

Interpersonal Relationships as a Sociological Factor in the Effectiveness of Knowledge Management Systems

Amanda Hribernik

International School for Social and Business Studies, Slovenia
amanda.hribernik@gmail.com

Zasl. Prof. Dr. Jana Goriup

International School for Social and Business Studies, Slovenia

Prof. Dr. Valerij Dermol

International School for Social and Business Studies, Slovenia

Abstract

Knowledge management systems (KMS) represent significant organizational investments, yet research consistently reports high failure rates and uneven adoption across sectors. While existing studies predominantly emphasize technological and structural determinants of KMS effectiveness, growing evidence suggests that knowledge sharing is fundamentally shaped by social and relational dynamics within organizations (Su, 2020; Ha et al., 2025).

This paper positions interpersonal relationships—encompassing trust, communication patterns, psychological safety, and informal networks—as central sociological factors influencing knowledge management effectiveness. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature from organizational sociology and knowledge management research, the paper synthesizes existing theoretical and empirical findings on how relational qualities such as interpersonal trust, emotional climate, and collaboration patterns affect knowledge-sharing behaviour and the functioning of both formal and informal knowledge channels (Figueiredo et al., 2025; Yuan et al., 2016).

Special attention is given to the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge transfer and to how interpersonal relationship quality may shape these processes within organizational knowledge management systems.

Based on this literature review, the paper develops a conceptual model linking interpersonal relationship quality to knowledge management system effectiveness and identifies key relational mechanisms that may mediate this relationship. By integrating sociological perspectives into knowledge management research, the study contributes to a more relational understanding of organizational knowledge processes and provides a

theoretical foundation for formulating a research question and guiding future empirical investigation into the relational determinants of knowledge management success.

Keywords: Interpersonal relationships, Knowledge management systems, Organizational sociology, Trust in organizations, Knowledge sharing, Tacit knowledge

1 INTRODUCTION

Organizations increasingly invest substantial resources in knowledge management systems (KMS) in order to improve organizational learning, innovation capacity, and decision-making quality. Despite these investments, many knowledge management initiatives fail to achieve their intended outcomes or experience low levels of employee engagement and knowledge-sharing activity. Traditional explanations of KMS effectiveness have largely focused on technological infrastructure, system usability, and formal organizational structures. However, such approaches often overlook the social context in which knowledge is created, shared, and applied.

In this study, knowledge management systems (KMS) are conceptualized primarily as information-technology-based organizational systems that facilitate the creation, storage, transfer, and practical application of both tacit and explicit knowledge.

Knowledge does not flow through organizations solely because formal systems exist; rather, it moves through relationships between individuals embedded in social and organizational networks (Anklam, 2002; Su, 2020). Employees are more likely to share knowledge when they trust their colleagues, perceive their environment as psychologically safe, and experience communication patterns that support openness and collaboration (Yuan et al., 2016; Ha et al., 2025). Conversely, hierarchical barriers, interpersonal conflict, or lack of emotional safety may inhibit knowledge sharing even in organizations equipped with advanced technological systems.

From the perspective of organizational sociology, knowledge can be understood as a socially embedded phenomenon shaped by interaction, culture, and relational dynamics rather than merely as information stored in databases or formal procedures. Interpersonal relationships—characterized by trust, communication quality, emotional connection, and informal networks—therefore represent a potentially decisive but underexamined factor in explaining differences in knowledge management system effectiveness across organizations (Figueiredo et al., 2025).

Although existing research acknowledges the importance of trust and collaboration in knowledge sharing, studies often examine these factors separately or treat them as secondary organizational variables. There remains a need for a more integrated conceptual understanding of interpersonal relationship quality as a multidimensional construct and for systematic examination of how relational dynamics influence knowledge management processes. Developing such an understanding is particularly important for identifying theoretical gaps and formulating research questions that connect sociological perspectives with knowledge management theory.

Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to review and synthesize existing literature on interpersonal relationships in organizational contexts, identify their key relational dimensions relevant for knowledge processes, and develop a conceptual model linking interpersonal relationship quality to knowledge

management system effectiveness. Particular attention is given to how relational conditions may influence the transfer of tacit and explicit knowledge, thereby providing a theoretical foundation for formulating a research question and guiding future empirical investigation into the relational determinants of organizational knowledge transfer.

1.1 Problem Definition

Despite decades of investment in knowledge management technologies, organizations continue to report high failure rates, low system adoption, and limited knowledge-sharing engagement. Existing explanations frequently emphasize technological limitations, system design, or organizational structure, yet these perspectives often fail to account for how knowledge actually moves between individuals in everyday organizational practice (Su, 2020; Curado et al., 2023).

A critical gap therefore remains in understanding the social mechanisms that facilitate or inhibit knowledge flow. In particular, the role of interpersonal relationships—encompassing trust, communication patterns, emotional climate, and informal networks—has not been sufficiently integrated into conceptual models of knowledge management system effectiveness. Prior research demonstrates that interpersonal trust, organizational justice, and psychological safety significantly influence knowledge-sharing behaviour and willingness to collaborate (Yuan et al., 2016; Sabahattin et al., 2022; Figueiredo et al., 2025).

Without examining these relational dimensions, it remains difficult to explain why similar technological solutions produce markedly different outcomes across organizations. Addressing this gap requires a clearer theoretical understanding of interpersonal relationship quality as a multidimensional sociological construct and its potential influence on knowledge management processes. This paper therefore approaches the problem from a conceptual and literature-based perspective, aiming to clarify the relational foundations of knowledge management effectiveness and to support the development of a focused research question for future empirical investigation.

2 CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS

2.1 Defining Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships refer to structured and dynamic connections between individuals that develop through repeated social interaction and are characterized by emotional exchange, communication processes, cognitive perceptions, and social expectations. In organizational settings, such relationships shape how individuals cooperate, exchange information, and coordinate activities.

From a theoretical perspective, interpersonal relationships can be understood as processes through which individuals reduce uncertainty, establish mutual understanding, and build relational stability through communication and interaction (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1987). Contemporary research further highlights that interpersonal relationships operate across both physical and digital environments, influencing participation, engagement, and information exchange within organizational and virtual communities (Li & Lee, 2013).

Within organizations, relationships are not merely personal connections but socially embedded mechanisms that structure how knowledge is accessed, interpreted, and shared. Organizational

sociology emphasizes that knowledge creation and transfer are inherently relational processes occurring through interaction rather than solely through formal systems or documented procedures (Gabbay & le May, 2004). This perspective suggests that interpersonal relationships constitute a foundational social infrastructure for organizational knowledge processes.

The distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge has been widely recognized in knowledge management theory, where tacit knowledge is understood as experiential and difficult to codify, while explicit knowledge can be formally articulated and stored in organizational systems (Nonaka, 1994).

In organizational settings, interpersonal relationships may take different forms, including formal hierarchical relationships, informal peer relationships, and broader professional network ties. Research in organizational sociology also distinguishes between strong ties, characterized by frequent interaction and emotional closeness, and weak ties, which connect individuals across departments or professional groups. While strong ties often facilitate the sharing of complex tacit knowledge through trust-based interaction, weak ties can support the diffusion of new ideas and information across organizational boundaries. Understanding these different types of relationships helps clarify how relational structures influence knowledge-sharing behaviour within knowledge management systems.

2.2 Key Relational Dimensions Relevant for Organizational Contexts

Existing literature conceptualizes interpersonal relationships as multidimensional constructs composed of several interrelated relational qualities that shape interaction patterns and collaboration outcomes.

2.2.1 Trust and Emotional Safety

Trust is widely recognized as a central relational dimension influencing cooperation and knowledge sharing. Interpersonal trust reduces perceived risks associated with sharing expertise, admitting uncertainty, or exposing incomplete knowledge, thereby facilitating collaborative behaviour (Yuan et al., 2016). Psychological safety—defined as the shared belief that individuals can express ideas or concerns without fear of negative consequences—further strengthens relational trust and promotes open communication and learning behaviour (Figueiredo et al., 2025). Conversely, breaches of trust, perceived injustice, or fear of judgment may significantly inhibit knowledge-sharing engagement (Sabahattin et al., 2022).

2.2.2 Communication Quality

Communication processes represent another essential dimension of interpersonal relationships. Effective relationships are characterized by openness, clarity, and reciprocal exchange of information, enabling individuals to interpret complex situations and coordinate actions. Communication quality influences how individuals construct shared meaning and understanding, which is critical for transferring both explicit and tacit knowledge within organizations (Ho et al., 2012).

2.2.3 Reciprocity, Power, and Relational Balance

Interpersonal relationships also involve structural aspects such as reciprocity, perceived fairness, and power distribution. Balanced relationships characterized by mutual exchange and recognition tend to foster cooperation and sustained knowledge exchange, while hierarchical distance or perceived inequity may suppress communication and reduce willingness to share knowledge (Nakash, 2025). Power

dynamics therefore shape not only access to knowledge but also individuals' readiness to contribute to collective learning processes.

2.2.4 Social Support and Relational Networks

Relational networks provide emotional, informational, and instrumental support that influences both individual well-being and collaborative effectiveness. Strong interpersonal support systems enhance organizational identification and strengthen motivation to contribute knowledge to collective processes (Lo et al., 2021). Social relationships embedded in everyday work interactions frequently function as informal pathways for problem solving and learning.

2.3 Interpersonal Relationships and Knowledge Processes

A growing body of research indicates that knowledge management effectiveness cannot be fully explained by technological or structural factors alone. Instead, knowledge flows predominantly through social interaction patterns and relational networks within organizations (Anklam, 2002; Su, 2020).

Interpersonal trust has been shown to facilitate both tacit and explicit knowledge sharing by reducing uncertainty and increasing perceived relational security (Yuan et al., 2016). Informal networks often act as primary conduits for knowledge exchange, as individuals tend to seek advice and share expertise within trusted relational circles rather than exclusively through formal systems (Su, 2020). Moreover, psychological safety and supportive communication climates significantly influence employees' willingness to engage in collaborative learning and contribute knowledge to organizational processes (Figueiredo et al., 2025).

These findings suggest that interpersonal relationship quality functions not only as a contextual factor but as an enabling mechanism shaping how knowledge is created, shared, and utilized. When relational conditions are supportive, formal knowledge management systems can amplify existing knowledge flows; when relational conditions are weak, even well-designed systems may remain underutilized.

2.4 Toward a Relational Perspective on Knowledge Management

Taken together, the reviewed literature indicates that interpersonal relationships constitute a multidimensional sociological construct encompassing trust, communication quality, relational balance, and social support networks, and these relational dimensions influence how individuals interpret organizational norms, engage in collaboration, and participate in knowledge-related activities.

Understanding knowledge management from this relational perspective allows for a shift away from purely technological explanations toward a more integrated view in which organizational knowledge processes emerge from interaction between social relationships and formal systems. This conceptual foundation provides the basis for developing a framework that links interpersonal relationship quality to knowledge management system effectiveness and for formulating a focused research question guiding future empirical investigation.

3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL

3.1 Research Question Development

Building on the reviewed literature and the proposed conceptual framework, this study seeks to clarify the relational foundations of organizational knowledge transfer. Prior research indicates that interpersonal trust, communication climate, and psychological safety strongly influence knowledge-sharing behaviour, particularly in situations involving tacit knowledge that cannot easily be codified or transmitted through formal systems (Yuan et al., 2016; Su, 2020). At the same time, explicit knowledge is often embedded in formal knowledge management systems, yet its effective use may still depend on relational factors such as collaboration patterns and perceived organizational support.

This distinction suggests that interpersonal relationship quality may influence tacit and explicit knowledge transfer in different ways and to different degrees. Understanding these differences is essential for developing a more relationally grounded perspective on knowledge management and for explaining variations in the effectiveness of organizational knowledge systems.

Accordingly, the central research question guiding future empirical investigation is:

How does interpersonal relationship quality influence the transfer of tacit and explicit knowledge within organizational knowledge management systems?

To further specify this inquiry, the research may also address the following sub-questions:

1. Which relational dimensions (e.g., trust, communication quality, psychological safety, social support) most strongly influence tacit knowledge sharing?
2. How do interpersonal relationships affect employees' willingness to codify, access, and reuse explicit knowledge within formal systems?
3. How do informal relational networks mediate the interaction between tacit knowledge exchange and formal knowledge management structures?

These questions establish a focused analytical direction and integrate sociological perspectives on interpersonal relationships with core knowledge management theory concerning tacit and explicit knowledge transfer.

3.2 Conceptual Model

Based on the literature synthesis, this study proposes a conceptual framework in which interpersonal relationship quality represents the primary explanatory construct influencing knowledge management system effectiveness.

The reviewed literature suggests that interpersonal relationships play a central role in shaping how knowledge is created, shared, and utilized within organizations. While knowledge management systems are designed to support knowledge acquisition, storage, and dissemination, their practical effectiveness largely depends on the social conditions under which employees interact and collaborate.

Interpersonal relationship quality can therefore be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing trust, communication quality, relational balance, and social support. These relational dimensions influence employees' perceptions of safety, reciprocity, and value within the organization, which in turn shape their willingness to share expertise, seek advice, and participate in collaborative learning processes (Yuan et al., 2016; Figueiredo et al., 2025).

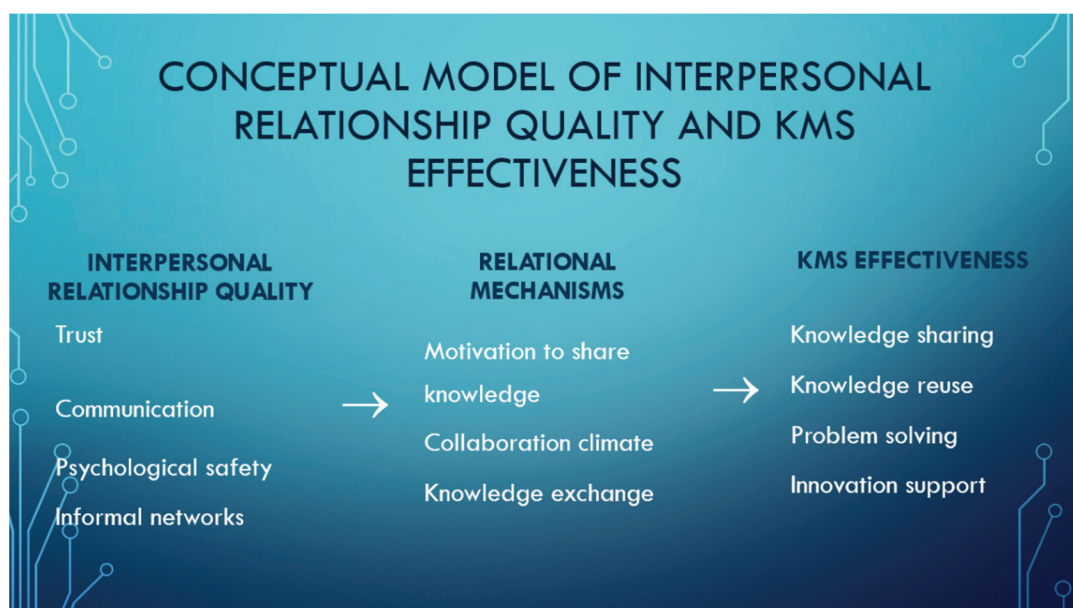
Research indicates that trust-based environments encourage more frequent knowledge exchange and reduce knowledge-hiding behaviours, while supportive communication climates facilitate the interpretation and transfer of tacit knowledge that cannot easily be codified in formal systems (Su, 2020; Curado et al., 2023). Informal relational networks further act as key channels through which knowledge flows in everyday organizational practice, often complementing or even surpassing formal knowledge management infrastructures (Anklam, 2002).

From this perspective, interpersonal relationship quality does not function merely as a background organizational condition but as an enabling mechanism through which knowledge management systems become operational in practice. Strong relational environments may amplify the effectiveness of formal systems, whereas weak relational climates may limit system use regardless of technological sophistication.

The influence of interpersonal relationship quality on knowledge management system effectiveness can be better understood through several relational mechanisms that mediate this relationship. For example, interpersonal trust and psychological safety may increase employees' willingness to share tacit knowledge and participate in collaborative problem-solving activities. Open and transparent communication patterns further facilitate the interpretation and practical use of knowledge stored in organizational systems. These relational mechanisms therefore function as mediating processes through which interpersonal relationship quality translates into observable knowledge-sharing behaviour and improved effectiveness of knowledge management systems.

The conceptual model developed in this paper is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual model of interpersonal relationship quality and KMS effectiveness



Interpersonal relationship quality is understood as a multidimensional independent construct consisting of:

- emotional trust and psychological safety,
- communication openness and clarity,
- relational reciprocity and perceived fairness,
- social support and collaborative networks.

These relational dimensions are expected to influence knowledge management effectiveness through several relational mechanisms, including:

- the development of a trust climate,
- increased motivation for knowledge sharing,
- higher collaboration intensity,
- reduced knowledge hiding or withholding behaviour, and
- stronger integration between informal knowledge networks and formal knowledge systems.

Knowledge management system effectiveness may be reflected in outcomes such as increased knowledge-sharing frequency, improved knowledge reuse, faster problem solving, enhanced decision-making quality, and greater innovation potential.

This framework positions interpersonal relationships as a foundational sociological layer underlying organizational knowledge processes and highlights the importance of examining relational mechanisms alongside technological and structural factors.

4 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The literature reviewed in this paper highlights that knowledge management effectiveness cannot be fully understood through technological or structural perspectives alone. Instead, organizational knowledge processes emerge from the interaction between formal systems and the relational environments in which employees operate (Anklam, 2002; Su, 2020). By conceptualizing interpersonal relationship quality as a multidimensional construct—including trust, communication quality, relational balance, and social support—this study contributes to a more socially grounded understanding of knowledge management.

A key implication of this perspective is the recognition that interpersonal relationships may influence different types of knowledge in distinct ways. Tacit knowledge, which is experience-based, context-dependent, and difficult to codify, typically relies on interpersonal trust, informal interaction, and psychologically safe communication environments for its transfer (Yuan et al., 2016; Figueiredo et al., 2025). In contrast, explicit knowledge can be formally documented and stored in knowledge management systems; however, its interpretation, reuse, and practical application still depend on collaborative interaction and shared understanding among organizational members (Ho et al., 2012; Vătămănescu et al., 2022). This suggests that even technologically advanced knowledge management systems remain relationally mediated in practice.

The importance of relational dynamics may vary across different organizational contexts. Knowledge-intensive environments such as healthcare organizations, research institutions, and project-based teams often rely heavily on tacit knowledge exchange and collaborative learning. In such settings, interpersonal trust, communication openness, and informal relational networks may play a particularly significant role in enabling knowledge management systems to function effectively. Understanding the contextual conditions under which relational factors become especially relevant may therefore help explain variations in knowledge management outcomes across organizations.

The proposed conceptual framework therefore extends existing knowledge management research by integrating sociological insights into how relational dynamics shape knowledge transfer processes. While prior studies often examine trust, collaboration, leadership, or organizational culture as separate variables, this study positions interpersonal relationship quality as an overarching relational infrastructure that enables or constrains knowledge flow (Shwayat et al., 2021; Ha et al., 2025). Such an approach provides a more coherent theoretical basis for explaining why organizations with similar technological capabilities may experience markedly different knowledge management outcomes.

From a practical perspective, the reviewed research implies that organizations seeking to improve knowledge management effectiveness should not focus exclusively on system design or digital infrastructure. Attention should also be directed toward strengthening relational conditions that support knowledge exchange, such as fostering trust-based work environments, encouraging open communication, and supporting informal collaboration networks (Lo et al., 2021; Su, 2020). Organizational initiatives aimed at improving psychological safety, fairness, and cross-level interaction may therefore indirectly enhance both tacit and explicit knowledge transfer (Sabahattin et al., 2022; Figueiredo et al., 2025).

Finally, this conceptual discussion establishes a foundation for future empirical research examining how interpersonal relationship quality shapes knowledge transfer mechanisms in real organizational settings. By distinguishing between tacit and explicit knowledge processes, future studies can more precisely investigate the relational conditions under which knowledge management systems function effectively and identify which relational dimensions most strongly influence organizational learning and knowledge sharing (Curado et al., 2023; Figueiredo et al., 2025).

5 CONCLUSION

This paper set out to examine the role of interpersonal relationships as a sociological foundation of knowledge management processes. Through a review of interdisciplinary literature, the study has shown that knowledge management effectiveness cannot be explained solely by technological infrastructure or formal organizational structures. Instead, knowledge creation, sharing, and utilization are deeply embedded in relational environments shaped by trust, communication patterns, social support, and informal interaction networks (Anklam, 2002; Su, 2020).

By conceptualizing interpersonal relationship quality as a multidimensional construct and linking it to organizational knowledge processes, the paper contributes to a more relationally grounded understanding of knowledge management. Particular emphasis has been placed on the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge transfer, highlighting that tacit knowledge exchange is especially dependent on trust-based interaction and psychologically safe environments, while even explicit

knowledge use remains influenced by collaborative interpretation and relational context (Yuan et al., 2016; Figueiredo et al., 2025).

The proposed conceptual framework provides a theoretical basis for examining how interpersonal relationship quality may influence knowledge management system effectiveness through relational mechanisms such as trust climate, communication openness, and informal collaboration networks. Building on this framework, the study formulates a research question focused on how interpersonal relationships shape the transfer of tacit and explicit knowledge in organizational settings.

Future empirical research could test the proposed conceptual model using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. For example, qualitative interviews with employees could provide insight into how interpersonal trust, communication patterns, and psychological safety influence knowledge-sharing behaviour in everyday organizational practice. In addition, survey-based studies could examine the relationships between relational dimensions and knowledge management outcomes across different organizational contexts. Social network analysis may further help to explore how informal relational networks shape knowledge flows within organizations and interact with formal knowledge management systems.

Future research should empirically investigate these relational mechanisms across different organizational contexts in order to identify which dimensions of interpersonal relationship quality most strongly influence knowledge transfer and organizational learning outcomes. Such research may support the development of more human-centered knowledge management strategies that integrate technological systems with relational and sociological insights.

6 REFERENCES

- Anklam, P. (2002). Knowledge management: The collaboration thread. *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 28(5), 8–13. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bult.254>
- Curado, C., Araujo, C., Oliveira, M., & Teixeira, J. (2023). Practices that mitigate organizational knowledge hiding: A systematic literature review. *European Conference on Knowledge Management Proceedings*, 24(2), 1579. <https://doi.org/10.34190/eckm.24.2.1579>
- Figueiredo, P., Rodrigues, R., & Diogo, A. (2025). From safety to sharing: A bibliometric mapping of psychological safety, knowledge management, and organizational learning. *Administrative Sciences*, 15(11), 427. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci15110427>
- Gabbay, J., & le May, A. (2004). Evidence based guidelines or collectively constructed mindlines? Ethnographic study of knowledge management in primary care. *BMJ*, 329(7473), 1013. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.329.7473.1013>
- Ha, Y., Kim, K. N., & Jeong, S. (2025). The impact of transformational leadership on knowledge creation: A serial mediation of interpersonal relationships and learning organizations. *European Journal of Training and Development*, 49(5), 26. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ejtd-02-2025-0026>
- Ho, L., Kuo, T., & Lin, B. (2012). How social identification and trust influence organizational online knowledge sharing. *Journal of Information Science*, 38(1), 12–27.
- Lo, M., Tian, F., & Ng, P. (2021). Top management support and knowledge sharing: The strategic role of affiliation and trust in academic environment. *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 25(3), 800. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JKM-10-2020-0800>
- Nakash, M. (2025). Sharing as power: Key strategies for breaking knowledge silos. *European Conference on Knowledge Management Proceedings*, 26(1).
- Nonaka, I. (1994). A dynamic theory of organizational knowledge creation. *Organization Science*, 5(1), 14–37. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.5.1.14>

- Sabahattin, C., Davarci, M., & Karaka, A. (2022). The impact of organizational justice and trust on knowledge sharing behaviour. *Bulletin of the National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage*, 13(3), 47–58.
- Shwayat, D. A., MacVaugh, J., & Akbar, H. (2021). A multi-level perspective on trust, collaboration and knowledge sharing cultures in a highly formalized organization. *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 25(3), 354.
- Su, C. (2020). To share or hide? A social network approach to understanding knowledge sharing and hiding in organizational work teams. *Communication Research Reports*, 37(1), 35–49.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318920985178>
- Vătmănescu, E., Bratianu, C., Dabija, D., & Popa, S. (2022). Capitalizing online knowledge networks: From individual knowledge acquisition towards organizational achievements. *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 26(8), 273.
- Yuan, X., Olfman, L., & Yi, J. (2016). How do institution-based trust and interpersonal trust affect interdepartmental knowledge sharing? *Information Resources Management Journal*, 29(1), 102.