Unlocking the Key Account Manager Black Box:

Exploring the Identities of Key Account Managers through Conceptual Considerations and Empirical Analyses

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the complexities of key account management (KAM), a vital business approach for building and sustaining long-term relationships with strategically important customers. However, the role of key account (KA) managers, who serve as the primary link between a supplier's internal network and the external network of the KA, remains somewhat of a "black box." By focusing on the often-underexplored roles of KA managers, particularly in terms of identity, this research was conducted to unlock that black box through three interrelated studies.

The first study examines identification in KAM by exploring four main identity anchors—organization, KA, leader, and occupation—identified through 40 semi-structured interviews with KA managers. A conceptual model is developed to illustrate these identity dimensions. The second study investigates how different identification profiles impact KA managers' effectiveness, revealing four successful configurations through a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis of survey data from 218 respondents. The third study examines the role of knowledge sharing in enhancing KA performance by combining qualitative insights from 88 interviews with a quantitative moderated mediation analysis of survey data from 307 respondents. The findings show that organizational identification promotes knowledge sharing and positively influences KA performance, with the degree of formalization moderating this relationship.

Overall, this dissertation contributes to both the theoretical and practical understanding of KA managers by integrating insights from social identity theory and knowledge management. Together, these studies provide a comprehensive exploration of KAM, advancing our understanding of how identity dynamics and knowledge sharing drive the effectiveness and performance of KA managers. The findings offer valuable implications for optimizing the roles and practices of KA managers, ensuring that KAM programs generate sustained value across diverse business contexts.

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Life is a rollercoaster—just gotta ride it.

Embarking on this dissertation journey has been much like riding a rollercoaster—full of exhilarating highs, challenging lows, and unexpected twists and turns. The thrill of discovery, the anxiety of the unknown, and the satisfaction of reaching milestones have made this experience unforgettable. However, no one rides a rollercoaster alone, and I am deeply thankful to the people who joined me on this ride by offering their support, guidance, and friendship.

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As I reflect on the invaluable professional support I've received, my thoughts naturally turn to recalling the incredible encouragement from my friends. Your understanding, your laughter, and your seemingly effortless belief that I was on the right path have meant the world to me. Thank you for being there every step of the way.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my parents.

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- Leonore Peters, University of Bamberg
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- Catherine Pardo, Emlyon Business School

Industrial Marketing Management 90 (2020), pp. 300–313

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Paper 2

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- Björn Sven Ivens, University of Bamberg
- Catherine Pardo, Emlyon Business School

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Paper 3

"The more we share, the more we have"? Analyses of knowledge sharing by key account managers

- Leonore Peters, University of Bamberg

Industrial Marketing Management 120 (2024), pp. 100–114

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1 Introduction

1.1 Relevance

Key account management (KAM) has emerged as a critical business strategy for organizations aiming to build and sustain long-term relationships with customers who hold strategic significance. These key accounts (KAs) are selected based on their potential to contribute substantially to a firm's long-term performance, often representing a small but highly valuable segment of company's overall customer portfolio (Ivens & Pardo, 2007; Pardo, Ivens, & Wilson, 2014) [1]. The strategic management of these relationships is central to KAM, which involves a targeted set of activities, resources, and actors designed to enhance value for both the supplier and the customer (Homburg, Workman, & Jensen, 2002; Workman, Homburg, & Jensen, 2003).

The importance of KAM programs extends beyond pure relationship management. Stable relationships with KAs are not merely beneficial but can also be considered valuable and rare intangible resources for firms operating in business markets (Hunt, 2000). These relationships provide a significant source of competitive advantage as they are difficult for competitors to replicate and are central to a firm's ability to create sustained value. Consequently, KAM programs are vital tools for achieving and maintaining a sustainable competitive advantage, fostering ongoing development, and deepening business relationships with strategically important customers (Guesalaga, Gabrielsson, Rogers, Ryals, & Marcos Cuevas, 2018; Ivens & Pardo, 2007).

[1] All references cited in Introduction, Theoretical Overview, and Conclusion are included in the list of references in Section 7.

KAM serves as a critical inter-organizational interface, mediating the (conflicting) interests of suppliers and KA organizations (Ivens & Pardo, 2016; Ring & van de Ven, 1994). From a KAM perspective, these are different corporate domains, each with unique agendas, philosophies, and visions that converge to create a new dimension of business exchange. In this complex environment, KA managers occupy a central role, acting as the primary link between the supplier's internal network and the customer company, or external network (Atanasova & Senn, 2011; Davies & Ryals, 2013; Homburg et al., 2002). This duality places KA managers in a unique field of tension, tasked with balancing the diverging objectives of both entities (Pardo et al., 2014). The significant responsibilities assigned to KA managers render their role somewhat of a black box, which is often obscured and underexplored in academic discourse (e.g., Guesalaga et al., 2018; Ivens, Pardo, Niersbach, & Leischnig, 2016; Kumar, Sharma, & Salo, 2019; Pardo, Ivens, & Niersbach, 2020; Sandesh, Sreejesh, & Paul, 2023). Little research has explored how KA managers perceive their own roles or how they identify with elements of the complex environments in which they work.

The dual role of KA managers operating within both the supplier's internal and external network necessitates the navigation and reconciliation of the varying priorities and expectations of internal stakeholders and external clients (Pardo et al., 2014). This balancing act demands exceptional competence and skill and an appropriate mindset, making KA managers valuable and strategic assets to their organizations (Guesalaga et al., 2018; Herhausen, Ivens, Spencer, & Weibel, 2022). Their proficiency enables them to establish and sustain long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with strategic business-to-business (B2B) customers, thereby exploiting a company's growth potential and assisting in maintaining its competitive advantage (Abratt & Kelly, 2002; Herhausen et al., 2022; Homburg et al., 2002; Shi, Zou, & Cavusgil, 2004; Pardo et al., 2014). The sophisticated interplay of internal and external factors stresses the critical importance of KA managers in driving organizational success and fostering enduring partnerships (Abratt & Kelly, 2002; Guesalaga et al., 2018). However, the challenges inherent in KAM extend beyond mere operational tasks; they encompass broader issues related to organizational dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and individual identity within the organizational context. Accordingly, a deeper understanding of the role of KA managers and their drivers is crucial.

Adopting an influential and critical school of thought from the field of social psychology—that is, social identity theory (SIT) and self-categorization theory (SCT)—offers significant potential to elucidate both the challenges of KAM as a task for an individual KA manager and the broader challenges that firms encounter when integrating KA managers into their overall structure and processes. Specifically, drawing on the extensive and rapidly expanding body of literature on individual identification in intra-organizational and inter-organizational contexts (e.g., Ellis & Ybema, 2010; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Korschun, 2015; Schotter, Mudambi, Doz, & Gaur, 2017) promised to offer valuable insights. Despite Pardo et al.'s (2020) call to investigate the attitudes and behaviors of KA managers in relation to their personal identity, this perspective has not yet been extensively explored. Since KAM fundamentally centers on the focal role of KA managers, addressing this gap is essential for advancing both the understanding and effectiveness of KA managers and KAM practices.

The theoretical relevance of this dissertation is anchored in the application of SIT and SCT to the field of KAM. These theoretical frameworks provide a differentiated understanding of how individuals derive their sense of self from membership in social groups and how this influences their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g., Haslam & Ellemers, 2005; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into various social groups, leading to the formation of in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2005). This process significantly affects how they view themselves and interact with others (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). Within the context of organizational behavior, this theory suggests that employees gain a sense of identity and belonging from their affiliation with an organization or organizational units (Hirst, Van Dick, & Van Knippenberg, 2009; Korte, 2012; Van Dick, 2004; Van Dick & Wagner, 2002).

The concept of identification, wherein individuals anchor their identity to multiple sources, is particularly relevant for understanding employees' behavior (Ashforth et al., 2008; Böhm, 2008; Haslam & Ellemers, 2005; Riketta, 2005; Van Dick & Wagner, 2002; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). Research across various work settings has demonstrated that identity and identification with different foci significantly impact performance and effectiveness. This includes the influence of organizational identification on job performance (e.g., Lee, Park, & Koo, 2015; Riketta, 2005), the effect of group identification on group outcomes (e.g., Haslam, Eggins, & Reynolds, 2003; Scott, 1997), and the positive effects of customer identification on organizational success (e.g., Cardador & Pratt, 2018; Joshi & Randall, 2001). Additionally, Wilson and Millman (2003) provide a conceptual analysis demonstrating that identification within an organization can yield both positive effects on and risks to work behavior.

This dissertation argues that identification represents a major individual challenge for KA managers and that several constellations of identification likely exist between their own organization and their KA. Consequently, this dissertation pursues the objective of exploring the role of KA managers' identities. Gaining a deeper understanding of KA managers' roles and their identities addresses a significant research gap with substantial implications. Such an understanding has the potential to illuminate the complex interplay involving KA managers and their various work interfaces. By delving into this underexplored research area, vital insights can be uncovered that enhance KAM practices. These insights would not only be academically relevant but would also enable organizations to design more effective KAM programs by addressing the underlying psychological and social factors that influence KA managers' behavior and performance. Moreover, these insights would hold practical value, particularly in the refinement of KAM strategies and the alignment of KA managers' roles with their organizational environments. They would offer valuable guidance for optimizing the selection and positioning of KA managers as well as for facilitating their ability to articulate their roles within both internal and external networks. Such advancements are essential for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of business outcomes.

Moreover, the effective deployment of KAM programs in supplier organizations involves a thorough process that includes identifying and analyzing KAs and creating the necessary structures to systematically integrate KAM into an organization (Guenzi & Storbacka, 2015; Ivens & Pardo, 2007; Leischnig, Ivens, Niersbach, & Pardo, 2018; Ojasalo, 2001; Pardo, 1999; Ryals & Humphries, 2007). Accordingly, the range of KAM practices in contemporary business environments is remarkably diverse. Consequently, the challenges inherent in KAM encompass broader issues related to organizational dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and other contextual factors. KA managers serve a crucial intermediary role between suppliers and buyers, effectively bridging internal organizational networks with external market forces (Davies & Ryals, 2013; Ivens et al., 2016; Ojasalo, 2001). Despite KA managers' importance to an organization, there remains a substantial gap in understanding the role and influence of contextual factors for KA managers' identities on their effectiveness. While studies have examined the general principles of KAM, there is a notable lack of research addressing the diversity across KAM programs and the specific combinations of resources and skills required in different contexts (Guesalaga et al., 2018; Kumar et al., 2019; Sandesh et al., 2023). The current research addresses this gap by investigating the role of KA managers' identities in different business environments. In particular, this dissertation aims to elucidate the identity profiles of successful KA managers who excel in specific business environments shaped by internal organizational structures, such as formalization and external business conditions, including competitive intensity and market dynamism.

Furthermore, KAM relationships are characterized by intense knowledge exchange at multiple levels (Nätti, Halinen, & Hanttu, 2006; Salojärvi & Sainio, 2010, 2015). In this context, KA managers serve as essential knowledge hubs and are responsible for controlling and disseminating knowledge within intra-organizational and inter-organizational networks (Guesalaga et al., 2018). The complexity of this role arises from the expansive and often diffuse nature of these networks, combined with the unique positioning of KA managers within their organizations' hierarchies. Consequently, essential knowledge about KAs is frequently acquired by KA managers and is not formally documented, highlighting the need to explore factors that influence the willingness to share knowledge within the organization (Davies & Ryals, 2013; Guenzi, Pardo, & Georges, 2007; Pardo et al., 2020).

Research by Kumar et al. (2019) and Sandesh et al. (2023) highlighted a relevant gap in the literature regarding these points about knowledge exchange. They advocated for a comprehensive approach that considers both organizational elements and individual factors. This integrative approach is crucial for understanding how these elements collectively drive knowledge sharing behaviors and ultimately impact KA performance. Addressing this research gap is essential for refining KAM strategies and enhancing organizational performance. By investigating how organizational structures and individual identification influence knowledge-sharing practices, this dissertation aims to contribute valuable insights into improving KAM effectiveness and optimizing knowledge management strategies within diverse business contexts.

The capacity to generate added value for the supplier and buyer is inherently shaped by the identities of KA managers, with a multitude of relevant identification foci (Pardo et al., 2020). Understanding these multifaceted identifications is crucial for optimizing the strategic effectiveness of KAM programs and ensuring that the substantial resources invested yield the desired outcomes (Sandesh et al., 2023). In summary, this dissertation seeks to contribute to both the theoretical and practical dimensions of KAM by elucidating how internal and external factors interplay to shape KAM practices and outcomes. By advancing our understanding of the identity profiles of successful KA managers and their knowledge sharing strategies, this research aims to provide valuable insights for optimizing KAM strategies and enhancing organizational performance in diverse business contexts.

1.2 Research objective

This dissertation investigates the previously identified research gaps through three interrelated studies, with the overarching goal of unlocking the black box 'key account manager' and uncovering the role of KA managers' identities. To achieve this, the research integrates conceptual considerations and a broad range of empirical analyses, providing a comprehensive examination of the complex dynamics involved in the role of KA managers.

The objective of Study 1 is to enhance comprehension of the identification construct within a KAM context. In particular, the study aims to explore the role of identification for KA managers, the key factors that serve as anchors for identification within the context of KAM, and how these factors may be linked to the responsibilities of KA managers. For this purpose, the study adopts an exploratory research approach, utilizing qualitative interviews as the primary method of data collection. A total of 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted with KA managers to gather insights into their perspectives and experiences.

The research questions are as follows:

(1) Does the concept of identification play a role for KA managers?

(2) Which identification anchors are relevant in a KAM context?

Study 2 responds to the call for expanded research within the field and endeavors to offer insights into the diverse identification patterns observed among KA managers, as well as the influence of various contextual factors. Its primary objective is to investigate the interrelation between different identification patterns and the effectiveness of KA managers, while also examining how these patterns vary based on contextual elements. For this purpose, survey data collected from 218 KA managers employed in industrial firms across Germany were analyzed. By employing fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA), this study aims to uncover configurations of identification dimensions associated with high levels of effectiveness among KA managers.

The research questions are as follows:

(1) Which identification patterns are related to KA managers' effectiveness?

(2) How do identification patterns differ according to contextual factors?

The primary aim of Study 3 is to investigate the factors—both organizational and individual—that influence knowledge sharing and assess their impact on KA performance. By addressing this dual focus, the research aims to shed light on how various elements within the organizational environment, as well as individual factors, contribute to the processes of knowledge sharing and impact KA performance. For this purpose, the research project adopts a mixed-methods approach. First, it follows a broader, exploratory approach, utilizing qualitative interviews with 88 KA managers to delve into KA managers' perspectives on knowledge sharing. Second, it employs an empirical approach, analyzing data from 307 KA managers in Germany to confirm findings related to the factors influencing knowledge sharing behaviors, in particular emphasizing the influence of identification with both the organization and the KA, as well as the role of formalization.

The research questions are as follows:

(1) Which organizational and individual factors drive knowledge sharing?

(2a) How does identification with the organization and with the KA affect knowledge sharing behavior and KA performance?

(2b) To what extent does formalization influence these dynamics?

This dissertation endeavors to elucidate the multifaceted role of KA managers comprehensively through a variety of methodological approaches. By addressing these key questions, it aims to provide detailed insights and practical recommendations for the optimization of KAM strategies. The overall objective is to understand the individual behind the role and, by this, contribute to the evolution of more effective and sustainable KAM practices tailored to align with the complex needs and motivations of KA managers, thereby fostering enduring organizational success.

1.3 Structure

The dissertation consists of six chapters. Chapter 1 lays the initial groundwork by introducing the research area and emphasizing its relevance within the realms of research theory and management practice. In addition, the chapter outlines the emerging research questions, which constitute the basis for the subsequent investigations.

It is followed by Chapter 2, which provides an overview of the KAM literature and the literature on SIT and SCT, as well as the existing fields of research relevant to the topic. These form the basis for the three studies that are presented in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, each offering distinct perspectives on the role of identification in KAM.

Chapter 3 discusses the fundamental role of identification in KAM research through a qualitative study. This study also investigates with whom or what KA managers identify and how this affects their work. Based on an exploratory study that includes 40 semi-structured interviews with KA managers, four different identification foci emerge: (1) organizational identification, (2) key account identification, (3) leader identification, and (4) occupational identification. These are presented in a conceptual model as components delineating the multifaceted identity of KA managers.

Subsequently, Chapter 4 presents a study that explores this conceptual model with the application of fsQCA. This analysis further illuminates whether certain identification patterns, each consisting of different combinations of identification foci, are associated with KA manager effectiveness. Furthermore, as suggested by the study described in Chapter 3, three contextual factors are taken into account: competitive intensity, market dynamism, and the formalization of KAM. This study uses survey data from 218 respondents to conduct the fsQCA. The findings reveal four different configurations consisting of different identification profiles and contextual factors, which are sufficient for high KA manager effectiveness.

Chapter 5 presents a mixed-methods study consisting of two sub-studies: an explorative qualitative analysis (88 semi-structured interviews) and a quantitative analysis (n = 307). The focus of both studies is on the knowledge management of KA managers, particularly on knowledge sharing within an organization. KA managers play a crucial role in the exchange of knowledge as a central interface in inter-organizational relationships. Consequently, both studies focus on organizational and individual factors that influence knowledge sharing and enhance KA performance.

Finally, in Chapter 6, the findings of all three studies are discussed, accompanied by reflections on their theoretical contributions and practical implications. The dissertation concludes by addressing limitations and proposing emerging avenues for further research, thereby providing a thorough and insightful exploration of the chosen research domain.

2 Theoretical overview

2.1 Key account management

2.1.1 Conceptualization

KAM is a form of systematic customer relationship management in B2B relationships. It has its origins in relationship marketing (Millman & Wilson, 1995). Alternative terms that have a similar meaning to KAM include national account management (Shapiro & Moriarty, 1984), regional account management (Millman, 1996), global account management (Wilson & Millman, 2003; Yip & Madsen, 1996), major account management (Barrett, 1986), and strategic account management (Boles, Johnston, & Gardner 1999; Storbacka, 2012). Studies using these other terms often address the same or largely similar phenomena, leading to the acceptance of the terms as synonyms (Millman & Wilson, 1995; Pardo, 1999). However, within this research, the term KAM has been widely accepted as the result of a highly influential discussion by Pardo (1999).

KAM programs focus on those customers who are of strategic importance to a supplier's business. They aim to establish, maintain, and stabilize long-term relationships with strategic KAs, leveraging the multiple relationships between and around the respective networks; they also enhance value for both the supplier and customer through a specific, customer-focused set of activities, resources, and actors (Homburg et al., 2002; Workman et al., 2003). Consequently, KAM programs are seen as an important tool for companies to build a sustainable competitive advantage, create value, and continuously develop business relationships with strategically important customers (e.g., Guesalaga et al., 2018; Homburg et al., 2002; Ivens & Pardo, 2007; Pardo et al., 2014).

KAM can also be characterized as a systematic effort to enhance individual customers and allocate necessary resources (Boles et al., 1999; Ojasalo, 2001). For example, in most sales organizations, important customers are provided a privileged position. However, this has often been done informally, and sales structures have not been designed to support this special status (Wengler, Ehret, & Saab, 2006). KAM addresses this type of problem. A distinctive characteristic of KAM is that, unlike other forms of distribution, it focuses on relationships rather than transactions (Guenzi et al., 2007; Ivens & Pardo, 2007). Therefore, it is less about generating short-term sales and more about developing long-term strategic partnerships between two companies (Weitz & Bradford, 1999). Accordingly, KAM differs from traditional sales primarily in its coordinating role within relationship networks (Ivens et al., 2016) and its focus on long-term and strategic goals (Ivens & Pardo, 2007; Pardo et al., 2014; Wang & Brennan, 2014; Workman et al., 2003).

The implementation of KAM programs in supplier organizations requires the identification and analysis of KAs and the establishment of appropriate structures to systematically establish KAM within the organization (Guenzi & Storbacka, 2015; Ivens & Pardo, 2007; Leischnig et al., 2018; Ojasalo, 2001; Pardo, 1999; Ryals & Humphries, 2007). Thus, KAs are customers in a supplier–buyer relationship who have been selected by the selling company based on their strategic importance to its long-term performance. The strategic relevance of KAs is based on their high potential for future value creation (Ivens & Pardo, 2007; Pardo et al., 2014; Workman et al., 2003). KAs can even directly influence the supplier's strategic orientation, for example, in future business areas (Pardo, 1999). It is important to emphasize that KAs are not selected solely on the basis of existing sales or customer profitability. Rather, key selection criteria include the potential for sales/profit growth, prestige, the development of new businesses, and the development of new cooperative ventures (Davies & Ryals, 2014; Guesalaga & Johnston, 2010; Homburg et al., 2002; Millman & Wilson, 1995; Pardo, 1999).

The implementation of KAM also requires the development of skills that go beyond the typical activities of a sales representative (Guenzi & Storbacka, 2015; Homburg et al., 2002). The resulting complexity of the job profile and the skills required of KA managers are key challenges for KAM programs. Consequently, there is an urgent need for companies to examine the role of KA managers and their responsibilities for hiring, training, and retaining talent capable of what is required (Guenzi et al., 2007; Guesalaga et al., 2018; Ivens, Leischnig, Pardo, & Niersbach, 2018; Sandesh et al., 2023).

KA managers are responsible for working with a company's most important customers. As such, they can have a significant impact on a company's overall performance and success (Georges & Eggert, 2003; Guenzi et al., 2007). This distinguishes them from regular salespeople, although some responsibilities, such as contract negotiations or sales meetings, overlap (Guenzi et al., 2007; Hengstebeck, Kassemeier, & Wieseke, 2022; Sengupta, Krapfel, & Pusateri, 2000; Tzempelikos & Gounaris, 2015). KA managers pursue strategically driven goals that include establishing and maintaining a long-term relationship with a given KA, rather than maximizing sales in the short term. In particular, their role as boundary spanners in the inter-organizational relationship between the supplier company and KA presents several challenges (Atanasova & Senn, 2011; Davies & Ryals, 2013; Georges & Eggert, 2003; Hult, 2011; Hunt, 2000; Ivens et al., 2016; Mahlamäki, Rintamäki, & Rajah, 2019; Ojasalo, 2001; Piercy, 2009; Tzempelikos & Gounaris, 2015). Consequently, the requirements and tasks of KA managers are complex (Abratt & Kelly, 2002; Georges & Eggert, 2003; Guenzi et al., 2007; Guesalaga et al., 2018). Typically, they are highly qualified employees who are responsible for serving key customers and who form the interface between their own company and the KA company (Ojasalo, 2001; Pardo et al., 2014). The general task of the KA manager is the coordination of the relationship between the two companies, which is why the metaphor of the KA manager as a conductor is appropriate (Ivens et al., 2016; Niersbach, 2016; Sharma, 2006).

KA managers are responsible for both internal and external networks of relationships (Georges & Eggert, 2003; Ivens et al., 2016; Mahlamäki et al., 2019; Ojasalo, 2001). Specifically, an internal network consists of employees involved in KA value creation processes (Atanasova & Senn, 2011; Gupta, Kumar, Grewal, & Lilien, 2019). Within this internal function, KA managers aim to create customer value by improving the customer's orientation and optimizing customer-related processes within the organization (Atanasova & Senn, 2011; Georges & Eggert, 2003; Gounaris & Tzempelikos, 2013). Equivalently, employees who are part of the value creation process on the customer side are part of the external network coordinated by the KA manager (Davies & Ryals, 2013; Georges & Eggert, 2003). In their external role, KA managers not only have the task of coordinating exchange processes but also of responding to KA needs. In addition, KA managers analyze a KA's business in order to proactively anticipate (long-term) needs. They subsequently identify internal company resources and competencies and develop solutions for a KA (Davies & Ryals, 2013; Flaherty & Pappas, 2009; Guesalaga et al., 2018; Sengupta et al., 2000). As such, they act on behalf of a KA in their own company. This requires a relationship of trust with the relevant influential leaders and decision-makers. In their external function, they can thus achieve the goal of generating added value for the customer by further developing their own value proposition (Davies & Ryals, 2013; Georges & Eggert, 2003; Guesalaga et al., 2018; Hengstebeck et al., 2022; Shapiro & Moriarty, 1984).

2.1.2 Key account management literature and research streams

Interest in KAM research started to grow in the early 1980s, characterized by studies such as those of Shapiro and Moriarty (1984) and Barrett (1986). Since then, the landscape of KAM research has evolved into a multifaceted domain, encompassing a substantial body of scholarly work. In the last six years, three comprehensive reviews in particular have contributed to consolidating and illuminating the extensive literature on KAM: (1) Guesalaga et al. (2018), (2) Kumar et al. (2019), and (3) Sandesh et al. (2023). In their various analyses, these review present relevant research articles to show how KAM research has evolved and provide overviews of the relevant research areas.

Guesalaga et al. (2018) conducted an analysis of 72 articles published in 24 journals from 2001 to 2015. Their work provides insights into the development of KAM research during this timeframe. In contrast, Kumar et al. (2019) employed bibliometric methods to examine 373 articles from 68 journals. Their focus was broader, covering the period from 1979 to 2016. This bibliometric analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the trends, themes, and intellectual structure of KAM research over a period of nearly four decades. Sandesh et al. (2023) aimed to identify key areas and themes in KAM through a systematic literature review. They analyzed 104 articles from 25 journals from 1990 to 2022 and developed a comprehensive research agenda based on the identified areas.

The systematic reviews by Guesalaga et al. (2018), Kumar et al. (2019), and Sandesh et al. (2023) not only offer a comprehensive overview of the evolution of KAM research but also represent essential resources for researchers. These reviews synthesize and present relevant research articles that elucidate the development of KAM research and highlight the phases of change and emerging themes. Subsequent sections explore the key areas identified in these reviews, providing an understanding of the key themes that have shaped the research discourse on KAM.

Guesalaga et al. (2018) examined KAM from an organizational perspective using a resource-based approach and by integrating a dynamic capability view. Through a systematic literature review, the authors identified key resources and capabilities that are essential for strategic KAM. The findings emphasize that strategic KAM involves complex combinations of these resources and capabilities to create competitive advantages. The authors categorized organizational resources as tangible and intangible, and capabilities as operational and dynamic.

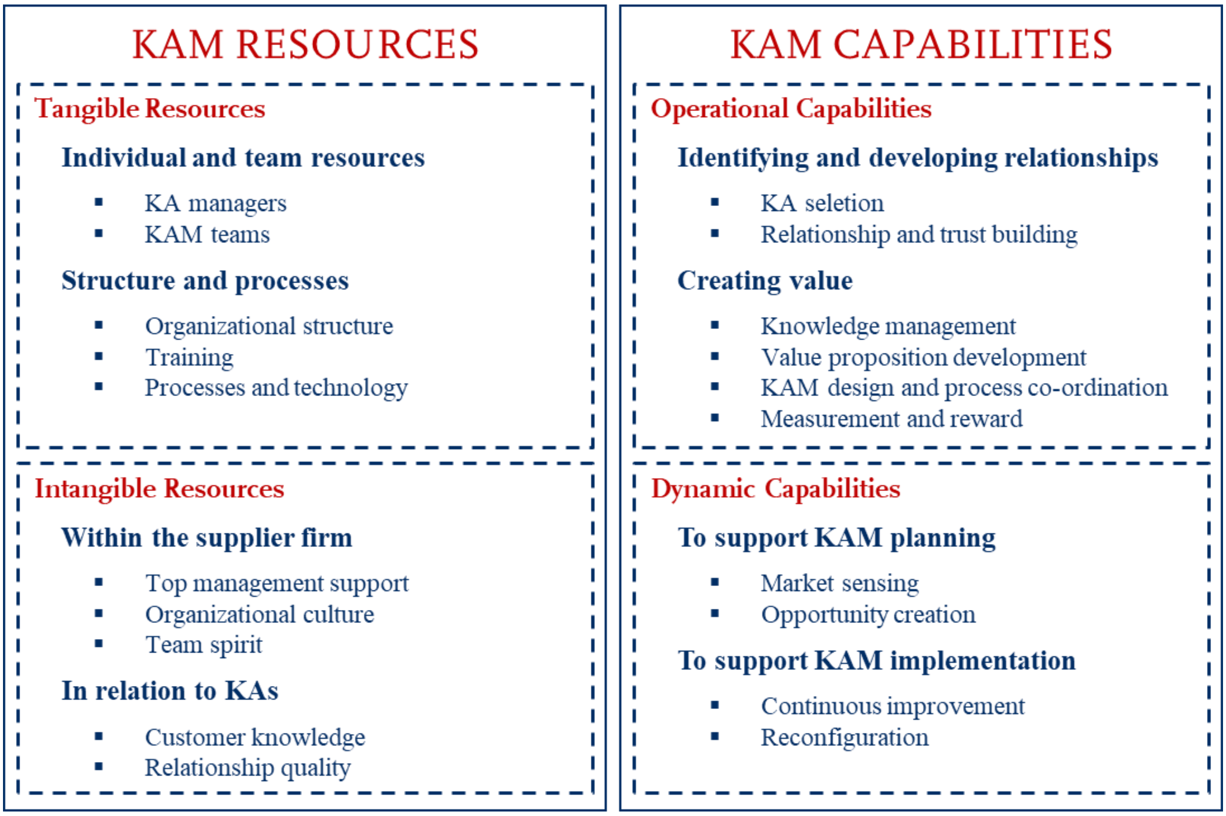

Figure 1. Resource-based key account management framework (Guesalaga et al., 2018).

In addition, the authors of the review reported the proportion of articles that addressed each of the four categories: tangible resources, 23.6%; intangible resources, 18.8%; operational capabilities, 36.6%; and dynamic capabilities, 20.9%. Figure 1 visually depicts the framework proposed by the authors and provides a concise overview of the key resources and capabilities discussed in the identified articles.

The tangible and intangible resources of a company constitute the foundational elements of KAM programs that attract sustained interest. However, Guesalaga et al. (2018) expected a shift in research toward investigating capabilities. In their view, this would be especially true for those capabilities that involve coordinated tasks to utilize resources and that not only enable companies in their current business activities but also play a critical role in shaping their future business strategies. The study emphasized the strategic value of capabilities, highlighting their dynamic nature in response to rapidly changing business environments. The significance of operational and dynamic capabilities in effective KAM lies in their ability to empower companies to adjust and respond to evolving customer needs and the dynamic nature of the market. The review emphasizes the significance of continuously renewing KAM capabilities, particularly in managing KAs, to navigate environmental uncertainties effectively. An additional dimension to highlight is that suppliers can gain a competitive advantage in KAM through the distinctive use of capabilities enabling the development of skills to adapt to potential changes. This strategic differentiation poses a challenge to competitors who attempt to imitate or replicate these skills. Guesalaga et al. (2018) conclude that there will likely be an increase in research on capabilities, reflecting rapidly changing environments and a rise in uncertainty in the environment.

Drawing upon the aforementioned considerations, the review authors advocated the formulation of several distinctive approaches to guide prospective research endeavors. The identified opportunities for future investigation can be organized into three overarching areas, each of which represents a unique perspective that contributes to the advancement of scientific understanding in KAM research: (1) qualitative research on KAM conceptualization, (2) a comprehensive analysis of resources and capabilities and their interrelations, and (3) supplier–buyer dyads.

Qualitative research on KAM conceptualization. This area for future research includes various research directions suggested by Guesalaga et al. (2018). First, future research should focus on expanding and strengthening the resources and capabilities identified in the framework (Figure 1) by applying qualitative research methods. Additionally, further studies should investigate the diversity within KAM programs and specifically analyze the combinations of resources and skills in different contexts.

Comprehensive analysis of resources and capabilities and their interrelations. Further suggestions for future study that Guesalaga et al. (2018) derived from their analysis can be summarized in this second area of research. A follow-up study should investigate the identified resources and capabilities within KAM. This can involve using the framework by Barney and Hesterly (2010) to comprehensively assess these elements based on their perceived value, rarity, inimitability, and organizational support (VRIO). Furthermore, the review authors recommend researching the links between KAM resources and capabilities to unravel their complex relational dynamics. In addition, the antecedents of resources and capabilities and the strategic approaches organizations use to build and develop these resources and capabilities should be explored.

Supplier–buyer dyads. Future research in the field of supplier–buyer dyads could involve investigating the potential of strategic KAM processes to evolve into interdependent relationships accordingly (Guesalaga et al., 2018). To contribute to this research objective, future studies could examine both the customer and supplier perspectives. Specifically, on the customer side, research should identify the key characteristics required by organizations to achieve mutual strategic benefits. On the supplier side, research should explore how suppliers can strategically develop KAM resources and capabilities within these relationships and shed light on the dynamics that enhance mutual strategic advantages between suppliers and buyers. Such research endeavors have the potential to significantly enhance the comprehension of the evolving landscape of collaborative relationships in the context of KAM.

Kumar et al. (2019) conducted a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of the research on KAM with the aim of broadening the perspective beyond its traditional boundaries. They extended their scope to include related fields, such as relationship marketing and sales management. To provide a foundational understanding, the authors initially categorized the main KAM research consisting of 56 articles into six clusters: KAM alliances (5 articles), KAM frameworks (12 articles), KAM value creation (7 articles), KAM structure (16 articles), global account management (5 articles), and KAM performance (11 articles). Table 1 provides an overview of the six clusters and their corresponding research areas and topics.

Clusters	Research areas / topics
KAM alliance	**Collaboration:** degree of collaboration; integration across traditional organizational boundaries; managerial attitude; use of technology to improve customer contacts. **Conflicts:** conflict management; pro-activeness.
KAM framework	**Conceptual biases:** biased toward supplier's perspective; an extension to sales management. **Theory/perspectives:** transaction cost economy; economic rent generation theory; commitment-trust theory; integrated business process perspective; relationship marketing perspective; strategic perspective; customer alignment perspective; network perspective; social media perspective; competency perspective; supply partnership perspective. **Concepts:** relational development cycle; product-process complexity matrix; account portfolio matrix; organizational and managerial competencies; relationship proneness; customer alignment-shareholder value relationship; account management system; planning and implementation; organizational fit; strategic fit; operational fit; personal fit; KAM strategy selection; operational KAM; corporate KAM; account team structure; account managers' decision-making process; vertical coopetition; coopetition continuum; social media usage model; key customer engagement cycle; KA profitability assessment; relationship effectiveness.
KAM value creation	**KAM teams:** role of knowledge integrators. **Behavior:** value-creating behaviors; value-claiming behaviors; perception forming behaviors of added value. **Competence:** value co-creation; value creation using existing structures; adaptation to new business models and business strategies in customers' industries; effective utilization of intelligence; better management of the interfaces between sales and other business functions; integration of KAM process to meet customer demand.
KAM structure	**Capabilities:** partnering; resource allocation; human resource; joint problem-solving; salesperson; organizational citizenship. **Programs:** inter-organizational alignment design elements; intra-organizational design elements; checklist for managing KAM programs; drivers to establish KAM programs. **Processes:** key accountization steps; internal design processes; process drivers. **Practices:** pricing; costing; risk assessment; co-ordination; transversality; contractual governance.
Global account management	**Capabilities (global account management):** opportunity identification; information processing; resource allocation; intelligence acquisition; reconfiguration. Strategies: inter-country coordination, inter-organizational coordination, marketing activities standardization, global integration. **Global account management team:** political entrepreneurial behavior.
KAM performance	**Performance drivers:** financial; relational; behavioral; activities-related; resource-related; technology; environmental. **Performance measures:** firm-level; market-level; account-level; dyad-level.

Table 1. Identified clusters and contributions (Kumar et al., 2019).

To trace the evolution of KAM research over time, the authors analyzed 373 articles from 68 journals and identified five distinct periods between 1979 and 2016. To depict a comprehensive and detailed development, Kumar et al. (2019) built upon the literature analysis conducted by Guesalaga and Johnston (2010) by incorporating new research findings and exploring various subdomains within the KAM literature.

Finally, Kumar et al. (2019) gathered valuable insights into emerging trends in the field of KAM by surveying academic researchers involved in core KAM research. Overall, the findings from the survey have served as a roadmap for future research endeavors, providing direction for scholars seeking to advance knowledge and understanding in the field of KAM (see Table 2).

Kumar et al. (2019) delved into the key findings from these three specific analyses, highlighting the fundamental role that networks play in the field of KAM research. The network conceptualization of KAM allows the viewing of all involved actors, such as customers and suppliers, not as independent entities but as interconnected organizations within a network. Finally, the review advocated for further research into various aspects of network-based KAM, including philosophy, competence, and value creation, to enhance understanding and effectiveness in managing KAs (Kumar et al., 2019).

	Clusters	Importance	Sample research questions
1	KAM alliances	6.03	1. What is the optimal level of coordination? 2. How can internal alignment be achieved? 3. How have new technologies helped to strengthen KAM alliances?
2	KAM performance	5.79	1. How to quantify qualitative measures for KAM performance? 2. What qualitative measures of KA performance can complement quantitative measures? 3. What process measures can be used to evaluate KAM performance?
3	KAM value creation	5.73	1. How should value creation be measured? 2. How does KAM help in creating brand value? 3. How is value shared between the seller and buyer in KAM?
4	Global account management	5.45	1. What are the similarities and differences between global and KA management? 2. How can new technologies enhance global account management programs? 3. When should a firm move from international KAM to global KAM?
5	KAM structure	5.36	1. What are the different types of organization structures for KAM? 2. How can a firm design an optimal KAM structure? 3. Should KA relationships be led by sales or other functional areas?
6	From competence-based partnership to joint capability-building	5.28	1. How are relationships enabling joint capability building partnerships formed? 2. What are the potential issues with capability building partnerships? 3. How does network-based capability help mitigate business and environmental risks?
7	From salesforce performance to network performance	5.16	1. What are the most effective methods to measure network performance? 2. What is the relationship between sales force performance and network performance? 3. How do salespeople react to the shift of performance metrics from sales outcome to network outcomes?
8	From transactional approach to relationship to network approach to relationship	5.09	1. What are the challenges of a network approach to relationships? 2. How can external network relationships help the KAM dyadic relationship between seller and buyer? 3. Should KAM research address relationships across the entire supply chain?
9	From relationship planning to relationship implementation	4.97	1. What are the potential barriers in the transition from relationship planning to relationship implementation? 2. How can organizational theories be applied to deal with organizational conflicts? 3. What monitoring procedures must be in place for effective relationship implementation?
10	KAM frameworks	4.91	1. What defines a KA versus a strategic account? 2. To what extent should KAM be an externally or internally-focused discipline? 3. Development of construct and measurement of KAM orientation.
11	From functional restructuring to inter-organizational restructuring	4.84	1. How and what types of organizational innovativeness are facilitated by using KAM? 2. How do KAM teams address the inter-organizational relationship? 3. How does the use of emerging technology affect KAM structure, processes, and practices?
12	From product and service performance to sustainability	4.45	1. How is sustainable market orientation achieved by supplier-customer dyad? 2. What is the willingness to pay for a sustainable supplier? 3. What is the definition of sustainability in KAM?

Table 2. Areas of future research (Kumar et al., 2019).

Sandesh et al. (2023) acknowledged that previous studies have explored different facets of KAM; however, they argued that there remains a notable lack of a comprehensive synthesis in the form of an extensive KAM framework. In order to close this gap, the authors classified diverse KA practices within the supplier–buyer relationship across the reviewed literature (comprising 104 articles), covering both intra- and inter-organizational contexts. Subsequently, they organized the identified intra- and inter-organizational KA practices into two distinct categories: organizational and people factors.

In an intra-organizational context, the organizational aspect involves elements such as strategic orientation, internal structure, and alignment as well as the management of knowledge (systems). This dimension illuminates how the company is positioned in terms of its internal operations, resources, and capabilities. In contrast, the people factor includes aspects of the skills, competencies, and collaborative behaviors exhibited by KAM managers. By analyzing these intra-organizational elements, organizations can gain valuable insights into their internal capabilities and the effectiveness of their KAM strategies.

In inter-organizational KA practices, the emphasis shifts to the supplier–buyer interface. This involves assessing collaboration structures and the alignment of departments between the two companies. Organizational factors encompass a consistent KA strategy and structure, alignment between supplier and buyer, and integration and coordination of involved actors to enhance value creation. Meanwhile, from a people perspective, attention is directed toward the general customer orientation and the interpersonal dynamics fostered within the collaborative relationship. In the inter-organizational context, these considerations underscore the complex interplay between organizational and people practices, which is crucial for optimizing the effectiveness of the KAM strategies.

Sandesh et al. (2023) presented these elements in their proposed framework as antecedents of KAM usage, summarizing the essential aspects of managing collaborative interactions between suppliers and buyers. They suggested that KAM usage has a direct impact on two typical outcomes: KA effectiveness and KA performance. By striving to achieve enduring partnerships characterized by mutual trust and stability, organizations can enhance both the effectiveness and performance of their KAM initiatives. Furthermore, Sandesh et al. (2023) suggested additional contextual factors that reinforce this connection: intervening factors and conditional factors. Figure 2 presents an overview of the framework proposed by Sandesh et al. (2023).

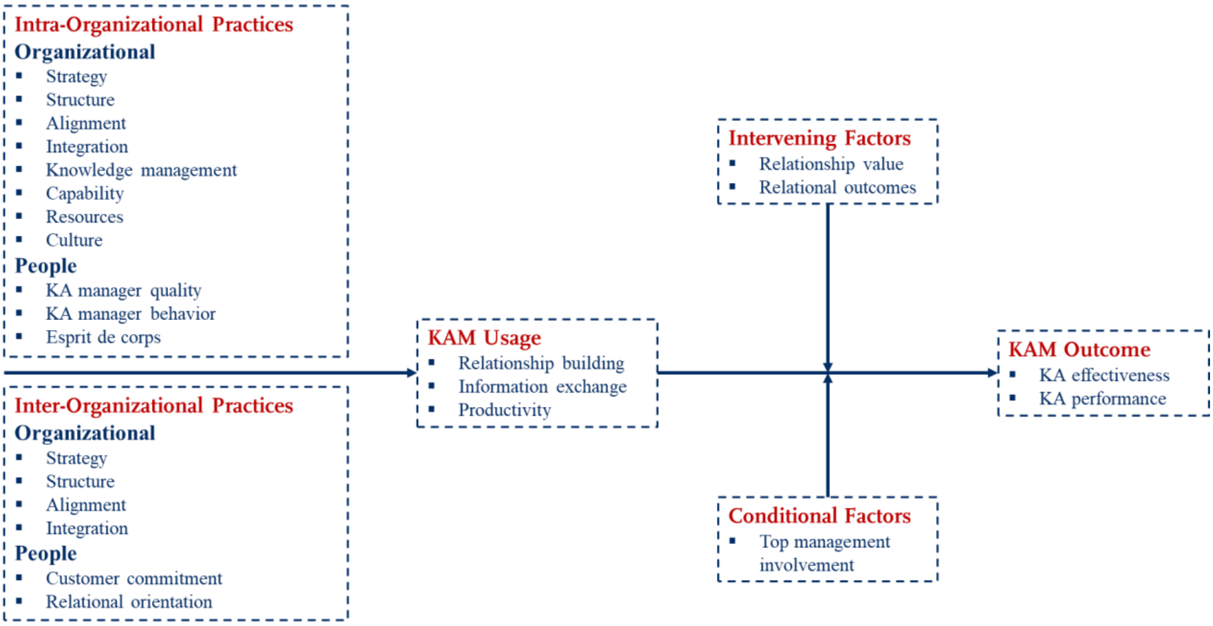

Figure 2. Framework (Sandesh et al., 2023).

The framework, serving as a synthesis of systematically identified KAM literature, embodies the objectives of Sandesh et al. (2023) to both review previous research endeavors and inspire scholars to pursue empirical research guided by this framework. This dual ambition seeks to advance the comprehension of KAM. Specifically, the authors derived potential avenues for further exploration.

While certain aspects of KAM, both independently and concerning KAM outcomes, have been extensively studied, there remains a lack of integrative perspectives that link intra- and inter-organizational practices. Consequently, Sandesh et al. (2023) asserted an urgent requirement for future research to embrace a more holistic approach, delving into the interactions between intra- and inter-organizational factors to understand their impact on KAM usage and outcomes.

The current state of research in KAM is primarily characterized by either qualitative or quantitative studies. Qualitative investigations, often conducted as case studies with a limited number of companies, are restricted in terms of the generalizability of their findings. This suggests an imbalance in the research methods employed. Consequently, there is a need for broader qualitative studies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of KA practices across diverse contexts. Additionally, there is a lack of research that rigorously tests conceptual models and hypotheses using quantitative techniques. This indicates the necessity for more quantitative studies and for mixed-methods approaches to complement qualitative findings, thus enhancing the comprehensive understanding of KAM programs (Sandesh et al., 2023).

2.2 Social identity theory and self-categorization theory

Social identity theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), integrates foundational research by Foote (1951); Kelman (1958); Brown (1969); Lee (1971); and Hall, Schneider, and Nygren (1970); it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the psychological underpinnings of group behavior. Self-categorization theory (SCT), developed by Turner, Oakes, Haslam, and McGarty (1994), extends and refines SIT. While SIT provides a broad framework for understanding the role of social identity in inter-group behavior, SCT delves deeper into the cognitive mechanisms that determine how and when individuals transform individual behavior into in-group behavior (Turner et al., 1994; Turner & Reynolds, 2012).

SIT elucidates the dynamics of intergroup relations through the investigation of how individuals categorize, identify with, and compare social groups. The theory's emphasis on the role of social identity in shaping individuals' self-concept and intergroup behavior has profoundly influenced the field of social psychology and offered valuable insights into the interplay between individual and group identities (Haslam & Ellemers, 2005; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The theory posits that individuals classify themselves and others into social categories, with social identity forming a part of their self-concept based on group memberships and the emotional significance of these affiliations (Tajfel, 1978). Tajfel and Turner (1979) defined groups as "[...] a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership of it" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 59).

Social identity is derived from individuals' affiliations with various groups, which become deeply internalized both cognitively and emotionally (Haslam & Ellemers, 2005).

Burke (1980) posits that identities are defined by similarities and differences, emphasizing individuals' aims at differentiating between the group to which they belong (i.e., the "in-group") and another group to which they do not belong, the "out-group." This distinctiveness of groups is a crucial aspect of social identity that serves to enhance self-esteem and self-perception through the cultivation of a positive social identity (Brewer, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Van Dick et al., 2005).

Based on these theoretical foundations, Tajfel and Turner (1979) derive core assumptions regarding the mechanisms of SIT. First, individuals seek to enhance their self-esteem, which is linked to their social identity. They classify themselves into certain groups, internalizing the group's norms, values, and behaviors and thereby integrating social identity into their self-concept. This group membership is associated with either positive or negative evaluations, thus shaping whether their social identity is perceived positively or negatively. Upon identification with a group, individuals participate in social comparison by evaluating their in-group against relevant out-groups. When these comparisons yield positive outcomes, the typical result is in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination, which serve to further enhance self-esteem and sustain a positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner & Reynolds, 2012). Conversely, if the comparison produces a negative result, individuals may either strive to join a more favorably perceived group or endeavor to elevate the status of their current group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The drive to maintain or achieve a distinct and positive identity for one's in-group is central to SIT, often resulting in efforts to highlight the perceived distinctiveness and superiority of the in-group over out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner & Reynolds, 2012). Such dynamics are central to individuals maintaining and enhancing their self-concept, as individuals are motivated to outperform other groups to bolster their self-esteem (Haslam, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner & Reynolds, 2012).

While SIT emphasizes the importance of social identity in inter-group relations and striving for positive distinctiveness, SCT elaborates on the cognitive processes underlying self-categorization, group behavior, and identity formation (Hogg, 2016; Tajfel, 1974; Turner & Reynolds, 2012). SCT posits a critical distinction between personal identity and social identity, representing two distinct levels of (social) self-categorization for individuals. These identity levels are characterized by self-categories, which are cognitive groupings formed in response to specific stimuli (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner et al., 1994; Van Dick & Wagner, 2002). Personal identity includes the unique traits that distinguish an individual from other members within a social group, whereas social identity involves self-categories that identify an individual as a member of particular social groups (Haslam & Ellemers, 2005; Turner et al., 1994). This identification with respective groups emerges from the social categorization of the self and others, enabling individuals to organize their social environments by grouping people into meaningful categories (Hogg, 2016; Tajfel, 1978).

The process of social categorization results in the integration or replacement of an individual's self-concept with the characteristics of the in-group, a phenomenon known as de-personalization (Haslam et al., 2003; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner, 2010; Turner et al., 1994; Turner & Reynolds, 2012). This dynamic entails individuals perceiving themselves less as unique entities and more as embodiments of the group's prototype, which encompasses the shared attributes and norms of the group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Turner, Hogg, Turner, & Smith, 1984). Prototypes are characterized as diffuse assemblages of context-dependent attributes, represented either by actual exemplary group members or by ideal types (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Stets & Burke, 2000). These prototypes serve to amplify similarities within the in-group and differences between the in-group and out-groups, thus clearly distinguishing each group as a unique entity. As members of a social group encounter the same social information, their prototypes tend to converge, resulting in shared and cohesive group identities (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner et al., 1994). This collective sharing of prototypes reinforces the in-group's distinctiveness and promotes a unified perception among its members. Consequently, personal identity is overshadowed by a collective social identity, reinforcing a sense of belonging and conformity within the group. This alignment with the in-group prototype not only shapes individual behavior and attitudes but also strengthens group cohesion and distinctiveness (Ashforth et al., 2008; Van Dick & Wagner, 2002; Wieseke, Kraus, Ahearne, & Mikolon, 2012).

In this context, the process of self-categorization fulfills two essential functions. First, it organizes and structures an individual's social environment by categorizing and distinguishing among different social groups. This cognitive segmentation allows individuals to make sense of their social surroundings and navigate the complexities of social interactions. Second, self-categorization helps individuals locate and define themselves within this structured environment. It provides a framework for individuals to understand their position and role within the broader social landscape, offering a sense of orientation and identity within society (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Tajfel, 1974).

Generally, the categorization process leads to a fusion of an individual's self-perception with the attributes that describe the character of a particular in-group. This integration means that individuals begin to see themselves in terms of the group's traits and values. Nonetheless, understanding the process requires careful consideration of the concept of category salience (Haslam et al., 2003; Oakes, 1987). Category salience refers to the relevance and prominence of membership in a group in a given context, which significantly influences the extent to which group characteristics are integrated into an individual's self-concept (Van Dick & Wagner, 2002). When a particular membership in a group attains high salience in a given context, individuals are more inclined to adopt and internalize the group's characteristics as integral components of their self-identity and act on behalf of the group (Haslam et al., 2003; Oakes, 1987; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). Nevertheless, an individual's affiliation with a group can be influenced by concurrent membership in other social groups. The presence of overlapping group memberships can lead to a re-evaluation of one's primary affiliations, while external competition or conflict may prompt individuals to disassociate from their current in-group in favor of another (Ellemers et al., 2002; Haslam & Turner, 1992; Turner, 1987; Van Dick et al., 2005). This dynamic illustrates the fluidity of self-categorization, indicating that group membership is not static but is subject to change based on an individual's social context and experiences (Turner, 1999). Consequently, the degree to which group attributes become embedded within an individual's self-concept is contextually contingent, highlighting the dynamic interplay between individual identity and group membership.

Certain identities, however, can be so integral to an individual that they remain consistently significant, regardless of the social context. These core identities maintain their importance to and influence on an individual's self-concept across various situations, reflecting a deep-seated connection that transcends changing social environments. This persistence suggests that while some aspects of social identity are fluid and context dependent, others are stable and central to an individual's overall sense of self (Thatcher, Doucet, & Tuncel, 2003; Van Dick et al., 2005).

In addition to category salience, the size of the in-group plays a crucial role in influencing individuals' self-categorization processes and identification with certain groups (Ashforth et al., 2008; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). Empirical research highlights that the strength of identification is closely linked to the size of the group (Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). The size of a group can influence how individuals perceive their own membership and distinctiveness within the group. Identification with a large group can potentially diminish a sense of individual uniqueness due to an extensive number of members, which can blur personal distinctiveness. Conversely, affiliation with a smaller group facilitates individuals' ability to distinguish themselves from others and fosters a stronger sense of belonging (Ashforth et al., 2008; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000).

Rooted in SIT and SCT, the concept of identification explains how individuals categorize themselves at different levels, leading to diverse foci of identification, for instance, on a personal identity level and a social identity level (Ashforth et al., 2008; Ellemers et al., 2002; Haslam & Turner, 1992; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Wieseke et al., 2012). Personal identification centers on aspects that distinguish an individual within a broader social context, such as personal characteristics, traits, and attributes. It focuses on elements that make an individual distinct and separate from others, contributing to a sense of individuality and personal uniqueness (e.g., Ellemers et al., 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In contrast, social identification pertains to group memberships, which are considered relevant for an individual (Ashforth et al., 2008; Turner et al., 1984). This identification entails the internalization of group norms, values, and behaviors, leading to a sense of belonging and identity tied to social groups rather than personal characteristics alone (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). For identification to take place, an individual must both recognize their membership within a group and attribute value and emotional significance to this affiliation (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel, 1982). As a consequence, social identification not only helps individuals locate and define themselves within their social environment but also affects their self-esteem and motivation (Ellemers et al., 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Cheney (1983) views social identification as an evolving process, whereas Ashforth and Mael (1989) provide a more specific definition, characterizing it as a cognitive construct: "the perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate" (p. 21). Following this conceptualization, this thesis approaches social identification primarily as a perceptual construct.

The concept of organizational identification extends the principles of social identification into the organizational realm. Ashforth and Mael (1989) proposed that organizational identification represents a specific application of social identification in which individuals align their personal identities with organizational attributes. This involves integrating the organization's values, norms, and goals into the individuals' self-concept (Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). Pratt (1998) described organizational identification as a state in which individuals' beliefs about their organization become integral to their self-concept. This highlights the role of personal beliefs in shaping identification: individuals are more likely to identify with aspects of an organization that they perceive as central to their self-concept. Consequently, different individuals may focus on varying attributes of the same organization based on their unique self-perceptions (Pratt, 1998).

In general, various researchers agree on the crucial role of organizational identification in understanding employee behavior (e.g., Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000; Van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2004). For example, Albert et al. (2000) describe organizational identification as a "rudder for navigating difficult waters" (p. 13), suggesting that it provides guidance and coherence during organizational changes. In essence, organizational identification involves the integration of organizational attributes into personal identity, influencing employee motivation and engagement. This alignment enhances the connection between employees and their organizations, shaping attitudes and behaviors (Albert et al., 2000; Van Dick et al., 2004).

Additional research acknowledges the central role of organizational identification; however, it recognizes that employees can form connections and a sense of belonging not only with the overall organization but also with specific subunits, roles, and their personal career aspirations within the organizational framework (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2008; Van Dick & Wagner, 2002; Van Dick et al., 2004; Wieseke et al., 2012). Accordingly, the concept of identification is not limited to the organization as a whole but extends to different levels within it. In the realm of organizational behavior, identification can be delineated into three distinct levels: personal, group, and organizational (Turner & Reynolds, 2012; Van Dick & Wagner, 2002). Identification on a personal level pertains to the unique traits, characteristics, and attributes that distinguish an individual within the broader organizational environment, such as individual career aspirations. Identification on a group level involves an individual's sense of belonging to one or more specific subgroups within the organization, such as work teams or departments. Lastly, identification on an organizational level encompasses the alignment with and internalization of the overarching values, norms, and goals of the organization (Van Dick & Wagner, 2002).

According to SIT and SCT, it is feasible for individuals to identify simultaneously with multiple groups and across different levels within an organizational context. The capacity for parallel identification reflects the dynamic nature of social categorization, in which multiple layers of identity can coexist and be salient depending on the context and situational factors (Ellemers et al., 2002; Haslam et al., 2003; Turner, 1999). For instance, an individual may exhibit a strong identification with their immediate work team (i.e., the group level) due to shared tasks and direct interpersonal relationships, while simultaneously maintaining a distinct level of identification with the entire organization (i.e., the organizational level) based on its mission and values. While the various foci of identification are generally independent, they can exhibit some level of correlation (Ashforth et al., 2008; Van Dick & Wagner, 2002; Van Dick et al., 2004; Wieseke et al., 2012). This interrelation becomes particularly evident when there is an overlap between the groups to which individuals belong or when conflicts arise among these groups. Such scenarios can lead individuals to reassess their affiliations, stimulating a re-evaluation of their group memberships (Ellemers et al., 2002; Haslam & Turner, 1992; Turner, 1987; Van Dick et al., 2005).

The state of belonging to or feeling associated with a certain group is integral not only to the concept of identification but also to the concept of organizational commitment. In the literature, both are closely related and sometimes even considered synonymous (Ashforth et al., 2008; Meyer & Allen, 1991; Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974). However, while both concepts share a focus on the psychological relationship between the individual and the organization, there are important differences (e.g., Riketta, 2005; Riketta & Van Dick, 2005; Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). Organizational identification involves the integration of organizational norms, beliefs, and values into an individual's self-concept. This means that the individual perceives the organization's attributes as part of their own identity (Pratt, 1998; Riketta, 2005). In contrast, organizational commitment refers to an individual's attitude toward the organization, emphasizing a psychological attachment that is primarily exchange based and characterized by loyalty and a sense of obligation (Van Dick et al., 2004; Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). Another key distinction lies in their corresponding natures of stability and adaptability. Organizational commitment exhibits a high degree of stability, showing resilience even during major organizational changes, such as mergers, acquisitions, and downsizing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Van Dick et al., 2004; Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). In contrast, organizational identification is inherently more flexible and context sensitive. The concept of category salience, a key element within the concept of identification, includes the assumption that the perceived relevance of a group within a given context influences the extent to which its norms and values are integrated into an individual's self-concept (Van Dick & Wagner, 2002). The salience of various groups with which one identifies can vary depending on the context or due to simultaneous membership in another social group, reflecting the dynamic nature of that identity (Haslam et al., 2003; Pratt, 1998; Van Dick & Wagner, 2002; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000).

Accordingly, while organizational commitment and identification are interrelated, they represent different aspects of an individual's relationship with the organization. Identification reflects the extent to which individuals define themselves through their organizational affiliations, with its significance fluctuating based on situational contexts. Commitment, in contrast, denotes a more stable attachment to the organization, guiding behavior through a sense of loyalty.

Analyzing inter-organizational relationships requires concepts that capture the complexities and dynamics of these interactions. Due to the objective of this thesis, to explore the role of identities within complex and dynamic business environments, identification is a more suitable concept. First, identification captures the deep psychological integration of organizational values and norms within an individual's self-concept, providing a detailed understanding of how individuals align with their organization's goals and culture in comparison to identification with other groups/categories, for example, with the KA organization. This is crucial in inter-organizational settings, in which alignment and shared identity can drive successful collaborations. Second, identification can vary with changing group dynamics and external conditions, offering a more accurate reflection of individuals' attitudes and behaviors in different organizational settings and environments. Accordingly, the concept of identification offers a promising approach for closely examining the role of the KA manager at the interface between supplier and buyer.

2.3 Interim conclusion: overview of (methodological) approaches

The dissertation explores the role of identification in KAM through a series of studies (see Section 3, 4, and 5) that are firmly rooted in the existing KAM literature (see Section 2.1) as well as in the theoretical frameworks of social identity and self-categorization theory (see Section 2.2). By integrating these diverse yet interconnected bodies of literature, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how identification processes influence KAM practices and outcomes. Table 3 provides a concise overview of research gaps that the subsequent three studies aim to address, along with the corresponding research objectives, sample compositions, and methodological approaches employed in the investigation.

Study	Research gaps	Research questions	Sample	Methodology
1	▪ Qualitative research on KAM conceptualization ▪ Extending and strengthening knowledge about resources and capabilities ▪ Understanding of KAM dynamics ▪ Integrative perspective in KAM research (intra- and inter-organizational dimension)	(1) Does the concept of identification play a role for KA managers? (2) Which identification anchors are relevant in a KAM context?	n = 40 Expert interviews	Inductive qualitative content analysis
2	▪ Understanding dynamics in supplier–buyer dyads within the context of KAM ▪ Comprehensive analysis of resources and capabilities and their interrelations ▪ Interplay between intra-organizational and inter-organizational factors with regard to KA manager effectiveness ▪ Research accounting for different KAM practices across diverse contexts and exploring factors contributing to value creation in KAM	(1) Which identification patterns are related to KA managers' effectiveness? (2) How do identification patterns differ according to contextual factors?	n = 218 Online questionnaire-based survey	Fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis
3	▪ Key research areas of KA performance and knowledge management in KAM ▪ Call for mixed-methods approaches in KAM research ▪ Comprehensive understanding of KAM dynamics ▪ Integrative approaches exploring the interplay between intra- and inter-organizational factors to comprehend their impact on KAM practices and outcomes	(1) Which organizational and individual factors drive knowledge sharing? (2a) How does identification with the organization and with the KA affect knowledge sharing behavior and KA performance? (2b) To what extent does formalization influence these dynamics?	n = 88 Expert interviews n = 307 Online questionnaire-based survey	Inductive qualitative content analysis Moderated mediation analysis

Table 3. Overview of (methodological) approaches.

3 Study 1

Identification as a challenge in key account management: Conceptual foundations and a qualitative study

Abstract

Managing business relationships requires that boundary-spanning actors, such as key account managers, perform their task at the interface between two relational networks, the internal firm network and the network on the side of the key account. Several streams of research have suggested that similar situations raise questions of identification, but the business-to-business literature has not yet paid much attention to this issue. This study focuses on key account management (KAM) as a typical task of inter-organizational interface management. The conceptual foundations of identification in a sales-related interface context, such as KAM, are first discussed. It then pursues with a qualitative exploratory study that uses data gained through 40 semi-structured interviews with key account managers to identify their identification anchors. The qualitative data suggest four identification foci, namely organizational identification, key account identification, leader identification, and occupational identification, which are illustrated in a conceptual model. The study concludes with a discussion and avenues for future research.

Keywords

Key account management; key account manager; identification; semi-structured interview

4 Study 2

Key account managers' identification profiles and effectiveness: A fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis

Abstract

Key account managers handle a supplier's most strategically important customer relationships. The success of a key account relationship essentially depends on the competencies, skills, and mindset of the key account manager. Previous research indicates that mindset and identity have a significant impact on the performance and effectiveness of (sales) employees. The concept of identity and identification, rooted in social identity theory and self-categorization theory, as well as literature on key account management and the unique role of key account managers provide the theoretical framework, proposing four relevant identification foci of key account managers: identification with organization, key account, leader, and occupation. This study uses survey data from 218 respondents and conducts a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis to identify configurations of identification foci that foster key account manager effectiveness. The findings reveal four different configurations, consisting of different identification profiles and contextual factors, which are sufficient for high key account manager effectiveness. The results of the analysis contribute to identity and key account management research and show that high effectiveness of key account managers can be achieved with different identification patterns and depending on different contextual factors.

Keywords

Key account management; key account manager; identification; identity; effectiveness; fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA)

5 Study 3

“The more we share, the more we have”? Analyses of knowledge sharing by key account managers

Abstract

Knowledge, as one of the most important resources, has a strong impact on inter-organizational relationships, particularly in key account (KA) relationships where knowledge sharing is essential. Previous research has shown that customer-specific knowledge is often tied to the respective KA manager and that knowledge sharing is especially complex, which raises the challenge of how to foster knowledge sharing to increase KA performance. However, the current state of research lacks an integrative perspective that considers both organizational and individual factors as relevant for knowledge sharing and KA performance. The research approach is twofold: First, a qualitative study based on 88 semi-structured interviews investigates the role of organizational factors and the individuals’ role in knowledge sharing. Second, a quantitative moderated mediation analysis reinforces these associations using survey data from 307 respondents. The results show that identification with the company positively influences knowledge sharing behavior and that high knowledge sharing behavior has a positive influence on KA performance, which is moderated by the degree of formalization. The results of the analyses contribute to the research of KA management and knowledge management and provide new insights by focusing on both, organizational and individual factors and by applying assumptions from social identity theory.

Keywords

Key account management; key account manager; knowledge management; knowledge sharing behavior; social identity theory; identification

6 Conclusion

6.1 Contributions

6.1.1 Theoretical contributions

This thesis addressed existing research gaps and explored previously identified areas for further investigation (see Section 2.1.2). This included not only responses to current scholarly discourse but also contributions to the advancement of research in these areas. Through the studies conducted and insights generated, it aimed to expand the theoretical understanding of KAM, with a specific focus on the role of KA managers. Accordingly, this work endeavored to provide new insights into critical aspects of the management of KAs and the role of KA managers through the lenses of social identity theory (SIT) and self-categorization theory (SCT), thereby unlocking the key account manager black box.

This dissertation advances the theoretical understanding of KAM by offering a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted identification processes that influence the effectiveness of KA managers. Key contributions include unveiling multiple identification foci of KA managers and analyzing how these identification profiles directly impact managerial effectiveness. The research also delves into the complex, interrelated dynamics of these identification processes, emphasizing their context-dependent nature and revealing how varying profiles influence outcomes across different business environments. Furthermore, the interplay between intra- and inter-organizational factors, particularly the role of organizational formalization and KA managers' identity, is examined to uncover its effects on knowledge sharing and KA performance. By synthesizing these insights, this dissertation offers a comprehensive perspective on the role of KA managers, highlighting the critical importance of their identification and organizational structures in optimizing KAM practices.

Unveiling multiple identification foci of KA managers

Generally, the findings of the conducted studies advance the nascent but steadily growing research area of identity in the realm of KAM, thereby elucidating the challenges of KAM as a task for individual KA managers and the challenges that organizations face when attempting to integrate KA managers into their overall structure and processes. In this regard, the findings contribute to the fast-growing stream of literature on individual identification in intra-organizational and inter-organizational contexts. Study 1 addressed the gap in qualitative research on KAM conceptualization (see Section 2.1.2) by extending and strengthening the knowledge about resources and capabilities identified by Guesalaga et al. (2018). By investigating the tangible resources of KA managers and the intangible resources of organizational culture within supplier companies and their relationships with KAs, this study provides a more detailed understanding of KAM dynamics.

In this context, the empirical studies of this thesis built upon the typology proposed by Wilson and Millman (2003). The findings confirmed the relevance of two key foci of identification: identification with the KA and identification with the KA manager's organization. Study 1 confirmed this typology in diverse KAM contexts and verified its robustness and generalizability. However, it was also evident that the identity of KA managers was more complex. This complexity was reflected in two additional identification foci that emerged from the expert interviews as particularly relevant: identification with the leader and identification with the occupation.

The qualitative analysis in Study 1 revealed that leader identification was a crucial aspect of KAM practice—one that has been largely overlooked in KAM research. KA managers often identified strongly with their direct line managers, citing their leadership style, behavior, and values as sources of motivation and guidance. Their leader served as a source of inspiration for how they approached their KAs, thus being directly relevant to KA management. This focus on leader identification was distinct from organizational identification, in which KA managers may not identify with the broader organization but feel a strong bond with their immediate superiors. While the role and relevance of top management involvement in KAM has received substantial attention in the literature (e.g., Guesalaga, 2014; Homburg et al., 2002; Tzempelikos, 2015), this research highlights the importance of direct leader identification for KA managers. By focusing on leaders at different hierarchical levels, including specialized heads of KAM, future studies can more accurately capture the dynamics between KA managers and their superiors.

Furthermore, the findings of Study 1 contribute to the theoretical understanding of KA managers' identity by introducing occupational identification as a new dimension. The KA managers often identified with the nature of their tasks, describing their roles as troubleshooters and strategic planners who managed complex, multi-actor relationships both intra-organizationally and inter-organizationally. Occupational identification highlights the intrinsic importance of KA managers' tasks in shaping their professional identities. The concept of occupational identification complements existing frameworks, such as the KAM conceptualization proposed by Homburg et al. (2002), which distinguishes between KAM actors and KAM activities. Unlike identification with actors, either specific individuals (leaders or KAs) or the organization, occupational identification focuses on activities—the unique tasks and responsibilities of KAM.

Accordingly, this thesis makes a significant theoretical contribution by enhancing the understanding of the factors that help build KA managers' identities and influence KA managers' behaviors and performance through the framework proposed in Study 1. By integrating SIT and related approaches, this study extends the framework of Sandesh et al. (2023) and addresses the need for an integrative perspective in KAM research (see Section

2.1.2). This expanded framework incorporates sociopsychological elements that span both intra-organizational and inter-organizational dimensions, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics in KAM. The inclusion of these identification foci allows for further exploration of how they interact and influence KAM practices and outcomes across different organizational contexts.

Identification profiles and their impact on KA manager effectiveness

Study 2 addressed the gap in understanding dynamics in supplier–buyer dyads within the context of KAM (see Section 2.1.2). By focusing on these collaborative relationships, this study provides valuable insights into how these supplier–buyer dyads thrive, identifying key factors that contribute to successful partnerships. This research advances the understanding of how different identification foci interact and contribute to achieving strategic goals in KAM. In this study, the configurational analysis (i.e., fsQCA) built upon the findings of Study 1 and shed light on identification profiles that enhance strategic objectives, particularly KA manager effectiveness, within the supplier–buyer relationship. Generally, the findings of Study 2 underpin the relevance of the concept of identification in the context of KAM. The configurational analysis yielded new insights that significantly contribute to academic research by providing a deeper understanding of how the interplay of the four central identification foci of KA managers under certain contextual factors were associated with KA manager effectiveness.

The results of Study 2 reinforce the assumption that different identification foci coexist (Ashforth et al., 2008; Ellemers et al., 2002; Haslam & Turner, 1992; Turner, 1987). The findings suggest that various attitudes and values by KA managers are closely interrelated, or at least exist concurrently. This insight contributes to the understanding of how multiple identification dimensions simultaneously shape the identity of KA managers. This enriches theoretical frameworks that are used to explore the complexities of KA managers' roles in KAM relationships and the implications for KA manager effectiveness (e.g., Davies & Ryals, 2014; Herhausen et al., 2022; Sandesh et al., 2023).

This study identified four unique configurations representing different pathways to achieving high KA manager effectiveness. The identification patterns in this research reflected the variance present in the field of KAM, which arises from diverse strategies, missions, implementation forms, and other factors in companies' practices (e.g., Guenzi & Storbacka, 2015; Pardo et al., 2014; Sandesh et al., 2023). The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay among different identification foci and underline their association with KA manager effectiveness. These results highlight the relevance of all four identification foci identified in Study 1 for the professional identity of KA managers. This was particularly evident, as each identification focus was present in at least one of the identified configurations. Accordingly, this study advances theoretical insights into the complex dynamics of KA managers and their roles in KAM by confirming the relevance of organizational identification, KA identification, leader identification, and occupational identification. Addressing the research gaps identified by Guesalaga et al. (2018) and Sandesh et al. (2023), as outlined in Section 2.1.2, this research revealed links between KAM resources and capabilities and investigated the interplay between intra-organizational and inter-organizational factors with regard to KA manager effectiveness.

Exploring interrelated identification dynamics in managerial effectiveness

This interplay was particularly evident through the identification foci of organizational identification and KA identification. A qualitative analysis of the data collected in Study 1 suggests that these identification foci may not be entirely independent of one another, challenging the view proposed by Wilson and Millman (2003). In contrast, the data suggest that there is a dynamic interplay among these identification foci, with the development of one influencing another over time. For instance, high levels of organizational identification may enable KA managers to access internal resources that facilitate customer-directed activities, leading to successful outcomes in the relationship with KAs. Such accomplishments might subsequently reinforce KA managers' identification with their respective KAs. This insight enriches the theoretical understanding of how intertwined identification processes can enhance the effectiveness of KA managers.

Study 2 advances the understanding of KA managers' roles by emphasizing the importance of dual identification with both the organization and the KA. Building on Wilson and Millman's (2003) role archetypes, it provides further clarity on ideal identity profiles for KA managers who successfully align the interests of both networks. The findings from the fsQCA in Study 2 revealed that this dual identification was vital in three out of four effective configurations, highlighting its importance in fostering stable, long-term partnerships that yielded mutual benefits. This dual identification seems to be essential for KA managers, as their main objective is to navigate the interface between internal and external networks, striving to balance respective interests and enhance collaborative relationships (Georges & Eggert, 2003; Ivens et al., 2016; Ojasalo, 2001; Pardo et al., 2014). By highlighting the dynamics in supplier–buyer dyads that enhance mutual strategic advantages, this research enriches theoretical frameworks related to KAM (i.e., Sandesh et al., 2023). It demonstrated that dual identification was not only a key driver of KA manager effectiveness but also a critical factor in the success of supplier–buyer relationships.

Context-dependent dynamics of KA managers' identification profiles

Furthermore, Study 2 addressed research gaps identified by Guesalaga et al. (2018), Kumar et al. (2019), and Sandesh et al. (2023) that required conducting research accounting for different KAM practices across diverse contexts and exploring factors contributing to value creation in KAM. The findings specifically extend the research landscape on the identification concept in KAM by strengthening the theoretical understanding of KA managers' identities. This research advances the theoretical conceptualization of KAM by highlighting the association between identification foci and KA manager effectiveness and demonstrating the key role of contextual factors. The findings challenge the notion of a universal solution for achieving high KA manager effectiveness, instead suggesting that the configuration of an ideal identification profile is highly context dependent. This was particularly evident in configuration 3 of the fsQCA, which reflected KA managers who achieved successful KAM outcomes without aligning with any of the four established identification foci. This finding provides insights regarding the diversity within KAM programs contingent upon internal organizational structures (formalization) and external business environments (competitive intensity and market dynamism). Consequently, it emphasizes the need for companies to conduct thorough analyses of both market conditions and organizational frameworks to optimize KA manager effectiveness. By focusing on the varied configurations of KAM practices and the role of contextual factors, this research emphasizes the importance of aligning organizational resources and skills within specific market environments. Accordingly, it provides a more comprehensive understanding of how different identification profiles and contextual elements interact to influence effectiveness of KA managers.

Interplay between intra- and inter-organizational factors affecting KAM practices

Generally, Study 3 focused on key research areas of KA performance and knowledge management in KAM—as emphasized by Kumar et al. (2019) and Sandesh et al. (2023)—by employing a mixed-methods approach. The integration of qualitative insights with quantitative evidence in Study 3 also addressed the need for a comprehensive understanding of KAM dynamics (Guesalaga et al., 2018; Sandesh et al., 2023). Furthermore, grounded in the KAM framework proposed by Sandesh et al. (2023), Study 3 sought to fill a research gap stemming from the lack of integrative approaches that explored the interplay between intra-organizational and inter-organizational factors to comprehend their impact on KAM practices and outcomes (see Section 2.1.2). Given the significant challenge in that KA knowledge is often constrained by the owner of the experience—in this case, the KA manager (Ivens & Pardo, 2014)—the insights from the qualitative and quantitative study provide perspectives on both organizational and individual determinants that facilitate knowledge sharing within companies. By exploring strategies and mechanisms that drive KA managers to share knowledge, Study 3 significantly advances the existing research landscape (e.g., Chari, Tarkiainen, & Salojärvi, 2016; Lai & Yang, 2017; Salojärvi & Sainio, 2010, 2015; Salojärvi et al., 2010).

Role of formalization for knowledge sharing and KA performance

This research provides deeper insights into optimizing organizational structures to facilitate effective knowledge sharing and improve KA performance. It significantly enhances the theoretical understanding of the dynamics of formalization within KAM, addressing ambiguities noted in previous research (Herhausen et al., 2022; Workman et al., 2003). Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of how formalized structures influence knowledge sharing and performance, responding to the call for mixed-methods approaches in KAM research (see Section 2.1.2). The qualitative aspects shed light on the different facets of formalization, revealing divergent perspectives among KA managers. Some managers perceived formalization as advantageous for facilitating interdepartmental knowledge sharing, thereby enhancing collaboration and establishing clearer communication channels. Conversely, others viewed formalization as a hindrance, attributing it to the increased administrative burden, bureaucratic complexities, and potential for redundant reporting it introduces. To reconcile these differing views, a subsequent quantitative approach provided empirical evidence demonstrating that formalized structures amplify the efficacy of knowledge sharing processes and enhance KA performance. Consequently, clear formal structures significantly strengthened the impact of knowledge sharing on KA performance, highlighting the importance of formalization in optimizing KAM processes.

Role of identification for knowledge sharing and KA performance

Furthermore, Study 3 explored the individual roles of KA managers, building upon previous research that highlighted the complexity of their task portfolios and the strategic importance they hold within organizations (Davies & Ryals, 2013; Guenzi et al., 2007; Ivens et al., 2018; Pardo et al., 2020). This research makes a significant theoretical contribution to the field by emphasizing the key role of KA managers as also managers of knowledge within organizations. The qualitative investigation revealed the self-perception of KA managers as central knowledge distributors despite the discrepancy between this perception and their actual behaviors. Barriers, such as insufficient customer relationship management (CRM) systems, time constraints, and individual motivations to retain control over knowledge (either for strategic reasons or due to its perceived irrelevance), substantially affected their inclination to share knowledge. These insights advance the understanding of the practical obstacles KA managers encounter, thereby contributing to more refined theoretical frameworks on knowledge sharing behavior.

In addition, the results of the study stressed the focal role of organizational identification, demonstrating that KA managers who strongly identified with their company's values were more inclined to share knowledge. This finding aligns with SIT in organizational contexts (Davies & Ryals, 2013; Guenzi et al., 2007; Ivens et al., 2018; Pardo et al., 2020) and strengthens the findings from Studies 1 and 2 by emphasizing that such identification promotes a seamless integration of individual and organizational objectives. KA managers with a strong organizational identification are likely to act in the best interests of their companies, facilitating effective knowledge sharing and collaboration.

The analysis of the expert interviews (Study 3) uncovered the impact of professional pride and the strategic roles of KA managers on their knowledge sharing behavior. This sense of pride, coupled with the challenges they encountered regarding knowledge sharing, contributed to a reluctance toward the organization's emphasis on sharing knowledge and formalizing processes. However, the results of the quantitative study (Study 3) suggest that strong organizational identification can mitigate this reluctance, harmonizing individual goals with organizational objectives and fostering a culture of knowledge sharing.

Integrative perspective

Accordingly, this research presents an integrative perspective that considers the interaction between organizational and individual factors and thereby closes the research gap identified by Sandesh et al. (2023) while extending the research of Salojärvi et al. (2010, 2013). In particular, the findings of Study 3 show that organizational factors and individual drivers seem to always mutually intertwine. Central to enhancing KA performance is the strategic management of KA managers, whose engagement is crucial. Additionally, effectively managing the formalization process—by implementing and aligning formal structures with organizational goals—is vital. Therefore, a holistic approach combining effective people management and smart formalization strategies is essential for maximizing KA performance.

6.1.2 Managerial implications

The findings of these studies demonstrate the essential role that KA managers play in the efficacy of KAM programs. Considering the substantial resources allocated to these programs, it is paramount to deepen our understanding of the individuals that take on the KA manager role. The findings suggest that KA managers must possess an appropriate strategic focus and mindset to fulfill their objective of generating value for both the KA and their own organization. Furthermore, it was evident that KA managers' capabilities to create dual added value and effectively manage strategic business relationships were inherently shaped by their identification with a multitude of relevant foci. Study 1 revealed that KA managers demonstrated a high level of awareness of their identification with several focal points. The analysis of expert interviews unveiled four central foci that were fundamentally important for KA managers. Understanding these identification foci is crucial for enhancing the strategic impact of KAM programs.

When recruiting and training KA managers, many companies prioritize individual skills and qualifications, such as education, industry experience, and functional expertise (Ryals & McDonald, 2010). However, relatively little attention appears to be given to the complex aspect of professional identity and the associated identification foci of KA managers. Based on the findings of Study 1, it is recommended that organizations integrate a stronger emphasis on identification-related factors into their people management practices. This shift in focus is essential for enhancing the effectiveness of KA managers in their strategic roles.

Study 2 provides more support for the assumption that different identification foci can exist concurrently and revealed that identity profiles among KA managers can vary significantly. The results of the fsQCA indicated that the diverse objectives and values of KA managers were either closely related or at least coexisted. The results of the fsQCA demonstrated that various identification patterns were associated with KA manager effectiveness. Determining the most suitable identification pattern depends on the distinct organizational environment in which the KA managers operate. These findings offer critical insights for managers responsible for KAM programs. Managers must determine the ideal identification pattern for KA managers, tailored to the market conditions in which their company or the corresponding business unit operates and the organizational structures of their KAM initiatives. This approach will help in optimizing the alignment between KA managers' identities and their strategic roles, thereby enhancing their effectiveness.

From a long-term perspective, these insights also have significant implications for the HR management of companies. By understanding their specific corporate environment, companies can account for identification anchors that are particularly important. This understanding is beneficial for internal recruitment as it offers insight into an employee's mindset and how it aligns with the company's requirements. For external recruitment, attention should be directed toward employee development and training, ensuring that new hires are effectively integrated into the organizational culture. Furthermore, HR and relevant leaders should prioritize the development of appropriate group memberships to foster a sense of belonging and alignment with the company's values and objectives. This can be achieved through targeted training programs, mentorship initiatives, and team-building activities designed to reinforce and promote the desired identification patterns among KA managers. By recognizing and addressing these distinct identification foci, companies can implement people management practices that are more effectively aligned with the unique motivations and strengths of their KA managers. Tailored approaches regarding the four identification foci—organization, KA, leader, and occupation— can lead to improved managerial performance:

Organizational identification. KA managers with a high degree of organizational identification exhibit a profound connection to the company's values, culture, and mission. They are likely to be more engaged and motivated when they see their work as directly contributing to the organization's overarching goals. This suggests that people management strategies should be tailored to leverage this strong sense of organizational alignment. To effectively support KA managers with high organizational identification, companies should place a strong emphasis on fostering a cohesive organizational culture. Collaboration within the company's internal cross-functional network enhances their position and enables them to perceive the broader impact of their work. By doing so, organizations can maximize the potential of KA managers who are intrinsically motivated by their identification with the company's strategic objectives, ultimately leading to improved performance.

KA identification. KA managers who primarily identify with their KA(s) place significant emphasis on customer satisfaction and the success of their accounts. This customer-centric focus has the potential to enhance KA outcomes and foster long-term partnerships. To effectively supervise KA managers with strong KA identification, organizations should prioritize specialized training in customer relationship management. This training should be designed to enhance the managers' skills in maintaining and improving client relationships, thereby ensuring high levels of client satisfaction and retention. One strategy could be to implement customer-focused performance metrics for KA managers, such as customer satisfaction scores and account success. By aligning KA managers' efforts with the strategic goals of KA(s), organizations can ensure that KA managers remain committed to achieving outcomes that benefit both the KA(s) and the company.

Leader identification. The research conducted in Study 1 highlights KA managers' preference for a participatory leadership style within hierarchical company relationships. This approach fosters transparent exchanges of opinions and values, which are essential for organizational coherence. KA managers excel when granted autonomy, trust, and self-determination. However, they also benefit significantly from the inspiration and guidance of leaders well versed in KAM. Therefore, a managerial implication is to consider a participatory approach with the leader serving as a role model to strengthen leader identification among KA managers. This can be achieved by emphasizing direct communication, mentorship, and leadership development opportunities. Organizations can support KA managers by implementing structured mentorship programs, conducting regular one-on-one meetings, and offering personalized feedback sessions. Additionally, leadership development programs that focus on building strong leader–employee relationships are beneficial, as they reinforce a KA manager's sense of connection and loyalty to their leader.

Occupational identification. KA managers with strong occupational identification demonstrate a profound connection to their professional roles. Such managers are driven by a desire for continuous growth, professional recognition, and advancement within their field. This intrinsic motivation necessitates a tailored approach to people management that supports and nurtures their professional aspirations. To effectively guide KA managers with high occupational identification, organizations should prioritize providing comprehensive professional development opportunities, such as access to industry certifications and specialized training programs. By recognizing and rewarding their professional achievements and providing opportunities for growth, organizations can foster a highly motivated and engaged KAM team. Moreover, this strategic approach to people management guarantees that

KA managers apply advanced knowledge and expertise in their roles. This, in turn, can lead to superior performance in KAM, as these managers apply their advanced skills and industry insights to drive organizational success.

A key finding of this thesis concerns the interplay between organizational identification and identification with the KA. Study 1 revealed that the role of archetypes for KA managers, as developed by Wilson and Millman (2003), continues to be relevant in corporate practice. While additional identification foci are important for KA managers, achieving a balance between organizational identification and KA identification is often crucial. This was further substantiated by Study 2, which demonstrated that three configurations of the fsQCA consistently included the combination of identification with the organization and the KA. In supplier–buyer relationships, maintaining balance is essential. Ideally, this balance results in the alignment of the objectives and values of both the supplier and the KA. Consequently, KA managers are driven to work in the interests of both networks and to identify with the involved parties to a certain degree. This aligns with the "arbiters" classification described by Wilson and Millman (2003) and is highly desirable for organizations.

However, the other side of the coin is that many KA managers encounter fragmented identification scenarios as they navigate the dual allegiances to their own company and the KA. This can potentially lead to internal conflicts and interpersonal confrontations; it also highlights the relevance of thoroughly assessing the identification profiles of the KA managers by those individuals responsible for the implementation and development of KAM programs. Moreover, they should recognize the potential challenges arising from various combinations of identification foci and ensure that these complexities are managed effectively to improve KA managerial performance and program outcomes.

A notable and risky identification profile for a KA manager involves a strong identification with the KA but a lack of identification with the manager’s own company. This profile corresponds to the “renegade” classification described by Wilson and Millman (2003). When a KA manager starts to display renegade tendencies, it becomes essential for KA leaders to step in and realign their identification focus, for example, by encouraging organizational identification. Shifting a KA manager’s profile toward a more balanced “arbiter” type, which aligns with the interests of both the organization and KA, is a complex challenge that KA leaders face.

However, other foci also represent challenges. Managers who have a strong occupational identification but low identification with actor-related foci, such as organization, leader, or KA identification, are more likely to consider leaving their current role for a similar position elsewhere. While these managers may enjoy the tasks associated with KAM, they are not strongly tied to their current employer and could easily switch to a similar role with a different company. Given the critical role KA managers play and the importance of stability in customer relationships, organizations should actively monitor and address situations where high occupational identification coexists with low organizational or leader identification. Efforts should be directed toward enhancing KA managers’ identification with their organizations and leaders to improve retention and foster enduring customer partnerships. This proactive strategy can help mitigate turnover risks and strengthen long-term customer relationships.

Thus, it is crucial to capture identification profiles to ascertain whether a balanced profile that has positive implications exists (Study 2: configurations 1, 2, and 4) or whether potential risks may arise due to a strong emphasis on individual identification foci (Study 1: e.g., KA identification paired with low organizational identification or high occupational identification in the absence of actor-related foci). Moreover, Study 2 highlights the extraordinary importance of contextual factors. For instance, configuration 3 reflected KA managers who did not strongly identify with any of the four foci but still achieved success. Consequently, contextual factors, such as market dynamics, competitive intensity, and formalization, play a crucial role in maximizing the potential of managing inter-organizational KA relationships. These factors shape the environment in which KA managers operate and influence their effectiveness. Companies with the effective work of KA managers as a goal must therefore first analyze the market environment and then the organizational structures of the KAM program and the company. Study 3 further enhances these insights by providing relevant guidance for management practices to mobilize knowledge within companies while specifically emphasizing formalized processes within organizational structures.

The qualitative findings of Study 3 reveal a range of perspectives on formalization within KAM practice, with different perceptions regarding the benefits of formalization. Some KA managers posited that formalization has a positive influence, enhancing knowledge sharing among stakeholders and departments within an organization. In contrast, others contended that formalization impedes knowledge sharing and its effectiveness due to increased administrative processes, as well as unnecessary reporting and analysis, as contributing factors. The quantitative findings suggest that formalized processes and clear organizational structures for knowledge sharing are crucial for KA managers to effectively fulfill their roles as translators, facilitators, and information hubs. These processes help KA managers make their knowledge transparent, share it with relevant parties, and leverage it to enhance KA performance. Consequently, the findings suggest that companies should prioritize the establishment of these formalized processes, supported by digital solutions and AI, while ensuring usability and acceptance among KA managers to maximize the benefits of these tools.

Within the domain of knowledge sharing, the findings of Study 3 draw attention to the tension between the interests of KA managers and those of the organization. It appears that some KA managers may not be highly motivated to share knowledge within their organizations despite the organizational goal of systematically embedding and making knowledge accessible to relevant actors. Given the critical role KA managers play in knowledge sharing and inter-organizational relationships, organizations must navigate the intricacies of their behaviors to improve knowledge sharing practices and enhance overall organizational success. Building on insights from Studies 1, 2, and 3, the relevance of organizational identification is apparent. KA managers who embraced the company’s values and adopt its identity were more inclined to share acquired knowledge with relevant stakeholders. Therefore, companies should focus on reinforcing the mindset and organizational identification of KA managers to foster effective knowledge sharing practices.

6.2 Limitations and avenues for further research

While this thesis provides meaningful contributions to research and management practice, it is essential to address its limitations. These limitations include methodological and content-related aspects, which require careful consideration for future studies. The purpose of this section is to encourage continued academic exploration and development in this area by identifying these limitations and suggesting potential avenues for further research.

The analyses conducted across all three studies were based on data collected from German-speaking KA managers. This deliberate emphasis offers a valuable perspective; however, it requires contextual interpretation in light of this common cultural background. Previous research suggests that there are significant differences between cultural groups in various dimensions (e.g., Hofstede, 1983). In this regard, recent research in global account management provides insights, demonstrating that inter-organizational relationships between suppliers and buyers with diverse cultural backgrounds are contingent upon various cultural factors (Kadam, Niersbach, & Ivens, 2023). Against the backdrop of the present research subject, culturally influenced diverse approaches can be anticipated regarding work routines, the handling of formalized processes and systems, and the interactions with colleagues and superiors, both within the company and externally. Future research endeavors may thus explore cultural group dynamics and expand upon this investigation to include additional markets.

The investigation of the current research questions was conducted using self-reported information collected from KA managers, employing both expert interviews and self-reported construct measures. These measures were fundamental because some of the constructs were directly linked to self-perception and self-identity. However, this approach introduced the risk of response bias (Zerbe & Paulus, 1987). Despite efforts to minimize this bias through careful questionnaire construction and interview guidelines, it was not possible to eliminate it entirely.

Similarly, potential common-method bias may have been present, although steps were taken to minimize this potential problem, such as the implementation of appropriate testing, questionnaire design, and respondent briefing. Future research should therefore strive to utilize objective alternative measures (when possible) to further validate the findings of this thesis. Especially when considering relevant contextual factors, such as market dynamics, competitive intensity, or market volume, objective classifications emerge as feasible alternatives. Furthermore, the assessment of KA performance and KA effectiveness could be validated with additional perspectives, such as those provided by customers, direct supervisors, and team members. This approach would likely unveil additional facets and contribute to a more objective assessment.

Furthermore, there are limitations associated with the cross-sectional nature of the data. The use of such data provides indications of potential causal relationships; nevertheless, it does not allow for definitive statements about causality. This limitation emerges because data collected at a specific time fail to capture temporal trends and dynamics. Furthermore, acknowledging the potential impact of confounding variables on observed relationships encourages exploration in future research aimed at enhancing the interpretation of cross-sectional data. Therefore, there is a need for longitudinal studies or experimental methodologies to gain a deeper understanding of the evolution of supplier–buyer relationships, particularly those focusing on the evolving behaviors and mindsets of KA managers over time. By addressing these methodological limitations, future research endeavors have the potential to gain insights into new aspects and contribute to more valid statements about causality.

In addition, there were additional factors related to the content that require thorough investigation in future research. In particular, forthcoming studies could expand upon the findings generated by this thesis by analyzing identity and related identification foci in more depth, alongside elucidating further boundary conditions relevant to the role of the identity of

KA managers and their KA performance. This may entail the identification of additional identification foci, an exploration of the interplay among various facets of KA managers' identification anchors, and consideration of influential contextual factors and additional organizational outcome variables.

The research on the identity of KA managers remains limited. Study 1 identified relevant identification foci for KA managers, which were further explored in Studies 2 and 3, thus providing an initial contribution to this research area. Given their complex task responsibilities and continuous engagement in inter- and intra-organizational networks, it is plausible that additional factors exist that are relevant to KA managers. These factors could additionally shape KA managers' perceptions of their roles within an organization and their interactions with key stakeholders. Previous research has shown that employees may identify with particular teams or departments (Ashforth et al., 2008; Van Dick, 2004; Van Dick & Wagner, 2002). KA managers who cooperate with various departments within both the internal and external networks of companies may also associate themselves with these entities. This identification with specific teams or departments may influence KA managers' sense of belonging and their approach to collaborative work within the organization. These dynamics must be explored for a better understanding of the complexity of KA managers' identity formation.

Another promising avenue for research would involve investigating the personal identity of KA managers. To achieve this goal, a qualitative exploratory approach would be particularly beneficial in uncovering the relevant aspects of identification. Furthermore, identifying the typical personality traits displayed by KA managers, for example, through the application of the Big Five model—commonly utilized across diverse research fields—could provide valuable perspectives (Badgaiyan & Verma, 2014; McCrae & Costa, 1986; Ones, 2005; Peters & Feste, 2023). Insights from such investigations can achieve a comprehensive understanding of the facets of KA managers' identities, thereby enabling the development of more targeted recruitment, training, and professional growth initiatives tailored to their unique characteristics.

Study 1 identified different identification foci expressed by KA managers, while Study 2 investigated different identity patterns, including different combinations of identification foci. Study 3 explored causal relationships, shedding light on the impact of identification with the organization, as well as with the KA, on knowledge sharing behavior and KA performance. However, an apparent gap is the lack of attention paid in these studies to the potential interplay between multiple foci of identification. Further research is needed to explore this interplay in more detail and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of identification foci among KA managers.

An initial avenue for further research emerges from the findings of Study 3, which suggest that the identification with the KA is balanced against the interests or identification with KA managers' own organization. In this regard, the interviewees disclosed that they intentionally retained knowledge for the benefit of their KAs. The theoretical foundations of SIT and SCT posit the temporally and contextually contingent nature of identification foci (e.g., Haslam et al., 2003; Pratt, 1998; Van Dick & Wagner, 2002). Following this premise, it is reasonable to assume that various focal points of identification and their corresponding interests are subject to deliberate evaluation and reciprocal effects. Future research could systematically explore the circumstances in which such evaluations occur and investigate their impact. This is a promising avenue of research to elucidate the complex dynamics underlying identification processes and their effects.

Concerning KAM, prior research suggests that the alignment of shared values and the coexistence of organizational and KA identification constitute the most favorable basis, as viewed through the lens of business relationship theory (Kleinaltenkamp, Eggert, Kashyap, &

Ulaga, 2022; Wilson & Millman, 2003). On the contrary, alternative constellations of identification foci may result in negative consequences for the supplier company or even for the entire supplier–buyer relationship (Wilson & Millman, 2003). For instance, Study 1 showed that strong identification with KA, in combination with low identification with one's own organization, could lead to behaviors that were detrimental to the organization. Preliminary findings from Study 3 support this assumption in the context of knowledge sharing behavior. However, neither the motives underlying this behavior nor the potential reciprocal effects were explored. Subsequent studies could provide insight into these aspects by employing the framework of principal–agent theory, leading to a more comprehensive understanding. Principal–agent models reflect (contractual) relationships between a principal and an agent acting on behalf of the principal with the assumption that the two parties are unequally informed (Davis, Bendickson, Muldoon, & McDowell, 2021; Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Pratt & Zeckhauser, 1985), and this asymmetry typically favors the agent. The agent can use this advantage in favor of or against the principal and opportunistically exploit the room for maneuvering (Davis et al., 2021; Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Pepper & Gore, 2015; Shapiro, 2005). Exploring the role of identification with various focal points could shed light on this mechanism. It is plausible to assume that KA managers (agents) strongly identifying with their own organization (principal) would be less inclined to exploit such an advantage. Conversely, alternative scenarios may emerge, for instance, where KA managers deliberately maintain information asymmetry to leverage personal advantages (Nätti & Ojasalo, 2008). Subsequent research endeavors could yield valuable insights for principal–agent models, the role of identification in KAM, and the decision-making processes of KA managers operating at the supplier–buyer interface.

The current studies offer valuable insights into the contextual factors influencing the formation of identities among KA managers. However, they do not encompass the full spectrum of potential influences. While Study 2 investigated formalization, competitive intensity, and market dynamism, Study 3 delved deeper into the role of formalization. Despite these valuable contributions, there is an opportunity for future research to explore additional factors that could impact KA managers' identities. Other factors that may influence identity development among KA managers, such as organizational factors, including company image, the complexity of internal and external coordination, agility, and the impact of technological advancements.

First, there is a need to explore the influence of company image in greater detail, considering its potential impact on KA managers' perceptions of their roles and identities. In the interviews conducted with KA managers as part of Study 1, they highlighted the relevance of company image and perceived organizational prestige in cultivating a sense of identification with their respective organizations. Previous studies have shown that a positive company image and high perceived prestige can enhance organizational identification among employees, positively influence customer perceptions, and thus potentially affect KA performance (e.g., Bartels, Pruyn, De Jong, & Joustra, 2007; Carmeli, Gilat, & Waldman, 2007; Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

Second, investigating the complexity of internal and external coordination could provide valuable insights into how KA managers navigate their roles within complex organizational networks (Homburg et al., 2002). In addition to the relevance of the dynamics of the specific market environment and the level of competition, this holds particular importance for the process of knowledge management (Homburg et al., 2002; Stock, 2006). Moreover, examining the role of agility in KA management could shed light on how KA managers adapt to changing market conditions and organizational demands (Chonko & Jones, 2005; Gounaris & Tzempelikos, 2014). Future research could explore the extent to which these two organizational aspects impact the identity of KA managers in their boundary-spanning role within their corresponding companies. These factors may influence identification with the organization and with the KA, as well as potentially affect occupational identification. Exploring how these influences manifest in the context of KA managers' daily activities, knowledge sharing behaviors, and decision-making processes could provide deeper insights into the complexities of their organizational identity.

Additionally, further focus on the work environment and established systems, including aspects such as organizational support, could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of KA managers' identities and performance. In this regard, the role of technology and advances in artificial intelligence (AI) are particularly interesting. B2B companies handle large amounts of customer data, which become manageable through the utilization of AI for comprehensive analysis and the automation of processes, routine tasks, and decision-making procedures (Chatterjee, Chaudhuri, & Vrontis, 2022). Recent research indicates that the integration of AI within CRM systems affects both the performance of B2B companies and B2B relationship satisfaction (Chatterjee et al., 2022; Rahman, Bag, Gupta, & Sivarajah, 2023). While these studies focus on customers in general, future research could specifically examine the role and potential of AI in KAM. Given the structural differences between regular sales management and KAM, it is anticipated that the utilization and potential of AI may require separate investigation. Personal interaction is particularly important in KAM, as highlighted in Studies 1 and 3. Therefore, future research should pay attention to the increasing relevance of AI in organizations and its impact on the work processes and scope of responsibilities of KAM managers. Given the inherently complex nature of their responsibilities, there is a potential risk of technology-induced stress arising from factors such as coping with overwhelming information and communication technologies. Research on technology-induced stress in various organizational settings suggests that how employees perceive this stress significantly affects their performance and attachment to the organization. The results highlight the importance of understanding the subjective experience of technology-induced stress in shaping employee behavior and organizational outcomes (Ragu-Nathan, Tarafdar, Ragu-Nathan, & Tu, 2008; Tarafdar, Pullins, & Ragu-Nathan, 2015; Srivastava, Chandra, & Shirish, 2015). Further research in this area could provide valuable insights into the evolving challenges faced by KA managers in contemporary business environments.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the studies and identify areas requiring further research concerning the potential effects of the identification profiles of KA managers. Although Studies 2 and 3 focused on assessing KA managers' effectiveness and performance—two established outcome measures in KAM research—further research is needed to thoroughly explore the effects of identification patterns. Specifically, there are additional organizational considerations to take into account. For instance, organizations are committed to retaining KA managers because of their critical role in the organization. Previous research suggests that organizational identification significantly impacts both job satisfaction and turnover intention, which are closely intertwined (e.g., Olkkonen & Lipponen, 2006; Riketta, 2005; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). Future research could establish and investigate the relationship of the identification foci identified in Study 1 with job satisfaction and turnover intention. For instance, a combination of low organizational identification and high occupational identification may lead to increased turnover intentions as individuals prioritize their specific job roles over their identification with the organization as a whole. This could imply that employees who strongly identify with their occupational roles but lack a strong identification with the overall organization may be more inclined to consider leaving their current company to pursue a KA manager position in another organization. Further research could investigate the underlying mechanisms and potential consequences of this dynamic, providing valuable insights for organizations seeking to improve employee retention strategies.

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