEM-supplier networks and digital or technological platforms—frequently require substantial contributions of resources from their members. This is done with the objective of organizing these contributions in a manner that enhances the overall value generated by the system (Gawer, 2014; Gulati et al., 2012; Kretschmer et al., 2022; Mukhopadhyay & Bouwman, 2019). In this setup, members, whether serving as architects or contributors, maintain control over the resources they commit to the collective endeavour.

The autonomy–authority tension

Despite being framed differently, both lines of research recognize the core challenge posed by the tension between the independence of members and the authority of the collective. In this regard, meta-level actors and architects wield their authority to organize members and facilitate meaningful collective endeavours. Simultaneously, they aim to safeguard members' autonomy, allowing them to retain as much freedom as possible within the framework of the meta-organization (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016; Mukhopadhyay & Bouwman, 2019). When this tension becomes imbalanced, it can lead to challenges arising from a misalignment between the interests of individual members and those of the meta-organization. This misalignment may potentially compel members to exit the collective or engage in competitive behaviours (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018; Gawer, 2014). Although both perspectives converge on the outcomes of mismanaging the authority–autonomy tension, each sheds light on distinct aspects of competition within meta-organizations.

Researchers with a greater focus on meta-level actors observe that competitive patterns can arise between the collective and its members when they possess the capability (in terms of skills and resources) to carry out similar tasks or when their activities exhibit significant overlap (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016; Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015). Competition can also emerge when members and the meta-level actor are accountable to different parties (Copper & Bor, 2018; Warwick-Giles et al., 2020). Garaudel (2020) points out that such mismatches between the meta-organization and member goals may negatively affect the meta-level actor's actorhood.

In orchestrated systems, which traditionally lean towards market-oriented dynamics, this tension manifests when a single member, often the architect, monopolizes a disproportionate share of the collective's value (Chen et al., 2022; Gawer, 2014; Kretschmer et al., 2022; Mukhopadhyay & Bouwman, 2019).

How do meta-organizations evolve and change

Several studies have focused on how meta-level actors and orchestrated systems emerge, evolve and disappear. Particularly, the process of organizing practices at the collective level of autonomous actors, termed 'meta-organizing' (Berkowitz, 2018, p. 420), has garnered significant interest. This intricate process may not necessarily lead to the establishment of a meta-level actor but could instead serve as a means to pursue coordinated collective action under different organizational forms (Sanioossian et al.,




2022). Consequently, meta-level actors and orchestrated systems could be viewed as distinct outcomes of a similar meta-level process. In this section, we review research that explores the dynamics of meta-organizations and pay special attention to the conditions that facilitate their formation. We then examine the meta-organizing processes involved in the creation of both meta-level actors and orchestrated systems, concluding by considering how these forms evolve over time. Table 4 presents a synthesis of the similarities and specific focus of meta-level actor and orchestrated systems research. We consider the absence of divergences a consequence of the underdeveloped state of current literature regarding meta-organization.

External and membership-level enabling conditions for meta-organizing

The creation of meta-organizations can be triggered or motivated by a number of factors. Both the meta-level actors and orchestrated systems perspectives acknowledge that the motivation to form a meta-organization may arise from institutional or market gaps that member organizations aim to address through collective rather than individual efforts (e.g. Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019; Gulati et al., 2012; Kretschmer et al., 2022; Valente & Oliver, 2018). Often, the inception of both forms of meta-organization is initiated by prospective members, following a bottom-up approach that emerges from horizontal, unformal interactions among multiple actors (e.g. Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Berkowitz, 2018; Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019; Radnejad et al., 2017). Alternatively, powerful actors can initiate the process, either by assuming the role of the architect in the orchestrated system (e.g. Chen et al., 2022) or by engaging in outreach activities to shape a meta-level actor that aligns with their objectives (Kaplan, 2024).

However, each perspective has developed distinct insights. Research focused on meta-level actors highlights that both external and member-related attributes can encourage the creation of meta-organizations. Some studies argue that third parties may prompt actors to engage in meta-organizing, as seen in cases like the European women's rights movements (Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015), or the World Anti-Doping Agency (Malcourant et al., 2015). Valente and Oliver (2018) also emphasize that members must meet three conditions to initiate the meta-organizing process: (1) They must be embedded in the context surrounding the targeted problem, (2) they should have the ability to adopt a complex system perspective that frames the issue at stake as interrelated with other challenges necessitating collaboration among diverse actors and (3) they must be open to innovative forms of collaboration. Conversely, research related to orchestrated systems indicates that access to cultural,

TABLE 4 Comparative analysis of meta-organizations' evolution and change as meta-level actors and orchestrated systems.

	Meta-level actor	Orchestrated systems
Similarities among concepts 	<i>Conditions for meta-organization</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation triggered by institutional/market gaps, prospective members interaction, powerful initiators <i>Meta-organizing and the creation of organizational arrangements</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meta-organizing process implies phases moving on a continuum of more or less organized arrangements <i>The autonomy–authority tension:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The autonomy–authority tension results in members' departure or competitive behaviours 	
Divergences between concepts 		
Research insights specifically developed in the literature 	<i>Conditions for meta-organizing</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External third parties' inducement • Member-level attributes <i>Meta-organizing and the creation of organizational arrangements</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A collective goal formation process and consequences for decidability • Degree of organizationality affected by country-specific attributes <i>Evolution over time</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effects of institutional forces and intra-collective dynamics • Organizational inertia and adaptability • Weakening and Strengthening • The 'end' of meta-level actors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources availability supports creation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effects of inter-member and inter-meta-organization competitive relationship

social and material resources is crucial for initiating the meta-organizing process (Roundy, 2021; Roundy & Bayer, 2019).

The meta-organizing process and the setting up of meta-organizations

Both approaches acknowledge the complexity of the meta-organizing process, which can go through various phases, ranging from emergent networks to formalized arrangements (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019; Gawer, 2014; Järvi et al., 2018; Saniossian et al., 2022), and even revert to a network state in certain cases (Cropper & Bor, 2018; Roundy & Bayer, 2019). This phenomenon is often seen as an iterative process resulting in the setting up of forms of meta-organizations along a continuum of more or less organized collectives (Radnejad et al., 2017; Rizzi & Frey, 2014).

During the meta-organizing process, a key distinction between meta-level actors and orchestrated systems lies in how the collective goal is established. In the first case, the members define a shared vision, producing a decided social order and therefore relinquish a portion of their

autonomy to the overarching authority of the collective (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Kerwer, 2013). Through collective activities, members jointly interpret and construct the meaning of the situation they are dealing with in order to derive a shared goal that ensures members' autonomy (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Matinheikki et al., 2017; Saniossian et al., 2022; Valente & Oliver, 2018). Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer (2022) remark that the meta-level actors' missions, or 'mandates', determine the scope of the collective decisions that members agree to discuss, thereby defining an area of decidability. As per the collective goal, members decide on the meta-level actor's degree of organizationality, which involves selectively combining organizational components (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016), further contributing to tensions within the collective (Berkowitz et al., 2022). Additionally, some research suggests that country-specific attributes may influence structural choices (Chaudhury et al., 2016; Corazza et al., 2021). Research devoted to orchestrated systems has not studied much about how system-level goals emerge, mostly assuming that the architect decides on them either alone or with members having decision rights (Gulati et al., 2012; Mukhopadhyay & Bouwman, 2019).

Meta-organizational evolutions over time

The evolution of meta-organizations has been analysed mostly for meta-level actors, whereas our understanding of orchestrated systems in this regard remains limited.

Over time, various external factors can prompt members to reconsider the organizational structures that govern their interactions. Institutional forces have received significant attention in this regard. Some argue that evolving institutional forces can reshape the structures of meta-level actors or dictate a redefinition of their mission, suggesting a coevolution between institutions and meta-organizations (Cropper & Bor, 2018; Laurent et al., 2020; Radnejad et al., 2017). However, changes in dynamics can also arise from activities and decisions of the collective, such as membership strategies (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016), professionalization of the secretariat (Roux & Lecocq, 2022) or alterations in governance mechanisms (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019).

In the context of orchestrated systems, evolving competitive relationships among members, typically the architect and other members, may also influence the organizational structure (Gawer, 2014), as can competition between different orchestrated systems (Kretschmer et al., 2022).

In response to these changes, meta-level actors may exhibit a dynamic interplay between adaptability and inertia, as well as periods of strengthening and weakening. Some works demonstrate their ability to effectively navigate a changing environment (Cropper & Bor, 2018; Laurent et al., 2020). They can adjust their self-regulation despite their consensus-based decision-making structure (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019), or in response to contestations (Peixoto & Temmes, 2019). However, other studies argue that meta-level actors can resist change when faced with unexpected changes (König et al., 2012). As activities become more bureaucratized over time, shifting their focus becomes increasingly challenging (Vifell & Thedvall, 2012). Long-term evolutions may affect members' perceptions differently, potentially leading to changes in collective goal and decision lock-ins (Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2022). Additionally, meta-level actors can experience fluctuations in their authority over members, with some gaining strength over time, whereas others weaken (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016).

Finally, the question of how meta-level actors come to an end remains relatively understudied. There are several potential scenarios for their conclusion. One possible outcome is the dissolution of the collective, where the meta-level actors disband and members merge into an individual-based organization (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016). Alternatively, meta-level actors may face the risk of losing relevance without completely vanishing. Instead, they can transition into a state of inactivity, resembling a

'dormant' or 'ghost meta-organization' (Berkowitz et al., 2020, p. 2; Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016, p. 152).

DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH AGENDA

In this paper, our aim was to review the literature on meta-organizations and clarify their diverse, and at times conflicting, interpretations within the fields of organization and management studies. Our examination of the literature revealed differences primarily arising from empirical and conceptual distinctions. To address this issue, we propose two distinct categories: 'meta-level actor', referring to meta-organizations as formal entities comprised of other organizations, and 'orchestrated system of organizations', referring to informal meta-organizations as open systems of autonomous actors coordinated by an architect. Establishing clear conceptual boundaries enhances our understanding of these phenomena, facilitates further theoretical development and promotes cross-pollination where applicable.

Our primary contribution lies in this new categorization. When the same concept is used by two different communities with differing definitions, it creates conceptual ambiguity or conceptual dissonance. This ambiguity might lead to shaky knowledge production because of risks of fragmentation, irrelevance and theoretical misfit, but also conceptual confusion, miscommunication and challenges in producing cumulative knowledge, conducting interdisciplinary research or having meaningful discussions across these communities. Addressing conceptual ambiguity and dissonance requires profoundly understanding different perspectives, which we have done here. Although it may be challenging, embracing diverse interpretations can enrich research and foster a more comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena.

Thanks to the two new categories, we contribute to the literature by bringing greater clarity to the field, by explicitly differentiating between the previously ambiguous uses of the term 'meta-organization'. Each new construct, meta-level actor and orchestrated system, can be defined with precision, reducing confusion and providing a more specific framework for research and analysis. We provide a state of the art of both categories about their nature, meta-organizational effects (purposes directed at organizing members, at influencing non-members and 'latent effects'), structural and operational dimensions (daily management, organizational components, resources, autonomy–authority tensions) and evolutionary dynamics from a meta-organizing perspective. We also reveal two fundamental ways of meta-organizing, understood as the creation of decided order among and beyond organizations: via collectively decided social order

TABLE 5 Potential avenues for future research (non-exhaustive)

Common lines of enquiry	Cross-pollination and exports	Concept-specific research venues
<i>Why is there a certain form?</i> Understanding the influence of collective purpose on chosen organizational arrangement	<i>What is the value of applying a decisional organization theory lens to orchestrated systems?</i> Understanding the specificities and challenges of orchestrated structural and entitative organizationality	Meta-level actor <i>How do meta-level actors' resourcing work?</i> Developing the direct and indirect resourcing view
<i>How are social orders distinguished and intertwined in both forms?</i> Conceptualizing and investigating the distinctions between collectively decided vs. orchestrated social orders	<i>Can we develop a more competitive dynamics approach of meta-level actors?</i> Analyzing multi-level and multi-dimensional value capture strategies. Competitive/cooperative tensions and conflicts of interests	<i>What are their negative impacts on societies?</i> Developing the dark side analysis of meta-level actors
<i>What are the unplanned and non-decided effects of layering?</i> Understanding and contrasting the latent effects of both forms	<i>Are there architects in meta-level actors?</i> Exploring the roles and characteristics of architects within meta-level actors. Studying meta-level actors as architects in broader environments	<i>What goes with their accountability?</i> Differentiated, multi-level, multi-directional accountability
<i>What affects variations within forms, and what are the implications of such variations?</i> Unpacking the factors and effects of variations among organizational profiles, implications on organizationality, including on members' entry or exit	<i>Can we take inspiration from orchestrated system to study organizationality, resources and effects?</i> Analyzing incentivization, membership composition strategy of meta-level actors based on orchestrated system approaches	<i>What does the secretariat do?</i> Investigating the role and activities within the secretariat
<i>What is the role of space?</i> Understanding the influence of spatial and socio-material contexts over forms	<i>Can both forms be viewed as part of a continuum?</i> Using structural and entitative organizationality, decisionality and decidability to understand the potential movements between one form and the other (a meta-level actor becoming an architect, an orchestrated system becoming a meta-level actor, etc).	Orchestrated systems <i>How do they decide on their mission?</i> Unpacking the mechanisms of system level goal formation and evolution
<i>Can we compare the evolutions of both categories?</i> Analysing and comparing meta-organizational life-cycle		<i>Are there constraints inherently associated with the arrangement?</i> Analyzing the effects of the absence of collective actorhood and the presence of orchestrated actorhood
		<i>What is the dark side of orchestrated system?</i> Studying power asymmetries and domination relations for instance
		<i>How are value attribution issues managed?</i> Unpacking value capture/value distribution mechanisms between the architect and other members
		<i>What does the architect do?</i> Identifying activities implemented for the collective by the architect
		<i>Is the concept of orchestrated systems relevant for the not-for profit domain?</i> Applying it to other domains.

and via orchestrated social order. On this basis, we suggest a three-pronged research agenda on (1) common lines of enquiry (requiring comparative studies), (2) cross-fertilization and export and (3) specific research venues for each concept.

Table 5 provides a variety of research venues that we believe are promising for meta-organizational research. We will shortly elaborate on the most intriguing perspective in later paragraphs.

As a first set of investigations, we suggest developing knowledge applicable to the two forms either by exploring commonalities or by comparing them, through social orders, meta-organizing processes and degrees of organizationality.

The differences between meta-level actors and orchestrated systems open up interesting venues for exploring the different ways in which social orders are established and maintained. Both forms appear as decided social orders,

or 'order[s] that [are] the result of a decision' (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016, p. 95). As such, both forms differ from strictly emergent and non-decided social orders resulting from repeated interactions among actors such as networks. Despite this strong commonality, the distinctive nature of the two constructs hints at fundamental differences in their characteristics as social orders. In the case of meta-level actors, decisions are made by the collective of members itself. In contrast, architects take decisions that subsequently impact orchestrated systems. Therefore, we propose that meta-level actors present a *collectively decided social order*, whereas orchestrated systems are characterized by *orchestrated social orders*. This distinction raises several questions.

First of all, we need a better understanding of the fundamental characteristics of both types of decided social orders. Both forms present a stratification or layering of orders between the collective and its members (Grothe-Hammer et al., 2022; Gulati et al., 2012). But how does the nature of the decided order (collective or orchestrated) affect this layering and vice versa? Next, previous studies have introduced nuances to the binary approach differentiating between emergent and decided social orders, suggesting the possibility of their intertwining (Laamanen et al., 2020), leading to potential conflict and decidability loss (Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2022). In that perspective, more work is needed to understand and compare the dynamics and effects of the intertwining of orders in meta-level actors and orchestrated systems. Further, it could be interesting to develop a comparative empirical and theoretical analysis of the latent effects of both forms of meta-organizations, of the effects of time and space on them (and vice versa), and generally on the implications of variations in orchestrated and collectively decided social orders (e.g. in terms of decision-making, structural or entitative organizationality and entry or exit of members).

Beyond the differences between meta-level actors and orchestrated systems, we still need a better understanding of meta-organizing as a process, especially over the long term (Berkowitz, 2018; Sanioossian et al., 2022). Indeed, both forms of meta-organization emerge through a dynamic process of meta-organizing understood as creating decided order among and beyond organizations. In addition, architects and members of orchestrated systems can themselves be organizations or meta-level actors. We can expect possible evolutions between the two over the long term. More research is needed to understand factors influencing the choice of one form over the other, or evolutions and interactions between the two. Our categorization also highlights that different trajectories may stem from the decision-making approach used within the collective, with meta-level actors favouring a pluralistic

approach while orchestrated systems tend to be more hierarchical. Exploring whether certain factors have a more significant impact on the emergence of these organizational forms and how they interact with one another could advance meta-organization research significantly.

Additionally, both perspectives acknowledge that meta-organizations undergo phases of varying levels of organization (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019; Cropper & Bor, 2018; Radnejad et al., 2017). However, empirical studies suggest different degrees of structural and entitative organizationality. Orchestrated systems generally seem to relate more to constraining agreements compared to meta-level actors. The latter however exhibit higher degrees of organizationality concerning actorhood, collective identity and interconnected systems of decision-making. Investigating why and how the degree of organizationality varies across these collectives, and understanding its impacts could provide valuable insights for meta-organization scholarship. Furthermore, in relation to organizationality, both literatures acknowledge that membership composition plays an important role in the resourcing strategies of meta-organizations (Bor & Cropper, 2023; Gulati et al., 2012). However, we lack a comparative understanding of the factors affecting membership composition for resourcing across contexts and organizational forms.

Next, we suggest that cross-pollination and export from one perspective to the other can provide fruitful insights—when it is actually conceptually possible. Both research approaches emphasize the competitive implications of meta-organizations. However, for scholars interested in meta-level actors, meta-organizations facilitate cooperation among members (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018), but competitive tensions may arise between members and the meta-level actors in their struggle for autonomy and independence (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016). Garaudel (2020) further highlights the potential tensions resulting from different mechanisms of accountability. In orchestrating systems, competition manifests itself in multiple dimensions. First, competition arises between members and the architect(s) who shape the orchestrated system's governance, dynamics and direction, as well as among individual members themselves, and finally among orchestrated systems themselves (Chen et al., 2022; Gawer, 2014; Kretschmer et al., 2022). This multi-level perspective on competition could be fruitfully applied to meta-level actors' studies, challenging the assumption of monopolistic tendencies in meta-organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). Future research could investigate how members compete against each other, identifying their strategies and practices to impose their views.

Finally, research about orchestrated systems has emphasized the role of architects (Chen et al., 2022; Mukhopadhyay & Bouwman, 2019). It would be interesting to explore

whether and how certain members, secretariats when they exist or other organizations play a similar role for meta-level actors (see, for instance, Sanioossian et al., 2022). This exploration could analyse the mechanisms through which meta-level actors manage internal power imbalances, potentially leveraging informal strategies to strengthen their authority and facilitate a collaborative mindset.

There are many venues for research specific to each perspective, especially owing to the nature of the meta-level actor and the orchestrated system, as we show in Table 5. Here we can emphasize for instance the importance of investigating accountability mechanisms and responsibility in meta-level actors, as well as value distribution among architects and other members in orchestrated systems. And finally, there are some common blind spots in these literatures on meta-organizations. It should be noted that there is a glaring lack of quantitative studies. As we continue to glean insights from qualitative studies—some of them even providing testable proposals (Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2022; Lupova-Henry et al., 2021a, 2021b)—scholars could investigate whether these results can be generalized, but also help refine the boundary conditions of the mechanics identified in the extant literature. There is also an issue of cumulativeness with other literatures that have looked at similar empirical phenomena but using other concepts or theories (e.g. whole-of-networks, clusters, industrial districts and lead organization-governed networks). Connecting with these bodies of work is urgent to show the value of taking a meta-level actor or orchestrated system perspective. Next, more work needs to be done on the dark sides of meta-organizations, whether as meta-level actors or as orchestrated systems, from conflicts of interest (Alo & Arslan, 2023) to other negative latent effects on members and non-members. Finally, there are very few works on nonwestern contexts and by nonwestern colleagues. Some researchers have investigated meta-level actors in nonwestern settings (Alo & Arslan, 2023; Chaudhury et al., 2016; Fernandes & Lopes, 2022) but more works are needed to understand (1) the originalities and specificities of collectively decided social orders and meta-level actors in these settings, (2) whether these concepts are relevant there or not and (3) how theorizing can be enriched by nonwestern contexts. We have identified no such works about orchestrated systems. There is clearly an urgent need for developing an understanding of these organized phenomena in these other settings, which would enrich and challenge western-centred theories and approaches and ensure better knowledge production (Vijay, 2023).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Since Ahrne and Brunsson's (2005) pioneering work, 20 years ago, a burgeoning literature has analysed and theorized meta-organizations but has become fragmented over time. The field is notably marked by a strong divide between two research perspectives that use the same name for two different concepts. As meta-organization gains academic traction, with some works now borrowing insights from both sides, the ontological divergence increases risks of fragmentation, irrelevance and theoretical misfit. Through this systematic literature review, we provide a state of the art while clarifying the boundaries between different definitions of meta-organizations and hope to offer a solid basis for future research.

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ORCID

Philippe Coulombel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8241-0529>

Héloïse Berkowitz  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9652-0841>

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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