What Knowledge Management is Not

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Abstract: *Purpose*: This conceptual paper aims to initiate a discussion and raise awareness about some of the misinterpretations of Knowledge Management (KM) that we have observed in recent conferences and academic papers. We contend that continuing to ignore these misconceptions might jeopardize the future of KM within the emerging Super Smart Society. *Method*: The essay begins with an introduction that outlines the problem and its extent. The second section examines significant misuses and misinterpretations of KM in the literature. For each theme, the essay critiques the inappropriate application of KM and offers clarifications to distinguish its true nature. The themes discussed include: KM is not synonymous with *innovation*; KM is distinct from *dynamic capabilities*; and KM is not merely an extension of *organizational learning*. The third section revisits the origins of KM, exploring how seminal scholars originally conceptualized it—shifting the perspective from a Newtonian framework to one that embraces uncertainty through people and practices. The human-centred nature of KM is emphasized, particularly in relation to how individuals address knowledge uncertainties and absences. The essay concludes by reflecting on the future of KM within the paradigm of Society 5.0. *Outcome and Contribution*: The essay highlights numerous instances in which more established fields tend to overshadow knowledge management (KM)—a persistent trend. Old habits die hard, and KM appears increasingly isolated within the strategy literature, particularly in the post-1995 era. A pervasive industrial mindset continues to frame KM as a positivistic tool, despite warnings from seminal scholars. Considering the emerging human-centred paradigm, this essay seeks to reassert KM's centrality as a standalone field within Strategic Management. By revisiting KM's origins and clarifying its distinct identity in relation to adjacent disciplines, the essay contributes to a deeper understanding of the field and its evolving role within the context of Society 5.0.

Keywords: Knowledge management, Innovation, Organizational learning, Dynamic capabilities, Human-centred

1. Introduction

Knowledge Management (KM) remains a relatively young discipline within Management and Organization Studies, having emerged just over 30 years ago. From its tentative beginnings in the early 1990s, it has steadily evolved into a recognized field, supported by dedicated academic journals such as *The Journal of Knowledge Management*, *Knowledge Management Research and Practice*, and *The International Journal of Knowledge Management Studies*. Despite its notable achievements, the future of KM remains uncertain. Adjacent and often more established disciplines are gaining prominence—or are increasingly being conflated with KM—as reflected in recent publications and conference presentations. This paper contends that such developments warrant critical examination and should not be passively accepted.

Why, then, is it crucial for scholars to confront the current ambiguity surrounding KM and ensure that their efforts are directed toward the most pressing and relevant issues? The most immediate reason is tautological: the field has taken its current shape because it is essential and supports organizational development. In the 1990s and 2000s, as value creation shifted from brick-and-mortar (tangible asset-based) businesses to those driven by intangible assets, we must acknowledge the 'magic' that enabled this transformation. Nonaka (1991) emphasized the role of organizational knowledge as a lever for achieving sustainable competitive advantage. As a result, both practitioners and scholars were compelled to engage with this phenomenon, and a language was developed to articulate it (Spender, 2013). A second reason is more forward-looking: for the first time since the Industrial Revolution, we are entering an era that may allow us to place people and the planet at the center of societal development. Japan refers to this vision as *Society 5.0* (Cabinet Office, 2015).

In the first section of this paper, we examine the overlap between Knowledge Management (KM) and neighboring fields—namely innovation, dynamic capabilities (DC), and organizational learning (OL). We provide examples of how these intersections are addressed in the literature, before clarifying what makes KM fundamentally distinct and incompatible with being merely a blend of these domains. KM has emerged as a field whose dimensions and substance have consistently been challenging to define. Therefore, in the following section, we explore the nature of KM, emphasizing its human-centric orientation. The final section envisions the role and evolution of KM within the context of a Super Smart Society.

2. Knowledge Management and Adjacent Fields

2.1 Knowledge Management and Innovation

KM and innovation are not interchangeable concepts, but rather complementary ones. Nevertheless, confusion between the two is frequently observed in the literature (e.g., Nowacki & Bachnik, 2016). This confusion is understandable, as innovation inherently involves the notion of creation, a concept that can be traced back to Schumpeter's theory of *creative destruction*. To clarify the distinction, we will examine several leading theories of innovation and highlight how they differ from KM in both purpose and process.

Von Hippel (1988; 2005) emphasized the role of external users—particularly lead users—as primary sources of innovation, highlighting their involvement in initiating new product development. In contrast, KM focuses on internal organizational processes and the knowledge generated within them. The dynamics of knowledge creation, storage, and retrieval are largely governed by internal mechanisms (Bolisani & Bratianu, 2018). While user-driven innovation centers on the contributions of external actors, KM is more concerned with systematic internal processes and the use of technology to manage knowledge within the organization (Edwards et al., 2005). Moreover, KM encompasses a broader range of dimensions related to the overall management of knowledge—such as its creation, storage, retrieval, and application—not limited to innovation or product development (Kianto et al., 2014).

Similar differences in focus and methodology can be observed in the work of Chesbrough (2003), who introduced the concept of *open innovation*. He proposed that firms should leverage both external and internal ideas and technologies to enhance their innovation processes. Chesbrough emphasizes collaboration with external partners and conceptualizes innovation through an aggregated lens: inbound and outbound flows of knowledge enable organizations to integrate external insights into their internal ecosystems and to commercialize innovations through external channels (Chesbrough, 2007). Following the publication of his foundational book in 2003, Chesbrough's work has centered on the role of business models in shaping how firms create, deliver, and capture value. This perspective contrasts with KM, which is more internally focused and concerned with the systematic management of knowledge across the organization rather than the strategic orchestration of innovation networks.

Although both KM and open innovation aim to leverage knowledge to enhance organizational performance, they differ fundamentally in focus and approach. From a knowledge management systems perspective, KM examines the broader organizational processes through which knowledge is created, stored, shared, and applied to sustain competitive advantage and improve performance (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Alavi & Denford, 2011). Building on the work of Nonaka and Takeuchi (2021), KM practices emphasize the conversion of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge and its dissemination across the organization. The ultimate goal is the achievement of *organizational wisdom*—a holistic and strategic orientation that extends beyond product development. While innovation may be a key outcome, it represents a shift in focus from KM to innovation-specific processes (Shafique et al., 2022). Finally, as Chesbrough (2003) describes, open innovation advocates for the creation of ecosystems that facilitate knowledge exchange across organizational boundaries. In contrast, KM relies on systematic internal processes and technologies to manage knowledge within the organization (Magnus & Iguehi, 2017).

Cohen and Levinthal (1989; 1990) introduced the absorptive capacity describing it as an organization s' ability to recognize the value of new external information, assimilate it, and apply it to develop commercial products or services. Their approach emphasizes the importance of identifying and integrating external knowledge into the firm's operations through learning capabilities and innovation mechanisms, rather than through ad hoc KM practices. In this framework, the use of knowledge is treated as a "black box," where assimilation and application occur through the firm's internal capabilities. The focus remains at the organizational level, with little consideration given to the role of the individual. Absorptive capacity theory is notably broad, leading scholars to consider it "as a by-product not only of R&D activities, but also of the diversity or breadth of the organization's knowledge base, its prior learning experience, a shared language, the existence of cross-functional interfaces, and the mental models and problem-solving capacity of the organization's members" (Camisón and Forés, 2010, p. 708).

Considering the approaches of Von Hippel (1988; 2005), Chesbrough (2003; 2007), or Von Hippel (1990), the primary focus lies in the organization's connection to external influences—such as collaboration with external partners, user-driven innovation, and the integration of external knowledge. These perspectives are primarily concerned with product and service development, rather than with the nuanced processes through which tacit

and explicit knowledge are exchanged. What these accounts share is a strategic, aggregated viewpoint, typically situated at the organizational level. In contrast, Knowledge Management (KM) operates across both the individual and organizational levels. KM acknowledges that knowledge originates at the individual level and must be effectively captured, shared, and applied within the broader organizational context.

2.2 Knowledge Management and Dynamic Capabilities

The highly influential Dynamic Capabilities (DC) theory focuses on a firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments. DC are distinct from ordinary capabilities, which support current operations. They involve sensing (opportunities and threats), seizing (mobilizing resources to capture value), and transforming the organization (Teece et al., 2007, p. 1342). While the principles are compelling, DC theory remains broad and difficult to operationalize. It operates at the organizational or meso-level—not the individual level.

Recent literature introducing knowledge-based dynamic capabilities (Kaur, 2019) often positions KM as a sub-field of DC (e.g., Tamirat & Amentie, 2023; Cordeiro et al., 2023; Denford, 2013). Knowledge-based DC (KBDCs) are viewed as an extension of the DC framework. Within this literature, capabilities are defined as essential resources for driving and managing technical change, including skills, knowledge, experience, organizational structure, and linkages (Sinkovics et al., 2018). Kaur (2019) further classifies KM-related processes and capabilities as dynamic capabilities. The DC framework focuses on an organization's ability to adapt to environmental change—essentially, the adaptation of the firm's system (meso level) to the macro environment. Arifin (2017) notes that DCs are knowledge-based, meaning that only knowledge processes and capabilities—treated at the same level—can gather and respond to changes in the business environment.

KBDC is an ambitious framework. Beyond its organizational focus, it relies on KM to engage with the macro level—that is, the environmental conditions to which firms must adapt. Through the sensing, seizing, and transforming structure, KM processes are mobilized to meet the need for dynamism that Teece, and arguably KBDC proponents, have overlooked. While this discussion could be extended, it would stray from our central argument. We view the conflation of DC and KM as an unfortunate development, especially as KM is increasingly treated as a mere toolbox. This integration often neglects the complexity and distinctiveness of KM. The field did not emerge as a set of eclectic concepts to be absorbed by adjacent frameworks. DC is compelling in its simplicity, offering a three-step model with accessible semantics. In contrast, KM models such as Nonaka's SECI (1994) are less widely adopted, likely due to the more abstract interplay between tacit and explicit knowledge. Similarly, Alavi and Leidner's (2001) triadic model—knowledge creation, storage and retrieval, and transfer and application—remains difficult to implement, partly due to the lack of consensus around its core concepts. of knowledge nor on the priority given to the firm's knowledge or the individual's knowledge. More about this in the second section of this paper.

2.3 Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning

A third field that we have identified as threatening the future of KM—regarding the way the concepts are handled—is Organizational Learning (OL). Two examples in the literature help outline the issue. (1) Castaneda et al. (2018) argue that OL processes such as knowledge creation and acquisition are now considered part of KM. Interestingly, the authors suggest in their literature review that KM has absorbed OL, providing more substance or meaning to OL. Another example is owed to (2) Argote et al. (2021), who categorize OL into three processes: knowledge creation, retention, and transfer, defining OL as converting experience into knowledge that impacts future performance. The text criticizes the narrow understanding of KM, which reduces it to a subset of OL, and argues that this approach creates confusion about the true nature of KM. Other examples of the overlap between OL and KM exist in the literature (e.g., Garvin et al., 2008; Noruzi et al., 2013).

These developments suggest that OL and KM are overlapping terms and can be used interchangeably. Our point is not about which field should absorb the other, but rather to emphasize that both KM and OL have their own standing and understanding. Both are relevant as they are for organizations, with OL being concerned with organizations' capabilities and KM with individuals' minds and organizational knowledge. OL and KM might be articulated together for some specific strategies, but claiming that one of these fields should be absorbed by the other is a far stretch.

At this juncture, we argue that KM is in danger of being diluted into neighboring fields. In the above section, we shared only a few examples from the literature where such attempts at dilution are occurring. However, this is a trend we find problematic. KM operates at the micro level of organizations; it goes beyond viewing individuals as mere units of labor, focusing instead on people's know-how and know-what, and how this is aggregated to

form organizational knowledge. KM involves practices (Kianto et al., 2019; Andreeva & Kianto, 2012)—the underlying and often difficult-to-define mechanisms that enable organizational knowledge to emerge and drive firm performance. KM is also a deeply human-centered concept, concerned with the grey matter and emotions that underpin knowledge and knowing. In contrast, innovation, DC, and OL are primarily focused on activities at the organizational level and its interface with the external environment—not at the level of the human mind. KM is positioned at a much earlier stage in the value creation process.

3. Knowledge Management: Why and What

Many attempts have been made to define KM, its dimensions, and its philosophical foundations—whether through dedicated papers (e.g., Demarest, 1997; Rowley, 1999; Barley, Trim, & Kuhn, 2018; Chopra et al., 2021; de Bem Machado et al., 2022) or as part of broader scholarly work (e.g., Nezafati et al., 2023; Sumbal & Amber, 2024; Alfiero et al., 2025). Yet, what KM truly is continues to elude our understanding. Without claiming to resolve this conundrum—which extends beyond the scope of this paper—we offer some reflections on the reasons behind KM's development. We then elaborate on our belief that KM's human-centricity is what fundamentally distinguishes it from innovation, DC, or OL.

3.1 Rationale Underpinning the Emergence of KM

KM as a field can be traced back to scholars who developed the knowledge-based view of the firm (KBV) (Spender, 1996; Grant, 1996) and to those who coined the phrase *organizational knowledge* (Nonaka, 1994). These scholars were concerned with how managers and their organizations faced uncertainty and how they could develop sustainable competitive advantage based on the skills and minds of the firm's workers. To achieve this, a critical reflection on the evolving resource-based view (RBV) of the firm (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984) was undertaken. Moving from the Newtonian-inspired RBV to the more empirically grounded KBV required a philosophical shift, as advocated by these same authors. Abandoning Descartes' skepticism about sensory experience and embracing Locke's emphasis on empirical evidence as a source of knowledge was a necessary step—one that laid the foundation for the KBV movement.

Scholars and managers began focusing on the subtle, everyday actions of workers in successful organizations, as seen in Japan (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), uncovering the deep cognitive dynamics linking the human mind to action (Blackler, 1993; 1995), and understanding the firm as a distributed knowledge system (Tsoukas, 1996; Grant, 1996), among others.

KM is more of an emergent concept than a top-down one, where a grand theory can be applied as a recipe for success. Each organization has its own dynamic, and its workers are unique. KM is about understanding and improving the mechanisms behind knowledge creation to enhance performance, while also integrating organizational-level dynamics (Alavi & Leidner, 2001).

3.2 KM is Human-Centred

KM is primarily human-centered. What does this mean? Polanyi (1962), in *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*—one of the foundational texts that inspired the development of KM—challenged the dominant view of objective, impersonal knowledge in scientific thinking. In 1975, he expanded the notion of tacit knowledge. His central argument is that all knowledge is inherently personal and involves the active participation of the knower. In *The Tacit Dimension* (1966), Polanyi famously stated, "we know more than we can tell," meaning that much of our knowledge is understood and applied without being explicitly articulated. This challenges the earlier notion of skepticism. Polanyi emphasizes the role of established beliefs and personal commitment in the process of knowing. We argue that this tacit dimension is crucial in how people identify and address knowledge uncertainties and absences.

Moreover, knowledge is fundamentally collective, as people learn from the group before internally processing what they have encountered. Drawing on Wittgenstein's idea that knowledge is inherently social, Tsoukas and Vladimirou (2001) offer one of the most explicit definitions of organizational knowledge: the capability of members to draw distinctions in their work based on collective understandings. For them, KM should focus on identifying unreflective practices and transforming them into reflective ones. This involves elucidating the rules that guide activities and enabling the emergence of heuristic knowledge.

Thus, KM is concerned with the human mind and how it evolves and becomes creative within the collective arena. This involves processes and dynamics rooted in people's experience and deep consciousness. Because knowledge is inherently human, emotions and feelings also play a role in its creation—a dimension often overlooked because it does not align with the Newtonian canon.

4. What's Next? KM and Super Smart Societies

We can conclude that (1) KM is under threat, and (2) it is misunderstood. (1) The first section of this paper introduced three instances where KM was misused and distorted by post-positivist mindsets. In other words, knowledge was objectified and forcefully framed around organizational-level actions. Yet, there is a significant gap between the human mind and organizational capabilities. (2) The second section outlined the nature of KM and, in doing so, highlighted why it is fundamentally incompatible with meso-level concepts such as DC or innovation, which tend to overlook the role of human emotions. The next step in this discussion is to understand why recognizing KM's human-centricity is essential for its future.

In today's context, the value generated by the intangible economy has grown dramatically. With the rise of smart technologies (e.g., smartphones, smart home devices) (Sharma et al., 2023) and super smart technologies (e.g., AI-powered homes, autonomous connected vehicles), intangible assets are reaching unprecedented importance in Western economies. This trend is further reinforced by the pervasive influence of social and digital media, marking the emergence of a digital society (Lindgren, 2021). In other words, while the 1990s marked the shift from industrial to knowledge societies (Bell, 1973; Powell & Snellman, 2004), the late 2010s ushered in digital societies, characterized by high user engagement and widespread social media adoption (Van Dijk et al., 2018).

As we approach the end of the 2020s, the concept of a Super Smart Society, or Society 5.0, is emerging as a new guiding principle for innovation (Fukuyama, 2018). This paradigm explicitly emphasizes a human-centric dimension (Cabinet Office, 2015; Carayannis & Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022). For the first time, technology is viewed as an extension of the human being—aligning with the human-centric approach at the heart of this new paradigm. There is broad scholarly consensus that knowledge originates in the human mind (Polanyi, 1966; Grant, 1996). We argue that now, more than ever, KM must consolidate its position as a legitimate and distinct research field. The advent of a human-centric Super Smart Society demands a renewed focus on knowledge management.:

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