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KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT PROCESS: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW AND UNIFIED FRAMEWORK

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Purpose: This article critically examines and synthesizes the development of the knowledge management (KM) process over the past quarter-century, tracing its conceptual roots from Peter Drucker's foundational ideas to contemporary academic discourse. By mapping the evolution and highlighting the conceptual ambiguities surrounding the definition of KM, this article aims to provide conceptual clarity and a unified framework.
Design/methodology/approach: The purpose of this study is achieved through a comprehensive literature review, which serves as the primary research method. This approach enables a structured and in-depth examination of academic publications from the past 25 years related to knowledge management (KM) processes. This study conducts a comparative analysis of existing definitions, conceptual frameworks, and current discourse on KM. The paper adopts a conceptual and analytical approach, focusing on the theoretical foundations and evolution of KM.
Findings: Through a comprehensive review of scholarly literature, it identifies the fragmentation in KM interpretations and responds to this challenge by proposing a refined, four-part classification: knowledge creation, storage, sharing, and usage. This framework is intended to structure the complex dynamics of KM more coherently and to support researchers and practitioners in understanding how knowledge effectively circulates, evolves, and contributes to organizational value creation in a cyclical and integrated manner.
Research limitations/implications: The findings of this study are based on a narrative literature review and conceptual synthesis, which may not encompass all relevant sources and involve subjective judgment in process categorization. Additionally, the proposed framework has not yet been empirically tested.
Originality/value: Through a comprehensive review of scholarly literature, this paper identifies the fragmentation in KM interpretations and responds to this challenge by proposing a refined, four-part classification: knowledge creation, storage, sharing, and usage.
Keywords: knowledge management, knowledge management processes, knowledge creation, knowledge storage, knowledge sharing, knowledge usage.
Category of the paper: viewpoint.

1. Introduction

The history of knowledge management (KM) began in the 1970s with the work of Peter Drucker and others who recognized knowledge as a valuable organizational asset. In the 1980s, Peter Drucker introduced the term "knowledge worker" which after was used to create a term KM (Turriago-Hoyos et al., 2017). From the last two decades, knowledge has become one of the most important and valuable assets of organizations (Mohajan, 2017). In recent years KM has become an important success factor for enterprises (Staab, et. all. 2001). The formal concept of KM emerged in the early 1990s, as organizations began recognizing the value of knowledge as a strategic asset (Bennet and Bennet 2008). KM is integrating cognitive sciences, philosophy, sociology, psychology, information science, communication, document management, information management, information and communication technologies, management and economic theories, strategic management, change management, human resource management, organization learning, knowledge engineering, artificial intelligence and more (Raudeliūnienė, Davidavičienė, Jakubavičius, 2018). While the historical perspective provides a solid foundation for understanding the value of knowledge as an organizational asset, many studies lack an in-depth analysis of the processes that, in practice, constitute KM. Over the years, numerous scholars have proposed diverse frameworks and classifications of KM processes. Probst, Raub, and Romhardt (2000) identified seven interrelated KM processes, developing a model aimed at capturing the cyclical nature of knowledge management within organizations. In contrast, Davenport and Prusak (1998) focused on the practical dimension of knowledge flows, proposing a managerial and operational approach that considered organizational and technological challenges. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), within the concept of the knowledge spiral, proposed a dynamic model of knowledge creation consisting of four processes: socialization, externalization, internalization, and combination. Their approach was the first to clearly emphasize the interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge, while also highlighting the importance of organizational context. Alavi and Leidner (2001) identified four key processes supported by information technologies: knowledge creation, storage/organization, transfer, and application. In many key publications, scholars highlight the diversity and lack of consensus in defining and classifying KM processes. Heisig's (2009) comparative analysis of 160 KM models from around the world reveals significant terminological and structural variation in the field. His research underscores the need for integrated conceptual frameworks that reconcile divergent approaches and standardize KM process definitions. More recent studies also confirm the absence of consensus regarding the definitions and classifications of KM processes. Serenko and Dumay (2015) point to terminological ambiguities and challenges in comparing KM research findings. Similarly, Massingham (2018) and Durst and Zieba (2018) emphasize the diversity of approaches and the

need to develop more flexible and universal conceptual frameworks. Despite the richness of models and approaches, the literature still lacks an in-depth discussion on the classification and typology of KM processes that have evolved over time. This gap forms the basis of the research problem addressed in this paper: despite the growing recognition of KM's strategic importance, there is still no consensus on how its processes should be defined, categorized, and applied across various organizational contexts. To date, numerous KM process frameworks and classifications have been proposed, typically including activities such as knowledge creation, storage, sharing, and utilization. However, these models often differ significantly in scope and terminology, leading to conceptual fragmentation and practical implementation challenges. Furthermore, many of these frameworks fail to reflect the dynamic and interdisciplinary nature of KM, as well as the evolving technological and organizational realities. The aim of this analysis is to critically evaluate existing KM process classifications, identify their limitations, and propose a more integrated and flexible framework that better serves both academic inquiry and the practical application of KM in contemporary organizations.

2. Methodology

The aim of this study is to critically examine the diversity of definitions and classifications of KM processes presented in academic literature over the past 25 years and to propose a more coherent and adaptable conceptual framework. The research addresses the following main research question: what similarities, differences, and inconsistencies exist in the definitions and classifications of KM processes in academic literature, and how can these be integrated into a unified conceptual framework?

To achieve this aim, a narrative literature review was conducted. This method was chosen because it enables a flexible, qualitative, and in-depth synthesis of knowledge in conceptually fragmented fields such as KM, where the rigid inclusion criteria of systematic reviews may limit the ability to capture the complexity and evolution of the discourse. A narrative approach allows for the incorporation of both theoretical and empirical perspectives across diverse academic traditions and organizational contexts. The selection of sources was based on their conceptual or empirical relevance to KM processes. Particular attention was given to works that presented definitions, typologies, or frameworks of KM processes from both theoretical and practical viewpoints. Publications were identified through purposive sampling to ensure a broad representation of perspectives, covering the development of KM thinking from the 1990s to 2025. The review process involved the extraction and analysis of definitions and classifications of KM processes according to three analytical dimensions: the terminology used to describe KM processes, the functional roles of the processes within organizational settings,

and the frequency and recurrence of specific processes across different models. A comparative analysis was then conducted to identify the most frequently cited and functionally significant KM processes. These processes were subsequently organized into four overarching and interrelated categories: knowledge creation, knowledge storage, knowledge sharing, and knowledge usage. The grouping was informed by the functional purpose of each process within the KM cycle, as well as by observable overlaps, dependencies, and feedback loops between them. This structure reflects the dynamic and cyclical nature of knowledge management, offering a more integrated understanding of how knowledge flows, evolves, and creates value within organizations.

This methodological approach not only enables the synthesis of a dispersed body of literature but also facilitates the identification of conceptual fragmentation, inconsistencies, and gaps in the field. The resulting framework lays the foundation for a more unified and operationally relevant conceptual model that can support both academic inquiry and practical applications of KM in contemporary organizations.

3. Results

KM processes refer to activities related to the systematic management of organizational knowledge in order to support the achievement of organizational objectives. A review of the literature indicates that these processes are conceptualized from multiple perspectives, including functional, technological, strategic, and social, reflecting the broad scope and interdisciplinary nature of KM research. From a functional and process-oriented perspective, authors such as Armistead (1999), Probst et al. (2000), and Staab et al. (2001) describe knowledge management as a set of structured activities, primarily encompassing knowledge acquisition, storage, sharing, and utilization. A similar approach is presented by Lytres et al. (2002) and Rollet (2003), who also conceptualize KM as a sequence of interrelated stages forming the organizational knowledge life cycle. Other authors, including Lin and Lee (2005), Nielsen (2006), and Franco and Mariano (2007), extend this scope by identifying additional processes such as knowledge transfer, capture, and application, leading to greater diversity in the classification of KM processes. A technological and system-based perspective is particularly evident in the studies by Lin and Lee (2005), Sun (2010), and Bigliardi et al. (2014), which focus on processes related to knowledge capture, storage, and retrieval supported by information systems and technological infrastructure. In contrast, a strategic perspective is reflected in the work of Nielsen (2006), Franco and Mariano (2007), and Kulkar et al. (2009), where processes such as knowledge acquisition, transfer, and application are analyzed in relation to strategy implementation and organizational performance. The social and behavioral

dimension of KM is emphasized by Becerra-Fernandez et al. (2004), Wee and Chua (2013), Kianto et al. (2016), Yusr et al. (2017), and Abualoush et al. (2018), who identify knowledge sharing, collaboration, and interaction as key mechanisms of knowledge flow and internalization within organizations. More recent studies, represented by Iqbal et al. (2019), Shahzad et al. (2021), Panahi et al. (2021), Yu et al. (2022), Bocoya-Maline et al. (2023), and Miraj et al. (2024), describe KM processes using integrative approaches that combine technological activities with human and relational factors. These authors frequently identify processes such as knowledge integration, reuse, and co-creation, highlighting the dynamic nature of knowledge in digital and networked environments. Despite the increasing complexity of the proposed models, the literature reveals clear differences in terminology, the number of identified processes, and the structure of the proposed conceptual frameworks. Table 1 summarizes how various authors define and apply KM processes over the last 25 years.

Table 1.
Analyzed KM processes in the last 25 years

Author, year / Process	Acquisition	Creation	Share	Transfer	Embedding	Goals	Identification	Development	Distribution	Preservation	Measurement	Import	Capture	Retrival	Access	Use	Value	Organization	Reuse	Planning	Integration	Maintenance	Assessment	Discovery	Application	Storage	Customer oriented	Dissemination	Transmission	(Re)combination	Assembly	Generation	Retention	Utilization	Coding	Search
Armistead, 1999		*		*	*																														
Probst, et al.,2000	*					*	*	*	*	*	*																								
Staab, et al.,2001		*										*	*	*	*	*																			
Lytres et al., 2002	*			*												*	*	*	*																
Rollet, 2003		*		*														*		*	*	*	*												
Becerra-Fernandez et al.,2004			*										*											*	*										
Lin and Lee, 2005	*												*			*									*	*	*	*	*							
Nielsen, 2006	*		*					*					*			*					*									*	*				
Franco and Mariano, 2007														*												*									
Matula and Mooko, 2008	*												*					*							*	*						*			
Kulkar et al., 2009	*	*																*										*					*		
Sun, 2010	*	*	*																														*		
Dalkir, 2011	*		*										*												*			*						*	
Pinho et al., 2011	*	*	*	*																															
Wee and Chua, 2013		*	*																*																
Bigliardi et al., 2014		*	*	*					*	*			*					*								*									*
Garcia-Fernandez, 2015		*		*																															
Kianto et al., 2016	*	*	*													*									*	*						*		*	
Yusr et al., 2017	*																								*			*							
Abualoush et al., 2018			*																						*	*					*				
Iqbal et al., 2019	*		*																														*		
Shahzad et al., 2021	*																								*			*							
Panahi et al., 2021	*		*															*							*										
Yu et al., 2022	*		*																														*		
Bocoya-Maline et al., 2023		*		*												*										*									
Miraj et al., 2024		*		*																					*	*									

Source: authors' own elaboration based on literature review.

The conducted analysis indicates that nearly all authors consider processes related to knowledge creation or acquisition, although they employ different terms and semantic scopes. Becerra-Fernandez et al. (2004) and Lin and Lee (2005) emphasize knowledge capture and acquisition as the foundation for subsequent activities, whereas Nielsen (2006) and Franco and Mariano (2007) directly link knowledge acquisition to the achievement of organizational strategic objectives. Kulkar et al. (2009) extend this perspective by highlighting the role of knowledge integration in building organizational capabilities. In more recent studies, such as Iqbal et al. (2019), Panahi et al. (2021), and Yu et al. (2022), knowledge creation is conceptualized in a more dynamic manner and includes co-creation, recombination, and the regeneration of knowledge in digital environments. Another area consistently present in the analyzed models comprises processes related to knowledge storage. Probst et al. (2000) point to the importance of knowledge storage and protection as elements of organizational memory, while Staab et al. (2001) and Rollet (2003) emphasize the role of structuring and formalizing knowledge resources. Garcia-Fernandez (2015) additionally incorporates planning and evaluation aspects of knowledge resources, indicating the need for systematic management of their quality and accessibility. Despite terminological differences, all these approaches functionally address ensuring the durability, availability, and usability of knowledge over time. Processes related to the flow of knowledge among individuals and organizational structures constitute another common element of the analyzed concepts. Dalkir (2011), Pinho et al. (2011), and Wee and Chua (2013) emphasize the importance of knowledge sharing and collaboration as mechanisms enabling its dissemination and internalization. Bigliardi et al. (2014) and Kianto et al. (2016) draw attention to the role of knowledge integration among different organizational units and stakeholders. Yusr et al. (2017) and Abualoush et al. (2018) indicate that effective knowledge transfer is strongly conditioned by organizational and cultural factors. Shahzad et al. (2021) and Bocoya-Maline et al. (2023) further develop this perspective by analyzing knowledge flows in the context of digitalization and networked collaboration. The final, yet equally important, area concerns the use of knowledge in organizational practice. Franco and Mariano (2007) and Kulkar et al. (2009) emphasize the relationship between knowledge application and organizational performance and innovation. Iqbal et al. (2019) and Yu et al. (2022) extend this perspective by incorporating knowledge reuse, maintenance, and updating in dynamic business environments. Miraj et al. (2024), in turn, highlight the importance of continuity in knowledge use as a component of organizational resilience and adaptability. Despite a shared process-oriented core, the table reveals clear inconsistencies regarding the number of identified processes, the level of their aggregation, and the manner in which they are conceptualized. Some authors, such as Armistead (1999) and Probst et al. (2000), employ relatively simple models consisting of a limited number of key stages, whereas others, including Lin and Lee (2005), Bigliardi et al. (2014), and Panahi et al. (2021), propose more elaborate classifications comprising numerous detailed sub-processes. These differences

stem not only from divergent research objectives but also from the adopted theoretical perspectives, particularly technological, social, and strategic. Moreover, the lack of unified terminology results in similar activities being described using different labels, which hinders cross-study comparability and the accumulation of theoretical knowledge. The integration of these dispersed approaches is possible through the consolidation of processes with similar functional meanings into a coherent conceptual framework. The analysis indicates that most identified activities can be logically assigned to four overarching areas: knowledge creation, knowledge storage, knowledge sharing, and knowledge use. Processes such as knowledge acquisition, development, identification, and capture were grouped under knowledge creation, as they all contribute to generating new knowledge or transforming existing information into organizational assets. Knowledge organization, measurement, planning, assessment, preservation, and storage were classified under knowledge storage, as they focus on structuring, maintaining, and safeguarding knowledge for future accessibility and use. The knowledge sharing category includes processes such as transfer, dissemination, distribution, integration, and utilization, which facilitate the movement of knowledge across individuals, teams, or departments. Finally, knowledge use encompasses activities such as reuse, access, maintenance, retention, and application, emphasizing the practical deployment of knowledge to improve decision-making quality, organizational performance, and innovation. The Table 2 below shows how the grouping was done.

Table 2.
Grouping of KM processes

Knowledge creation	Knowledge storage	Knowledge share	Knowledge use
Knowledge acquisition	Knowledge measurement	Knowledge share	Knowledge use
Knowledge creation	Knowledge organisation	Knowledge transfer	Knowledge reuse
Knowledge embedding	Knowledge planning	Knowledge distribution	Knowledge access
Knowledge identification	Knowledge assessment	Knowledge integration	Knowledge maintenance
Knowledge development	Knowledge preservation	Knowledge dissemintation	Knowledge retention
Knowledge import	Knowledge storage	Knowledge transfer	Orientation to customers and suppliers
Knowledge capture		Knowledge utilization	Knowledge goals
Knowledge retrival		Knowledge search	Knowledge value
Knowledge discovery			
Knowledge (re)combination			
Knowledge assebmbly			
Knowledge generation			
Knowledge coding			

Source: authors' own elaboration based on literature review.

This integrated approach preserves the richness of empirical insights offered by authors such as Armistead (1999), Probst et al. (2000), Lin and Lee (2005), Kulkar et al. (2009), Bigliardi et al. (2014), Iqbal et al. (2019), Panahi et al. (2021), and Yu et al. (2022), while simultaneously reducing excessive terminological fragmentation. The proposed classification enables a more coherent understanding of knowledge management processes by integrating dispersed terminology into a simplified conceptual framework. It highlights the iterative and

interconnected nature of knowledge management, whereby creation leads to storage, storage enables sharing, and shared knowledge is ultimately applied and reused, thereby initiating new cycles of creation. Such a conceptual framework facilitates more consistent comparisons of empirical studies and provides a solid foundation for further operationalization of variables and the development of analytical models.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This study set out to critically examine the similarities, differences, and inconsistencies in the definitions and classifications of KM processes in academic literature over the past 25 years and to explore how these perspectives can be integrated into a unified conceptual framework. The findings demonstrate that, despite substantial diversity in terminology, scope, and analytical emphasis, there is a strong underlying convergence in how KM processes are fundamentally understood across different research traditions. A key similarity identified across the reviewed studies is the consistent recognition of a core set of knowledge-related activities that collectively form the knowledge lifecycle within organizations. Regardless of whether authors adopt functional, technological, strategic, or social perspectives, most frameworks include processes related to knowledge creation or acquisition, knowledge storage, knowledge sharing or transfer, and knowledge use or application. Early process-oriented models emphasize structured sequences of activities, while later approaches increasingly incorporate dynamic, relational, and technology-enabled dimensions. Nevertheless, the functional logic of generating knowledge, retaining it, mobilizing it across organizational boundaries, and applying it to create value remains remarkably stable across time and disciplinary orientations. This convergence suggests that the diversity observed in the literature reflects differences in analytical lenses rather than fundamental disagreement about the essence of KM processes. At the same time, the analysis reveals substantial differences and inconsistencies in how these processes are defined, labeled, and structured. One major source of inconsistency lies in terminology. Similar activities are frequently described using different labels, such as acquisition, capture, identification, or development for knowledge creation-related activities, and sharing, transfer, dissemination, or integration for knowledge flow processes. This terminological fragmentation complicates cumulative knowledge development and limits comparability across empirical studies. Another source of variation concerns the level of granularity in process models. Some authors propose parsimonious frameworks with a limited number of high-level stages, whereas others develop detailed classifications that include numerous sub-processes reflecting technological functions, social interactions, or strategic mechanisms. These differences are partly driven by distinct research objectives and theoretical orientations, particularly the emphasis placed on information systems, organizational behavior, or strategic management.

In addition, inconsistencies emerge in how boundaries between processes are conceptualized. In several models, certain activities are treated as independent processes, while in others they are embedded within broader categories. For example, integration or reuse may be conceptualized as separate processes or as components of sharing and use, depending on the analytical perspective adopted. This lack of conceptual alignment contributes to overlapping classifications and ambiguous process boundaries, reinforcing the fragmented nature of the KM literature. To address these challenges, this study proposes an integrative framework that consolidates dispersed process definitions into four overarching and interrelated categories: knowledge creation, knowledge storage, knowledge sharing, and knowledge use. This categorization is grounded in the functional purpose of each process within the KM cycle and reflects observable dependencies and feedback loops among them. Knowledge creation encompasses activities that generate new knowledge or transform information into organizational assets; knowledge storage focuses on structuring, preserving, and maintaining knowledge for future accessibility; knowledge sharing facilitates the movement and integration of knowledge across organizational actors and units; and knowledge use captures the practical deployment of knowledge in decision-making, innovation, and performance improvement. By aggregating conceptually overlapping terms into broader functional domains, the framework reduces terminological complexity while preserving the richness of existing empirical insights. The proposed framework highlights the iterative and cyclical nature of KM, emphasizing that these processes do not operate linearly but dynamically reinforce one another. Knowledge use generates new experiences and insights that feed back into knowledge creation, while storage enables continuity and organizational memory, and sharing ensures knowledge diffusion and recombination. This dynamic perspective aligns with contemporary organizational realities characterized by digitalization, distributed work, and continuous innovation, making the framework adaptable across different organizational contexts and levels of analysis.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to KM research by offering a coherent synthesis of fragmented conceptualizations and by providing a common analytical language that can support cumulative theory building. The framework enables more consistent comparison of empirical findings, facilitates operationalization of KM constructs, and supports the development of integrative models linking KM processes to organizational outcomes. For practitioners, the framework offers a structured yet flexible lens for diagnosing KM maturity, designing KM initiatives, and aligning technological investments with human and organizational capabilities.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The narrative review approach, while enabling conceptual depth and flexibility, does not provide the same level of replicability and exhaustiveness as systematic reviews. The selection of studies was purposive and may not capture all relevant publications or emerging streams of research. Furthermore, the proposed framework remains conceptual and has not yet been empirically validated across different organizational settings or industries.

Future research should therefore focus on empirically testing the proposed framework, examining causal relationships among the four process categories, and exploring how contextual factors such as organizational size, industry, digital maturity, and culture influence the configuration and effectiveness of KM processes. Longitudinal studies could further illuminate how KM process configurations evolve over time and how feedback loops between creation, storage, sharing, and use shape organizational learning and innovation. Such research would strengthen the practical applicability and theoretical robustness of the integrated conceptual framework proposed in this study.

5. Summary

The aim of this article was to analyze similarities, differences, and inconsistencies in the definitions and classifications of knowledge management processes presented in academic literature over the past 25 years and to develop a coherent and adaptable conceptual framework integrating dispersed approaches. A narrative literature review was employed, enabling a qualitative synthesis of concepts developed across diverse research traditions and organizational contexts. The analysis focused on the terminology used to describe KM processes, their functional roles within organizations, and their frequency of occurrence in existing models. The findings indicate that despite substantial conceptual fragmentation, most authors identify a common core of processes encompassing knowledge creation or acquisition, knowledge storage, knowledge sharing, and knowledge use. At the same time, significant differences were observed in the number of identified processes, the level of their granularity, and the way boundaries between them are conceptualized. These inconsistencies stem from divergent theoretical perspectives and the lack of unified terminology, which limits cross-study comparability and cumulative theory building. In response to the identified discrepancies, an integrated conceptual framework was proposed consisting of four overarching and interrelated categories: knowledge creation, knowledge storage, knowledge sharing, and knowledge use. The framework reflects the iterative and dynamic nature of knowledge management and enables the organization of dispersed terminology into a coherent analytical structure. The proposed approach provides a foundation for further empirical research and may support the design and improvement of knowledge management practices in organizations.

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