

Original Article

Autonomy in Decision-Making Processes and Forms of Control: A Study Based on Adorno's Negative Dialectics with Technology Professionals

Autonomia no processo decisório e formas de controle: Um estudo baseado na Dialética Negativa de Adorno com profissionais de tecnologia

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Do technology companies truly adopt horizontal management models? This study aimed to analyze the level of autonomy of individuals in the decision-making process within technology companies, identifying forms of control and contradictions in the interviewees' discourses, through the lens of Adorno's Negative Dialectics.

Methodology: Qualitative research was conducted through interviews with 16 professionals from technology companies who occupy different organizational positions.

Results: The results indicate, firstly, that even in organizations characterized by higher levels of horizontal management, where greater autonomy of individuals is presumed, some form of "authority" is still observed. The data also reveal that the autonomy of individuals in these technology environments is closely related to the technical competence of the professionals in their respective fields. Finally, it was found that some managers advocate for the autonomy of their employees but still seek to maintain control through various mechanisms, such as budget centralization; management by objectives; creation of formal and standardized structures; and attempts to copy and replicate American management models adopted by companies in Silicon Valley.

Originality: In the national literature, there was no national study that sought to analyze horizontal management in the context of technology companies from the perspective of Adorno's Negative Dialectics. In this sense, this study was able to promote a deeper and more critical analysis of the dynamics of power and authority within technology organizations.

Keywords: Organizational Structure; Power Decentralization; Critical Theory; Technology Market

RESUMO

Objetivo: Empresas de tecnologia de fato adotam modelos de gestão horizontal? Este estudo buscou analisar o nível de autonomia dos indivíduos no processo decisório em empresas de tecnologia, identificando formas de controle e contradições nos discursos dos entrevistados, sob a ótica da Dialética Negativa de Adorno.

Metodologia: Foi realizada uma pesquisa qualitativa por meio de entrevistas com 16 profissionais de empresas de tecnologia que ocupam diferentes posições organizacionais.

Resultados: Os resultados indicam, primeiramente que mesmo nas organizações caracterizadas por maiores níveis de gestão horizontal, onde se pressupõe maior autonomia dos indivíduos, observa-se que há alguma figura de “autoridade”. Os dados revelam ainda que a autonomia dos indivíduos nesses ambientes de tecnologia tem total relação com a competência técnica dos profissionais na área em que atuam. Verificou-se, por fim, que alguns gestores defendem a autonomia dos colaboradores, mas ainda buscam manter controle através de vários mecanismos, como centralização orçamentária; gestão por metas; criação de estruturas formais e padronizadas; a tentativa de copiar e replicar modelos de gestão americanos adotados por empresas inseridas no Vale do Silício.

Originalidade: Na literatura nacional não havia nenhum estudo nacional que buscou analisar gestão horizontal no contexto de empresas de tecnologia sob a ótica da Dialética Negativa de Adorno. Nesse sentido, este estudo pôde promover uma análise mais profunda e crítica da dinâmica de poder e autoridade dentro de organizações de tecnologia.

Palavras-chave: Estrutura Organizacional; Descentralização do poder; Teoria Crítica; Mercado de tecnologia

1 INTRODUCTION

The motivation for this research stems primarily from the personal experience of one of the authors, who has worked in the technology market for over twenty years and has held management positions for more than ten years. In many technology organizations, the adoption of agile methodologies and a management model referred to as horizontal is common.

Firstly, the agile management model is a managerial approach that seeks to increase flexibility and efficiency in project development, especially in software, based on principles of collaboration, adaptability, and continuous value delivery to the customer (Sutherland, 2014).

The horizontal management model is an organizational structure that aims to distribute decision-making power and promote participation from individuals at

all levels in the decision-making process. This presupposes a flatter structure, with few hierarchical levels and composed of empowered, multinational teams that make decisions collaboratively (Oliveira et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2022). Various startups in Brazil and around the world have adopted this horizontal management model to foster creativity and innovation (Melhor RH, 2022).

The approach to horizontal management has been the subject of several recent studies aimed at understanding the impacts of this model on individual and organizational performance (Costa, Silva & Oliveira, 2019). Hackman (2015) have explored the benefits of horizontal management in promoting autonomy and self-actualization among team members. Additionally, researchers such as Gratton and Erickson (2016) have dedicated themselves to investigating the effects of horizontal management on innovation and the ability of individuals and organizations to adapt to rapidly changing contexts. Schein (2010) also offers valuable insights into how horizontal management can positively impact organizational dynamics, directly influencing team performance and employee satisfaction.

One of the strengths of horizontal management models is the structuring of work in teams with the involvement of top management. In these organizations, responsibility is shared, the layouts and arrangement of desks and rooms do not allow for visual identification of who the “boss” is, and everyone works toward a common goal: customer satisfaction (Besemer et al., 2019).

Despite the benefits of adopting a horizontal management model, contemporary studies point to a dissonance between the discourse of horizontal management and its implementation in practice (Lopez-Robles et al., 2019; Ivonika, 2020; Silva et al., 2023). In summary, although many technology companies espouse a horizontal management discourse, the implementation of this model can be challenging in practice.

Silva et al. (2023), for example, studied 30 Brazilian startups and found that while most advocate for horizontal management, only 20% implement it effectively. The authors identified three main challenges: lack of organizational maturity, a deeply

rooted hierarchical culture, and a lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities. The study by Santos et al. (2022) analyzed 10 Portuguese startups and found dissonance between the discourse and practice of horizontal management. The main discrepancies were the concentration of power in the hands of founders and the lack of effective communication mechanisms. Therefore, while many technology companies adopt the discourse of horizontal management, the implementation of this model can be challenging in practice.

In this context, it is pertinent to analyze the contradictions present in these technology environments from the perspective of individuals positioned at different organizational levels. This study employed methodological procedures inspired by those used by Adorno (1973), recognized as one of the most influential figures of the Frankfurt School. Adorno's thought has increasingly been considered in research in the field of management, particularly in organizational studies (Wood Jr. & Paes de Paula, 2008; Batista-Dos-Santos, Alloufa & Nepomuceno, 2010; Vilela, Carvalho Neto & Lopes, 2010).

Adorno, oriented toward identifying contradictions, opposing views, and unusual aspects not commonly found in the literature on the subject, suggests the notion of Negative Dialectics, as emphasized by Vilela (2010, p. 7): "The approach to the social object from a negatively dialectical perspective, as proposed by Adorno, can be useful for providing access to the knowledge of a complex object."

This work is guided by Adorno's Negative Dialectics, aiming to understand the level of autonomy of individuals in the decision-making process within technology companies, utilizing inconsistencies in the discourse of interviewees from different hierarchical levels.

In this direction, the study aimed to analyze the level of autonomy of individuals in the decision-making process in technology companies, identifying forms of control and contradictions in the interviewees' discourses, from the perspective of Adorno's Negative Dialectics.

In the academic field, up until the time of conducting the research in August 2025, there had been no national study that sought to analyze horizontal management in the context of technology companies from the perspective of Adorno's Negative Dialectics, according to research carried out in the main databases in the area (Web of Science, Scopus, SPELL, ANPAD). Furthermore, Negative Dialectics is a critical approach that questions power structures and the instrumental logic prevailing in contemporary societies (Adorno, 1966; Sennett, 2012). In this sense, this study can promote a deeper and more critical analysis of the dynamics of power and authority within technology organizations. By applying this approach in companies with horizontal management, it may be possible to reflect on the subtle power dynamics that can emerge even in seemingly more egalitarian structures (Hamel, 2007).

2 ADORNO'S NEGATIVE DIALECTIC AND ITS APPLICATION IN ORGANIZATIONS

Adorno was a German philosopher recognized as one of the most influential members of the Frankfurt School and a key architect of critical theory, which is characterized by its critique of the instrumental rationality that pervades modern society (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1985). This concept refers to a condition in which rational processes are fully operationalized, in contrast to critical reason.

Adorno's ideas have been incorporated by several scholars in the field of management, particularly within organizational studies. For these authors, instrumental rationality can undermine autonomy and creativity, leading to standardized, bureaucratic, and impersonal work environments (Paes de Paula & Wood, 2002; Wood Jr. & Paes de Paula, 2008; Batista-Dos-Santos, Alloufa & Nepomuceno, 2010; Faria, Maranhão & Meneghetti, 2013; Vilela & Carvalho Neto, 2017).

A central aspect of Adorno's thought is the call to transcend ideological bias. He argues that research must adopt methodological tools capable of simultaneously

capturing both the objective and subjective dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation. The purpose of Adorno's negative critique is the legitimization of facts, in contrast to conventional critical theories that seek to establish absolute truths—an endeavor Adorno deems impossible (Vilela, 2012, p. 87).

Adorno outlines two irreconcilable conceptions of sociology: on one hand, an approach that merely observes and systematizes social facts for administrative purposes (administrative research), and on the other, a critical investigation that interrogates the communication and meaning of such findings (Vilela, 2012). While administrative research reduces individuals to objects, critical investigation recognizes society as a subject, which precludes the neutrality advocated by positivist science (Adorno, 2011).

Instrumental rationality, as described by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), neglects the complexity of human experience by reducing it to the status of an object of scientific analysis. In doing so, it disregards the uniqueness and socially constructed character of such phenomena (Vilela, 2012, p. 90). As Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, p. 127) observe, "the lack of humanism in empirical methods is more human than the humanistic interpretation of what is not human."

Unlike Marx, who emphasizes macro-level analysis and external contradictions (the social structure, the bourgeoisie as the oppressive class, and the working class), Adorno asserts that the central reference point of Negative Dialectics is the object itself and its internal contradictions. From this perspective, the analysis prioritizes the subject's own discourse, uncovering the contradictions embedded within the object, and thereby highlighting paradoxes and arguments that negate one another:

From the way the contradiction was presented by Adorno, it was clear that contradiction should not be sought outside the object – for example, in the contrast between leader and led – but within the object itself. That is, it was not the contradiction of the leader or leadership, but the contradiction within the leader and the leadership relationship.

(Vilela, 2010, p. 109)

Adorno's Negative Dialectics centers on a critique of modern society, particularly its tendency toward standardization, excessive rationalization, and pervasive commodification. He argues that the dominance of instrumental reason in modern life leads to the instrumentalization of individuals and the subordination of all spheres of existence to the logic of capitalism. Mass culture, the culture industry, and the commodification of art are understood as mechanisms of domination and alienation. Instrumental reason privileges efficiency, quantification, and control, resulting in a technical rationality that penetrates all areas of social life (Vilela, 2012).

For Adorno, this rationality constitutes a form of domination, as it reduces human beings to means for economic ends and subordinates' culture and art to mercantile logic (Vilela, 2012).

Modern society, therefore, is marked by relationships of domination and oppression (Adorno, 2011). The capitalist system creates hierarchical structures in which a minority holds economic and political power, exploiting and oppressing the majority.

Adorno also emphasizes ideological domination, whereby mass culture and the culture industry shape behaviors, restrict critical capacity, and diminish the potential for emancipation. In this sense, domination extends beyond the economic sphere, infiltrating social institutions, interpersonal relationships, and even collective modes of thought. The culture industry operates as a mechanism of manipulation and control, standardizing tastes, behaviors, and ideas, while undermining autonomy and critical reflection (Vilela, 2012).

A central objective of Negative Dialectics is the pursuit of both individual and social emancipation, achievable only through active resistance to structures of domination. For Adorno, emancipation does not result from adherence to ideology or an alternative political system, but from continuous critique of the established order and the pursuit of an authentic life. Thus, critical reflection, the questioning of established norms, and the preservation of individuality emerge as forms of resistance (Adorno, 2011).

Applied to organizational contexts, *Negative Dialectics* invites a systematic questioning of power and control structures (Adorno, 1966), even within ostensibly egalitarian models such as horizontal management. Despite claims of greater participation, domination can persist in subtle forms. Instrumental rationality often privileges profit and efficiency over other values, reducing individuals to mere resources for economic objectives. The application of *Negative Dialectics* requires uncovering these forms of hidden domination and reflecting critically on how they shape organizational life (Vilela, 2012).

As such, Negative Dialectics (Adorno, 1996) provides a conceptual framework for problematizing the prevalence of instrumental rationality in organizations and for questioning the values and principles that underlie organizational practices. Adorno (1966) underscores the need to examine informal hierarchies, the exclusion of marginalized voices, and the persistence of control practices, even in democratic or participatory organizational forms. This perspective also challenges organizational cultures that constrain autonomy, limit creativity, and suppress critical thinking.

The application of Negative Dialectics therefore entails a deep critique of organizational culture, identifying potential spaces of resistance and emancipation (Adorno, 1966). By valuing plurality of thought and encouraging intellectual freedom, this approach envisions organizations not as spaces of conformity, but as contexts where diverse perspectives can flourish. In this regard, Negative Dialectics advocates for active resistance and continuous reconfiguration of organizational dynamics, with the aim of creating environments conducive to both individual and collective development.

Regarding participation in decision-making processes, Vilela (2012) notes that even in structures that claim openness, strategic decisions are often reserved for a select group of leaders, while the involvement of others remains merely symbolic. *Negative Dialectics* questions these limitations, emphasizing the importance of genuine and inclusive participation in decisions that affect everyday organizational life

(Adorno, 1966). True participation, according to Vilela (2012), must transcend formal mechanisms, granting individuals a substantive voice and meaningful influence in shaping organizational direction.

In sum, Adorno's critique of instrumental rationality offers a valuable theoretical lens for advancing more critical, reflective, and human-centered approaches to management and leadership (Vilela & Carvalho Neto, 2017).

3 METHODOLOGY

Considering the objective of analyzing the level of autonomy of individuals in the decision-making process within technology companies, identifying forms of control and contradictions in the respondents' discourse, a qualitative research approach was chosen (Creswell, 2013), valuing the perspectives of the interview subjects. This choice allowed for a rich and in-depth analysis of the phenomenon studied, taking into account the experiences, perceptions, and meanings attributed by individuals embedded in technology environments.

Data collection was conducted through 16 semi-structured interviews. The research subjects were intentionally selected based on specific criteria: i) professional experience; ii) years of experience in the technology market; iii) familiarity with agile frameworks and tools. Therefore, the study participants included leaders and team members with substantial knowledge of agile methodologies and a background in technology organizations. The identification of these professionals relied on the authors' network of contacts. Consequently, most of the interviewees are clients and former colleagues of one of the authors.

The 16 interviewees are Brazilians working primarily in organizations located in Belo Horizonte and São Paulo, with 14 in the private sector and 2 in the public sector. Data on the profile of the interviewees are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 – Interviewees' Profile

ID	Position	Gender	Age	Education
AP	Director	Masculine	38	Postgraduate
CK	Technology Director	Feminine	48	Postgraduate
CP	Project Analyst	Feminine	36	Postgraduate
EA	Follower	Masculine	26	Incomplete higher education
FM	Founder, Chief Technology Officer	Masculine	47	Complete higher education
GD	Founder, CEO	Masculine	52	Complete higher education
HG	Founder	Feminine	33	Complete higher education
LS	Developer	Masculine	27	Postgraduate
FH	Head of Low Code	Masculine	47	Complete higher education
MS	Founder, Director	Masculine	55	Complete higher education
NM	CEO	Masculine	21	Incomplete higher education
PM	Software Architect	Masculine	46	Incomplete higher education
PF	Developer/follower	Masculine	18	Technical high school
RC	Analyst Developer	Masculine	37	Complete higher education
RF	CEO	Masculine	45	Complete higher education
TB	Systems Analyst	Masculine	38	Postgraduate

Source: Prepared by the authors based on research data

The interviews were conducted individually through online meetings on the Google Meet platform. The interviews, which lasted an average of 40 minutes, were recorded with the participants' consent, and efforts were made to ensure the anonymity of the interviewees so they could share their perceptions and experiences comfortably.

The open-ended questions were designed to explore themes related to horizontal management and the autonomy of individuals in the decision-making process from Adorno's perspective, referencing analytical categories created from the theoretical framework and revised in light of the empirical data. The aim was to understand the respondents' discourse regarding three central categories: i) the level of implementation of the horizontal management model in technology companies; ii) the level of autonomy of individuals in the decision-making process and the existence

of authority or a certain centralization of power; iii) forms of control over individuals in companies that claim to be horizontal.

The data analysis technique adopted in the research followed the principles of content analysis, a technique for processing, organizing, and analyzing meanings present in textual data. Content analysis involves identifying themes and patterns in a data set, allowing for analyses and inferences based on, for example, the most cited and emphasized themes within a given set of textual data (Bardin, 2011). This allows researchers to identify patterns and emerging themes that may be relevant for understanding a specific phenomenon (Minayo, 2014).

In this research, the first step of the content analysis involved the complete transcription of the interviews and a thorough reading of the generated transcripts. Subsequently, the interviewees' accounts were organized according to the research questions regarding horizontal management and individual autonomy in the decision-making process from Adorno's perspective, seeking to identify patterns and repetitions, as well as divergent perceptions. A re-reading of the text was then conducted to identify themes that had not been anticipated in the initial interview script.

Additionally, efforts were made to identify explicit, implicit, and silenced aspects present in the discourse of the social actors involved. After a detailed analysis of the relevant quotations from each interview, the differences and similarities between the responses of leaders and team members were explored, aiming to identify convergences and contradictions in the participants' discourses.

4 REFLECTIONS ON AUTONOMY AND FORMS OF CONTROL IN ORGANIZATIONS

Using a Negative Dialectics analysis based on Adorno, applied to companies that adopt a horizontal management model, it is possible to reflect on the subtle power dynamics that emerge in seemingly more decentralized structures (Hamel,

2007). Adorno (1966) argues that even horizontal structures can reproduce forms of domination and control practices. Based on this, the autonomy of the professionals participating in the research was analyzed, along with the contradictions between discourse and practice.

Firstly, it is worth noting that varying levels of implementation of the horizontal management model were observed in organizations, according to the interviewees' perspectives. While greater levels of decentralization and autonomy were noted in some organizations, others maintained more traditional management practices, such as a certain centralization of decisions at higher hierarchical levels.

In this sense, even in organizations characterized by higher levels of horizontal management, where greater individual autonomy is presumed, some form of "authority" is observed. As noted by one partner at a company: *"No matter how horizontal the management is, there's always a leadership figure who takes responsibility for the project as a whole."* (EA, Partner).

Although this figure exists, the founder and partner of one of the companies emphasizes that leadership is exercised collaboratively, aligned with the assumptions of a horizontal management model:

There is the idea of having a leader who can help you improve. But it's not a boss. If necessary, yes, they will notify and punish, but that's not the focus; it's about improving performance. The leader is more of a hand-holding style than a whip-wielding one. (MS, Founder, Director, and Partner).

On the other hand, a developer analyst participating in the research reports characteristic aspects of an environment where there is also a certain centralization of power:

I see that the impact of horizontal management is that people don't call themselves bosses. 'I'm not a boss; I'm a leader.' But to me, it's the same. The moment a person has to tell me everything I'm going to do, making all the decisions for me, it's the same. (RC, Developer Analyst).

The data also reveal that individual autonomy in these tech environments is closely related to the technical competence of the professionals in their respective areas, as suggested by the report:

Regarding hierarchy and decision-making, we have a culture focused on authority, which is not authoritarianism; authority is when we respect those who know more about each topic. For example, there are three partners. I make decisions related to the platform, so that authority is mine; my partners make strategic business decisions, and my partner L. makes administrative decisions, and everything belongs to the company. (CK, Director of Technology and Partner).

Another aspect that favors the autonomy of professionals is the trust that they will meet agreed-upon goals and deadlines, as suggested by the following statement: “Developers work on demands and deliver according to their productivity. Very free, in a positive sense. There’s a lot of trust that people are working on what is expected.” (Software Architect). This trust partly stems from the technical capability of the professionals, which is generally high in the investigated organizations. In other words, startups usually have teams characterized by high technical skills.

The term “granting autonomy” is mentioned in various interviews as a characteristic present in the organizations, though it is contextualized according to the circumstances:

Grant autonomy, but it can’t be 100%, okay? Not everything can be democratic, because otherwise, it might become chaos. It might deviate, so we are always evaluating to what extent this autonomy is worthwhile, to what extent it poses a risk to us as well as to the client (...). This also depends on the person’s project, and listening to everyone is good, but it doesn’t necessarily mean it will be followed. But they will be heard. (AP, Director and Partner).

Some discourses also emphasize the intense results-oriented culture prevalent in the investigated organizations; that is, the establishment of goals/deadlines and adherence to their fulfillment by leadership can be seen as a form of control. The following excerpts illustrate this discussion: “In our decision-making culture, we have

a very strong focus on results, where the culture of authority is an important bias.” (CK, Director of Technology and Partner); “Man, deadlines and delivery schedules, I get chills when I hear a name like that.” (FH, Head of Low Code); “If you want to bring a results culture, where people only care about deliveries, you also have to foster a very strong culture of support, otherwise, burnout will happen, and people will get sick in your company.” (CK, Director of Technology and Partner).

Therefore, one form of control mentioned by some interviewees is management by results/goals and budget centralization, where financial decisions end up being under the purview of the organization’s strategic leadership:

Within the company, there’s a very strong culture of rules, a very strong culture of order, where a Netflix employee is very controlled, even though they have the freedom to make decisions. They are monitored on their deliveries, their budget, everything; they have all the tools to know how much they have reached their budget, how much they haven’t, what kind of ideas they’ve had compared to other producers. (CK, Director of Technology and Partner).

Such arguments are instrumentalized to justify the capitalist logic highlighted by Adorno (2011). Companies use this façade to justify traditional management models, characterizing them as “hybrid models.”

It will be horizontal until the vertical is demanded. And the impact is controlled. Let’s think about an accounting department. Can the analyst decide how to enter an invoice? Can they talk and interact with another area to solve it? Yes, as long as they follow a policy that was built vertically. If they mess up—sorry for the swear—they could bankrupt a company with taxes and penalties. So they must have responsibility and authority walking together. So, I see that, in almost all situations in life, balance in the hybrid model is what leads to success. (CK, Director of Technology and Partner).

This coexistence of a traditional hierarchical structure and work units where the management model is horizontal/democratic is very common in technology sector companies. Perhaps the creation of more autonomous microstructures within the

organization is a way to deal with a certain centralization of power and combat the prevailing structure (Adorno, 2011).

The data also indicate that the growth of organizations may demand the creation of formal structures and standardization of processes, reducing the characteristics of informality and autonomy in the structure: *"When we departmentalized, we felt a bit of difficulty, right? With growth, we had to do that. Introduce a little more hierarchy, appoint coordinators."* (GD, Founder, CEO, and Partner). Thus, characterizing the existence of "hybrid" structures, as termed by some interviewees.

At the same time, the autonomy granted to the interviewed professionals reveals a paradox. A significant portion of interviewees or managers without a partnership position reported feeling overloaded due to the various functions and responsibilities they end up assuming as a result of this discourse of empowerment and autonomy. This occurs in various ways, such as participation in numerous projects simultaneously or the mere presumption that individuals need to solve problems outside their purview because they have autonomy.

My position is IT analyst, and today I have a project manager function. And I try to adopt an agile methodology, so I take on the role of SCRUM Master in the project I've been working on the longest. In addition to being SCRUM Master, I also end up taking on what should be more of the client's role than my product owner role, which involves the business side and everything. (CP, Project Manager).

Another paradox identified in the interviews is a feeling of insecurity experienced by some professionals in the absence of a support figure for decision-making. Some interviewees mentioned the "obligation to fend for themselves" to meet goals and deadlines without the backing of a leader. From this, a certain demand from some professionals for a formal hierarchy is observed: "I don't have a technical person above me. Not that I need one all the time, but we used to have a technology manager who also took care of infrastructure. That reference point of someone more experienced than me is what I miss. (LS, Developer).

In other cases, the data reveal a demand for a higher level of process standardization:

I think the biggest problem... it's contradictory what I'm going to say. But it was a lack of standardization within these companies. At the same time that this freedom is good, there were companies where each team operated differently, and there was no visibility into what was working for one and not for the other. These experiences aren't even about wanting to standardize but finding a way to see how teams are performing with this freedom and trying to adjust what's going wrong and replicate what's going right. (PM, Software Architect).

The data also reveals that the structuring of organizations into teams or squads—multifunctional teams commonly used in organizations adopting agile methodologies—favors a certain decentralization of power and decision-making, bringing responsibility to the team level. This team empowerment gives managers and partners greater peace of mind, as the team itself, in pursuit of results, tends to bring problems and the appropriate responsible parties to light. This is a way to implement a culture of empowerment that requires low-performing workers to be identified: “Whether we want to or not, we bring the spotlight to that person, right? It's a factor in which the person either improves or they end up naturally leaving the team.” (EA, Partner); “It's not about spreading a culture of discord, right? But rather of transparency and alignment. And thus giving names to the issues so that it doesn't become something loosely defined.” (EA, Partner).

Another interview emphasizes the importance of collective performance indicators, which generate a sense of responsibility to the team, potentially signifying a loss of individual autonomy:

The agile method has a really cool aspect: when someone starts producing less, they begin to harm the team, and they leave. Many indicators for the development team are collective... In other words, we do this to create a collaborative spirit, everyone in the same boat. It works, man. In this respect, it works better than the other method. (MS, Founder, Director, and Partner).

It can be observed that adopting an agile management model, in which responsibilities are somewhat shared, forces individuals to perform at a minimum standard to avoid putting their team at risk. The attention and scrutiny of team members focus on the individual with low performance, compelling them to at least keep up with the team's average.

A negative aspect arising from team structuring mentioned by some interviewees is the emphasis on collective decision-making, which, in emergency situations, can hinder the speed of the decision-making process: "There's something I need to decide very quickly, and there can't be an authoritarian decision, let's say; at least I must consult the rest of the team, and sometimes that can take time, something that should be an emergency." (FH, Head of Low Code). Even interdependence between different teams can challenge the timely achievement of goals: "The main challenge is that many things are entirely dependent on another team, which sometimes is in another location, and communication is difficult. So, I don't know, a team in Finland and a team in India, it varies, you know?" (RC, Developer Analyst).

Finally, a way to limit individual autonomy stems from companies' attempts to "copy" American management models, particularly those from Silicon Valley, one of the world's main innovation ecosystems. This relentless pursuit to adopt the culture of these tech companies was widely observed in the data obtained in this research. Expressions commonly used in these ecosystems were frequently noted in interviewees' accounts: culture of innovation, startups, agile methodologies, data-driven management, customer focus, among others.

Discourses comparing their small startups with American companies generating millions of dollars and employing thousands of people were common: "The Google model is outdated; today we see Netflix." (CK, Director of Technology and Partner). In this sense, for some, the attempt to imitate American management models may limit individuals' creative and critical capacities, leading them to blindly appropriate successful models from other countries.

Some interviewees expressed a critical view regarding this attempt to copy management models from Silicon Valley, noting that the reality of Brazilian tech companies is quite different, as their accounts reveal.

We have to implement microservices here because we need to scale. We have to do a lot of things because we need to scale; for many people, scaling means a thousand users, and when we're talking about scaling for Silicon Valley, we're talking about millions. (MS, Founder, Director, and Partner).

The gains from the agile methodology have been suppressed by the mania of copying Silicon Valley in everything. So, in Brazil, you have a lot of people trying to copy how software is made in California, which alone must have twice the GDP of Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, and all of us combined, and they copy: "We have to do it the same way because that's how they do it there." (MS, Founder, Director, and Partner).

An approach based on Adorno's Negative Dialectics would encourage a critical analysis of organizational culture, especially concerning the culture of conformity. Organizations often adopt values, norms, and practices that limit individuals' autonomy, creativity, and critical thinking. The application of Negative Dialectics involves questioning organizational culture, seeking spaces for resistance and individual emancipation, where a diversity of ideas and perspectives can be valued.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of horizontal management environments through the lens of Adorno reveals a series of subtle dynamics that can arise even in seemingly horizontal and autonomous structures. Adorno, who emphasizes the importance of questioning existing power relations, can be used to understand these dynamics. Despite the pursuit of horizontality, hierarchical relationships and figures of authority may exist and limit levels of autonomy. Certain groups or individuals can exert disproportionate influence, compromising equal participation.

Autonomy is seen as a crucial factor, but there are limits to “avoid chaos” and ensure alignment with business objectives. The autonomy of employees is considered fundamental in the views of the partners and founders involved in the research, but the analysis reveals contradictions between discourse and practice. In some cases, autonomy is more a delegation of responsibilities than true empowerment.

The approach of hybrid models is mentioned as a possibility, recognizing the need to balance horizontality and verticality. Some managers advocate for employee autonomy but still seek to maintain control through various mechanisms, such as budget centralization, goal management, the creation of formal structures, and the standardization of processes as organizations grow (to manage complexity); as well as attempts to copy American management models.

The division of the organization into teams is seen as an advantage, as it brings responsibility to the collective level. Despite the benefits of empowerment, there are limits. Emergency situations may require quick decisions, and the need to involve other areas can restrict autonomous decision-making. Moreover, individuals may feel a lack of experienced technical references and may demand greater centralization in certain cases.

The research contributes to an understanding of the contradictions that exist in technology companies adopting a horizontal management model, seeking to understand levels of autonomy and empowerment in technological environments. Therefore, the research helped reveal how structures of power and control in technology companies influence workers’ autonomy. This aids in understanding the contradictions between promoting an innovative environment and imposing control practices.

The analysis of interviewee discourses exposed tensions between the expectation of autonomy and the lived reality. These contradictions are fundamental for critiquing the ideology that underpins the functioning of these companies, showing how they can justify oppression disguised as freedom. Furthermore, Adorno’s Negative

Dialectics proposes a critique that does not seek synthesis or conflict resolution, but rather the exploration of contradictions. This can encourage a new perspective on the concept of autonomy, understanding that it is often illusory and conditioned by various circumstances and organizational factors. From an academic standpoint, Adorno's critical philosophy can enrich the theoretical field of organizational studies, offering new approaches to understanding corporate culture in technology companies.

Among the limitations, it is worth noting that the research included participants from one of the researchers' networks, which may have inhibited the professionals' accounts of certain aspects of the investigation. Furthermore, because this is a qualitative study based on only 16 interviews, there was no intention to generalize the results.

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2. Literature review		✓	
3. Definition of methodological procedures			✓
4. Data collection	✓		
5. Investigation	✓		
6. Formal analysis		✓	
7. Validation		✓	
8. Visualization			✓
9. Writing – Original Draft			✓
10. Supervision	✓		

Conflict of Interest

The authors have stated that there is no conflict of interest.

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Data availability statement

Data will be available upon request