

A Conceptual Analysis of the Relationship Between Knowledge Management Capabilities and Learning Orientation Among Hoteliers in Malaysia

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Abstract: This study focuses on a literature review examining the impact of Knowledge Management Capabilities (KMC) and Learning Orientation (LO) among hoteliers in Malaysia. The tourism industry, one of the fastest-growing sectors, was significantly affected by Covid-19. However, it is now beginning to recover, with tourists adopting different perspectives. To maintain a competitive edge, the industry, including hoteliers, must stay abreast of the latest market trends. This requires both top management and employees to be equipped with adequate and relevant knowledge. Despite this need, some hoteliers are still reluctant to adopt knowledge management practices. Additionally, some are unable to utilize knowledge as part of their learning orientation to address changing market trends and various challenges, both micro and macro, to remain competitive. This research aims to explore how learning orientation is influenced by knowledge management capabilities, based on empirical studies. The conceptual analysis from this study can pave the way for developing a framework and further research analysis.

Keywords: *Knowledge Management Capabilities, Learning Orientation, Hoteliers, Tourism*

1. Introduction

Tourism makes a significant contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP) of many countries, accounting for 10.4% of the total global GDP, which is USD 9.2 trillion, and generating 10.6% (334 million) of all jobs worldwide (WTTC, 2021). In Malaysia, the tourism industry attracted 13 million international tourists from January to August 2023 alone (Ganesan, 2023). This figure is more than triple the 4.33 million tourists recorded during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Malaysian Tourism Ministry, 2021). This demonstrates that the tourism industry has been the fastest and largest growing sector for many decades, serving as a key driver of economic growth and social development (Yu et al., 2023). However, Syed Mohamad et al. (2023) and Weidenfeld (2006) have noted that the industry has reached a saturated market and needs to learn as well as adopt new segmentation strategies such as eco, religious, and nature tourism. Consequently, hoteliers are focusing on specific niche markets such as boutique hotels, Shariah-compliant hotels, and hotels catering to businesswomen (Nor et al., 2012). Bharwani and Mathews (2016) emphasized that the global tourism and hospitality industry has shifted from a product-focused approach to a customer-focused approach to meet tourists' demands and trends based on the learning orientation that is being adopted among them.

In the context of emerging markets, market trends, and tourist demands, knowledge is a crucial element for all companies within the tourism and hospitality industry, including hotels. This knowledge shapes how these companies respond to the needs and demands of their guests and tourists (Syed Mohamad et al., 2023; Muhamad Nor et al., 2019; Nor et al., 2012; Poloski-Vokic, 2008). To navigate changes in the business landscape and remain successful, companies must ensure that all their staff have access to sufficient and relevant knowledge (Mohamad et al., 2022; Poloski-Vokic, 2008). According to Mohd Zahari et al. (2013), the business is already in an era where knowledge is paramount, and employees must manage it effectively as part of their companies' strategies to sustain and thrive in a competitive market.

Syed Mohamad et al. (2023) and Guimaraes et al. (2017) emphasize that companies must strategically identify and develop knowledge to achieve sustainable competitive advantages over their competitors by nurturing learning orientation within their companies' environment. On a macro level, countries must also implement

effective knowledge management systems to support progressive development (Albassam, 2019). Knowledge in the economic sphere needs to be generated, applied, and disseminated among the populace, providing them with a learning orientation that ensures the country's growth (Hamzah et al., 2020).

Problem Statement

The tourism and hospitality industry has reached a saturation point, highlighting the need to explore new markets. The dynamic global business landscape, characterized by rapid changes in consumer trends and preferences, underscores this necessity that needs to be aware of and learned by many industry players. Mohamad et al. (2022) and Payal et al. (2016) emphasized that the service industry depends on knowledge management for modern survival. Without adequate knowledge, skills, and capabilities, companies struggle to achieve and maintain competitiveness (Khan, 2019). Nor et al. (2019) also argued that the industry must explore and learn novel approaches to stay competitive and relevant in the evolving business landscape. One such approach is knowledge management, as noted by Syed Mohamad et al. (2023) and Poloski-Vokic (2008). Strategically implementing knowledge management practices enables the industry to respond effectively to changing customer and guest demands and preferences. Weidenfeld (2006) highlighted the importance of recognizing these changes to identify new market segments. In response to these shifts, Syed Mohamad et al. (2023) and Ngah et al. (2016) advocated for a strategic shift in the services industry towards adopting and implementing knowledge management practices. This strategic move is essential for the industry to learn to adapt and thrive in a highly competitive environment. Albassam (2019) extended this perspective by suggesting that nations, particularly those aiming to remain competitive globally, should establish effective knowledge management systems. A robust knowledge management system and learning orientation are crucial for sustaining competitiveness and aligning with the practices of developed nations.

Another critical issue is the timeliness with which companies adopt knowledge management practices and acquire intellectual resources to stay competitive in their respective industries (Alavi et al., 2005). In today's fast-paced business environment, the ability to quickly implement and integrate knowledge management systems is crucial for maintaining a competitive edge. Companies that are slow to adopt these practices risk falling behind more agile competitors who can leverage knowledge to innovate and respond to market changes more effectively (Chiu & Chen, 2016).

Gold et al. (2001) highlighted the significant challenges involved in establishing and sustaining knowledge management initiatives over time. These challenges can be multifaceted, including organizational resistance, the complexity of integrating new systems with existing processes, and the continuous need for updating and maintaining knowledge repositories. The initial implementation phase requires substantial investment in terms of time, money, and resources (Gotteland et al., 2020). Companies need to develop or acquire technology infrastructure, train employees, and create a culture that values knowledge sharing and continuous learning. Moreover, sustaining knowledge management practices over the long term is equally demanding. Organizations must ensure that their knowledge management systems remain relevant and useful, which requires ongoing assessment and adaptation (Syed Mohamad et al., 2023; Mohamad et al., 2022). This includes regularly updating the knowledge base to reflect the latest industry trends and technological advancements, as well as ensuring that employees remain engaged and motivated to use and contribute to these systems which could be tend to continuously learning orientation.

The dynamic nature of many industries adds another layer of complexity. Market conditions, technological advancements, and regulatory changes can all impact the effectiveness of knowledge management practices (Anjaria, 2020). Companies must be able to adapt their knowledge management strategies to keep pace with these external changes. Failure to do so can result in outdated or irrelevant knowledge and learning processes (Hindasah & Nuryakin, 2020), which can hinder decision-making and operational efficiency. Furthermore, the competitive advantage gained from effective knowledge management is not static. As more companies recognize the value of knowledge management, the bar for competitive advantage is continuously raised. What was once a cutting-edge practice can quickly become a baseline expectation (Hindasah & Nuryakin, 2020). Therefore, companies must not only implement knowledge management practices but also continuously innovate and improve these practices to maintain their competitive edge by nurturing learning orientation within the companies (Anjaria, 2020).

Implementing knowledge management over time can be particularly challenging for smaller companies, especially Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). These businesses often operate with limited resources, making it difficult to invest in and sustain comprehensive knowledge management systems. SMEs must constantly adapt to market changes to remain competitive, and they typically do so by leveraging their existing knowledge, resources, and capabilities. According to Randhawa et al. (2020), SMEs tend to rely on what they already possess to respond to market shifts, rather than investing heavily in new knowledge management infrastructure. This approach can limit their ability to fully capitalize on the benefits of advanced knowledge management practices, further complicating their efforts to keep pace with larger, better-resourced competitors.

Preparing knowledgeable and skilled managerial personnel is crucial for achieving excellent performance and business success, particularly within the hotel and tourism sector (Sheresheva, 2016; Stephenson et al., 2010). This emphasis on managerial expertise underscores the pivotal role that capable leadership plays in navigating the complexities of hospitality operations and enhancing guest satisfaction.

Simultaneously, companies must recognize that all employees are essential assets. Poloski-Vokic (2008) emphasized the importance of investing in skilled individuals across all levels of the organization to improve overall performance in tourism and hospitality establishments. Tavitiyaman et al. (2012) further explored the profound impact of skilled employees on hotel management, highlighting their ability to streamline operations and elevate service quality. The recognition of a skilled workforce as a cornerstone for enhancing the standards and efficiency of hotel operations is widely acknowledged within the industry. This acknowledgment reinforces the notion that employees are integral to the overall success and competitiveness of businesses in hospitality. In this context, fostering a learning-oriented environment becomes crucial (Hamzah et al., 2020). By nurturing continuous learning and professional development among employees, organizations can significantly enhance their capabilities and adaptability. This proactive approach not only improves individual performance but also contributes to organizational agility and innovation. Sheresheva (2016) expands on this perspective by emphasizing the importance of striking a balance between investing in skilled employees and implementing developmental initiatives in developing countries' tourism and hospitality sectors. This balance is critical for these countries to effectively compete with developed nations that boast superior service standards designed to attract both potential and repeat guests to their hotels.

Despite the potential benefits of knowledge management in the tourism industry, its adoption faces resistance, particularly due to the industry's unstable environment (Cooper, 2006). The uncertainty and dynamic nature of the tourism sector make industry players hesitant to fully embrace knowledge management practices, which could otherwise contribute significantly to their adaptability and success. The tourism industry is characterized by fluctuations in demand, seasonal variations, and external factors such as economic downturns and political instability. These elements contribute to a highly unpredictable environment, making it challenging for businesses to commit to long-term knowledge management strategies. Industry players often prioritize immediate operational concerns over strategic investments in knowledge management, fearing that the returns may not justify the costs in such a volatile setting.

In response to these challenges, Tavitiyaman et al. (2012) emphasized the necessity for hoteliers to invest in providing their employees with knowledge. This investment is crucial not only for enhancing the skills of the workforce but also for creating a learning environment that fosters continuous improvement and adaptability. By equipping employees with the right knowledge and cultivating a conducive learning environment, hotels can significantly improve their performance (Hamzah et al., 2020). A well-informed and skilled workforce can better anticipate and respond to market changes, innovate in service delivery, and maintain high standards even during periods of uncertainty. Moreover, a strong emphasis on learning and development can help mitigate the initial resistance to knowledge management by demonstrating its tangible benefits (Meher & Mishra, 2022).

Implementing effective knowledge management practices can address deficiencies in compliance with industry standards and regulations, ensuring that operations run smoothly and efficiently (Meher & Mishra, 2022). Over time, as employees see the positive impact of these practices on their daily work and the overall success of the organization, the resistance to knowledge management is likely to diminish (Hamzah et al., 2020). Ultimately,

by prioritizing knowledge management and fostering a supportive learning environment, hotels can enhance their operational efficiency, improve service quality, and achieve a competitive edge in the market, even amid the inherent uncertainties of the tourism industry.

2. Literature Review

Knowledge Management Capabilities: Knowledge is widely recognized as a crucial asset for organizations, playing a vital role in achieving superior business performance and maintaining a competitive edge. This perspective is supported by various researchers, including Muhamad et al. (2022), Grover and Davenport (2001), and Barney (1991). Bolisani and Bratianu (2018) have defined knowledge as an abstract concept that takes on tangible forms in the real world, underscoring its importance as a valuable resource for organizations. Furthermore, Anjaria (2020) has expanded on this notion by defining knowledge management as a comprehensive array of methods, tools, and techniques that companies use to manage their processes. This definition enhances the understanding of knowledge management, highlighting it as a systematic approach to managing organizational knowledge effectively.

Steward and Waddel (2008) contextualize knowledge management by tracing its development over more than four decades by highlighting its origins and early implementation in organizational settings, emphasizing its evolutionary nature. This perspective underscores how knowledge management has evolved from its inception, blending theoretical insights from academia with practical applications in real-world business environments. The timeline that Steward and Waddel (2008) provided with suggestions for the gradual maturation of knowledge management as a discipline, gaining significant traction, especially since the late 20th century.

On the other hand, Al-Hawari (2004) offered a distinct perspective by defining knowledge management in terms of its practical utility within companies by portraying knowledge as something that can be systematized and utilized to achieve organizational objectives. This perspective shifted the focus from knowledge as an abstract concept to viewing it as a tangible asset that can be codified, understood, disseminated, and effectively applied. By defining knowledge management in this manner, Al-Hawari (2004) highlighted its role in enhancing organizational effectiveness and competitiveness. The combination of these viewpoints enriches the understanding of knowledge management as a dynamic field that bridges theory and practice, evolving to meet the changing needs and challenges of organizations in the modern era.

Syed Mohamad et al. (2023) and, Chiu and Chen (2016) characterized knowledge management capabilities as an ongoing and purposeful process aimed at generating knowledge within an organization. This perspective underscores the active and continuous role of knowledge management in organizational growth. Earlier, Alavi and Leidner (2001) contributed to this concept by defining knowledge management capabilities as encompassing the skills to create, transfer, integrate, and apply knowledge within an organizational framework. Their definition encapsulates the diverse dimensions of knowledge management, encompassing creation, transfer, integration, and application.

The concept of knowledge management represents more than just incremental change; it signifies a profound transformation that profoundly affects the foundational aspects of an organization, such as its assumptions, structures, and value systems. The objective is to reshape and rebuild these elements to foster a knowledge-driven organization. This transformative approach underscores the necessity of sustained organizational support for knowledge management, acknowledging its critical role in improving performance (Hindasah & Nuryakin, 2020).

Additionally, organizations must develop specific capabilities to effectively support knowledge management. It emphasizes that organizations should not only nurture these capabilities but also view them as opportunities for integrating knowledge. This perspective underscores that knowledge management goes beyond mere tools or systems; it requires a strategic and deliberate effort to embed knowledge within the organization. Thus, Zhang et al. (2018) classified knowledge management capabilities into three categories: technological, structural, and cultural. This framework acknowledges the diverse aspects of knowledge management, recognizing its reliance not only on technology but also on organizational structures and cultural dynamics.

This comprehensive approach suggests that successful knowledge management hinges on a blend of technological tools, supportive organizational structures, and a culture that fosters and values knowledge sharing.

However, Gold et al. (2001) and, Lee and Yang (2000) categorized knowledge management differently into two main areas: knowledge infrastructure and knowledge processes. This division underscores the interaction between foundational structures and the dynamic activities involved in managing knowledge. Knowledge infrastructure pertains to essential elements such as systems and tools, while knowledge processes encompass the ongoing workflows and activities central to effective knowledge management.

Knowledge Infrastructure: The concept of knowledge infrastructure can be understood through various definitions and components. According to Wu and Chen (2014), knowledge infrastructure serves as the foundational support that organizations establish to bolster their core operations, encompassing systems and services. This definition underscores the pivotal role of infrastructure in providing essential support for both operational and strategic business needs. In an earlier perspective, Lee and Yang (2000) characterized it as a blend of organizational structure, technology, and culture. This broader view recognizes that infrastructure extends beyond technological elements alone, encompassing organizational structures and cultural dynamics, highlighting their interconnected roles in supporting business operations. Furthermore, Gil-Padilla and Espino-Rodriguez (2008) highlighted the specific impact of technology infrastructure on performance within the hotel industry. They elaborated on how technology infrastructure has evolved into a crucial resource influencing organizational performance, underscoring its pivotal role in the competitive landscape.

The concept of knowledge infrastructure can be understood from various viewpoints regarding its definition and components. According to Wu and Chen (2014), knowledge infrastructure represents the foundation that companies establish to support their core business operations, encompassing systems and services. This definition underscores the essential role of infrastructure in providing crucial support for both operational and strategic aspects of a business.

In an earlier perspective, Lee and Yang (2000) portrayed knowledge infrastructure as a synthesis of organizational structure, technology, and culture. This broader interpretation acknowledges that infrastructure extends beyond mere technological components to encompass organizational structures and cultural dimensions, highlighting their interconnectedness in facilitating business functions. Furthermore, Gil-Padilla and Espino-Rodriguez (2008) drew attention to the specific impact of technology infrastructure on hotel performance within the industry by explaining how technology infrastructure has evolved into a pivotal resource influencing organizational performance, emphasizing its significance in the competitive landscape. In another perspective, Gold et al. (2001) provided a comprehensive perspective by emphasizing how social capital can be maximized within organizational infrastructure. However, the dimensions of structural, cultural, and technological factors that Gold et al. (2001) highlighted align closely with those identified by Lee and Yang (2000). Thus, Gold et al. (2001) suggested that optimizing social capital, crucial for organizational effectiveness, involves harmonizing organizational structure, culture, and technology.

As part of knowledge management capabilities' dimensions, Mohamad et al. (2022) and Mohannak (2011) examined culture as an integral part of knowledge management capabilities (KMC), highlighting its significant impact on the success or failure of organizational knowledge management initiatives. This underscores the crucial role of a supportive cultural environment in fostering effective knowledge management practices. Furthermore, Syed Muhamad et al. (2023) and, Gil-Padilla and Espino-Rodriguez (2008) emphasized the influence of technological infrastructure and cultural factors on hotel performance in the industry. Building on this, Mohamad et al. (2022) and Gold et al. (2001) expanded the discussion by illustrating how social capital within an organization's infrastructure can be optimized through structural, cultural, and technological dimensions. Furthermore, Gold et al. (2001) also discovered a significant and direct relationship between knowledge infrastructure and organizational effectiveness, reinforcing the notion that a well-developed knowledge infrastructure, encompassing structural, cultural, and technological elements, directly enhances overall organizational effectiveness.

Knowledge Process: Meanwhile, knowledge processes are seen as leveraging organizational infrastructure to enhance performance. Syed Mohamad et al. (2023) and, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) characterized knowledge processes as involving the efficient capture, storage, reconciliation, and dissemination of knowledge within an organization. These processes are crucial for transforming knowledge into a competitive advantage. Additionally, Su and Lin (2006) defined knowledge processes as the organization's capability to identify core competencies, along with the corresponding knowledge categories, demands, and requirements. This encompasses identifying business core competencies and involves activities such as knowledge generation, dissemination, and application (Lee & Yang, 2000).

Wu and Chen (2014) provided an in-depth analysis of knowledge processes, categorizing them into creation, transfer, integration, and application. This holistic perspective treats knowledge processes as a cohesive system that fosters knowledge within an organization. Earlier, Gold et al. (2001) had identified key elements of knowledge process capabilities, such as knowledge acquisition, conversion, application, and protection. Thus, these studies highlighted a significant and direct link between knowledge processes and organizational effectiveness.

Learning Orientation: The concept of learning orientation within organizations can be understood from multiple perspectives. Sinkula et al. (1997) described learning orientation as an organizational commitment to learning, a shared vision, and open-mindedness. They further define it as a cultural aspect that promotes the continuous pursuit of new knowledge and ongoing improvement. Hinasah and Nuryakin (2020) added to this by depicting organizational learning as a comprehensive process that includes creating, integrating, learning business processes, and transferring knowledge and skills. These activities are essential elements of the organizational culture and contribute to overall organizational performance.

Furthermore, Anjaria (2020) presented a clear perspective on learning organizations, highlighting two distinct interpretations. Firstly, a learning organization is seen as 'organized learning,' focusing on education, learning, and pedagogy within the organizational context. Secondly, it is viewed as an entity undergoing a developmental process, emphasizing that learning is a dynamic and ongoing aspect within the organizational environment. Therefore, the multifaceted nature of a learning organization encompasses commitment, shared vision, open-mindedness, and a cultural dedication to continuous improvement.

The critical role of learning orientation for organizational survival and success, especially in competitive industries like hospitality and tourism, involves thriving and enduring amidst competition (Baker & Sinkula, 1999; Day, 1994). Ali et al. (2020) supported this view by identifying learning orientation as a key factor in enhancing business performance within the hospitality and tourism sector. From a customer-centric perspective, Su and Lin (2016) suggested that organizations can provide the highest quality products and services by better understanding their customers. This positive outcome is achievable when both organizations and their employees are capable and committed to continuous learning. Tajeddini (2009) concurred, emphasizing that learning orientation is essential for new service development and improving hotel performance.

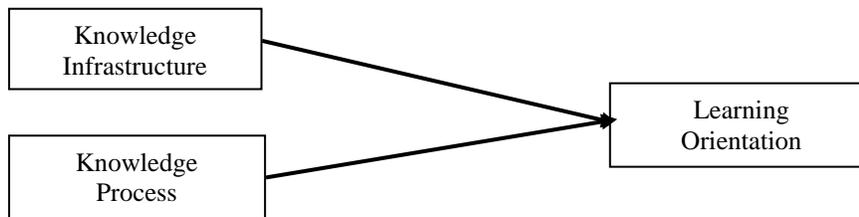
In volatile environments, Hoi and Ngui (2014) contended that learning orientation is essential for modern organizations to innovate, explore new opportunities, and maintain competitiveness. The dynamic nature of industries, particularly amidst uncertainty, requires an organizational culture that promotes continuous learning and adaptability. Moreover, Mohd Zahari et al. (2013) suggested that organizations must facilitate the sharing of knowledge and resources, both internally and externally, to enhance their effectiveness. Learning orientation extends beyond internal practices to include collaborative efforts that involve sharing insights and resources within and outside the organization. This makes learning orientation a critical factor for organizational success and competitiveness, particularly in dynamic and competitive industries such as hospitality and tourism. The positive impact includes improved customer satisfaction, new service development, and overall organizational effectiveness, highlighting the multifaceted benefits that a commitment to learning can bring.

3. The Relationship Between Knowledge Management Capabilities with a Learning Orientation

In the organizational context, numerous studies have explored knowledge management and learning orientation. Wi and Lu (2013) highlighted that learning acts as a mediator between knowledge sharing and tacit knowledge. Additionally, Antunes and Pinheiro (2019) proposed a conceptual link between knowledge management and organizational learning, which is connected to learning orientation within organizations. Moreover, Hindasah and Nuryakin (2020), Ngah et al. (2016), and Hooi and Ngui (2014) found that learning capabilities are positively influenced by organizational capabilities, such as human resources management and knowledge management, ultimately leading to improved organizational performance. This suggests that the effectiveness of human resources and knowledge management in enhancing organizational performance is further amplified by a strong learning orientation.

Similarly, Meher and Mishra (2022) emphasized the importance of individual learning orientation within an organization. They found that individual learning orientation significantly mediates the relationship between knowledge sharing and performance, especially in the service industry, such as IT companies. Their research suggested that the learning orientation of individuals within an organization, especially when influenced by peers, plays a crucial role in facilitating effective knowledge-sharing practices. However, for this research, the primary focus should be on learning orientation as the outcome variable, examining its direct impacts on knowledge management capabilities within the organizational context.

Figure 1: The conceptual framework



4. Conclusion

In the context of organizational research, numerous empirical studies have examined the variables of knowledge management and learning orientation from various perspectives, given their significant impact on organizational success. Consequently, this conceptual paper is a vital part of a doctoral research project that focuses on knowledge management and learning orientation among hoteliers in Malaysia. Specifically, the study aims to investigate the relationship between these two variables in three-star hotels and above nationwide. To ensure the study's relevance and accuracy, top management members from these hotels, including managers, managing directors, general managers, and chief executive officers, will be randomly selected to participate and represent their respective organizations.

The anticipated results of this study could have significant implications for hoteliers and companies across various sectors. By exploring the relationships between knowledge management capabilities and learning orientation, the study seeks to offer valuable insights to help organizations develop strategies to enhance their knowledge management and learning practices. This, in turn, can improve overall performance and increase competitiveness within the industry.

Contributions

The framework utilized in this research has been extensively applied by many scholars in previous studies to assess its relevance and applicability in various organizational contexts. However, this conceptual study aims to make a unique and significant contribution specifically within the hospitality industry. It seeks to enhance the existing body of knowledge on management practices and, ultimately learning orientation among hoteliers in Malaysia.

The dimensions of the variables under scrutiny—knowledge management and learning orientation—have the potential to offer a broader perspective on understanding these concepts. This research specifically aims to explain the elements of knowledge management, including knowledge infrastructure and knowledge processes, that significantly influence learning orientation. By exploring these dimensions, the study seeks to provide valuable insights and practical implications for industry professionals and academics alike.

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