

Variation, Selection, and Retention in Knowledge Management: An Evolutionary Integrative Review

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to develop an interpretation of the temporal development of Knowledge Management (KM) through the lens of variation-selection-retention (VSR) logic. More specifically, it examines how KM arrangements emerge, gain support, become stabilised, and subsequently follow different post-retention trajectories over time. Although KM research has generated rich insights into knowledge creation, transfer, innovation, and technological enablement, it has been less explicit in theorising what happens after KM arrangements are introduced and retained within organisations. This paper addresses that gap by proposing an evolutionary reading of KM that extends beyond implementation and performance. The study adopts a PRISMA-informed, theory-driven integrative review of Scopus-indexed journal articles in the Business, Management and Accounting subject area published between 2000 and 2026, complemented by a focused VOSviewer term co-occurrence analysis. The final corpus of 25 studies was analysed through interpretive synthesis, with VSR used as a sensitising framework and bibliometric mapping employed to support the identification of recurring thematic configurations. The analysis identifies four connected configurations of KM scholarship: KM as routinised capability, ecologically embedded knowledge creation, sharing-driven innovation, and technology-mediated infrastructure. These configurations show that KM literature already contains important temporal and evolutionary insights, but that these remain dispersed across adjacent streams. Building on them, the paper develops an evolutionary conceptual model in which retention is not treated as an endpoint. Instead, retained KM arrangements may follow four post-retention trajectories: renewal, dormancy, replacement, or obsolescence. These trajectories are shaped by the interaction of functional relevance, organisational support, social legitimacy, and adaptive renewability. The paper contributes in three ways. First, it offers a temporally oriented reinterpretation of KM as an evolving organisational phenomenon. Second, it extends existing debate beyond implementation and performance by foregrounding differentiated post-retention trajectories. Third, it proposes a conditions-based framework that can guide future empirical research on the long-run viability, adaptation, and decline of KM practices and systems across different organisational settings.

Keywords: Knowledge management, Variation-selection-retention, Post-retention trajectories, Conceptual model, Temporal dynamics, Bibliometric mapping, Organisational learning, Knowledge management systems

1. Introduction

Knowledge Management (KM) has long been central to management and organisation studies because it addresses a persistent organisational problem: how knowledge can be mobilised to support learning, coordination, innovation, and competitive advantage (Argyris 1977, 1999; Kogut and Zander 1992; Spender 1996; Barney 2001). Foundational contributions established KM as a field concerned with knowledge creation, codification and transfer, and the organisational role of knowledge management systems (Polanyi 1958; Nonaka 1994; Davenport and Prusak 2000; Wiig 1997; Alavi and Leidner 2001).

As the field expanded, however, its internal logic became harder to capture within a single interpretive frame. Over time, KM scholarship moved beyond storage and transfer towards routines, inter-organisational knowledge flows, digitally mediated coordination, and capability development (Grant and Baden-Fuller 1995), making the temporal development of KM arrangements harder to theorise in an integrated way. Much of the literature still approaches KM primarily through adoption, implementation, and performance, while giving less attention to what happens after knowledge arrangements are introduced: how they become stabilised, reworked, weakened, or displaced over time. KM scholarship itself suggests that such arrangements are embedded, reshaped by use, and sometimes neglected as priorities, technologies, and work practices change. Even when prior studies refer to routines, institutionalisation, adaptation, or path dependence, these temporal insights are usually developed in a partial way rather than integrated into a broader developmental account of KM (Korac-Kakabadse et al. 2002; Huang 2009; Asif 2021).

An evolutionary lens provides a useful way of addressing this fragmentation. Campbell's (1960) variation-selection-retention (VSR) model offers a parsimonious account of how organisational forms emerge, gain support, and become stabilised. Related perspectives similarly foreground environmental fit, routines, path dependence, and internal competition for legitimacy and resources (Hannan and Freeman 1977; Nelson and Winter 1982; Burgelman 1991). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that KM can be understood as an evolving set of organisational arrangements whose viability depends on multiple interacting conditions.

This perspective is not entirely external to the KM field. Several studies point in an evolutionary direction, even if they do not consolidate their insights within a common framework. Huang (2009) explicitly approaches knowledge creation from an evolutionary perspective; Filippini et al. (2012) show how KM projects may develop into broader learning contexts; Kane (2017) highlights how social media alters the conditions under which knowledge is created, shared, and retained; and Li et al. (2024) show how discontinuous technological change compels firms to reconfigure KM in order to preserve dynamic capabilities. Related work on knowledge loss and organisational forgetting further suggests that the persistence of KM cannot be assumed (Daghfous et al. 2013; Agrawal and Muthulingam 2015).

The gap addressed in this paper is therefore not the absence of process-oriented KM research, but the lack of an integrative evolutionary framework capable of connecting emergence, stabilisation, adaptation, weakening, and possible obsolescence within a single interpretive account. Existing scholarship is more developed in explaining adoption, transfer, and innovation outcomes than in theorising persistence, dormancy, replacement, or obsolescence as part of KM's longer-run development. This imbalance is especially visible in contexts marked by digital disruption and discontinuous technological change, where organisations must not only introduce new knowledge arrangements but also renew, reconfigure, or abandon existing ones (Kane 2017; Li et al. 2024). Against this background, the paper addresses two research questions:

RQ1. How can VSR logic help interpret the thematic structure and temporal assumptions of a selected body of KM literature?

RQ2. What theoretical propositions does a VSR perspective support regarding the conditions under which KM arrangements may be retained, renewed, displaced, or rendered obsolete within different organisational settings and contexts?

The paper pursues two closely related aims. The first is interpretive: to reread a selected body of KM literature through an evolutionary vocabulary that clarifies how KM arrangements emerge, gain traction, and become stabilised over time. The second is conceptual: to develop a conditions-based framework capable of explaining not only retention, but also adaptive renewal, dormancy, replacement, and obsolescence as possible post-retention trajectories.

To address these aims, the study adopts a PRISMA-informed, theory-driven integrative review, complemented by focused bibliometric mapping. The selected corpus is analysed to identify recurring thematic configurations and, on that basis, to develop an evolutionary reinterpretation of KM. The paper contributes by offering a temporally oriented reinterpretation of KM, extending debate toward post-retention trajectories, and proposing a conditions-based framework for future empirical research. The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 revisits dominant KM framings and positions VSR as an organising lens. Section 3 presents the review design and corpus construction. Section 4 examines the thematic configurations emerging from the literature, and Section 5 develops the evolutionary conceptual model. Section 6 discusses the findings, Section 7 outlines their implications, and Section 8 concludes with limitations and future research directions.

2. Theoretical Background and Analytical gap

The development of KM scholarship has been shaped by several influential framings, each of which has captured a distinct aspect of how organisations create, mobilise, and sustain knowledge. These include KM as capability and routine, KM as contextually embedded knowledge creation, KM as sharing-driven innovation, and KM as technology-mediated infrastructure (Clarke and Rollo 2001; Michailova and Nielsen 2006; Moustaghfir 2008; Kane 2017). These streams show that KM is not reducible to storage or codification alone, but they foreground different explanatory moments: creation, circulation, innovation, and technology. What remains less consistently developed across these streams is a common temporal vocabulary for understanding the longer-term development of KM arrangements. Even where the literature refers to routines, institutionalisation, adaptation, forgetting, or discontinuity, such insights often remain attached to specific themes rather than integrated into a broader developmental account of KM over time (Korac-Kakabadse et al. 2002; Filippini et al. 2012; Daghfous et al. 2013; Li et al. 2024). As a result, the field remains less explicit about the longer-term trajectories of KM arrangements.

2.1 VSR as an Organising Lens

Variation-selection-retention (VSR) provides a useful organising lens because it offers a minimal temporal grammar without presupposing a single substantive form of KM. Variation concerns emergence, selection concerns fit and support, and retention concerns stabilisation through repetition and embedding (Campbell

1960). Related traditions reinforce this logic from different angles. Population ecology foregrounds selection pressures and environmental fit (Hannan and Freeman 1977), evolutionary economics stresses routines and path dependence (Nelson and Winter 1982), and internal selection perspectives show that organisations are arenas in which initiatives compete for endorsement and survival (Burgelman 1991).

Thus, VSR does not replace established KM explanations; rather, it relates them within a more explicit temporal frame. It enables KM arrangements to be viewed not only as managerial tools or socio-technical systems, but also as evolving organisational forms whose trajectories depend on interacting organisational and contextual conditions.

2.2 Analytical gap

Taken together, the dominant KM framings and the VSR lens clarify the paper's analytical gap. The issue is not a lack of relevant KM insight, but the need for a more integrated temporal vocabulary through which these insights can be related within a coherent developmental account. This paper addresses this gap by using variation-selection-retention logic as an organising lens for a selected corpus of KM studies and by theorising trajectories that extend beyond implementation and retention alone.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a PRISMA-informed, theory-driven integrative review complemented by focused bibliometric mapping. This combined design supports the identification of conceptually relevant patterns within the KM literature and provides the basis for conceptual development through an evolutionary reinterpretation of the field.

3.1 Database Selection and Search Strategy

Scopus was selected as the source database because it offers broad coverage of peer-reviewed journal literature in management and organisation studies and supports direct export of bibliographic data for analysis in VOSviewer. The search was conducted in January 2026 using the title, abstract, and keywords fields. The search strategy combined core KM terms with concepts associated with evolutionary and organisational dynamics in order to identify studies relevant to an evolutionary interpretation of KM.

The search string was as follows:

TITLE-ABS-KEY(("knowledge management" OR "knowledge management system") AND ("variation selection retention" OR "selective retention" OR "organizational ecology" OR "organisational ecology" OR "population ecology" OR "evolutionary theory" OR "evolutionary perspective" OR "path dependence" OR "organizational routine" OR "organisational routine" OR "routinization" OR "routinisation")) AND PUBYEAR > 2000 AND PUBYEAR < 2027 AND (LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA, "BUSI")) AND (LIMIT-TO(SRCTYPE, "j")) AND (LIMIT-TO(DOCTYPE, "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE, "English"))*

The search was limited to the period 2000–2026, to journal articles published in English, and to the bBusiness, Management and Accounting subject area. After applying these filters, the search returned 61 records. This strategy provided a focused basis for the subsequent analysis.

3.2 Inclusion Criteria and Screening Process

The screening process followed a PRISMA-informed logic and is summarised in Figure 1. Titles, abstracts, and keywords were screened manually. Studies were retained when KM or KMS was central and relevant to an evolutionary interpretation of KM, including themes such as adaptation, routines, path dependence, organisational ecology, selective retention, persistence, transformation, or knowledge loss. Articles were excluded when KM was marginal, when evolutionary terminology lacked substantive relevance, or when the study focused primarily on technical or computational issues. Following screening, 36 records were excluded and 25 retained for the final sample.

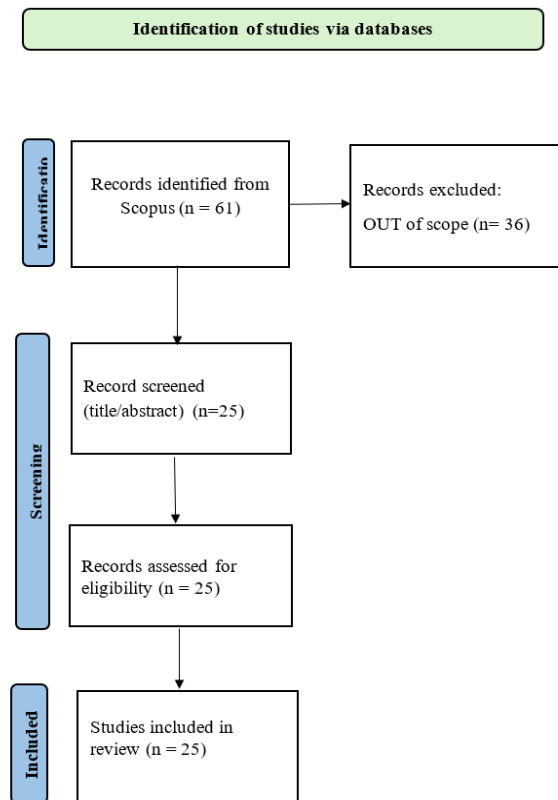


Figure 1: PRISMA-informed flow chart of the search and screening process. Source: Author's elaboration.

3.3 Analytical Strategy

The analysis proceeded in two stages. First, the 25 retained studies were examined through interpretive synthesis to identify recurring themes, conceptual tensions, and temporal assumptions concerning KM development over time. This reading was guided by VSR as a sensitising framework, with attention to variation, selection, retention, and post-retention dynamics. Second, a focused term co-occurrence analysis was conducted in VOSviewer using title and abstract terms from the final corpus. Terms with a minimum occurrence threshold of 2 were retained, while lexical variants, duplicates, and generic non-analytical terms were manually removed. The resulting clusters were interpreted alongside the close reading of the retained studies.

4. Results

The final corpus reveals a compact but conceptually differentiated body of literature. Rather than converging around a single understanding of KM, the selected studies point to four interconnected configurations through which knowledge-related arrangements are formed, stabilised, and transformed over time. Across the review period, the literature also suggests a shift in emphasis from codification, routines, and knowledge flows towards organisational ecology, capability development, knowledge loss, digital infrastructures, and adaptation under discontinuous technological change. The VOSviewer term co-occurrence analysis identified 21 items grouped into four clusters, with 83 links and a total link strength of 993. Figure 2 summarises these configurations, which were interpreted alongside the qualitative reading of the final corpus.

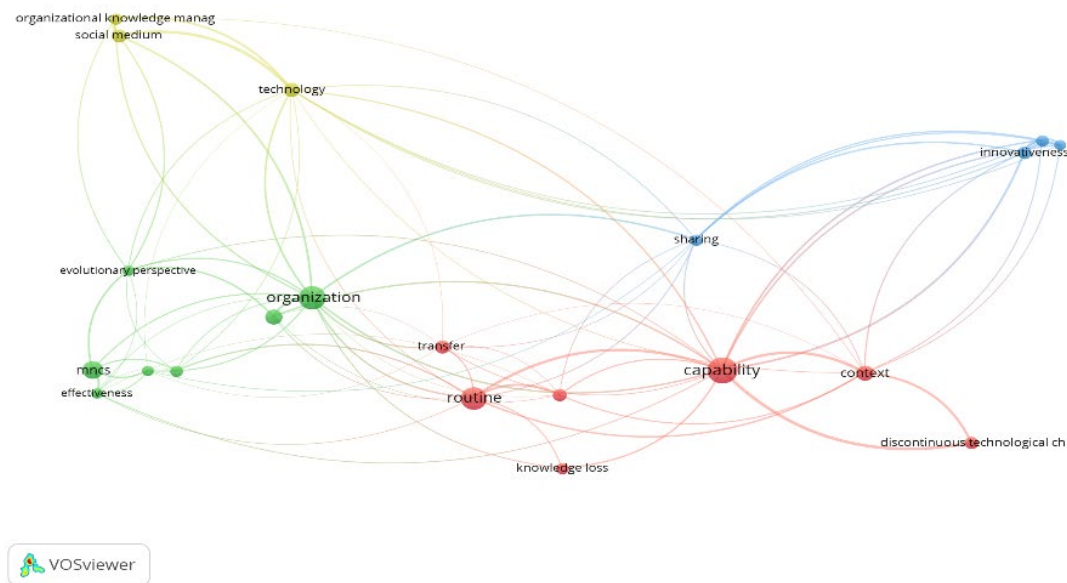


Figure 2: Term co-occurrence map. Source: Author's elaboration.

4.1 KM as Routinised Capability

The first configuration presents KM as a routinised organisational capability. Terms such as capability, routine, context, and transfer reflect a view of KM as becoming effective when embedded in recurring practices and everyday coordination. This reading aligns with research treating KM as enacted through use rather than simply stored or codified, and with studies showing that routines can support learning and capability development (Clarke and Rollo 2001; Sandhawalia and Dalcher 2011; Filippini et al. 2012). Yet routinisation does not ensure permanence: embedded KM arrangements may erode or lose fit under conditions of knowledge loss, forgetting, or discontinuous technological change (Daghfous et al. 2013; Agrawal and Muthulingam 2015; Li et al. 2024).

4.2 KM as Ecologically Embedded Knowledge Creation

A second configuration situates KM within a broader organisational and environmental ecology. Terms such as organisation, knowledge creation, organisational ecology, and effectiveness point to a view in which knowledge processes are shaped by contextual interdependencies rather than operating independently of their setting. This interpretation aligns with studies emphasising distributed expertise, boundary conditions, and the organisational environments in which knowledge is enacted (Michailova and Nielsen 2006; Becker 2007; Hu et al. 2022). In this configuration, KM viability depends not only on design quality but also on contextual fit and the conditions that sustain enactment over time.

4.3 KM as Sharing-driven Innovation

A third configuration links KM to innovation through knowledge sharing. Terms such as sharing, innovation, and innovativeness reflect a view in which KM supports learning, responsiveness, and adaptive performance. This reading aligns with studies that treat knowledge circulation as a mechanism for enhancing innovation outcomes (Moustaghfir 2008; Lakshman et al. 2023; Acevedo and Diaz-Molina 2023). While this configuration helps explain why certain KM arrangements gain traction, it places greater emphasis on the value they generate than on their longer-term durability.

4.4 KM as Technology-mediated Infrastructure

A fourth configuration foregrounds the infrastructural role of technology in shaping KM. Terms such as technology and social media reflect a line of research showing that digital systems do not simply support KM, but reshape the conditions under which knowledge is generated, shared, and retained. This interpretation is consistent with studies on KMS diffusion, digital platforms, and social media, which show that technologies

alter not only the speed of knowledge circulation, but also the forms through which it is coordinated and sustained (Lee et al. 2009; Kane 2017). In this configuration, technology appears not as a neutral support, but as a driver of variation, reconfiguration, and, at times, displacement under conditions of discontinuous change (Li et al. 2024).

4.5 Interim Synthesis

Taken together, the four configurations show that the selected corpus already contains the main ingredients for an evolutionary interpretation of KM. What remains to be articulated more explicitly is a temporal framework capable of relating these elements within a common explanation of KM trajectories. The next section addresses this issue by integrating these configurations into an evolutionary conceptual model of KM trajectories.

5. Toward an Evolutionary Conceptual Model of KM Trajectories

Building on the four configurations identified above, KM can be read through a temporal logic centred on variation, selection, and retention. This shift makes it possible to consider how KM arrangements emerge, become stabilised, and subsequently follow different trajectories over time. *Variation* refers to the emergence of alternative KM forms, whether through new systems, revised routines, novel transfer mechanisms, or digitally mediated practices. Such variation may arise incrementally through experimentation or more discontinuously through technological and environmental change (Huang 2009; Filippini et al. 2012; Kane 2017). KM should therefore not be treated as a stable category, since what is enacted as knowledge management may change across organisational settings and over time.

Selection refers to the differential viability of KM variants. Not all arrangements gain traction equally. Selection depends on more than technical efficiency alone: KM forms are more likely to be selected when they fit organisational structures, support coordination and innovation, align with patterns of use, and respond to the wider organisational context (Claver-Cortés et al. 2007; Lindner and Wald 2011; Hu et al. 2022; Lakshman et al. 2023).

Retention refers to the stabilisation of selected KM forms through routines, infrastructures, process integration, and repeated use. Retention occurs when a KM practice becomes part of the organisation's ordinary way of operating rather than remaining an isolated initiative (Clarke and Rollo 2001; Korac-Kakabadse et al. 2002; Asif 2021). Retention is not treated here as an endpoint: retained arrangements may still weaken when they lose relevance, become decoupled from practice, or fail to adapt (Daghfous et al. 2013; Agrawal and Muthulingam 2015; Li et al. 2024).

Taken together, these three mechanisms provide the basic evolutionary grammar of the model. The conceptual extension proposed here is that retention is not a common endpoint: stabilised KM arrangements may follow different trajectories depending on the conditions under which they continue to operate.

Four post-retention trajectories are proposed: *renewal, dormancy, replacement, and obsolescence*.

Renewal emerges when an established KM arrangement preserves sufficient continuity of purpose or identity but is actively reconfigured in response to changing demands. *Dormancy* refers to arrangements that remain formally available and recognisable, yet are only weakly enacted in practice and receive limited day-to-day support. *Replacement* develops when an older arrangement remains visible but is progressively displaced by an alternative that offers greater functional or organisational viability. *Obsolescence* arises when a KM arrangement loses not only use, but also recoverable relevance, legitimacy, and adaptive capacity to such an extent that it no longer operates as a meaningful organisational resource. Unlike dormancy, obsolescence implies not merely weak enactment, but a deeper loss of recoverable organisational usefulness. Movement from retention to one of these trajectories is shaped by four interacting conditions

These concern whether the arrangement continues to solve coordination, learning, transfer, or decision problems, receives managerial and structural support, remains trusted and enacted by organisational members, and can be updated in response to discontinuous change.

Taken together, these conditions help explain why retention does not produce uniform outcomes. The same retained KM form may be renewed in one context, remain dormant in another, be replaced in a third, and become obsolete in a fourth. KM evolution is therefore best understood as conditional, path-dependent, and contextually situated. These trajectories should not be understood as mechanically determined by single conditions, but as more likely under particular combinations of interacting factors.

This interpretation is summarised in four propositions:

P1. Renewal emerges when retained KM arrangements remain functionally relevant, socially legitimate, and adaptable, while continuing to receive organisational support for active reconfiguration in response to changing demands.

P2. Dormancy characterises KM arrangements that remain formally retained and recognisable, but whose everyday enactment weakens and whose organisational support becomes intermittent, without full abandonment or displacement by an alternative.

P3. Replacement occurs when retained KM arrangements lose comparative viability relative to alternatives that better fit prevailing coordination, innovation, or technological demands.

P4. Obsolescence develops when functional relevance, organisational support, social legitimacy, and adaptive renewability deteriorate in combination, thereby undermining both the current usefulness and the meaningful recoverability of the arrangement as an organisational resource.

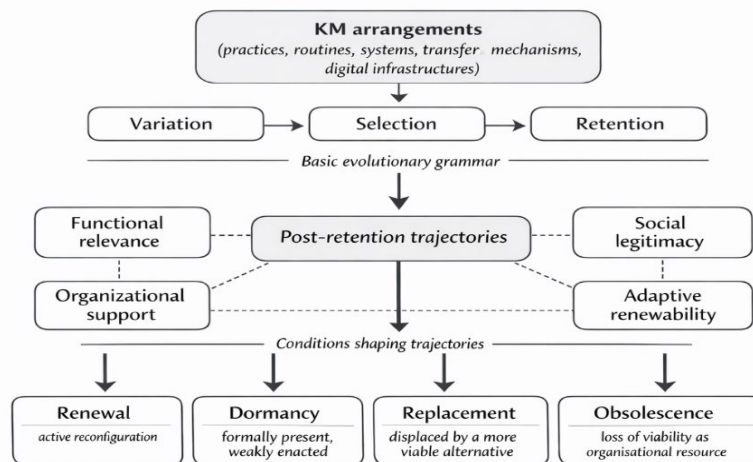


Figure 3: An evolutionary conceptual model of KM trajectories. Source: Author's elaboration

6. Discussion

The analysis suggests that an evolutionary reading helps connect themes that are often treated separately in KM research within a more explicit temporal framework. Across the selected literature, routines, contextual embeddedness, innovation, and technological change can be read not as isolated concerns, but as related dimensions of how KM arrangements emerge, gain support, stabilise, and respond to changing conditions over time. VSR does not replace existing KM explanations; rather, it clarifies a temporal dimension that is often implicit within them, especially by distinguishing between initial stabilisation and the divergent trajectories that may follow retention.

This reading extends attention beyond initial uptake and outcome-oriented accounts, showing that KM arrangements may be renewed, become only partially enacted, or be displaced once established.

The viability of KM arrangements cannot be understood independently of the settings in which they operate. Organisational structures, patterns of use, and technological environments shape whether a given arrangement remains meaningful, is adapted, or gradually loses relevance. The framework is therefore best read not as a universal sequence through which all KM arrangements necessarily pass, but as an interpretive model that highlights how different trajectories may emerge under different conditions.

Taken together, these points support a view of KM as an evolving organisational phenomenon rather than a stable managerial toolkit. Implementation, transfer, and innovation outcomes remain important, but they form only part of a longer temporal story in which knowledge arrangements may persist, change form, or fade from use. In this sense, the framework is offered not as a definitive general theory of KM evolution, but as a structured interpretive model that opens further analytical space around KM's longer-term dynamics.

7. Theoretical and Managerial Implications

Theoretically, the framework provides a basis for analysing KM not only in terms of creation, transfer, or performance, but also in terms of differentiated post-retention trajectories. This introduces greater temporal coherence by extending analysis beyond initial stabilisation. The framework also has implications for empirical research design. It points towards the value of longitudinal and comparative studies capable of examining how KM arrangements evolve across different organisational settings and contexts. In particular, it offers a basis for analysing why apparently similar KM practices follow different trajectories across settings, or why arrangements that seem well established at one moment later lose relevance or enactment.

Managerially, the analysis suggests that KM should be approached not only as a question of implementation, but also as one of ongoing viability. Knowledge systems and practices may therefore require periodic reassessment in relation to four conditions: continuing functional relevance, organisational support, social legitimacy, and adaptive renewability. This is especially important in digitally intensive environments, where newer tools often coexist with inherited knowledge practices.

8. Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research

This paper examined whether VSR logic provides a useful lens for interpreting a selected body of Knowledge Management literature and for thinking more explicitly about how KM arrangements evolve over time. The analysis indicated that the reviewed literature already points toward a more developmental understanding of KM, even though such insights are not usually brought together within a common temporal framework.

On this basis, the paper proposed an interpretive framework in which retained KM arrangements may follow four post-retention trajectories: renewal, dormancy, replacement, and obsolescence. Its contribution lies in providing a more explicit vocabulary for examining how knowledge arrangements persist, change, or lose relevance under changing organisational conditions. Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the review is based on a single database and on a corpus restricted to Scopus-indexed journal articles in the Business, Management and Accounting subject area. Relevant contributions from adjacent subject areas or other databases may therefore fall outside the present analysis.

Second, the final sample is intentionally selective and theory-driven. The aim was not to provide an exhaustive review of the KM field, but to identify a body of literature capable of supporting an evolutionary reinterpretation. The findings should therefore be read as interpretive rather than representative of KM scholarship as a whole.

Third, the bibliometric component was used in a focused and supportive way. The term co-occurrence mapping helped clarify thematic configurations within the selected corpus, but it was not intended to provide a field-wide bibliometric account.

Finally, the study does not examine organisational cases directly. The framework developed here is literature-based and remains open to empirical refinement and testing.

Future research could develop this framework in several directions. One priority is empirical examination through longitudinal studies of KM arrangements in different organisational settings. Such work could help clarify how knowledge practices move across stages of emergence, stabilisation, renewal, weakening, or decline, and whether the post-retention trajectories identified here are observable in practice.

It could also examine whether similar KM arrangements follow different post-retention trajectories across multinational firms, temporary organisations, universities, public agencies, or digitally intensive platform environments. An other direction would be to investigate post-retention dynamics more directly, particularly in relation to dormancy, replacement, and obsolescence. These dynamics in fact may become increasingly important in contexts marked by rapid technological change and overlapping knowledge infrastructures.

More broadly, KM research may benefit from a stronger temporal perspective that asks not only how knowledge is created, transferred, or implemented, but also how it becomes enduring organisational judgement and remains viable, is reconfigured, or gradually loses relevance over time.

Ethics Declaration: Ethical clearance was not required for this research, as the study is based exclusively on published literature and does not involve human participants, personal data, or primary empirical data collection.

AI Declaration: No AI-based tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the conception of the study, the analysis and interpretation of the findings, and the writing and final revision of the text.

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