

Exploring the Interplay Between Tacit and Explicit Knowledge in Organizational Settings: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: This systematic review explores how tacit and explicit knowledge interact in organizational contexts and identifies the factors that facilitate or hinder their integration. The central research question is: *How do tacit and explicit knowledge complement each other in organizations, and what influences their effective integration?* The review addresses the ongoing challenge organizations face in managing these distinct knowledge forms to enhance performance, innovation, and decision-making. Only empirical studies from peer-reviewed journals or top conferences published between January 2011 and April 2025 were included; studies outside this range were excluded. A comprehensive search strategy was applied across multiple academic databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, ABI/INFORM Global, IEEE Xplore, and Business Source Complete. Drawing from both qualitative and quantitative studies, the review examines themes such as knowledge sharing, organizational learning, leadership, and culture. Findings suggest that effective integration relies on trust, supportive leadership, and well-designed knowledge management systems. The review emphasizes a dual approach—fostering informal, tacit knowledge sharing alongside formal mechanisms to capture and disseminate explicit knowledge—and offers practical implications for improving organizational effectiveness.

Keywords: Tacit knowledge, Explicit knowledge, Knowledge transfer, Knowledge sharing, Organizational learning, Knowledge management

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The foundational distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge originates from Michael Polanyi (1966), who argued that "we can know more than we can tell." Tacit knowledge is embodied, experiential, and context-dependent manifested in intuition, skills, and insights that resist articulation. Explicit knowledge is codified, systematic, and easily transferable through formal channels. Digital transformation, knowledge-intensive industries, and hybrid work models have reconfigured how knowledge is produced and shared, blurring traditional boundaries between formal and informal knowledge flows (Ullrich et al., 2023; Santoro et al., 2023). Organizations increasingly recognize that innovation relies not only on structured information but also on leveraging individual expertise, intuition, and collaboration. Tacit knowledge proves especially crucial in contexts involving ambiguity, judgment, and creativity areas where explicit knowledge alone is insufficient. Despite its importance, tacit knowledge is frequently undervalued in formal KM systems due to its intangible nature. While models like Nonaka and Takeuchi's SECI framework (1995) describe dynamic interactions between knowledge types through socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization, empirical validation remains uneven across contexts. This systematic review examines the interplay between tacit and explicit knowledge, investigating how organizational structures, leadership behaviors, digital tools, and social environments mediate this relationship.

1.2 Rationale of the Study

The dynamic and often tacit nature of knowledge presents ongoing challenges for organizations aiming to capture, share, and apply both tacit and explicit forms of knowledge effectively. While explicit knowledge is readily articulated and stored, tacit knowledge remains embedded in individual experience, often transferred informally through observation and practice. In the context of increasingly digitized and dispersed work environments, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations are struggling to maintain effective knowledge flows that balance both formal systems and informal, interpersonal mechanisms (Ullrich et al., 2023; Santoro et al., 2023). Existing knowledge management frameworks such as Nonaka's SECI model conceptually address the conversion between tacit and explicit knowledge. However, empirical evidence on how this conversion occurs in practice across different organizational settings remains fragmented. Many studies examine either tacit or explicit knowledge in isolation or are limited by context-specific constraints that reduce generalizability (Seghroucheni et al., 2023). Moreover, the increasing adoption of digital collaboration tools introduces new complexities into the tacit-explicit knowledge interplay that are not yet fully understood. Thus, there is a need to synthesize empirical findings across sectors to understand how these knowledge forms interact and what enables their effective integration in modern organizational settings.

2. Problem Statement

Despite the widespread recognition that tacit and explicit knowledge must be effectively integrated to support innovation, learning, and strategic decision-making, organizations continue to face significant barriers in managing this interplay. These barriers include cultural silos, inadequate technological systems, lack of trust, and misaligned incentives. Moreover, the literature on knowledge management is highly fragmented, with inconsistent terminology, diverse methodological approaches, and studies often limited to specific industries or case studies, making it difficult to form a coherent understanding of best practices (Zhu et al., 2023). Compounding this challenge is the evolving nature of organizational work—characterized by hybrid teams, remote collaboration, and reliance on digital platforms—which impacts how tacit and explicit knowledge are shared and utilized. The traditional boundaries between formal (explicit) and informal (tacit) knowledge-sharing practices are increasingly blurred, yet academic research has not kept pace with these workplace transformations (Santoro et al., 2023). This systematic review aims to fill these gaps by consolidating and analysing recent empirical evidence on the interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge. By doing so, the study seeks to uncover the organizational, technological, and human factors that either facilitate or hinder knowledge integration. The goal is to provide practical insights and theoretical refinements that can inform more effective knowledge management strategies in diverse and evolving organizational environments.

3. Research Objective

This primary research objective is to:

- To investigate the complementary roles of tacit and explicit knowledge within organizations and identify key enablers and barriers to their effective integration.

This objective was selected as the central theme of the review because it provides the necessary foundation for understanding how organizations manage both types of knowledge in practice. It also allows for a focused exploration of the factors that support or hinder integration, which is critical in a fast-evolving digital and organizational landscape.

4. Methodology

Following PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021), 3,782 articles were identified, and titles and abstracts were screened and included 83 empirical studies. Both qualitative and quantitative designs were considered. Seminal pre-2009 studies were included for foundational framing (e.g., Polanyi, 1966; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Studies were selected using the SPIDER framework (Cooke et al., 2012) and drawn from major academic databases. Inclusion criteria focused on primary research addressing tacit-explicit knowledge in organizational settings. Data were extracted on study design, context, mechanisms, digital tools, and outcomes. Quality appraisal followed established tools for each research type (CASP, 2018; Hong et al., 2018). Fig 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram, summarizing the screening process and showing how studies were identified, filtered, and included.

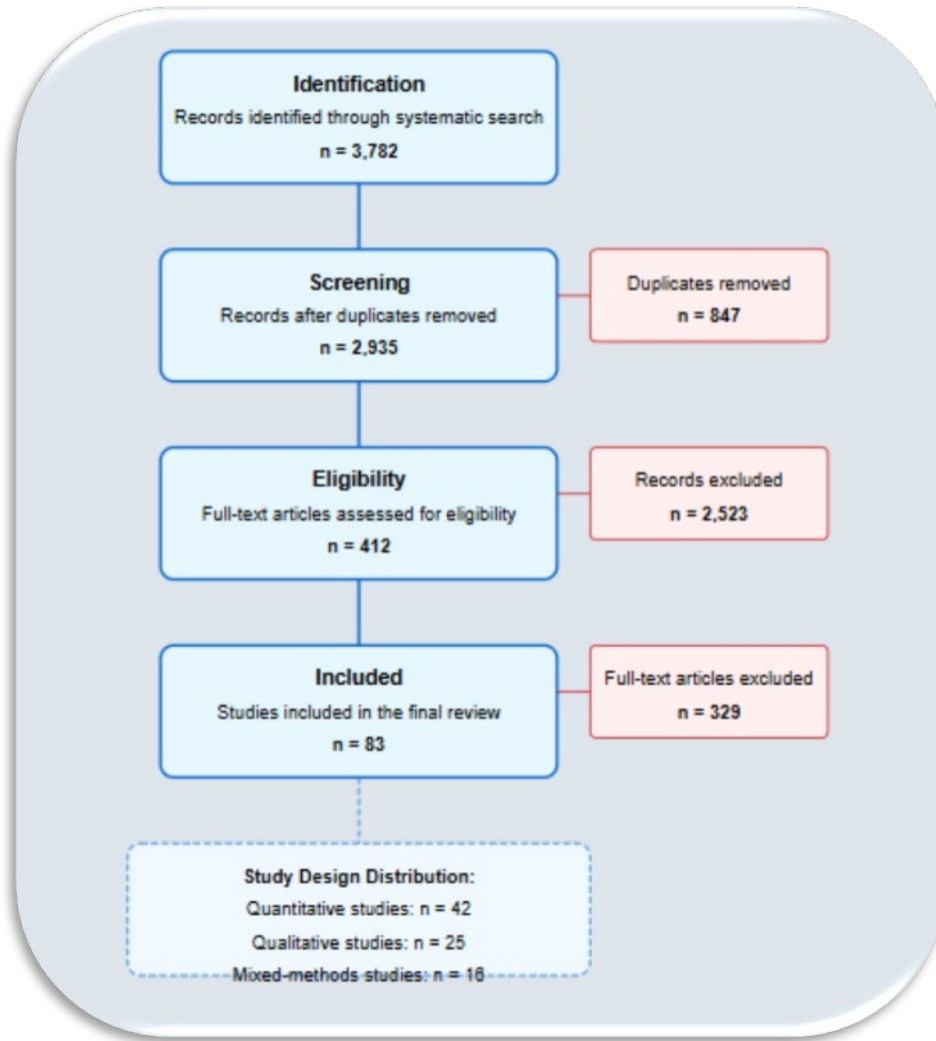
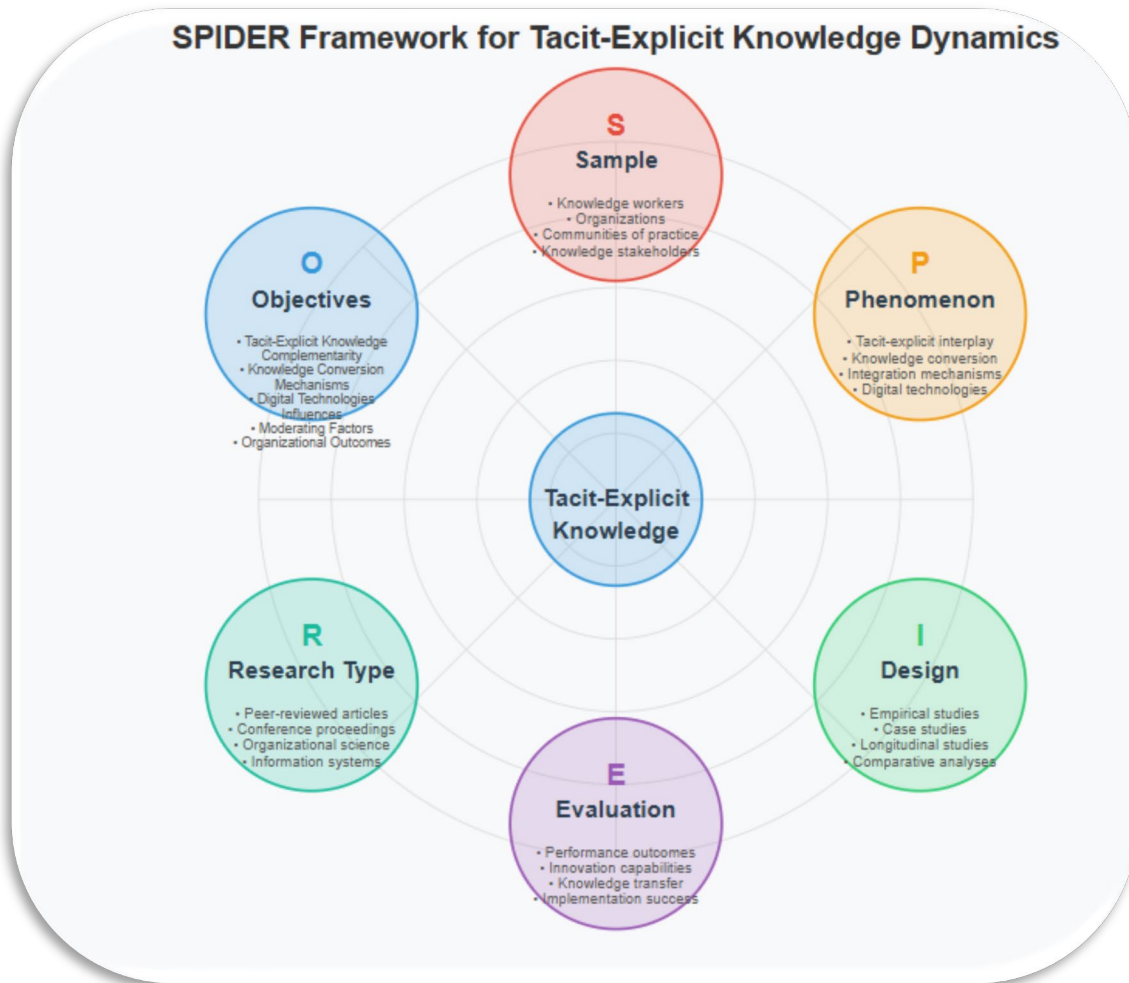


Figure 1: Adapted from the PRISMA workflow diagram (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021)

4.1 Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using databases including Web of Science, Scopus, ABI/INFORM Global, IEEE Xplore, and Business Source Complete. The strategy followed PRISMA guidelines and focused on keywords related to tacit knowledge, explicit knowledge, and knowledge conversion within organizational settings. Boolean operators—**AND**, **OR**, and **NOT** were used to strategically combine search terms during the literature search process. These operators helped refine and expand search results to ensure both comprehensive coverage and relevance of the retrieved studies.

Figure 2 visually summarizes the SPIDER framework and its application to the study selection process.



Source: Author's own creation (2025)

Figure 2: A summary of the SPIDER framework and its application to the study selection process Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

Following the identification and selection of 83 empirical studies—comprising both qualitative and quantitative research—a systematic and rigorous data extraction and analysis process was undertaken. Key data points were extracted using a standardized template, including research design, organizational context, types of knowledge explored, mechanisms of tacit-explicit knowledge integration, technological enablers, and reported outcomes. To analyse the extracted data, a multi-phase thematic synthesis approach was employed. For quantitative studies, relevant variables and findings were extracted and mapped onto corresponding qualitative categories to facilitate thematic convergence and triangulation. The analytic process was both inductive and deductive: while new themes were allowed to emerge from the data, coding was also guided by key constructs from the SPIDER strategy Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, and Research type (See Fig 4.3). This framework helped organize findings and maintain analytic coherence across studies of varying designs. Quality appraisal of included studies was conducted using established tools appropriate for each methodology: the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018) for qualitative studies, and the Effective Public Health Practice Project ((Symonds & Tang, 2024) tool for quantitative studies. This ensured that only methodologically sound evidence contributed to the synthesis.

5. Results

The review incorporated 83 empirical studies from 32 countries, spanning sectors such as healthcare, education, manufacturing, technology, and non-profit organisations. Among these, 42 percent used qualitative methods (such as interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, and case studies), 37 percent employed surveys and quantitative techniques, and the remaining 21 percent implemented mixed-method designs. Most studies anchored their work in established theoretical frameworks including Polanyi's tacit–explicit continuum, Nonaka and Takeuchi's

SECI model, and the knowledge-based view of the firm. Findings consistently indicate that tacit knowledge, embodied in personal experience and intuition, fuels innovation, while explicit knowledge—being formal and codified—supports efficiency and reliability. The reviewed studies surpass simplistic binary classifications by showing that tacit and explicit knowledge operate along a continuum and reinforce one another. For instance, Zhang et al. (2024) emphasized the centrality of trust in facilitating tacit knowledge management and its positive impact on product innovation and organizational performance. Similarly, Gamble, (2020) and other researchers noted that environments characterized by high trust and authentic leadership create psychological safety essential for uncovering and sharing tacit insights. Trust-based environments also lead to higher employee engagement and retention, both of which are essential for preserving organizational knowledge continuity (Zanabazar et al., 2024). The review identified three primary mechanisms for converting tacit into explicit knowledge. The first is social interaction such as mentorship, storytelling, and communities of practice that foster trust and open communication (Kucharska & Bedford, 2024). These social mechanisms function as forms of social capital that enable effective knowledge integration within organizations (Arruda et al., 2024). Second, technological mechanisms particularly advanced AI and natural language processing enable organizations to systematize and codify unstructured data, though such tools require human oversight to preserve contextual nuance (Zhang & Liu, 2021; Seghroucheni et al., 2023). Third, structured frameworks such as Clarke's Tacit Knowledge Spectrum Model (2011) and conceptual schema guide the formalization of complex, experiential knowledge into transferable formats; Clarke's spectrum reveals the many layers within tacit knowledge, demonstrating how reflection and triggers bring deeper tacit elements to the surface. Digital tools including AI analytics, enterprise knowledge repositories, and collaboration platforms were also found to significantly support explicit knowledge creation. NLP-enabled tools help distill insight from text, while synchronous and asynchronous systems like Microsoft Teams and Slack underpin essential socialization and internalization phases of knowledge creation (Seghroucheni et al., 2023). However, studies emphasize that digital tools are most effective when embedded within socio technical systems grounded in trust and continuous interpersonal interaction (Pedersen et al., 2023; Nupap, 2022; Igoa-Iraola & Díez, 2024). Isolated digitization, devoid of human context, was found to yield superficial or misaligned knowledge assets. Analysis also highlighted several moderating factors influencing knowledge conversion at organizational, individual, and environmental levels. Organizational factors such as decentralization, sector-specific norms, and supportive culture particularly prevalent in larger or more dynamic firms accelerate knowledge exchange (Igoa-Iraola & Díez, 2024). The perceived value of knowledge and engagement in organizational citizenship behaviour significantly impact attitudes towards knowledge sharing. These attitudes mediate the relationship between beliefs and sharing intentions, promoting a culture of knowledge exchange (Mahmood et al., 2023). Trust emerges as a critical factor in these organizational dynamics, functioning as social capital that facilitates knowledge integration and enhances overall organizational performance (Arruda et al., 2024). Tacit knowledge sharing (TKS) is shaped by both individual and environmental factors. At the individual level, self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and a growth-oriented mindset influence how confidently and willingly individuals articulate and share tacit insights (Juan & Lin, 2020; Nor et al., 2024). Externally, factors such as market competitiveness and regulatory pressures affect whether organizations prioritize open knowledge-sharing mechanisms (Ning et al., 2024; Akrofi, 2023). Organizations operating in highly competitive or regulated environments are more likely to adopt structured TKS strategies to maintain compliance and competitive advantage. Notably, firms that align these individual and environmental elements exhibit stronger, more sustainable knowledge integration. However, this alignment is most effective when supported by an enabling organizational culture and leadership that actively promotes and models knowledge-sharing behaviors. Research indicates that such environments not only facilitate knowledge transfer but also contribute to higher levels of employee engagement and organizational commitment (Zanabazar et al., 2024). Despite these positive trends, persistent challenges were evident. Knowledge hoarding, rigid hierarchical structures, leadership disengagement, and high staff turnover limited institutional learning (Phaladi, 2022; Herlina et al., 2024). Conversely, organizations that cultivated learning-oriented cultures, implemented mentorship programs, and held leaders accountable for KM practices showed stronger knowledge performance, innovation capacity, and continuity of expertise (Makhanya & Vezi-Magigaba, 2023; Schaate, 2023; Sharif et al., 2023).

6. Discussion of Findings

This review highlights the dynamic interplay between tacit and explicit knowledge as central to organizational learning and innovation. Rather than representing binary categories, tacit and explicit knowledge exist along a continuum (Polanyi, 1966), where tacit knowledge embedded in personal experience, intuition, and contextual understanding often serves as the source of novel insights and creative problem-solving in complex

environments. A key finding is the enabling role of trust in facilitating the movement of knowledge along this continuum. Trust not only supports interpersonal collaboration but also functions as social capital, enabling individuals to contribute personal insights to collective organizational learning processes (Arruda et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). Consistent with prior research, psychologically safe environments underpinned by mutual respect and openness were shown to be critical for encouraging the disclosure of tacit knowledge (Kucharska & Bedford, 2024; Shafique et al., 2023). The role of leadership emerged prominently in this context. Leaders who model vulnerability, decentralize authority, and cultivate inclusive cultures reinforce these trust-based dynamics and, in turn, contribute to enhanced knowledge flows and employee engagement (Zanabazar et al., 2024). However, the findings also draw attention to structural and cultural inhibitors of tacit knowledge sharing. Hierarchical rigidity, time pressure, and knowledge hoarding continue to reflect legacy models that treat knowledge as power to be controlled rather than shared. In contrast, organizations that promote mentoring, storytelling, and peer learning practices create more conducive environments for surfacing tacit knowledge and converting it into explicit, reusable organizational assets (Kucharska & Bedford, 2024). These practices not only preserve institutional memory but also drive innovation and adaptability. While technological tools particularly AI and NLP are increasingly integrated into knowledge management systems, the findings suggest their role is largely limited to codifying explicit knowledge (Seghroucheni et al., 2023; Zhang & Liu, 2021). Their effectiveness is significantly enhanced when embedded within socio-technical systems that recognize the value of human judgment, contextual interpretation, and ethical considerations in knowledge use (Medina et al., 2011; Pedersen et al., 2023). Thus, technology should be viewed as an enabler within a broader human-centered framework rather than as a substitute for relational knowledge processes. Moreover, organizational and sector-specific factors were found to shape knowledge management outcomes. Decentralized structures and responsiveness to contextual demands such as industry competition or regulatory compliance were associated with stronger knowledge-sharing behaviors (Igoa-Iraola & Díez, 2024). Importantly, the review also identified individual-level enablers, including self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and a growth mindset, as critical drivers of tacit knowledge articulation and participation in knowledge-sharing activities (Plank & Zlomuzica, 2024; Prihandoko et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2021). These personal attributes not only influence willingness to share knowledge but also reinforce organizational commitment and retention (Zanabazar et al., 2024).

7. Interpretations of Results

The results indicate that the transformation of tacit knowledge into organizational value relies on trust-based, psychologically safe environments that act as social capital enablers. Trust not only supports knowledge integration but also promotes engagement and retention, essential for sustaining organizational knowledge over time (Arruda et al., 2024; Zanabazar et al., 2024). Mentoring, storytelling, and peer collaboration emerged as core social learning mechanisms that facilitate the sharing and codification of tacit knowledge. These practices support reflection, deepen understanding, and foster a sense of shared meaning, which are vital for organizational learning (Kucharska & Bedford, 2024; Arruda et al., 2024). Clarke's (2011) Tacit Knowledge Spectrum offers a conceptual basis for how structured reflection surfaces otherwise hidden insights. While digital tools like AI and NLP aid in codifying explicit knowledge (Zhang & Liu, 2021; Seghroucheni et al., 2023), their value is enhanced when embedded within socio-technical systems that preserve context and human meaning (Clarke, 2011; Pedersen et al., 2023). Technology should therefore amplify—not replace—human knowledge processes. Contextual alignment across systems, individual motivations, and leadership is another key determinant of knowledge-sharing effectiveness (Igoa-Iraola & Díez, 2024). Leaders play a catalytic role by embedding knowledge-sharing values into everyday practice, fostering environments where tacit knowledge is seen as a strategic asset (Kucharska & Bedford, 2024; Shafique et al., 2023). Finally, individual psychological resources such as self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and growth mindset moderate effective knowledge sharing. These traits enhance both cognitive and emotional engagement in collaborative learning environments, further reinforcing knowledge retention and innovation (Plank & Zlomuzica, 2024; Prihandoko et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2021).

7.1 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Limitations include the exclusion of non-English and non-academic sources and methodological diversity across studies. Future research should explore the evolving role of technologies like AI and AR in knowledge sharing (Zhou et al., 2025) and examine longitudinal, cross-cultural dynamics.

7.2 Conclusions and Recommendations

This systematic review concludes that the effective management of tacit and explicit knowledge constitutes a vital strategic capability for contemporary organizations. The findings reveal that no single approach—whether

technological, cultural, or structural can independently ensure successful knowledge integration. Instead, organizations must adopt a holistic perspective that recognizes the interdependence of these elements. Tacit knowledge, with its experiential and context-bound nature, complements explicit knowledge to drive innovation and problem-solving. While digital tools can support the codification and dissemination of knowledge, they are most effective when embedded within trust-based, collaborative environments that facilitate informal exchanges. Ultimately, sustained innovation and resilience depend on the organization's ability to integrate knowledge practices across multiple levels, foster a culture of openness, and align leadership behaviour with knowledge-sharing values.

Recommendations for organizations include:

- **Adopting balanced knowledge management approaches** that respect the complementary nature of tacit and explicit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Polanyi, 1966; Clarke, 2011).
- **Promoting leadership models** that incentivize knowledge-sharing behaviours and embed them within performance structures (Zanabazar et al., 2024; Kucharska & Bedford, 2024; Shafique et al., 2023).
- **Implementing digital technologies** with careful consideration of their impact on human interaction and organizational values (Seghroucheni et al., 2023; Pedersen et al., 2023; Zhang & Liu, 2021).

These recommendations are essential for fostering innovation, building organizational resilience, and sustaining competitive advantage in a knowledge-intensive economy.

7.3 Contributions to Literature

This review consolidates global empirical evidence on tacit-explicit knowledge interplay. It identifies leadership, culture, and digital infrastructure as key enablers (Castañeda & Ramirez, 2022; Igoa-Iraola & Díez, 2024) and offers a foundation for advancing knowledge management theory and practice.

Ethics Declaration: This study did not require ethical clearance as it did not involve human participants, personal data collection, or sensitive information.

AI Declaration: AI tools were used solely for language refinement and grammatical improvements. No AI-generated content was included in the research, analysis, or original writing of this paper.

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