



Absorptive Capacity in the Public Sector: An Analysis of Scientific Production

Capacidade Absortiva no Setor Público: Análise da Produção Científica

Capacidad de Absorción en el Sector Público: Análisis de la Producción Científica

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Abstract

This study analyzes the scientific literature on absorptive capacity (ACAP) in the public sector and aims to examine how this construct, originally developed in the context of private firms, has been adapted to public management, as well as to identify its distinctive characteristics and the principal research gaps. Unlike the private sector, public management operates under nonmarket logics and institutional constraints, posing challenges to the direct application of theoretical models originally designed to explain competitive advantage. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining bibliometric analysis with a systematized literature review, an appropriate strategy for examining an emerging field of research. Data were collected from three databases (SciELO, Scopus, and Web of Science) and included empirical studies published between 1990 and 2025. A total of 205 studies were initially retrieved. After duplicate removal and the application of eligibility criteria, 17 articles were included in the final analysis. The findings indicate that ACAP has been increasingly applied in the public sector, particularly in relation to innovation, organizational performance, and the adoption of information systems. In this context, however, ACAP is used not to achieve competitive advantage but rather to improve public service delivery and support decision-making. The analysis also reveals a concentration of research on the early stages of the absorptive process — knowledge acquisition and assimilation — with comparatively less attention devoted to knowledge transformation and exploitation. Furthermore, the literature is characterized by the predominance of theoretical models adapted from the private sector, with limited progress toward developing conceptual approaches that are more responsive to the institutional specificities of public organizations. As its primary theoretical contribution, this study provides a critical synthesis of the field and highlights the need for theoretical models that are better aligned with the institutional dynamics of the public sector.

Keywords: absorptive capacity, public sector, literature review, scientific production.

Resumo

Este estudo analisa a produção científica sobre capacidade absorptiva no setor público e tem o objetivo de compreender como esse construto, originalmente desenvolvido no contexto das empresas privadas, tem sido adaptado à gestão pública, bem como suas especificidades e principais lacunas de pesquisa. Diferentemente do setor privado, a gestão pública opera sob lógicas não mercadológicas e restrições institucionais, o que impõe desafios à transposição de modelos teóricos voltados à vantagem competitiva. A pesquisa adota abordagem mista, combinando análise bibliométrica e revisão sistematizada da literatura, estratégia

adequada a campos ainda incipientes. A coleta de dados foi realizada em três bases de dados: Scielo, Scopus e Web of Science, considerando empíricos publicados entre 1990 e 2025. Inicialmente, foram recuperados 205 estudos, dos quais, após exclusão de duplicidades e aplicação de critérios de elegibilidade, restaram 17 artigos analisados. Os resultados indicam crescente aplicação da capacidade absorptiva no setor público, especialmente associada à inovação, ao desempenho organizacional e à adoção de sistemas de informação, não para obtenção de vantagem competitiva, mas para melhoria da prestação do serviço e auxílio na tomada de decisão. Observa-se uma concentração nos estágios iniciais do processo absorptivo (aquisição e assimilação), com menor atenção às fases de transformação e exploração. Ademais, predomina a adaptação de modelos oriundos do setor privado, com avanços limitados na construção de abordagens teóricas sensíveis às especificidades institucionais do setor público. Como contribuição teórica, o artigo sistematiza criticamente o campo, evidenciando a necessidade de modelos teóricos mais aderentes às dinâmicas do setor público.

Palavras-chave: capacidade absorptiva, setor público, revisão de literatura, produção científica.

Resumen

Este estudio analiza la producción científica sobre la capacidad de absorción en el sector público y tiene como objetivo comprender cómo este constructo, desarrollado originalmente en el contexto de las empresas privadas, se ha adaptado a la gestión pública, así como sus especificidades y principales lagunas de investigación. A diferencia del sector privado, la gestión pública opera según lógicas no mercantiles y restricciones institucionales, lo que plantea desafíos para trasladar modelos teóricos orientados a la ventaja competitiva. La investigación adopta un enfoque mixto, que combina el análisis bibliométrico y la revisión sistematizada de la literatura, estrategia adecuada para campos aún incipientes. Los datos se recopilieron en tres bases de datos: Scielo, Scopus y Web of Science, considerando estudios empíricos publicados entre 1990 y 2025. Inicialmente, se recuperaron 205 estudios, de los cuales, tras la exclusión de duplicados y la aplicación de criterios de elegibilidad, quedaron 17 artículos para el análisis. Los resultados indican una aplicación creciente de la capacidad de absorción en el sector público, especialmente asociada con la innovación, el desempeño organizacional y la adopción de sistemas de información, no para obtener una ventaja competitiva, sino para mejorar la prestación del servicio y apoyar la toma de decisiones. Se observa una concentración en las etapas iniciales del proceso de absorción (adquisición y asimilación), con menor atención a las fases de transformación y explotación. Además, predomina la adaptación de modelos procedentes del sector privado, con avances limitados en la construcción de enfoques teóricos sensibles a las especificidades institucionales del sector público. Como contribución teórica, el artículo sistematiza críticamente el campo y evidencia la necesidad de modelos teóricos más acordes con las dinámicas del sector público.

Palabras clave: capacidad de absorción, sector público, revisión de la literatura, producción científica.

Introduction

Absorptive capacity (ACAP) is a concept developed to explain the complex interactions between organizational performance and knowledge processes. It emerged from the Resource-Based View (RBV) and the theory of dynamic capabilities. The concept was first introduced by Cohen and Levinthal (1990), who described how organizations acquire, assimilate, transform, and apply external knowledge effectively to foster innovation, adaptation, and competitive advantage.

Applying this theoretical framework to the public management context, however, presents significant challenges and remains relatively underexplored. Public organizations operate under institutional logics that differ substantially from those of private organizations, being characterized by the absence of market competition, legal constraints, political pressures, and strong public accountability. These distinctive features appear to limit the direct transferability of theoretical models originally developed in competitive market settings.

Within this context, Harvey et al. (2009) were among the first scholars to advocate the relevance of ACAP for public management as a means of enhancing organizational performance. They identified three principal reasons for applying ACAP in the public sector. First, public organizations must understand not only the needs and demands of service users to improve management and service delivery, but also the complexity inherent in managing, delivering, and evaluating public services. Second, they must recognize the challenges associated with measuring organizational performance in environments involving multiple stakeholders. Finally, the authors emphasized that, despite these compelling reasons, empirical studies and practical applications of ACAP in the public sector remain scarce, even though the construct has become well established in the private sector literature.

This scarcity however should not be interpreted as evidence of the construct's limited relevance to public management. Rather, it may reflect the epistemological and methodological challenges involved in adapting a theory originally developed within strategic management to organizational contexts that are not market oriented. Consequently, it is important to investigate how ACAP has been incorporated into the public administration literature, the organizational contexts in which it has been examined, the theoretical and methodological approaches adopted,

and the limitations and research gaps that have emerged from its application. These considerations justify the use of a bibliometric analysis combined with a systematized literature review. In emerging and still underdeveloped fields, where the number of available studies is relatively limited, this approach enables the identification of early patterns of scientific production as well as theoretical, methodological, and empirical trends. Thus, even when the number of empirical studies remains modest, an integrated analysis provides a structured understanding of the field's evolution, analytical focus, and remaining challenges.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine how ACAP, originally developed within the context of private firms, has been adapted and applied to public management. Specifically, it explores the methodological categories, thematic areas, and organizational contexts in which the construct has been investigated.

Using a mixed-methods, exploratory design, this study synthesizes the literature based on empirical articles indexed in SciELO, Scopus, and Web of Science published between 1990 and 2025 to examine the evolution of the field over the past decades. The analysis identifies publication trends, the contexts in which empirical research has been conducted, the sectors in which ACAP has been applied, the methodological approaches employed, the most frequently used keywords, authorship clusters, and the foundational ACAP scholars cited in the selected studies, whose contributions have supported the development and consolidation of the concept within the public sector.

By providing a comprehensive overview of the literature, this study contributes to advancing the theoretical understanding of ACAP in public management while offering valuable insights for researchers, scholars, and practitioners interested in the topic. The analysis not only highlights the principal trends and research gaps in the literature but also helps contextualize individual contributions within this emerging field of inquiry.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the concepts of dynamic capabilities and discusses the principal theoretical models of ACAP. Section 3 describes the methodological procedures adopted in the study. Section 4 presents the research findings, beginning with a quantitative analysis followed by a qualitative synthesis of the selected studies. Finally, the concluding remarks and references are presented.

Absorptive Capacity as a Dynamic Capability

The construct of ACAP is situated within a broader theoretical tradition that seeks to explain how knowledge processes influence organizational performance, drawing on the Resource-Based View (RBV) and, subsequently, the development of the dynamic capabilities perspective (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984; Teece et al., 1997). The RBV assumes that differences in organizational performance arise from the nature, combination, and deployment of organizational resources and capabilities and was originally formulated to explain competitive advantage in market environments (Barney, 1991; Peteraf, 1993).

As organizational environments became increasingly characterized by rapid technological change, uncertainty, and growing complexity, however, the RBV proved insufficient to explain how organizations adapt to dynamic contexts (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Zollo & Winter, 2002; Furlan et al., 2018).

It was in response to these limitations that the dynamic capabilities perspective emerged as an extension of the RBV, aiming to explain organizations' ability to integrate, reconfigure, and renew resources in response to environmental change (Teece et al., 1997; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000).

Accordingly, dynamic capabilities refer to organizations' ability to adapt, coordinate, integrate, and reconfigure internal and external resources in order to respond effectively to the demands of an increasingly globalized marketplace. Such environments are characterized by rapid and continuous change, requiring organizations to respond with agility and effectiveness to create value and sustain competitive advantage (Teece et al., 1997; Campos et al., 2020).

From the perspective of the private sector, Teece et al. (1997) were the first to develop the dynamic capabilities framework. They argued that some organizations achieve superior performance because they develop capabilities, procedures, processes, organizational structures, and routines that facilitate resource renewal and integration, thereby enhancing organizational performance and generating sustainable competitive advantage (Teece, 2007).

Collis (1994), in turn, defined dynamic capabilities as an organization's ability to innovate more rapidly and effectively than its competitors. Winter (2003) further argued that dynamic capabilities involve the regular use of solutions to organizational problems, producing consistent and competitive organizational change. According to the author, isolated or sporadic responses do not constitute dynamic capabilities; rather, such capabilities require systematic and repetitive changes embedded in organizational processes and routines.

By contrast, Zollo and Winter (2002) conceptualized dynamic capabilities as learned and stable patterns that emerge over the course of organizational history through collective activities and learning processes, enabling organizations to generate and modify operational routines in pursuit of greater effectiveness.

Wang and Ahmed (2007) proposed that dynamic capabilities comprise three interrelated dimensions: adaptive capability, ACAP, and innovative capability. Adaptive capability refers to an organization's ability to identify and respond to emerging market opportunities. ACAP reflects its ability to learn from external partners, whereas innovative capability concerns the organization's capacity to develop new products or enter new markets by aligning strategic innovation with innovation processes.

In a subsequent study, Teece (2014) proposed a hierarchical distinction between two fundamental classes of organizational capabilities: ordinary capabilities and dynamic capabilities. The former encompass routine administrative and operational activities, whereas the latter involve higher-level strategic activities that enable organizations to generate superior returns. According to Teece (2014), effective management of both types of capabilities is essential for organizational value creation.

Although definitions of dynamic capabilities vary, they converge in emphasizing organizations' capacity to foster innovation in environments characterized by continuous technological and market change (Meirelles & Camargo, 2014).

Although this theoretical perspective was originally developed to explain organizational performance in private firms, it has increasingly been applied to the public sector, not to explain competitive advantage but rather to understand innovation processes in complex institutional settings. Its primary objective in this context is to improve efficiency in public service delivery (Kattel & Mazzucato, 2018) by examining how knowledge, organizational capabilities, and administrative routines interact to enhance institutional performance.

Although public organizations are not market oriented, they operate under substantial external pressures — including political, social, regulatory, and technological pressures — that require continuous learning, coordination, and organizational reconfiguration.

Among the dynamic capabilities proposed by Wang and Ahmed (2007) — adaptive capability, innovative capability, and ACAP — ACAP appears to be particularly well aligned with the operating logic of public organizations. Whereas adaptive capability is primarily associated with strategic responses to market change and innovative capability emphasizes the creation of new products, services, or markets, ACAP focuses on organizational learning processes, the incorporation of external knowledge, and the recombination of existing knowledge.

Accordingly, ACAP refers to an organization's ability to acquire, assimilate, transform, and apply external knowledge effectively to improve organizational performance and foster innovation.

Within the context of public management, which is characterized by legal constraints, institutional pressures, multiple stakeholders, and limited managerial discretion, innovation tends to occur incrementally and depends heavily on the accumulation and interpretation of prior knowledge (Moore, 1995; Hartley, 2005; Osborne & Brown, 2011). In such settings, the ability to acquire, assimilate, transform, and apply external knowledge becomes more important than strategic adaptation or the generation of radical innovations for responding to societal demands, improving public service delivery, and enhancing institutional performance, even in the absence of market competition.

The concept of ACAP has evolved considerably over time through the contributions of numerous scholars. Cohen and Levinthal (1990) first introduced the construct in their seminal work, defining it as a firm's ability to acquire external knowledge through a process involving prior competencies that enable the recognition of the value of new information (i.e., codified knowledge that can be communicated through a common language across different communities), as well as the assimilation and commercial application of such information to improve organizational performance.

Cohen and Levinthal (1990) emphasized that ACAP is fundamental to both innovation and adaptation to environmental change. As a prerequisite, organizations must possess related prior knowledge, since existing knowledge provides the foundation necessary to assimilate and effectively exploit newly acquired knowledge.

This implies that ACAP is not an isolated capability but rather depends on the organization's existing knowledge base, which serves as the foundation for understanding and integrating external knowledge.

Furthermore, Cohen and Levinthal (1990) analyzed ACAP at both the individual and organizational levels. They argued that ACAP depends not only on the characteristics of individual organizational members but also on the practices, processes, and systems established to facilitate the acquisition and application of external knowledge.

Within this framework, the authors highlighted the central role of ACAP in fostering innovation. Organizations that develop strong ACAP are better positioned to adopt new ideas, technologies, and innovative practices originating from the external environment, thereby strengthening their competitive advantage.

Finally, according to Cohen and Levinthal (1990), ACAP extends beyond the mere absorption of knowledge to encompass the ability to adapt to change. Organizations capable of rapidly assimilating and applying new knowledge are consequently better equipped to operate in continuously evolving business environments.

Subsequently, Van den Bosch et al. (1999) expanded the concept of ACAP by emphasizing the need to balance the exploration of new knowledge with the exploitation of existing knowledge to achieve competitive advantage. This discussion is embedded within the broader literature on organizational ambidexterity.

This perspective emphasizes that organizational performance depends on the ability to simultaneously reconcile the search for new sources of knowledge with the effective use of knowledge already internalized. In the context of ACAP, this balance is reflected in the articulation between the acquisition and assimilation of new knowledge and its subsequent application based on previously consolidated cognitive structures.

Zahra and George (2002) further emphasized the importance of the strategic orientation of ACAP. They argued that firms should develop a strategic orientation to guide ACAP, thereby enabling them to focus on critical areas of knowledge relevant to their business strategies. The authors proposed two distinct dimensions of ACAP: potential and realized. Potential ACAP encompasses the ability to develop opportunities through the assimilation of new knowledge; i.e., organizations can acquire external knowledge and convert it into opportunities for innovation and development. Realized ACAP, by contrast, involves the ability to create value by transforming the opportunities generated through

knowledge assimilation into new or improved products or processes. The emphasis is therefore on the effective transformation of knowledge into tangible outcomes.

Zahra and George (2002) further argued that ACAP, as a dynamic capability, comprises organizational routines and processes. In summary, these routines encompass knowledge acquisition, assimilation, transformation, and exploitation. ACAP therefore consists of a set of activities and processes that enables organizations to enhance their capabilities (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Zahra and George's (2002) model of absorptive capacity.



Source: Zahra and George (2002).

However, Zahra and George's (2002) definition was criticized for omitting the recognition of value. Some scholars argued that the transformation of opportunities into value is an intrinsic component of ACAP and should therefore not have been excluded.

For these reasons, Todorova and Durisin (2007) subsequently introduced new nuances into the concept of ACAP by criticizing Zahra and George's (2002) framework and revisiting the approach originally proposed by Cohen and Levinthal (1990).

According to Todorova and Durisin (2007), ACAP is not a single capability but rather a set of interrelated capabilities. They emphasized the importance of internal coordination and interdepartmental collaboration, arguing that the integration of knowledge within the organization is essential to successful ACAP.

Todorova and Durisin (2007) proposed that the knowledge flow begins with recognizing the potential value of external knowledge. This is followed by the acquisition of such knowledge, which may subsequently undergo assimilation in the case of incremental innovation or transformation in the case of radical innovation, after which the knowledge is exploited and applied in the market. Additional elements that extend previous contributions include the influence of power relationships, flexibility, innovation, and performance as well as the reinstatement of value recognition before knowledge acquisition.

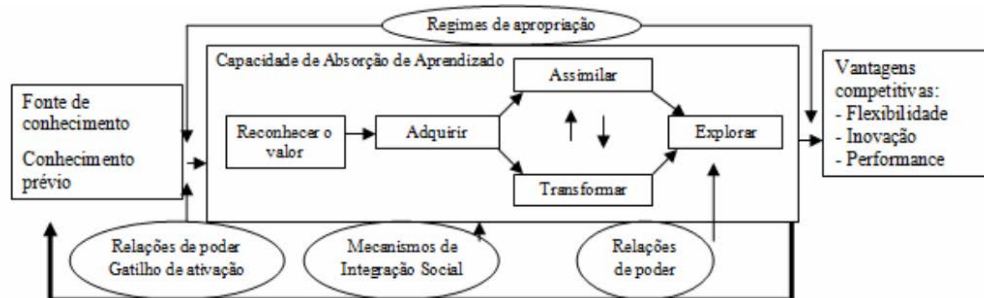
Todorova and Durisin (2007) emphasized the influence of power relationships not only during the initial search for external knowledge but also during the subsequent exploitation of that knowledge in the market. This suggests that organizational power dynamics play a fundamental role in an organization's ability to acquire, assimilate, transform, and apply external knowledge. Power relationships may therefore affect both knowledge acquisition and the organization's ability to exploit such knowledge effectively.

Moreover, the value of external knowledge should be assessed before it is acquired. This implies that organizations should identify the relevance and potential value of new knowledge before investing resources in its acquisition. Such prior assessment helps direct organizational efforts toward knowledge with greater potential value.

Following this line of reasoning, the authors also emphasized that social mechanisms influence the entire ACAP process. Interpersonal relationships, collaborative networks, and social interactions are therefore relevant at every stage, from value recognition to knowledge exploitation (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Operational model of absorptive capacity



Source: Todorova and Durisin (2007).

The conceptual evolution of ACAP also includes the work of Flatten et al. (2011). They introduced the notion that ACAP is not a static organizational characteristic but rather a capability that can be developed and enhanced over time, highlighting the importance of continuous organizational learning and its active management.

Recent studies have examined ACAP across different contexts while also reconceptualizing its dimensions. Yildiz et al. (2024) investigated ACAP within teams and proposed four new dimensions: identification, harmonization, improvisation, and consummation. Martins and Freire (2023), in turn, analyzed the contribution of ACAP to innovation development and competitive advantage in educational technology startups. Werlang and Werlang (2021) examined the relationship between the development of ACAP and innovation in firms led by young entrepreneurs.

Thus, ACAP, as developed in the management literature, has predominantly been applied to the analysis of private-sector organizational performance within the logic of market competition and competitive advantage. Its adaptation to the public sector, however, requires conceptual reinterpretation. Although the core mechanisms of the theory are retained, its purposes and units of analysis must be redefined. Rather than explaining competitive performance, ACAP is used to understand organizational learning, administrative innovation, and improvements in service delivery (Harvey et al., 2009).

One of the earliest studies on this topic in the public sector was conducted by Harvey et al. (2009). The authors identified three reasons why applying ACAP in the public sector would be relevant.

The first is that public-sector organizations should be encouraged to improve their understanding of service users' needs and priorities and, based on this understanding, continuously enhance the management and effectiveness of service delivery. At its most advanced stage, this process would entail coproduction among government, citizens, and businesses (Bovaird, 2007). Implicitly, this theory of responsive public organizations assumes that knowledge can be translated into improved performance (Harvey et al., 2009).

Second, the authors highlighted that public service organizations operate in complex environments. Performance standards are contested by different stakeholders (including political representatives, citizens, service users, and other actors) and only some dimensions of organizational performance can be measured objectively. The ability to understand, negotiate, and reconcile these different values and expectations involves managerial and political knowledge processes through which information is translated into organizational competencies and activities (Harvey et al., 2009).

Finally, ACAP is relevant to the public sector because dynamic capabilities theory and the RBV have rarely been used to theorize or empirically analyze the performance of public service organizations. Despite their importance in the literature on firms operating in market environments, their adaptation to noncompetitive or quasi-competitive contexts has remained very limited (Harvey et al., 2009).

The literature on ACAP, dynamic capabilities, organizational learning, and knowledge management has largely evolved independently. Only recently have scholars begun to establish connections among these fields and identify the potential benefits of their convergence (Easterby-Smith & Prieto, 2008). The analysis conducted by Harvey et al. (2009), for example, indicated that ACAP can play a complementary role and help integrate some of these theories of knowledge management and knowledge processing within the context of organizational performance.

By focusing on an organization's ability to acquire, assimilate, and effectively apply knowledge, this approach to ACAP can provide a conceptual framework for understanding how public-sector organizations may improve their performance (Harvey et al., 2009). From a public management perspective, performance is not limited to economic outcomes but encompasses the ability to formulate and implement policies effectively, improve the quality and continuity of services, respond to societal demands, use public resources responsibly, and generate public value (Moore, 1995; Boyne, 2002). By conceptualizing knowledge as a critical and dynamic resource, ACAP helps explain how public organizations can transform information and learning into tangible improvements in administrative innovation, institutional effectiveness, and service delivery to society (Harvey et al., 2009).

Accordingly, the study of ACAP in the public sector emphasizes the importance of learning, adaptation, and knowledge utilization as key determinants of organizational performance, with effective knowledge management playing a central role. In this regard, the studies conducted by Liao et al. (2023), Turner (2022), and Oliveira et al. (2021), which are discussed in the Results section, are particularly noteworthy.

Methodological Procedures

In terms of its objectives, this study is exploratory and descriptive, adopts a mixed-methods approach, and combines bibliometric analysis with a systematic literature review. Three databases were selected to retrieve data on scientific production: SciELO, Scopus, and Web of Science. The publication period was restricted to empirical articles published between 1990 and 2025 in English, Portuguese, or Spanish. The starting point was defined based on the publication of Cohen and Levinthal's (1990) seminal study on ACAP, and the end point corresponded to the most recent year included in the analysis. The search strategy was applied to the title, abstract, and keyword fields using the following combination of terms:

((“civil service” OR “government* service” OR “public employ*” OR “public sector work*” OR “public service*” OR “public sector” OR “public administrat*” OR “public management” OR “serviço público” OR “setor público” OR “administração pública” OR “gestão pública” OR “serviço governamental”) AND (“absor* capacit*” OR “capacit* absor*” OR “capacidad* absor*” OR “capacidade de absorção” OR “absor* know*” OR “absor* do conhecimento” OR “absor* de conhecimento”)).

The search retrieved two articles from SciELO, 66 from Scopus, and 136 from Web of Science. The bibliographic records were exported to an account in Mendeley, a reference and document management software program, and duplicate records were removed, resulting in 130 unique articles. Titles, abstracts, and keywords were subsequently screened to select only primary empirical studies addressing the practical application of ACAP in the public sector, including public enterprises and public administration bodies.

Studies were excluded when they were purely theoretical, duplicated, or unrelated to ACAP according to the theoretical frameworks adopted in this study (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Zahra & George, 2002; Todorova & Durisin, 2007). Studies were also excluded when their empirical application was not directly related to the public sector but instead focused on public-private partnerships or on medical, biological, agricultural, or other fields in which the activities examined were not performed by public administration organizations.

The decision to include only empirical studies was based on the objective of this article, namely, to analyze how ACAP has been effectively applied and operationalized in the public sector, with particular emphasis on empirical evidence concerning organizational learning, administrative innovation, policy implementation, and institutional performance. Although excluding theoretical studies limits the conceptual breadth of the review, this methodological decision was intended to provide a more in-depth understanding of the concrete practices and applications of the construct in public management. The theoretical studies identified through the search supported the theoretical framework but were not included in the results analysis, which focused exclusively on empirical research.

Although the study did not formally adopt a rigid systematic review protocol, such as the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) or Cochrane standards, systematic and transparent procedures were followed for study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion, drawing on the principles underlying these protocols. The decision not to adopt a formal protocol reflected the exploratory nature of the study and the still-emerging character of the field. Strictly applying protocols originally developed for areas with more consolidated bodies of evidence could have resulted in the excessive exclusion of relevant studies.

The final research corpus comprised 17 articles, all of which were read in full to identify the variables of interest and analyze their theoretical contributions. All included articles are duly listed in the references. The reduction in the number of studies throughout the selection process did not result from limitations in the search-string design but from the rigorous application of analytical and conceptual criteria aligned with the research problem.

The search terms were intentionally defined broadly to maximize the sensitivity of the initial retrieval and prevent the premature exclusion of potentially relevant studies. The subsequent narrowing of the corpus resulted from restricting the empirical object to public organizations, requiring explicit adherence to established ACAP frameworks, and including only empirical studies. Therefore, the limited number of articles reflects the still-emerging nature of scientific research on ACAP in the public sector.

Table 1

Corpus of article analyzed in alphabetical order

Butler and Ferlie (2020).
Fratale and Bido (2024).
Hodgkinson et al. (2012).
Khan et al. (2017).
Liao et al. (2023).
Lindblad and Karrbom Gustavsson (2021).
Liu et al. (2018).
Luna-Reyes et al. (2020).
Oliveira et al. (2021).
Parente et al. (2021).
Paulsen and Hjertø (2014).
Pinho et al. (2024).
Richards and Duxbury (2015).
Riemenschneider et al. (2010).
Stark (2019).
Turner (2022).
Waheed (2024).

Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

Results

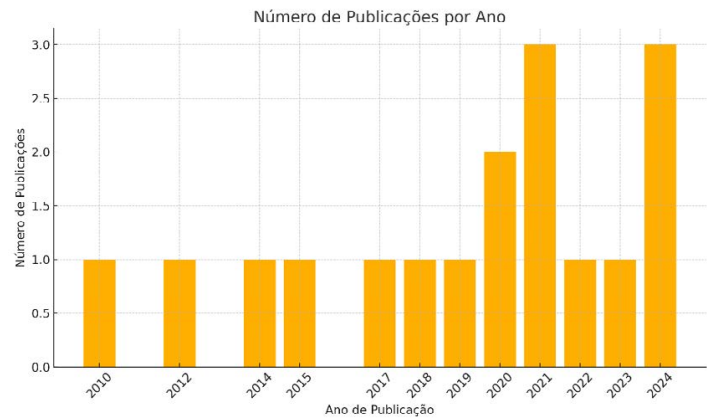
This section presents the mapping and analysis of the literature on ACAP in the public sector. More specifically, it describes the number of publications, the countries in which the empirical studies were conducted, the sectors in which the research was applied, the methodological approaches adopted, the most frequently used keywords, the authorship clusters, and the ACAP models employed.

Quantitative Analysis

Figure 3 presents the annual number of publications between 1993 and 2025. At first glance, the field appears to remain at an early stage, given that only 17 articles were identified. This finding reveals a theoretical gap that in itself creates opportunities for further academic discussion.

Figure 3

Publications per year on absorptive capacity in the public sector.



Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

As shown in Figure 3, although the first article on ACAP was published in the 1990s, the first study applying the concept to the public sector was not published until 2010. This single publication was followed by another in 2012, indicating a modest beginning for research in the field. In 2014 and 2015, there was a slight increase, with one publication in each year; however, the overall volume remained very limited, and no publications were identified in the following year.

From 2017 to 2019, publications continued at a rate of one article per year. In 2020 and 2021, however, publication output increased, with a total of five articles published during the period — two in 2020 and three in 2021 — suggesting growing scholarly interest in ACAP within public service organizations.

Between 2022 and 2023, output declined again to one publication per year, indicating a slight slowdown in research activity. The highest number of publications, however, was recorded in 2024, demonstrating renewed academic interest in the topic.

Scientific production on ACAP in the public sector can therefore be characterized as both late-emerging and quantitatively limited. This scarcity should not necessarily be interpreted as academic resistance to applying the construct to public organizations. Rather, it may reflect conceptual and empirical challenges in reconciling a theory originally developed for market-oriented organizations with the distinctive characteristics of public management. Indeed, the institutional features of the public sector impose constraints and require theoretical adaptations.

In this regard, the limited body of research may indicate the inherent complexity of applying ACAP analytically to public organizations, thereby reinforcing the need for studies that critically examine this interface. Analyzing the geographical distribution of the studies is also important for identifying the countries in which this approach has attracted the greatest interest. Table 2 presents the countries in which empirical research on ACAP in the public sector was conducted, according to the analyzed sample.

Table 2

Countries in which empirical studies on absorptive capacity were conducted

Country	Frequency
Brazil	4
United States	3
United Kingdom	2
Canada	2
England	2
Australia	1
China	1
Mexico	1
Norway	1
New Zealand	1
Sweden	1

Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

Regarding the geographical distribution of publications, Brazil accounted for the largest number of identified empirical studies, with four articles, followed by the United States with three publications and the United Kingdom and Canada with two publications each. The remaining countries (Australia, China, Mexico, New Zealand, Sweden, and Pakistan) were represented by one publication each. Some studies, however, were conducted in more than one country.

Brazil's predominance may be understood in light of institutional and academic factors. First, the country has an established tradition of research in public administration and public policy, together with an empirically significant public sector that is extensive, decentralized, and marked by substantial challenges related to management, innovation, and performance. Furthermore, Brazilian scholarship has historically incorporated theoretical frameworks from strategic management and organizational studies from a critical perspective, which may facilitate the application of ACAP theory to public management.

Regarding geographical dispersion, the presence of studies conducted in several countries indicates an emerging international diffusion of the topic. This pattern is more consistent with the developing nature of research on ACAP in the public sector than with an established pattern of internationalization.

As shown in Table 3, the main sectors in which the studies were conducted primarily include state-owned enterprises operating in industries where services could, to some extent, also be provided by private organizations. These include agricultural companies, postal service providers, transportation companies, and the São Paulo Metropolitan Company. In these contexts, ACAP has been used to understand innovation processes, operational efficiency, and technological adaptation.

The second group comprises organizations responsible for services that are typically public in nature and exclusively provided by the state, including public administration bodies, local governments, and sectors directly involved in public policy formulation and implementation. These include public-sector organizations located in Hefei, Anhui Province, China; state information technology departments in the United States; information technology departments in semiurban, urban, and metropolitan municipalities in Mexico; public leisure facility managers in England; federal organizations in Canada; ministers, policymakers, and public-sector leaders in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom; public security organizations, specifically the police, in England; the information systems sector in

the United States; open-data initiatives in Brazil; municipal managers in Norway; and departments of higher education, primary and secondary healthcare, and social welfare within the Government of Punjab, Pakistan. In these cases, ACAP is more closely associated with institutional learning, public policy implementation, and public value creation under restrictive institutional conditions.

Table 3

Sectors in which the studies were conducted

State-owned enterprises	Transportation company – Sweden – 2013 to 2017
	Agricultural-sector company – Brazil – 2021
	Postal service company – United Kingdom – 2022
	State-owned enterprise – São Paulo Metropolitan Company – 2024
	State-owned enterprises – Brazil – 2024
Public administration/local governments	State information technology departments – United States – 2010
	Public leisure facility managers – England – 2012
	Municipal managers – Norway – 2014
	Federal organizations – Canada – 2015
	Public-sector organizations located in Hefei, Anhui Province – China – 2017
	State information technology departments – United States – 2018
	Ministers, policymakers, and public-sector leaders – Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom – 2019
	Information technology departments in semiurban, urban, and metropolitan municipalities – Mexico – 2020
	Public security—police – England – 2020
	Brazilian Executive Branch—public managers and federal civil servants – Brazil – 2021
	Information systems sector – United States and China – 2023
	Departments of higher education, primary and secondary healthcare, and social welfare within the Government of Punjab – Pakistan – 2024

Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

Regarding the methodological analysis of the reviewed articles, quantitative approaches predominated. As shown in Table 4, however, quantitative and qualitative approaches were employed in relatively similar proportions, reflecting the diversity of techniques and perspectives adopted in this field. Notably, most studies used questionnaires as their principal data collection instrument.

Table 4

Methodological approaches used in studies on absorptive capacity in the public sector

Approach		Total
Quantitative	11	17
Qualitative	5	
Mixed methods	1	
Data collection instruments		
Questionnaire	12	17
Interview	6	
Document analysis	3	

Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

Keywords are an effective tool for identifying emerging or dominant themes and trends, thereby facilitating the alignment of research agendas with areas of current relevance and scholarly interest.

By understanding which topics are gaining prominence, researchers can allocate their efforts and resources more effectively and plan future studies more strategically. Huang et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of this technique and described how it can contribute to the development and evolution of a field of study. By remaining aligned with emerging trends, research not only retains its relevance but may also anticipate and respond to future needs and questions within the field. The keywords used in the analyzed articles are presented in Figure 4, with ACAP, innovation, public sector, and dynamic capabilities emerging as the most prominent terms. These keywords indicate

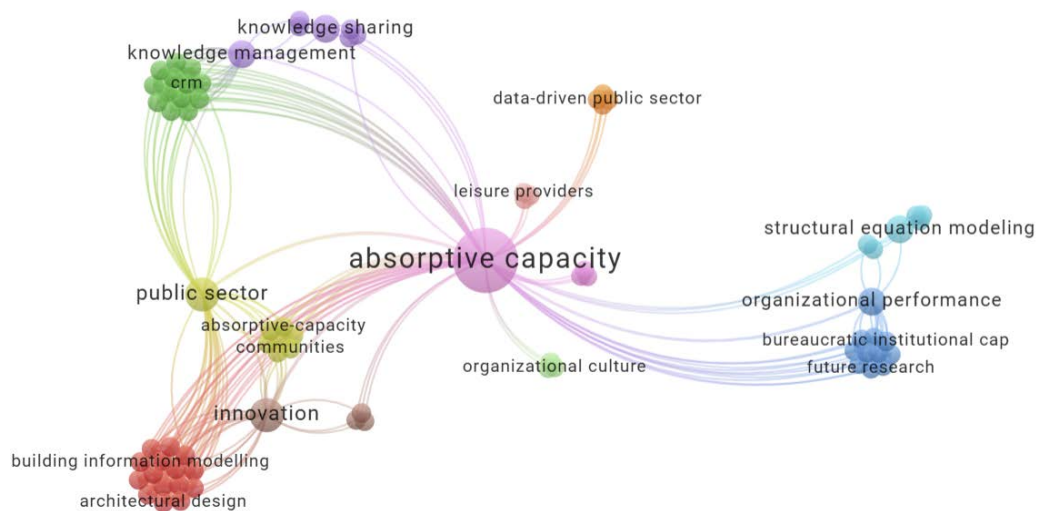
that the literature has used the construct to explain organizational change, learning, and performance improvement in public organizations.

Within this conceptual association, ACAP has been used as an explanatory link between the acquisition of external knowledge and administrative innovation, particularly in contexts involving the adoption of information technologies, the modernization of public management, and service improvement. At the same time, the recurring association with dynamic capabilities reinforces the understanding of ACAP as a central mechanism of organizational adaptation in complex institutional environments, where change tends to be incremental and constrained by formal rules and structures.

The keyword analysis also reveals thematic gaps, as ACAP appears to have been less frequently associated with traditional public management topics such as public policy formulation and implementation, accountability, interorganizational governance, and service coproduction. This absence suggests that, although the construct has been incorporated into the field, its application remains concentrated in specific areas of public management. This finding highlights opportunities for future research examining the relationship between ACAP and the challenges facing contemporary public administration.

Figure 4

Keyword clusters in the 17 selected articles.



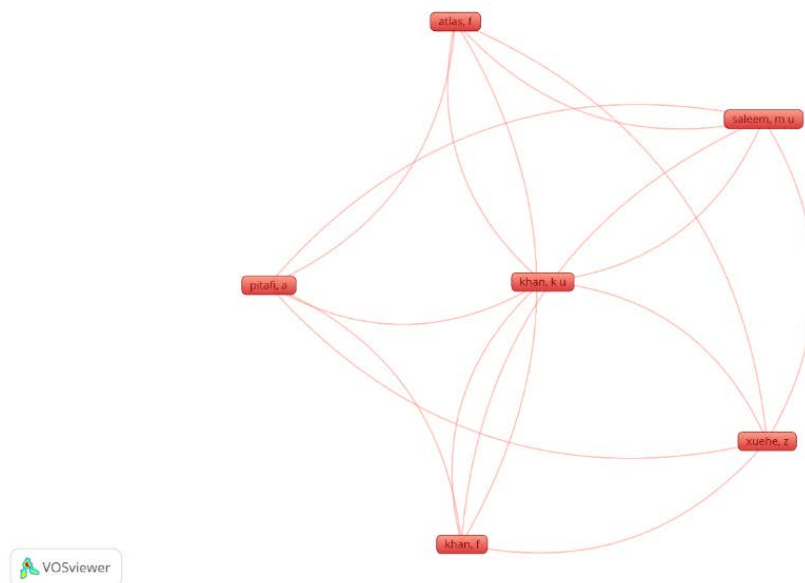
Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

Despite the limited number of articles and scholars examining ACAP in the public sector — 53 authors in total — the analysis sought to identify relationships among them through cluster analysis, as shown in Figure 5. The findings reveal a small group of six interconnected researchers interested in investigating ACAP within public services. This pattern differs substantially from research conducted in the private-sector context, where well-established and robust coauthorship networks already exist, reflecting the longer-standing tradition of research in that field.

Previous bibliometric studies of ACAP in private organizations have identified broader and more consolidated coauthorship networks, reflecting the greater maturity and longer tradition of this research field (Volberda et al., 2010; Apriliyanti & Alon, 2017). Accordingly, the configuration observed in the public sector is more consistent with the still-emerging and fragmented nature of this line of inquiry than with a lack of academic interest.

Figure 5

Coauthorship clusters in the 17 selected articles.

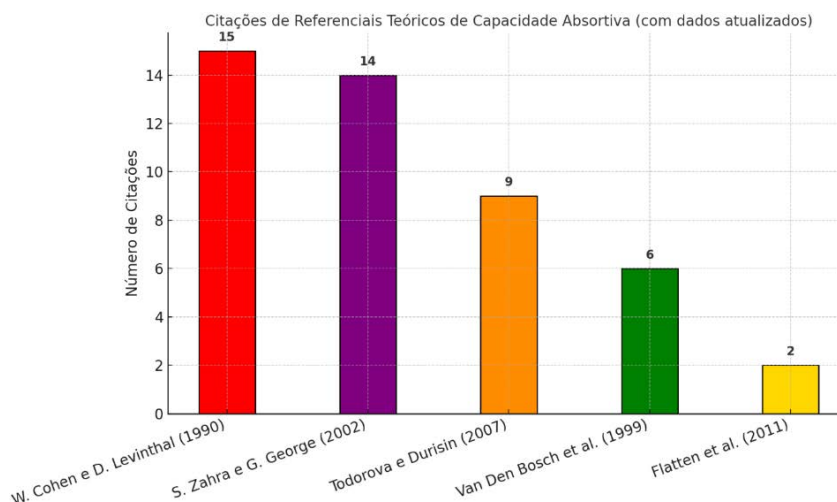


Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

Regarding the most frequently used ACAP models, Figure 6 shows a predominance of Cohen and Levinthal's (1990) seminal framework, including in more recent studies.

Figure 6

Most frequently cited authors in the 17 studies.



Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

Given the seminal nature of their work, it is unsurprising that Cohen and Levinthal (1990) are cited in most of the articles, either as the basis of the adopted model or as the starting point of the construct's theoretical development. What is particularly noteworthy is the considerable gap in the number of citations to Van den Bosch et al. (1999). Moreover, Zahra and George (2002) occupy a more prominent position within the analyzed corpus, serving as the principal theoretical framework for most of the studies.

The original approach proposed by Cohen and Levinthal (1990) is closely aligned with market-oriented innovation and the generation of competitive advantage, which may limit its explanatory capacity in noncompetitive contexts. In addition, the model tends to conceptualize ACAP as a relatively linear process, providing less analytical sensitivity

to the institutional, political, and organizational barriers that frequently hinder the transformation of knowledge into action in the public sector.

The incorporation of more recent models — such as that proposed by Zahra and George (2002) and the critiques advanced by Todorova and Durisin (2007) — allows for a more refined analysis of the tensions among learning, implementation, and public value creation.

By distinguishing between potential and realized ACAP, as proposed by Zahra and George (2002), studies can capture situations in which public organizations demonstrate a strong capacity for learning but face institutional, organizational, or political difficulties in transforming that knowledge into administrative innovation, service improvement, or enhanced institutional performance. Furthermore, the 17 articles were published in 17 different journals, all concentrated within the fields of management and administration, with no journal publishing more than one article on the topic. Table 5 lists the journals in which the analyzed articles were published.

Table 5

Journals in which the articles were published

Authors	Journal	CAPES Qualis, 2021–2024 Quadrennium	2023 Journal Citation Reports (JCR) Impact Factor	JCR Impact Factor Excluding Self-Citations
Parente et al. (2021).	Journal of International Business Studies	A1	8.6	7.6
Stark (2019).	Wiley Governance	n.a	6.4	6.3
Richards and Duxbury (2015).	Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory	A1	5.2	4.9
Khan et al. (2017).	Management Science	A1	4.6	4.2
Butler and Ferlie (2020).	British Journal of Management	A1	4.5	3.8
Hodgkinson et al. (2012).	Journal of Strategic Marketing	A1	3.7	3.4
Turner (2022).	Journal of Management and Organization	n.a	3.1	2.8
Lindblad and Karrbom Gustavsson (2021).	Construction Management and Economics	n.a	3.0	2.5
Liao et al. (2023).	Frontiers in Psychology	A2	2.6	2.3
Paulsen and Hjertø (2014).	Learning Organization	A2	2.6	1.9
Pinho et al. (2024).	International Journal of Public Sector Management	A1	2.5	2.1
Luna-Reyes et al. (2020).	Transforming Government	A1	2.4	2.2
Waheed (2024).	Review of Policy Research	A1	2.3	1.8
Riemenschneider et al. (2010).	Journal of Organizational Computing and Electronic Commerce	A2	2.0	1.7
Liu et al. (2018).	Communications of the Association for Information Systems	n.a	1.7	1.4
Frate and Bido (2024).	RAUSP Management Journal	A2	1.3	1.3
Oliveira et al. (2021).	JeDEM Issue	n.a	n.a	n.a

Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

Among these publications, the study by Parente et al. (2021), published in the Journal of International Business Studies, is particularly noteworthy because it appeared in a journal with a high impact factor. It should therefore receive close attention from scholars intending to conduct research on the topic. Moreover, with the exception of five journals for which no classification was identified, most are highly relevant outlets classified by CAPES as Qualis A1 or A2.

Another important finding is that, among the authors, only Liu et al. and Riemenschneider contributed to two publications on the topic. Liu et al. (2018), in particular, used the same empirical setting to conduct two distinct studies, resulting in two separate articles.

Finally, the number of citations received by each article was examined to assess its scholarly relevance, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Number of citations received by each article

Article	Number of citations
Richards and Duxbury (2015).	50
Lindblad and Karrbom Gustavsson (2021).	37
Hodgkinson et al. (2012).	32
Parente et al. (2021).	27
Luna-Reyes et al. (2020).	26
Stark (2019).	25
Paulsen and Hjertø (2014).	24
Riemenschneider et al. (2010).	17
Butler and Ferlie (2020).	14
Khan et al. (2017).	14
Liu et al. (2018).	10
Oliveira et al. (2021).	4
Liao et al. (2023).	3
Waheed (2024).	2
Frate and Bido (2024).	2
Turner (2022).	1
Pinho et al. (2024).	0

Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

The analysis shows that the most frequently cited article was that by Richards and Duxbury (2015), followed by Lindblad and Karrbom Gustavsson (2021) and Hodgkinson et al. (2012). Following the bibliometric analysis, the next section presents a qualitative analysis of the articles included in the sample.

Qualitative Analysis

A qualitative analysis of research on ACAP in the public sector makes it possible to identify the principal topics investigated and the main theoretical gaps. Table 7 first summarizes the key research themes.

Table 7

Main research themes in absorptive capacity in the public sector

Year	Theme
2010	External environment; absorptive potential
2012	Organizational learning environment at the market orientation–performance interface
2014	Role of individual- and group-level autonomy and ACAP in interorganizational knowledge transfer
2015	Knowledge acquisition
2017	Relationship between ACAP and dominant logic
2018	Precursors of ACAP and the potential antecedents of absorptive capacity
2019	Relationship between ACAP and organizational memory loss
2020	Relationship between ACAP and information technology governance
2020	Cross-sector transfer — a new ACAP framework for public service organizations: cocreation, testing, metamorphosis, and diffusion
2021	ACAP processes and the subsequent creation of an innovation ecosystem in an emerging economy
2021	Development of an instrument to assess factors associated with value creation through the use of open government data in the public sector
2021	Public-sector clients
2022	Prior knowledge
2023	Organizational capabilities, information systems-enabled ACAP, and organizational knowledge performance; the influence of legislative frameworks on ACAP
2024	Factors promoting innovative work behavior, with particular emphasis on individual absorptive capacity (IAC)
2024	How potential absorptive capacity (PACAP) and realized absorptive capacity (RACAP) influence project performance in resource-constrained public organizations
2024	Relationship among ACAP, entrepreneurial orientation, and organizational performance in Brazilian federal state-owned enterprises

Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

The analyzed articles reveal several relevant patterns and trends that help explain the impact of ACAP on innovation and public management.

One of the principal themes is the relationship between ACAP and innovation, particularly how public-sector organizations use their capacity to absorb knowledge to foster innovation. This relationship has been examined at the individual, group, organizational, and interorganizational levels, as well as in relation to the influence of the external environment.

Another recurring line of inquiry concerns the impact of ACAP on public management and public policy, particularly how this capability contributes to organizational efficiency, decision quality, and the development of more effective policies (Liao et al., 2023; Luna-Reyes et al., 2020; Parente et al., 2021).

The studies also examine the determinants of ACAP, with particular emphasis on prior knowledge, cultural factors, and technological factors (Liu et al., 2018). Cultural factors primarily concern organizational values, informal norms, attitudes toward learning and knowledge sharing, and the degree of autonomy granted to individuals and teams (Paulsen & Hjertø, 2014; Richards & Duxbury, 2015). Technological factors, by contrast, concern the adoption and use of information systems, digital platforms, and technological infrastructures that enable knowledge acquisition, dissemination, and integration within public organizations (Liao et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2018).

Finally, ACAP has been linked to other constructs, including knowledge acquisition and transfer, cocreation processes as an alternative to the mere acquisition of knowledge, interorganizational learning, individual and group autonomy, and organizational amnesia. These connections broaden the understanding of the mechanisms through which knowledge is mobilized in the public sector (Butler & Ferlie, 2020; Paulsen & Hjertø, 2014; Stark, 2019).

The principal findings indicate that public organizations with higher levels of ACAP innovate more rapidly, particularly in contexts of digital transformation. The development of information systems is therefore an essential component of knowledge assimilation and application.

Within public management, ACAP was found to be instrumental in improving operational efficiency and public service delivery, while also facilitating integration across sectors and promoting interorganizational collaboration. Key determinants include an organizational culture that supports learning, the availability of technological resources, and the continuous provision of training. Despite these benefits, however, ACAP faces challenges such as organizational resistance and structural, bureaucratic, and legislative barriers that hinder its full implementation.

The studies also identify several theoretical gaps that require further investigation. These include the need to diversify the scope of analysis across different levels of government, broaden the research settings examined, expand studies to sectors that are not traditionally market oriented, investigate the role of information systems in ACAP, examine interorganizational relationships and network collaboration, and employ a wider range of research methods, including longitudinal designs. Although some of these gaps have already been addressed in individual studies, many still require further investigation to consolidate a more robust theoretical body applicable across different contexts.

Oliveira et al. (2021) identified a shortage of studies examining different levels of government, including municipal and state administrations. Nevertheless, Luna-Reyes et al. (2020) investigated ACAP at the municipal level, whereas Riemenschneider et al. (2010) examined the construct in state agencies. Even so, substantial research gaps remain at each level of government because research on ACAP in the public sector as a whole is still at an early stage.

Butler and Ferlie (2020), in turn, emphasized that most studies focus on limited settings, typically one or two agencies or a single federal entity, thereby highlighting the need for large-scale research to understand the mechanisms of knowledge absorption in the public sector. As Ferlie et al. (2005) noted, it is essential to clarify the conditions under which innovations spread and how political pressure for improved performance affects ACAP.

The authors propose a reconceptualization of ACAP that is more closely aligned with institutional and nonmarket dynamics, replacing the conventional categories of acquisition, assimilation, transformation, and exploitation with a process model comprising cocreation, testing, metamorphosis, and diffusion. Cocreation refers to the joint development of knowledge by multiple actors — both internal and external to the organization — in contexts characterized by interaction, negotiation, and the coproduction of public value. Testing involves the practical and context-specific experimentation of this knowledge through projects, policies, or organizational routines, enabling incremental learning under conditions of uncertainty. Metamorphosis concerns the gradual incorporation of the tested knowledge into organizational structures, processes, and practices, entailing institutional change and the reconfiguration of routines. Finally, diffusion involves disseminating and internalizing this transformed knowledge throughout the organization and across public organizations, thereby consolidating its effects on performance and public value creation (Butler & Ferlie, 2020).

Hodgkinson et al. (2012) advanced the discussion of ACAP in the public sector by demonstrating that the adoption of practices traditionally associated with market orientation does not, in itself, automatically improve the performance of public organizations. The authors showed that, in public-sector contexts, the effectiveness of these practices depends on organizational ACAP, which acts as a moderating mechanism that filters, assimilates, and transforms external information into organizational responses consistent with the public mission. Based on an empirical study of public leisure service providers, the authors demonstrated that not all components of market orientation are universally beneficial, particularly in environments characterized by extensive bureaucracy, multiple stakeholders, and institutional constraints.

Liao et al. (2023) suggested the need to test additional information technology (IT) assets, such as artificial intelligence (AI), robotic process automation (RPA), and the Internet of Things (IoT), as mechanisms for enhancing ACAP in government departments. According to the authors, future studies could investigate how these assets improve the depth and breadth of organizational knowledge across different public-sector areas and geographical contexts.

Liu et al. (2018) also advocated examining the effects of standardized versus customized enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems on ACAP. The influence of specific roles within government IT departments also requires further investigation, as does the relationship between knowledge management and ACAP.

Lindblad and Karrbom Gustavsson (2021) and Paulsen and Hjertø (2014) emphasized that external relationships and interorganizational collaboration remain underexplored in the ACAP literature. They reported that, although analyses at the individual and organizational levels had already emerged, albeit to a limited extent, studies at the group level remained scarce. It should be noted, however, that studies such as Richards and Duxbury (2015) have already examined knowledge acquisition within work groups, although larger samples and more extensive multilevel studies are still needed.

Richards and Duxbury (2015) in turn emphasized the importance of studies with larger samples and more sophisticated methodologies, particularly to capture the complexity of ACAP across different organizational levels. Longitudinal research may also help explain how ACAP evolves over time, especially in response to management changes or the implementation of new technologies.

Riemenschneider et al. (2010) recommended further research to establish the causality of the relationships identified in existing studies. Methods such as in-depth interviews and case studies may help explain the factors that facilitate or impede knowledge absorption in government agencies. In addition, comparisons between the public and private sectors may provide useful insights into the different institutional conditions that affect ACAP.

Waheed (2024) in turn identified the scarcity of research on ACAP in social-sector projects, particularly in uncertain environments, as a theoretical gap. Most studies of ACAP focus on the private sector, leaving limited understanding of how the capability operates in public organizations and social projects.

By contrast, Pinho et al. (2024) identified a lack of studies integrating ACAP, entrepreneurial orientation (EO), and organizational performance (OP) in state-owned enterprises.

Finally, Frate and Bido (2024) identified a shortage of research on individual absorptive capacity (IAC) and its relationship with innovative work behavior (IWB), particularly regarding the moderating role of job autonomy. According to the authors, research also remains insufficient regarding the influence of non-work-related life experiences on IAC.

Regarding the current state of the art and directions for future research, some of the identified gaps have already been partially addressed in recent studies. Examples include the examination of different levels of government (Luna-Reyes et al., 2020; Riemenschneider et al., 2010), the analysis of ACAP in work groups (Richards & Duxbury, 2015), and the development of theoretical models for public service organizations (Butler & Ferlie, 2020).

Nevertheless, substantial opportunities remain for original research. These include examining the impact of emerging technologies, such as AI, RPA, and IoT, on the expansion of ACAP and organizational innovation in the public sector; investigating the relationship between market orientation and ACAP in public-sector areas that do not interact directly with end users; conducting longitudinal analyses to understand how ACAP evolves over time in public organizations, particularly in response to political and technological changes; undertaking in-depth studies of the influence of organizational culture and knowledge management on ACAP across different levels of government; and examining interorganizational collaboration and the effects of external networks on knowledge absorption in public institutions.

Final Considerations

The primary objective of this study was to map the research landscape on ACAP in the public sector and identify its specific characteristics. The intersection between ACAP and the public sector was clearly delineated, demonstrating how this approach can be effectively applied within this context.

The literature mapping provided insights into the evolution of the field between 1990 and 2025, highlighting the number of publications, international collaborations, the sectors in which the studies were conducted, the methodological approaches adopted, the most frequently used keywords, authorship clusters, and the ACAP models employed.

The findings indicate that scientific production on ACAP in the public sector is quantitatively limited and relatively recent. This pattern should not be interpreted as academic resistance but rather as a reflection of the tensions inherent in adapting a construct derived from a market-based logic to an institutional context characterized by limited competition, multiple stakeholders, legal constraints, and objectives oriented toward the public interest.

The analysis revealed a considerable concentration on the initial stages of the absorptive process, particularly knowledge acquisition and assimilation. The studies emphasized the importance of prior knowledge, the influence of the external environment on knowledge acquisition, cocreation as an alternative to the mere acquisition of knowledge, knowledge transfer, and the role of individual- and group-level autonomy in interorganizational knowledge transfer. By contrast, less attention has been devoted to the final stages of the process — knowledge transformation and exploitation — revealing an important gap in the literature, particularly regarding the conversion of knowledge into tangible outcomes such as improved public policy implementation and enhanced institutional performance.

Furthermore, some studies sought to relate ACAP to other constructs, including dominant logic, governance, innovation ecosystems, the role of the organizational learning environment, market orientation, institutional memory loss, the adoption of information systems (IS), organizational capabilities, IS-enabled ACAP, and organizational knowledge performance.

From a theoretical perspective, the seminal model proposed by Cohen and Levinthal (1990) continues to be used alongside the model developed by Zahra and George (2002), as also acknowledged by Murray et al. (2011). However, both models remain strongly grounded in the logic of the firm and competitive advantage, limiting their full applicability to the public sector. Within this context, the model proposed by Butler and Ferlie (2020) constitutes a relevant contribution because it reinterprets ACAP through the categories of cocreation, testing, metamorphosis, and diffusion, which are more compatible with the logic of public management. Public management is characterized by interaction among multiple actors, institutional experimentation, incremental adaptation, and the dissemination of practices throughout public services.

From a practical perspective, aligning the ACAP approach with the public sector may foster innovation and organizational learning, improve the performance of public organizations, and enhance the quality of services provided to users.

Among the dynamic capabilities, ACAP is particularly important to public organizations because it operates as an intermediary mechanism between external knowledge and public action. It therefore helps explain how information, rules, technologies, and practices are internalized, reinterpreted, and applied within complex institutional contexts.

In this regard, characteristics typically associated with the public sector, such as employment stability among civil servants, the continuity of organizational routines, and the centrality of institutional learning, may even strengthen the development of ACAP, particularly regarding the transfer and retention of organizational knowledge. ACAP therefore functions as a useful analytical framework for addressing recurring public management challenges, including inadequate policy implementation, the loss of institutional knowledge through organizational amnesia, and the difficulty of translating innovation into tangible outcomes for society.

Notwithstanding these contributions, this study is limited by the small number of empirical studies examining ACAP in the public sector, which reflects the still-emerging nature of this field of research. Rather than constituting merely a methodological constraint, this limitation highlights opportunities for further research that deepens the dialogue between ACAP theory and the central challenges of public management.

As a future research agenda, theoretical and empirical studies should investigate more systematically how ACAP can contribute to processes that are characteristic of public administration, including institutional learning, public policy implementation, administrative innovation, interorganizational coordination, and public value creation. Applied research across different types of public organizations (including public universities, central government bodies, regulatory agencies, and essential public service providers) may help explain how ACAP mechanisms operate under different institutional conditions. Such investigations may contribute both to the conceptual refinement of the construct and to its adaptation to the specific characteristics of public management. Finally, digital tools such as AI and IoT should be examined as potential mechanisms for developing ACAP in the public sector.

In summary, this study contributes to public organizations by demonstrating how they may benefit from applying the principles of ACAP to foster innovation and improve organizational performance. It also maps the relevant literature and identifies the principal theoretical gaps in the field.

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