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The Role of Transformational Leadership Style in Organizational Innovation Capability: A Systematic Review of Antecedents, Mechanisms, and Outcomes

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Abstract

This study presents a systematic literature review (SLR) examining the role of transformational leadership style (TLS) in driving organizational innovation capability (OIC). Despite the growing scholarly interest in this relationship, no comprehensive synthesis exists that simultaneously maps the antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes linking TLS to OIC across diverse organizational contexts. Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines, this review analyzed 100 peer-reviewed articles retrieved from the Dimensions AI database using the search string “transformational leadership” AND “innovation capability” in title and abstract, covering publications from 2013 to 2026. The findings reveal that TLS consistently and positively influences OIC through two dominant mechanisms: (1) knowledge-based pathways, particularly knowledge sharing (identified in 17 studies) and knowledge management capability (10 studies), and (2) digital

transformation mechanisms (18 studies), which have emerged as the primary pathway in recent literature from 2024 to 2026. Antecedents of TLS effectiveness include perceived organizational support, organizational culture, and CEO or managerial characteristics. Key outcomes associated with TLS-driven OIC include competitive advantage, organizational performance, and sustainable performance. The theoretical foundations most frequently employed are Dynamic Capabilities Theory and the Resource-Based View. Geographically, the literature is concentrated in Southeast and East Asia, particularly Indonesia, Vietnam, and China. This review identifies four critical research gaps: geographic bias, reliance on cross-sectional designs, understudied green innovation dimensions, and limited examination of individual-level psychological mechanisms. The findings offer actionable insights for scholars and practitioners committed to leveraging leadership for sustained organizational innovation.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Innovation Capability, Knowledge Sharing, Digital Transformation, Systematic Literature Review, Organizational Performance

1. Introduction

In an era defined by rapid technological change and intensifying global competition, the capacity of organizations to innovate continuously has become a prerequisite for survival and long-term growth ^[1,2]. Innovation capability — broadly understood as an organization's ability to mobilize knowledge, resources, and processes to generate and implement new solutions — is widely recognized as one of the most critical antecedents of sustained competitive advantage ^[3,4]. Accordingly, understanding the organizational and leadership conditions that cultivate innovation capability has attracted substantial scholarly attention over the past two decades.

Among the leadership styles examined in this context, transformational leadership (TL) has emerged as one of the most extensively studied and empirically supported drivers of organizational innovation ^[5,6]. First conceptualized by Burns ^[1] and subsequently operationalized by Bass ^[2] through the Full Range Leadership Model, transformational leadership describes leaders who inspire, motivate, and intellectually stimulate followers beyond immediate self-interest. This construct encompasses four behavioral dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration ^[2], all of which create conditions conducive to creative thinking and knowledge exchange within organizations.

Empirical research has consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between TL and innovation outcomes. Le and Lei ^[5] established that TL exerts differential effects on product and process innovation through knowledge sharing and perceived

organizational support. Lei *et al.* [6] demonstrated that employees' psychological capital serves as a critical mediating pathway. Parallel studies by Le [7] and Gui *et al.* [8] extended this evidence to radical and incremental innovation, reinforcing knowledge-based mechanisms as the dominant transmission pathway. More recently, digital transformation has emerged as an equally prominent mediating pathway [9,10], signaling a theoretical shift toward understanding TL within digitally transformed environments.

Despite this growing body of evidence, existing studies predominantly examine single mediating mechanisms in isolation [11, 12], and the literature exhibits marked geographical concentration in Southeast and East Asia [13], leaving cross-cultural generalizability unresolved. This study addresses these gaps through a PRISMA 2020-guided systematic review of 100 peer-reviewed articles from Dimensions AI (2013–2026), pursuing four objectives: (1) to identify antecedents of TLS effectiveness; (2) to map mediating and moderating mechanisms; (3) to synthesize organizational outcomes; and (4) to identify theoretical frameworks and future research directions.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a systematic literature review design guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework [14]. The Antecedents–Mechanisms–Outcomes (AMO) framework was adopted as the organizing theoretical lens [15, 16]. A systematic search was conducted using Dimensions AI on May 19, 2026, applying the Boolean string “transformational leadership” AND “innovation capability” to title and abstract fields [17]. The search yielded 100 records, exported in CSV format with full bibliographic and citation metadata. Eligibility criteria were formulated a priori following the PICO adaptation for non-clinical reviews [14]. Included studies explicitly addressed both TLS and innovation capability as primary constructs, were published in English between 2013 and 2026, and were peer-reviewed with registered DOIs. Articles with missing abstracts, non-English language without translation, and book chapters lacking full methodology were excluded. The four-stage PRISMA 2020 process [14] yielded a final set of 94 included studies from 100 initially retrieved records: three excluded at screening (non-English, n=3) and three excluded at eligibility (missing abstract n=2; insufficient methodology n=1). The PRISMA flow is presented in Fig 1.

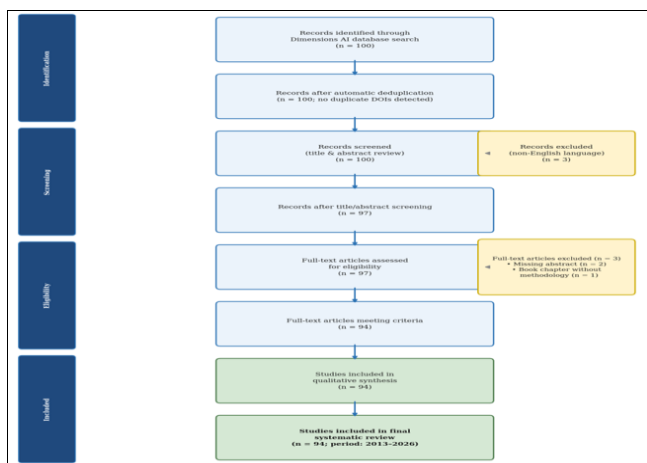


Fig 1: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process

Each of the 94 articles was coded across seven categories: bibliographic, methodological, theoretical, construct-level variables, contextual, key findings, and citation impact. Quality was assessed using an adapted MMAT protocol [18]. For quantitative studies (n=87), quality indicators included sample size (n≥100), instrument reliability (Cronbach’s α≥0.70), and model fit (CFI≥0.90; RMSEA≤0.08). A narrative synthesis approach [19] was employed, organized by the AMO framework across three temporal periods: early (2013–2020), transitional (2021–2023), and contemporary (2024–2026).

3. Results and Discussion

The temporal distribution reveals a pronounced growth trajectory. The early period (2013–2020) contributed 14 articles (14.9%); the transitional period (2021–2023) added 18 articles (19.1%); and the contemporary period (2024–2026) accounts for 62 articles (65.9%), reflecting rapid thematic diversification toward digital transformation and sustainability [9, 10]. Fig 2 presents the annual distribution.

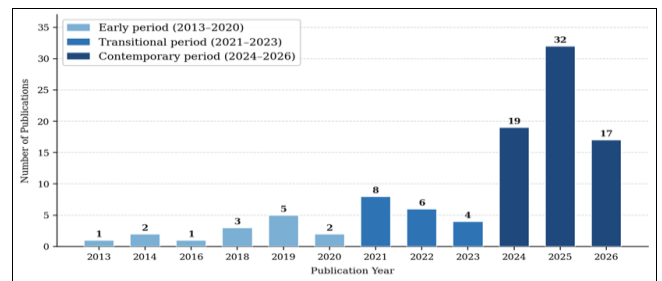


Fig 2: Annual Distribution of Publications on Transformational Leadership Style and Innovation Capability (2013–2026)

The 94 articles span 63 unique sources. Table 3 presents the most prolific journals. The Journal of Knowledge Management (n=3; 719 total citations) and Leadership & Organization Development Journal (n=3; 244 citations) represent the primary intellectual anchors of the field. Le and Lei's [5] 2019 article alone accumulated 499 citations, establishing it as the most influential single study in the corpus.

Table 3: Most Prolific Journals and Their Citation Impact

Journal / Source Title	n	Total Citations	Avg Citations	OA %
Journal of Knowledge Management	3	719	239.7	67%
Leadership & Organization Development Journal	3	244	81.3	33%
Sustainability	4	194	48.5	100%
European Journal of Innovation Management	2	238	119.0	0%
International Journal of Business Administration	2	35	17.5	100%
Journal of International Business and Management	3	9	3.0	100%
Asia-Pacific Journal of Business Administration	1	88	88.0	0%
Kybernetes	1	87	87.0	0%

Source: Authors' compilation from Dimensions AI (n = 94 articles; exported May 2026).

The literature is concentrated in Southeast and East Asia: Indonesia (n=15, 16.0%), Vietnam (n=10, 10.6%), and China (n=7, 7.4%) collectively represent 34.0% of the

corpus. Manufacturing (n=18) and SMEs (n=17) are the dominant sectoral contexts, with education (n=10) and technology firms (n=11) also well represented. The near-absence of studies from North America, Western Europe, and Australia limits generalizability [13]. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) dominates the methodological landscape, employed in 48 studies (51.1%). Survey-based quantitative designs account for 26 additional studies (27.7%). The dominance of cross-sectional, single-source designs limits causal inference and introduces common method bias vulnerability across the corpus.

3.1 Antecedents of Transformational Leadership Effectiveness

Three antecedent clusters are identified. At the organizational level, perceived organizational support [5] and knowledge-centered culture [11, 12] create the enabling environment for TLS to influence innovation. At the individual level, CEO and manager characteristics — theorized through Upper Echelon Theory [2] — shape leadership style adoption, while entrepreneurial orientation predisposes leaders toward innovation-enabling behaviors. Contextually, environmental dynamism and competitive intensity condition the magnitude of TLS effects, with stronger impacts observed in high-turbulence, emerging-economy settings [13, 21].

The synthesis identifies seven key mechanisms. Table 4 summarizes each with frequency, representative studies, and direction of effect.

Table 4: Summary of Mediating and Moderating Mechanisms in the TLS–OIC Relationship

Mechanism Variable	n Studies	Key Representative Studies	Direction of Effect
Knowledge Sharing	17	Le & Lei (2019) [5]; Gui <i>et al.</i> (2021) [8]; Lei <i>et al.</i> (2021) [20]	Positive full mediation; stronger for process than product innovation
Digital Transformation	18	Majumdar <i>et al.</i> (2024) [9]; Asbeetah <i>et al.</i> (2025) [26]	Positive partial mediation; dominant pathway in 2024–2026 literature
Knowledge Management Capability	10	Gui <i>et al.</i> (2022) [11]; Le & Le (2023) [13]; Nguyen <i>et al.</i> (2021) [12]	Positive partial mediation; moderated by innovation and collaborative culture
Organizational Learning	5	Schweitzer (2014) [21]; Lei <i>et al.</i> (2018) [23]	Positive full mediation through four learning components
Psychological Capital	3	Lei <i>et al.</i> (2020) [6]; Le (2020) [7]	Positive partial mediation; self-efficacy strongest sub-dimension
Organizational Culture (Mod.)	11	Gui <i>et al.</i> (2022) [11]; Nguyen <i>et al.</i> (2021) [12]	Positive moderation; strengthens TL→KM→innovation path
Environmental Dynamism (Mod.)	11	Le & Le (2023) [13]	Positive moderation; competitive intensity amplifies TL effect

Source: Authors' synthesis from included studies.

Knowledge sharing (n=17) remains the most historically consistent mediator [5, 8, 20], while digital transformation (n=18) has emerged as the dominant contemporary pathway

[9, 26]. Knowledge management capability (n=10) operates as an organizational-level complement [11, 13], while psychological capital [6, 7] and organizational learning [21, 23] constitute secondary individual and organizational pathways respectively. Organizational culture and environmental dynamism consistently moderate these relationships, amplifying TLS effects when normative and competitive conditions are favorable [11, 12, 13].

TLS-driven OIC generates cascading outcomes across three levels. At the innovation level, product, process, radical, incremental, frugal, and ambidextrous innovation are all positively influenced [5, 7, 11, 20]. At the organizational level, competitive advantage (n=15), firm performance (n=10), and sustainable performance (n=8) represent the primary performance dividends of TLS-enabled innovation capability [25, 27]. At the employee level, innovative work behavior emerges as a proximal behavioral outcome, mediated by organizational commitment and knowledge sharing [28].

3.2 Theoretical Framework Synthesis

The integrated AMO framework (Fig 3) positions TLS as a meta-capability within Dynamic Capabilities Theory [25], enabling organizations to sense, seize, and reconfigure knowledge and digital resources for innovation. The Resource-Based View provides complementary grounding, framing TLS and knowledge management as rare, co-specialized resources. The Knowledge-Based View explains micro-level knowledge sharing mechanisms, while the Full Range Leadership Model anchors TLS construct definition.

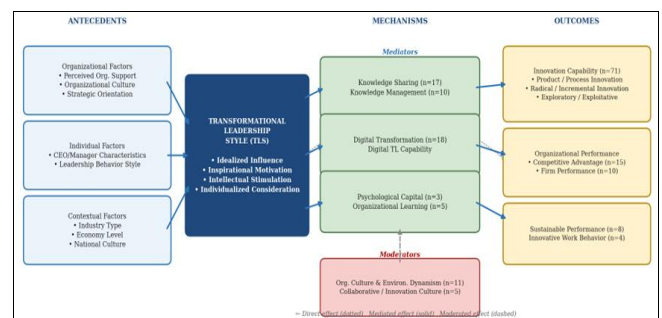


Fig 3: Integrated AMO Conceptual Framework: Transformational Leadership Style, Mechanisms, and Organizational Innovation Capability Outcomes

3.3 Discussion

This review demonstrates that TLS operates as a multi-modal driver rather than a single-pathway mechanism, challenging isolated mediation models prevalent in the empirical literature [5, 6, 9]. The temporal emergence of digital transformation as a primary pathway signals evolving theoretical boundary conditions that necessitate periodic model revision. The consistent alignment with Dynamic Capabilities Theory across diverse contexts strengthens the theory's cross-contextual applicability while revealing culture and environmental dynamism as its primary boundary conditions.

Practitioners in SMEs and manufacturing organizations — particularly in Southeast Asia — should invest in structured knowledge-sharing programs that formalize TLS behaviors through mentoring, cross-functional ideation, and knowledge repositories [5, 8]. Organizations undergoing digital transformation should develop explicit 'digital

transformational leadership' competencies rather than treating digital initiatives as purely technological projects [9]. Leaders committed to sustainability should align TLS development with green innovation capability frameworks to capture compounding performance benefits [26, 27].

Four priority gaps are identified: (1) geographic diversity — 34.0% of studies concentrate in Indonesia, Vietnam, and China, and cross-national comparative studies are urgently needed [13]; (2) longitudinal designs — the dominance of cross-sectional SEM studies prevents causal inference; (3) individual psychological mechanisms — psychological capital and creative self-efficacy merit deeper investigation as proximal TLS–innovation links [6, 7]; and (4) green innovation frameworks — the rapid growth of green TLS studies requires integrated theoretical models linking green leadership, green innovation capability, and sustainability outcomes [26, 27].

4. Conclusion

This systematic literature review set out to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the role of transformational leadership style (TLS) in organizational innovation capability (OIC), organized around four research questions. The review of 94 peer-reviewed articles, spanning 2013 to 2026 and retrieved from the Dimensions AI database, yields definitive answers to each research question, as summarized in Table 5.

Table 5: Summary of Research Questions and Answers

RQ	Research Question	Summary Answer
RQ1	What are the antecedents shaping TLS effectiveness in driving OIC?	Three antecedent clusters are identified: organizational (perceived organizational support, culture, strategic orientation), individual (CEO/manager characteristics, psychological capital, entrepreneurial orientation), and contextual (industry type, economic development level, national culture). These antecedents collectively determine the receptivity of the organizational environment to TLS behaviors.
RQ2	What mechanisms mediate or moderate the TLS–OIC relationship?	Two dominant mediating pathways are established: knowledge-based (knowledge sharing, n=17; knowledge management capability, n=10) and digital transformation (n=18). Secondary mediators include psychological capital (n=3) and organizational learning (n=5). Key moderators are organizational/collaborative culture (n=11) and environmental dynamism (n=11).
RQ3	What outcomes are associated with TLS-driven OIC?	Primary outcomes are multidimensional innovation capability types (product, process, radical, incremental, frugal, ambidextrous). Secondary outcomes include competitive advantage (n=15), firm performance (n=10), sustainable performance (n=8), and innovative work behavior (n=4). All effects are consistently positive and mediated rather than direct.
RQ4	What theoretical frameworks dominate and what gaps remain?	Dynamic Capabilities Theory (n=8) and Resource-Based View (n=7) dominate the theoretical landscape. Four priority research gaps are identified: geographic bias toward Southeast and East Asia, reliance on cross-sectional designs, underdeveloped green innovation frameworks, and limited investigation of individual psychological mechanisms.

Source: Authors' synthesis.

Across all four research questions, the evidence is consistent and robust: TLS is a powerful and versatile driver of organizational innovation capability whose effectiveness is shaped by organizational and contextual antecedents, channeled through knowledge and digital mechanisms, conditioned by cultural and environmental moderators, and ultimately manifested in a cascade of innovation types and performance outcomes. The analysis of 94 studies, totaling 2,069 citations, substantiates the centrality of TLS in the innovation management literature and affirms its theoretical grounding in Dynamic Capabilities Theory and the Resource-Based View [25].

4.1 Theoretical Contributions

This review makes three distinct theoretical contributions. First, it provides the first comprehensive AMO-framework synthesis of the TLS–OIC literature, integrating antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes into a single conceptual model rather than examining isolated pathways. This integration reveals that TLS does not operate through a single transmission route but rather deploys multiple reinforcing mechanisms whose relative dominance shifts across time periods and organizational contexts. Second, it documents a paradigmatic shift in the field's theoretical emphasis: the knowledge-based pathway — dominant from 2013 to 2023 — is being progressively supplemented and in some contexts supplanted by the digital transformation pathway in 2024–2026 publications, suggesting that organizational digitalization is redefining the channels through which transformational leaders create innovation capacity [9, 10]. Third, by mapping the theoretical frameworks employed across 94 studies, this review positions Dynamic Capabilities Theory as the most comprehensive and empirically supported macro-level framework for understanding TLS-driven innovation, while identifying the Knowledge-Based View and Resource-Based View as essential complementary theories at the meso and micro levels respectively [25].

4.2 Practical Contributions

For organizational leaders and human resource practitioners, this review provides a structured understanding of the leadership, knowledge, and digital investments most likely to yield innovation capability returns. The consistent mediating role of knowledge sharing across 17 studies — particularly in SMEs and manufacturing sectors — underscores the imperative for organizations to formalize knowledge exchange architectures: structured mentoring programs, inter-departmental innovation forums, and digital knowledge repositories [5, 8, 20]. The prominence of digital transformation as a contemporary mediating pathway points to an urgent competency development need: transformational leaders must develop digital fluency not merely as a technological skill but as a leadership capability that enables innovation-oriented communication, organizational agility, and data-driven decision-making [9, 26]. For policymakers in emerging economies — particularly across Southeast Asia and East Asia — these findings advocate for institutional support frameworks that combine leadership development programs with knowledge infrastructure investment and digital transformation incentives, thereby maximizing the innovation capability

dividends of transformational leadership at the national level.

4.3 Limitations

This review acknowledges four methodological limitations that qualify its conclusions. First, the search was conducted on a single database (Dimensions AI), which, despite its comprehensive coverage, may not index all relevant publications, particularly those in non-English language journals or regional databases not yet integrated into Dimensions. Second, the search string — while precisely constructed — is limited to title and abstract fields; studies where TLS and OIC are central but not foregrounded in titles or abstracts may have been inadvertently excluded. Third, the review is limited to publications in English, which may underrepresent important contributions from scholars in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Fourth, the narrative synthesis methodology, while appropriate given the heterogeneity of included studies, does not permit the quantitative effect size estimation that a formal meta-analysis would provide. Future reviews should address these limitations by employing multi-database searches, bilingual inclusion criteria, and meta-analytic protocols where data homogeneity permits.

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