

Stimulating knowledge-sharing behaviours through ethical leadership and employee trust in leadership: the moderating role of distributive justice

Phong Ba Le and Dung Thi Nguyet Nguyen

Phong Ba Le is based at the Hanoi University of Industry, Hanoi, Vietnam, and School of Business Administration, Hunan University, Changsha, China.
Dung Thi Nguyet Nguyen is based at the Hanoi University of Industry, Hanoi, Vietnam.

Abstract

Purpose – Drawing on social exchange theory, this paper aims to clarify the influences of ethical leadership (EL) on knowledge-sharing (KS) behaviours of employees through the mediating roles of affective- and cognitive-based trust in leadership. This work further offers deeper insight into the moderating mechanism of distributive justice in the EL–KS relationship.

Design/methodology/approach – Structural equation modelling (SEM) is used to investigate the influential degree of EL, aspects of employee trust in leadership and distributive justice on employee behaviours towards tacit and explicit knowledge via data collected from 339 participants in 75 Vietnamese firms.

Findings – The empirical findings reveal that employee trust in leadership positively mediates the relationship between EL and KS behaviours. In particular, distributive justice significantly fosters the impacts of EL on tacit and explicit KS behaviours.

Practical implications – Managers and practitioners should strengthen EL practices to build and maintain employee trust in them for promoting KS behaviours. In addition, research highlights the necessity of establishing distributive justice in organisations to enhance the effect of EL on KS behaviours of employees.

Originality/value – This paper is unique in its attempts to advance the insights on the theory of leadership and knowledge management by investigating the different moderated-mediation mechanisms in the relationship between EL and specific aspects of KS behaviours.

Keywords Ethical leadership, Affective-based trust, Cognitive-based trust, Distributive justice, Tacit knowledge-sharing, Explicit knowledge-sharing

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In today's knowledge-based economy, the key factor for prosperity and economic growth is superior knowledge capitalisation. Rather than physical resources such as assets, capital and facilities, the competency and competitive advantage of a firm is mainly determined by its intellectual capital, such as technology, management know-how and knowledge resources (Le and Lei, 2019; Nguyen *et al.*, 2021). Many prior studies have pointed out that the knowledge-sharing (KS) processes can foster the flow and integration of knowledge in organisations, arouse creativity and new ideas of employees and actively support the emergence of competitive advantage in firms (Lei *et al.*, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2018). KS helps equip companies with essential skills and knowledge for employees to work efficiently by enabling firms to improve performance and obtain key organisational outcomes (Son *et al.*, 2020; Tangaraja *et al.*, 2015). KS plays a dominant role in the knowledge management

Received 13 June 2021
Revised 6 November 2021
24 December 2021
4 February 2022
2 March 2022
Accepted 8 April 2022

process. Accordingly, the successful degree of knowledge management initiatives is mainly determined by the organisations' extent of KS activities (Gui *et al.*, 2021; Le *et al.*, 2020; Wang and Noe, 2010). Although KS processes are widely recognised as the antecedent of many benefits or important outcomes of organisations, this process does not happen spontaneously (Afshan *et al.*, 2021; Wu and Lee, 2017; Yang *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the identification of factors promoting KS among members in an organisation is vital.

Current literature reveals that ethical leadership (EL) and employee trust in leadership are the key antecedents to creating an appropriate climate for fostering KS behaviours in employees (Bhatti *et al.*, 2021; Lei *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b). Moreover, organisational justice in terms of distribution is also perceived as a crucial situational factor having a potential influence on the leadership–KS relationship (Le and Lei, 2017; Phong and Son, 2020; Thompson and Heron, 2005). Prior studies indicate that if employees have high trust in the ethical behaviours of leaders and perceive integrity and fairness in their organisation (Phong and Son, 2020; Su *et al.*, 2021), they have greater motivation and commitment to actively participate in the activities of KS. Accordingly, this study focusses on exploring the different mechanisms and interactions by which EL affects KS behaviours via the mediating role of employee trust and the moderating role of distributive justice. This study expects to significantly expand the theory of leadership, organisational behaviour and knowledge management from the perspective of various motivational factors.

First, leadership behaviour not only affects KS behaviours of employees directly due to the leaders' decisive roles and comprehensive impacts on all organisational activities but also indirectly affects KS processes by creating an appropriate culture to foster the willingness of employees for sharing knowledge (Lei *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b; Shariq *et al.*, 2019). Scholars have devoted considerable effort to exploring and explaining the leadership–KS relationship; however, most studies examine the effects of transformational leadership (Phong and Son, 2020; Yin *et al.*, 2019) while overlooking the essential role of EL despite it being one of the most appropriate leadership styles for enhancing KS activities in an organisation (Bavik *et al.*, 2018; Bhatti *et al.*, 2021). Although typical studies have tried to explain the EL–KS relationship (Bavik *et al.*, 2018; Bhatti *et al.*, 2021; Tu *et al.*, 2019), they have not clarified the mechanism and influence of EL on specific aspects of KS, such as tacit and explicit KS. To address these theoretical gaps, this study applies a moral lens to inspect and explain how EL can shape and foster specific aspects of KS behaviours of employees, namely, tacit and explicit KS, by proposing the first research question:

RQ1. Does EL significantly predict tacit and explicit KS?

Second, literature on trust suggests that high levels of trust generally create reciprocity among employees and managers while inspiring employees to share formal and informal knowledge (Le *et al.*, 2018; Swift and Hwang, 2013). In addition, Wu and Lee (2017) suggested that employees are the main executors of KS processes within an organisation, stressing the importance of understanding psychological behaviours surrounding the KS process, such as aspects of employees' trust in leadership. Notably, Lei *et al.* (2019a, 2019b) argued that little to no research has applied a moral lens to examine the effects of EL on employees' KS behaviours via the mediating role of employee trust. This limits our insight into the different ways EL may positively affect employee trust in leadership to produce better influences on KS behaviours. In other words, further theoretical and practical evidence is required to detect and explain possible mediating effects of attributes of employee trust in the relationship between EL and KS processes. So, the second research question arises:

RQ2. Do aspects of employee trust in leadership mediate the impacts of EL on tacit and explicit KS?

Third, distributive justice refers to the perceived fairness of outcomes employees receive (Phong and Son, 2020). It is considered the main component of organisational justice to

encourage positive intentions and behaviours of employees for obtaining key organisational outcomes (Aguilar-Quintana *et al.*, 2020; Alpkan *et al.*, 2020). Regarding the relationship between EL and KS, prior studies have revealed that the effects of EL on KS processes will be greater if employees perceive their outcome to be fair in comparison with the others (Bavik *et al.*, 2018; De Cremer *et al.*, 2004). Specifically, if employees perceive distributive justice (as exhibited by their trust in receiving reasonable compensation and outcomes for their KS activities), then their anxiety would decrease while their willingness to accept the risk of KS activities would strengthen (Le and Lei, 2017; Phong and Son, 2020). Organisations with differences in distributive justice and support may produce various impacts on KS behaviours due to dissimilarities in providing opportunities and motivations for KS activities. These effects, therefore, can enhance the influence of leadership on KS behaviours of employees. To explore and provide empirical evidence of the role of justice in organisational relationship, this study investigates the moderating effect of distributive justice on the EL–KS relationship by proposing the third research question.

RQ3. Does distributive justice moderate the effect of EL on KS behaviours?

To address the research questions, this study applies structural equation modelling (SEM) based on data collected from 339 participants in 75 Vietnamese firms to investigate the degree of influence of EL and aspects of employee trust on KS behaviours under the moderating role of distributive justice. Social exchange theory recommends that parties with the expectation of some future return or reciprocity will be involved in and sustain the exchange relationship with others (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Drawing mainly on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), this study suggests that positive perceptions and attitudes about leaders and the organisation lead to high trust and positive KS behaviours of employees. This study is expected to provide theoretical initiatives on organisational behaviours and knowledge management as well as practical implications to foster KS behaviours of employees in organisations.

The remainder of this study is arranged as follows. A literature review clarifies the relationship among the latent research factors in Section 2. The methodology section presents the research methods testing the proposed model given in Section 3. Section 4 presents data analysis and results, which are followed by an examination of the empirical findings. Finally, a discussion and conclusions present the theoretical and practical contributions and offer proposals for future research in Section 5.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1 Theoretical background and concepts

2.1.1 Social exchange theory. “Social exchange theory” is considered one of the foremost concepts related to individual behaviour in the workplace (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). The theory suggests that interactions between two parties must involve reciprocal interdependence (Blau, 1964). This theory implies that employees will respond with suitable behaviours if they realise that their organisation is dedicated to them (Alpkan *et al.*, 2020; Su *et al.*, 2021). Drawing from the principles of social exchange theory, this study purports that expressions of sincere concern and kindness by ethical leaders towards employees while focusing on their collective interests can create employee trust. This display of interest in the welfare of employees from ethical leaders fosters positive reciprocation from employees through engagement in KS activities that benefit their organisation in return.

2.1.2 Ethical leadership. Leadership behaviours play a decisive role in creating appropriate conditions that allow employees to exercise and cultivate their knowledge and skills, and to contribute their private knowledge capital to organisational knowledge resources (Gui *et al.*, 2021; Wang and Noe, 2010). Among different leadership styles, EL is perceived as one of

the most effective leadership styles that correlate with many benefits and key outcomes for organisations (Bedi *et al.*, 2016; Brown and Treviño, 2006; Lei *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b).

According to Brown *et al.* (2005), EL leaders emphasise honesty and integrity and manifest normatively appropriate behaviour through personal actions and interpersonal relationships. Leaders who practice EL further promote such behaviour to subordinates based on two-way communication, reinforcement and decision-making. Bedi *et al.* (2016) spotlighted that ethical leaders actively promote ethical behaviour through both roles of “moral persons”, and “moral managers” by clearly communicating their ethical standards and requiring followers responsible for ethical behaviour. Although there are certain commonalities in the ethics between EL and other typical leadership styles (such as authentic leadership, transformational leadership and servant leadership), prior studies have pointed out that some leadership styles consider ethics as merely one aspect of leadership behaviour. In comparison, ethical leaders focus entirely and explicitly on ethics and ethically driven behaviour (Lei *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b; Mayer *et al.*, 2009).

2.1.3 Knowledge-sharing. As a crucial asset for any organisation, knowledge is a special resource that differs from other resources in its frugality (Du *et al.*, 2007). The application and transfer of knowledge in KS processes not only does not consume knowledge but also helps promote knowledge creation by improving the absorptive capacity of organisations (Yang *et al.*, 2018). As Göksel and Aydıntan (2017) stated, “knowledge has no value if it is not used”. Accordingly, to increase the value of knowledge, it must be shared among individuals both inside and outside organisations.

Le and Lei (2019) defined KS as the process of exchanging knowledge and experience that helps individuals equip each other with new complementary and valuable knowledge and skills to achieve personal and organisational goals. The literature mainly distinguishes KS behaviours into two main components – explicit and tacit KS – due to its crucial influences on key organisational outcomes, such as organisational productivity and performance, absorptive and innovation capability and sustainable competitive advantage (Lei *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b; Shao *et al.*, 2015; Wang *et al.*, 2016). “Tacit KS” involves the process of sharing knowledge possessed by individuals such as experience and expertise, uncommon understandings, insights and intuitions (Lei *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b; Wang *et al.*, 2016). “Explicit KS” involves the process of sharing codified knowledge and formal information that can be captured and transmitted within an organisation, such as documents and reports, procedures and policies or handbooks (Lei *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b; Wang *et al.*, 2016).

2.1.4 Trust in leadership. Trust is considered a dynamic, interpersonal link between people in the workplace (Bligh, 2017). In particular, trust manifests itself in the degree of confidence an individual has in another’s competence and his or her willingness to act in a fair, ethical and predictable manner (Nyhan, 2000). Developments in the organisational sciences stress the significance of employee trust in the leadership–employee relationship for sustaining individual and organisational effectiveness (Islam *et al.*, 2021; Le and Lei, 2017).

In the organisational context, trust in leadership is considered a central feature of leader–follower relationships that affects key outcomes of an organisation (Bligh, 2017). Successful leaders can build and maintain employee trust through practices that create positive employee perceptions of their leadership characteristics and behaviours (Le and Lei, 2018a, 2018b).

According to Schoorman *et al.* (2007), trust in leadership reflects the willingness of employees to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of the intentions of leaders. McAllister’s (1995) model of trust separated trust into affective-based trust and cognitive-based trust. “Cognitive-based trust” is rooted in one individual’s logical and objective evaluation of another person’s key personal characteristics, such as her or his

competence, reliability and integrity (Yang *et al.*, 2009). “Affective-based trust” is formed by one individual’s feelings based on ongoing socio-emotional exchanges and a sense of reciprocated sentiments (Zhu *et al.*, 2013). To simplify, Chua *et al.* (2008) described cognitive-based trust as “trust from the head” and affective-based trust as “trust from the heart”. This study uses these two types of trust to measure employee trust in leadership because they are commonly used in empirical studies of leadership and have been validated in a variety of contexts (Lei *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b). Moreover, McEvily and Tortoriello’s (2011) work measuring trust in organisational research regarded McAllister’s two-dimensional model of trust as a noteworthy instrument, ranking it first out of 27 evaluated models.

2.1.5 Distributive justice. Organisational justice is a traditional subject of research on organisational behaviour that mainly focusses on employees’ perception of justice in organisations (Le and Lei, 2017). “Justice” is defined as the extent to which employees consider that the organisational decisions are fair (Phong and Son, 2020). In general, feelings and evaluations of employees in social interactions flow from their judgment of the fairness of outcomes in interactions others, such as their leaders (De Cremer *et al.*, 2004; Phong and Son, 2020).

As a significant issue in the field of leadership and organisational behaviour, organisational justice is generally classified into three main categories: distributive, procedural and interactional justice (Akram *et al.*, 2017). Among these, distributive justice is the main component of organisational justice because positive behaviour and working motivation of employees can only be aroused and developed if they receive fair or favourable outcomes (Alpkan *et al.*, 2020; De Cremer *et al.*, 2004; Samadi, 2018). According to Phong and Son (2020), distributive justice reflects employees’ perceptions of fairness of key outcomes that they received in the process of working in an organisation. To a certain extent, the achievement of the organisation’s goals depends significantly on the degree of fairness or unfairness in the distribution of outcomes such as salary, promotions and welfare (De Cremer *et al.*, 2004; Le and Lei, 2017). Distributive justice can serve as a crucial factor that explains employees’ motivation and willingness to share knowledge in organisations (Phong and Son, 2020; Samadi, 2018). Hence, this study focusses on investigating the moderating influence of distributive justice on the EL–KS relationship.

2.2 Effect of ethical leadership on knowledge-sharing

KS activities do not come automatically in an organisation – the KS process occurs only when necessary conditions are met. Organisational support and the leadership role have great potential to influence the extent of KS activities (Le, 2021). Leadership behaviours have a strong correlation and are necessary to create and maintain a positive KS climate among employees in organisations (Le and Lei, 2019; Lin and Lee, 2004).

Many previous studies have shown the positive relationship between leadership styles (such as transactional, transformational and authentic leadership) and KS processes (Edu-Valsania *et al.*, 2016; Le and Lei, 2019; Rawung *et al.*, 2015). Regarding the EL–KS relationship, Tang *et al.* (2015) showed that EL has positive influences on KS behaviour. Bavik *et al.* (2017) indicated that EL contributes to stimulating KS behaviours of employees by eliminating the structural barriers hindering KS, fostering the formation of trusting and fair relationships and developing employees’ expectation of fair interchange for their contributions. In particular, Lei *et al.* (2019a, 2019b) argued that ethical leaders significantly contribute to fostering the engagement and attitude of employees towards KS behaviours based on creating an ethical and ideal environment for KS activities to take place. Their empirical findings revealed that EL is significantly associated with KS behaviours of employees towards tacit and explicit KS. Xia and Yang (2020) argue that employees identify ethical leaders as attractive and credible role models, thus they will follow and actively participate in KS activities for the common benefit of the organisation. Similarly,

Su *et al.* (2021) justified that ethical leaders care about setting ethical standards in their work and rewarding ethical behaviours. Consequently, based on perceiving the sense of organisational identity and having achieved returns, employees are willing to repay their organisations through active efforts, such as sharing knowledge. Recently, Bhatti *et al.* (2021) noted that positive behaviours of ethical leaders (such as caring for two-way communication, discussing ethical norms and reinforcing appropriate behaviours through reward systems) not only have the effect of reducing barriers towards sharing of knowledge and resources among individuals in an organisation but also stimulate them sharing more knowledge and information to overcome challenges and achieve intended organisational goals.

The above arguments support the positive relationship between EL and KS behaviours. We therefore propose the following hypotheses.

H1a.b. EL is positively related to tacit and explicit KS behaviours of employees.

2.3 Effect of ethical leadership on employee trust in leadership

Trust is most meaningful in situations where one party is at risk or vulnerable to another party. For this reason, it becomes especially crucial in leader–employee relationships in the workplace (Bligh, 2017). Le and Lei (2018a, 2018b) exhibited that leadership behaviours and substitutes (such as intrinsically satisfying tasks or employees' ability, training and experience) account for unique variance in attitudes of employees.

The relationship between EL and trust in leadership has recently received significant attention from scholars and practitioners. Indeed, according to Kalshoven and Hartog (2009), employees tend to highly appreciate to ethical behaviours of leadership because such moral behaviours make their leaders attractive and credible models. So ethical leaders are significantly related to the level of employees' trust in the leadership. Basing a sample of 294 matched leader–employee dyads, Kalshoven *et al.* (2011) asserted that perceptions of employees towards ethical behaviours significantly contribute to their trust in leadership. In a similar vein, Engelbrecht *et al.* (2015) indicated that if employees perceived the ethical behaviour of the leaders, their trust in leaders will be set up. Bedi *et al.* (2016) reveal that ethical leaders positively influence both employees' cognitive trust in leadership (trust in their leadership capabilities and personal attributes) and affective trust in leadership (trust in socio-emotional exchanges and admiration towards their leaders). According to Mo and Shi (2017), employees may have a higher degree of trust in ethical leaders keeping promises and behaving consistently due to such leaders usually reward ethical behaviour and discipline unethical behaviour. They inform employees of what is expected from them and how they can positively contribute to the organisation. In a similar vein, Engelbrecht *et al.* (2017) reported a positive relationship between EL and employee trust in leadership. These scholars argued that ethical leaders' concern for the best interests of the organisation and fair decision making should result in fostering the trust of employees in their leaders. Using data collected from 269 participants at 65 Chinese firms, Lei *et al.* (2019a, 2019b) reported that ethical leaders induce positive impacts on cognition-based trust and affect-based trust of employees in their leaders. Bhatti *et al.* (2021) supposed that when interacting with ethical leaders, employees tend to have high trust in them, worry less about socio-political challenges and focus much attention on tasks leading to fertile outcomes. In particular, literature indicated that ethical leaders enhance employee's cognitive trust by maintaining consistency between words and actions, and they also strengthen the emotional bond to elicit higher levels of affective trust of employees (Zhu *et al.*, 2013; Iqbal *et al.*, 2020).

In general, the above arguments support the positive influences of EL on employees' trust in leadership. However, there has been a scarcity of research on how ethical leaders connect

with specific aspects of employee trust in leadership (Lei *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b). Thus, the following hypotheses are posed.

H2a.b. EL positively predicts affective- and cognitive-based trust in leadership.

2.4 Mediating role employee trust between ethical leadership and knowledge-sharing

Concerning the employee trust-KS relationship, prior research showed the support for the positive effects of employee trust on KS activities. Indeed, according to Cheng *et al.* (2008), employee trust is one of the main factors influencing their decision to share knowledge. In case of having higher trust in relationships with leaders and colleagues, employees will pay more intentions to actively participate in the KS process and are more willing to provide useful knowledge. Using the sample of 202 professionals and managers in the world headquarters of an international organisation, Holste and Fields (2010) stressed that trust acts as an antecedent and lies at the centre of KS. Their empirical findings show both cognitive trust and affective trust significantly affecting the extent to the willingness of professionals for using and sharing knowledge with their colleagues. Ferreira Peralta and Francisca Saldanha (2014) explained that as an aspect of relationships among individuals, trust propensity will serve as a predictor of KS activities due to a trusting interaction established between two or more employees in organisations. Also, Jain *et al.* (2015) asserted that a higher level of trust among employees will create greater impetus and intentions to engage in KS processes. Their empirical findings showed affective-based trust and cognitive-based trust positively associated with employee behaviours of collecting and donating knowledge. Notably, Le and Lei (2018a, 2018b) claimed that the difference in the trust levels of employees explained the variance in their degree of sharing knowledge with others. Their empirical findings showed that both disclosure- and reliance-based trust in leadership are significantly related to KS behaviours. Lee *et al.* (2020) suggest and show the key roles of trust and openness in fostering informal and formal KS processes. It is also noted that affective-based trust and cognitive-based trust encourage employees to share their ideas with others because it subtracts the fear of sharing their significant resources with someone else, such as the position in the organisation, job security, time, bonuses and others (Casimir *et al.*, 2012; Islam *et al.*, 2021; Jain *et al.*, 2015).

Based on the discussion above, this study suggests that when employees have a high level of trust in leadership in terms of cognition and affection, they will feel free and ready to share their expertise and skill with colleagues to obtain greater interests for themselves and the organisation. Thus, the following hypotheses arise:

H3a.b. Affective-based trust in leadership significantly affects tacit and explicit KS.

H3c.d. Cognitive-based trust in leadership significantly affects tacit and explicit KS.

The arguments above suggest the positive impacts of EL on employee trust in leadership that in turn significantly relate to tacit and explicit KS behaviours of employees. Furthermore, Lee *et al.* (2010) indicated that both trust in leaders and co-workers mediates the effect of leaders on KS behaviours. Notably, Le and Lei (2018a, 2018b) justified that ethical leaders who successively build up employees' trust in leadership will positively stimulate KS behaviours of employees in an organisation. Their findings manifested that disclosure- and reliance-based employee trust in ethical leaders serve as mediators between the EL–KS relationship. Current literature also reveals that the fairness and moral behaviours of EL not only create reciprocity among employees and managers but also build high levels of employee trust in their leaders, thereby leading to greater willingness and motivation for sharing both tacit and explicit KS (Bavik *et al.*, 2018; Le and Lei, 2018a, 2018b; Lee *et al.*, 2020; Lei *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b). To clarify the mediation of aspects of employee trust in the relationship between EL and KS behaviours, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4a.b. Affective-based trust mediates the effects of EL on tacit and explicit KS.

H4c.d. Cognitive-based trust mediates the effects of EL on tacit and explicit KS.

2.5 Moderating role of distributive justice between ethical leadership and knowledge-sharing

Distributive justice is a crucial factor that explains how compensation and rewards are proportionally and fairly distributed among employees in an organisation (Le and Lei, 2017). Regarding the impact of distributive justice on KS, Ibragimova (2012) demonstrated that employee perceptions of fairness play an important role in stimulating KS. Akram *et al.* (2017) suggested that employees will voluntarily share their knowledge with their colleagues if they trust in receiving a fair reward for their KS efforts. Similarly, Le and Lei (2017) pointed out that the awareness of fairness and reciprocity of employees in the KS process is the main drive motivating them to positively share their knowledge and expertise with others (Le and Lei, 2017). Recently, Phong and Son (2020) claimed that the degree of attitude and behaviour of employees towards KS activities is governed mainly by their beliefs and evaluations about expected results and outcomes.

Previous studies considered distributive justice as a vital moderating or mediating factor in organisational relationships (De Cremer *et al.*, 2004; Janssen *et al.*, 2010; Oh, 2019). According to De Cremer *et al.* (2004), the sense and evaluations of employees in social interactions flow from their assessments of the fairness of their outcomes when dealing with others. Consequently, the impact of ethical leaders on KS processes will be multiplied and stronger if employees perceive fairness in the outcomes arising from their KS activities (Bavik *et al.*, 2018; De Cremer *et al.*, 2004). In particular, recent studies have indicated that employees tend to be reluctant to share key knowledge with others because they dreaded losing their distinctiveness compared with colleagues, especially in cases of a lack of awareness of the integrity and fairness of an organisation (Le and Lei, 2019). Thus, ethical leaders will be more likely to strongly provoke explicit and tacit KS behaviours in an organisation if employees have high trust in the support, integrity and fairness in the outcome distribution (Bavik *et al.*, 2018; Le and Lei, 2019). To explore the potential moderating role of distributive justice in the EL–KS relationship, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5a.b. Distributive justice significantly predicts tacit and explicit KS.

H6a.b. Distributive justice positively moderates EL's effects on tacit and explicit KS.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Sampling

The study applied a survey method based on a questionnaire to collect data. To select participants, this study examined a total of 75 Vietnamese firms. The firms were randomly selected from a list of the top 1,000 service and manufacturing enterprises in Vietnam published by *VietNamNet Magazine* in 2018. We communicated with representatives of these firms by phone or make personal visits to explain the purpose of the research and ask for their assistance in disseminating and collecting the questionnaires. To meet research needs, the respondents in our research need to be key employees who are team leaders or leaders at departments of administration, R&D, accounting, operation, marketing and sales to ensure the necessary understanding of their firm as well as frequently exchanging strategic information in the organisation. This study used the measurement items that adapted from existing scales in the literature to develop the initial list of items. We then employed backward translation to confirm the consistency between English questionnaire and Vietnamese questionnaire. We carry out pilot tested by means of in-depth interviews with five outstanding academic scholars who have deep knowledge in leadership theory

and knowledge management at three universities and 35 participants from five firms to determine the efficiency of the questionnaire before the process of formal data collection.

In the formal data collection, 650 questionnaires were issued to participants, and 416 responses were received. Of the responses, 339 were valid (validity rate of 52.1%). Valid questionnaires were selected after the process of cleaning the survey data by identifying and removing responses from respondents who either do not match the target criteria or did not answer the survey form thoughtfully, such as respondents who only answered part of the questionnaire, provided inconsistent responses, repeatedly chose the same answer choice, or offering nonsensical feedback to open-ended questions. We used [Armstrong and Overton's \(1977\)](#) method to assess potential non-response bias. Chi-square and independent sample *t*-tests were used to compare the first 85 respondents and the last 85 via demographic variables, namely age and gender. The results demonstrated no significant differences between the two groups of responses ($p > 0.05$).

3.2 Variable measurement

All items were measured via a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from “1” (strongly disagree) to “5” (strongly agree) or from “1” (strongly unwilling to) to 5 (strongly willing to).

3.2.1 Ethical leadership. This study used 10 items developed by [Brown et al. \(2005\)](#) to assess employees' perceptions of EL style of their supervisor. Some sample items are “my supervisor discusses business ethics or values with employees” and “my supervisor makes fair and balanced decisions”. *Trust in leadership.* To measure employee trust in leadership, this study used 11 items adapted from [McAllister \(1995\)](#). Five items were used to measure affective-based trust. Sample items are “I have a sharing relationship with my supervisor” and “I can freely share our ideas, feelings and hopes with my supervisor”. Six items were used to measure cognitive-based trust. Sample items are “My supervisor approaches his/her job with professionalism and dedication” and “I can rely on my supervisor not to make my job more difficult by careless work”. *Tacit KS and explicit KS.* This study used 13 items adapted from the study of [Lei et al. \(2019a, 2019b\)](#) to measure tacit and explicit KS. Wherein, tacit KS is measured by seven items, a sample item is “we frequently share knowledge based on our experience”; and explicit KS is measured by six items, a sample item is “we frequently share existing reports and official documents with colleagues”. *Distributive justice.* To measure distributive justice, this study used three items adapted from the research of [Lin \(2007\)](#) to assessing employee perceptions of outcome's fairness, a sample item is “I believe that my rewards appropriately reflect my contributions to the organisation”. *Control variables.* It is consistent with the research of [Lei et al. \(2019a, 2019b\)](#), this study uses some demographic variables, namely, position and experience as the control variables to account for differences among firms and their potential impact on KS behaviours.

3.3 Common method bias and data analysis methods

Scholars argue about the effects of common method bias (CMB) in self-reporting variables. Prior literature has indicated several statistical methods to identify and control for any possible CMB ([Chang et al., 2010](#)). This study used Harman's single-factor test to check for CMB. The result shows the overall variance is less than the 50% threshold for substantive common method variance. This indicated that CMB was not a concern.

Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) was employed for measurement validation and to examine the structural model based on the data gathered from the 339 respondents in 75 firms. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS and AMOS version 22. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was implemented to examine the validity and reliability of the constructs.

4. Data analysis and results

4.1 Measurement model

We first tested the reliability of the measures for the constructs by examining the private Cronbach's alpha coefficients ($C\alpha$). The results of statistics are range of 0.94–0.97, which are all over than Nunnally and Bernstein's (1994) recommended level of 0.7. We continuously analyse CFA to evaluate the universal measurement model to check the discriminant and convergent validity.

4.1.1 Convergent validity. To get the measure of the convergent validity, we adopted Hair *et al.*'s (2006) suggestion by checking three main measurements: first, the values of indicators' factor loadings need to be statistically significant and higher than 0.6; second, the composite reliability (CR) values require higher than 0.7; and third, the average variance extracted (AVE) values must exceed 0.5. Table 1 reported that all three main measurements meet the criteria on convergent validity (factor loadings are range of 0.818–0.953; CR values are range of 0.94–0.97; and AVE values are range of 0.75–0.85). Table 1 exhibits the standard deviation (SD), means, AVE, CR, factor loading and $C\alpha$ of all constructs.

4.1.2 Discriminant validity. To assess the discriminant validity, Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion that square root of the AVE for each construct should be greater than the correlation between constructs. Table 2 shows the values of the square root of the AVE were all greater than the inter-construct correlations suggesting good discriminant validity. Overall, the above results show strong evidence for both the reliability of the constructs, and the discriminant validity of scales.

Regarding the satisfactory of measurement model, we estimated the fit of measurement model based on examining:

- absolute fit values (such as GFI; CMIN/df and RMSEA); and
- incremental fit values (such as NFI, AGFI and CFI).

Table 3 shows that all fit indices of the measurement model were satisfactory; thus, the model fit the data.

4.2 Structural model and research findings

Prior study indicated that the SEM method is widely used due to its ability to demonstrate versatile regression correlations on a single model and test (Kline, 2015). It is also appropriate and practical to investigate interaction and mediation effects (Le and Lei, 2019). So, this study used SEM with maximum likelihood estimation procedures to test the proposal hypotheses. We perform privately 16 models to clarify the direct and indirect effect of EL on aspects of KS behaviours via mediating roles of employees' trust in leadership as well as moderating role of distributive justice.

4.2.1 Test direct effects. Findings in Table 4 and Figure 1 show that all the standardised path coefficients of direct effects are found to be significant and in line with the stated hypothesis. Specifically:

H1a.b relating to the relationship between EL and KS behaviours, results in the Table 4 show the positive effects of EL on tacit KS ($\beta = 0.705$; $p < 0.001$) and explicit KS ($\beta = 0.732$; $p < 0.001$). Thus, *H1a.b* is supported.

Regarding the relationship between EL and two aspects of employee trust in leadership, Table 4 indicated that EL is positively related to affective-based trust ($\beta = 0.725$; $p < 0.001$) and cognitive-based trust ($\beta = 0.715$; $p < 0.001$). Thus, *H2a* and *H2b* are supported.

Table 4 also confirms the *H3a.b* and *H3c.d*. Specifically, the results reveal that affective-based trust has greater effects on both tacit KS ($\beta = 0.777$; $p < 0.001$) and explicit KS ($\beta = 0.787$; $p < 0.001$) in comparison with the effects of cognitive-based trust on tacit KS

Table 1 Standardize loading and reliabilities for measurement model

Construct	Item	Standardize loading	t-value	AVE	CR	C α
Ethical leadership (TL)	10	–	–	0.75	0.96	0.96
	EL1	0.825***	18.635			
	EL2	0.880***	20.663			
	EL3	0.896***	21.282			
	EL4	0.886***	20.875			
	EL5	0.873***	20.367			
	EL6	0.885***	20.850			
	EL7	0.894***	21.223			
	EL8	0.829***	18.763			
	EL9	0.867***	20.126			
Distributive justice (DJ)	3	–	–	0.85	0.94	0.94
	DJ1	0.919***	29.325			
	DJ2	0.915***	28.940			
	DJ3	0.930***	30.112			
Affective-based trust (ABT)	5	–	–	0.78	0.94	0.95
	ABT1	0.918***	27.133			
	ABT2	0.860***	23.192			
	ABT3	0.879***	24.358			
	ABT4	0.856***	22.937			
Cognitive-based trust (CBT)	6	–	–	0.81	0.96	0.96
	CBT1	0.899***	26.725			
	CBT2	0.926***	29.098			
	CBT3	0.919***	28.424			
	CBT4	0.873***	24.800			
	CBT5	0.908***	27.853			
	CBT6	0.896***	26.502			
Tacit knowledge sharing (TKS)	7	–	–	0.83	0.97	0.97
	TKS1	0.871***	27.730			
	TKS2	0.953***	35.643			
	TKS3	0.860***	26.695			
	TKS4	0.930***	35.191			
	TKS5	0.926***	34.431			
	TKS6	0.928***	34.729			
	TKS7	0.933***	35.641			
Explicit knowledge sharing (EKS)	6	–	–	0.84	0.97	0.97
	EKS1	0.921***	32.163			
	EKS2	0.870***	43.408			
	EKS3	0.916***	31.907			
	EKS4	0.937***	29.619			
	EKS5	0.943***	32.676			
	EKS6	0.931***	31.185			

Notes: C α \geq 0.7; CR \geq 0.7; AVE \geq 0.5; ***Significant at $p < 0.001$

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and construct correlations

Constructs	Mean	S.D	EL	DJ	ABT	CBT	TKS	EKS
Ethical leadership (EL)	3.37	0.60	0.86					
Distributive justice (DJ)	3.50	0.71	0.43***	0.92				
Affective-based trust (ABT)	3.48	0.67	0.73***	0.61***	0.88			
Cognitive-based trust (CBT)	3.57	0.69	0.64***	0.65***	0.75***	0.90		
Tacit knowledge sharing (TKS)	3.87	0.67	0.74***	0.65***	0.74***	0.79***	0.92	
Explicit knowledge sharing (EKS)	3.81	0.70	0.76***	0.61***	0.77***	0.79***	0.78***	0.91

Notes: S.D: standard deviation; Diagonal elements (in bold) are the square root of the AVE; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3 The Fit indices of the CFA model

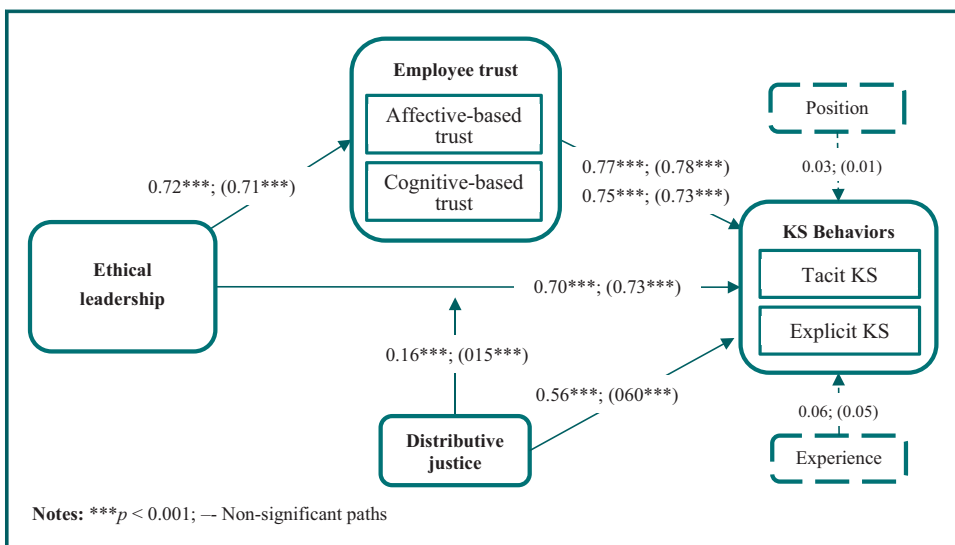
Fit index	Scores	Proposal threshold values
<i>Absolute fit measures</i>		
CMIN/df (Chi-square/df)	1.484	$\leq 2^a$; $\leq 5^b$
GFI (goodness of fit index)	0.878	$\geq 0.90^a$; $\geq 0.80^b$
RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation)	0.038	$\leq 0.08^a$; $\leq 0.10^b$
<i>Incremental fit measures</i>		
NFI (incremental fit measures including normed fit index)	0.949	$\geq 0.90^a$;
AGFI (adjusted goodness of fit index)	0.860	$\geq 0.90^a$; $\geq 0.80^b$
CFI (comparative fit index)	0.983	$\geq 0.90^a$;

Notes: ^agood fit; ^bacceptable fit (Schermelleh-Engel *et al.*, 2003; Le and Lei, 2019)

Table 4 Results of the direct relationships and moderation

Model	Hypothesis	Relationship	Beta	Standard error	t-value	Results
Model 1	H1a	EL → Tacit knowledge sharing	0.705***	0.058	14.391	Supported
Model 2	H1b	EL → Explicit knowledge sharing	0.732***	0.060	14.601	Supported
Model 3	H2a	EL → Affective-based trust	0.725***	0.061	13.627	Supported
Model 4	H2b	EL → Cognitive-based trust	0.715***	0.061	13.958	Supported
Model 5	H3a	ABT → Tacit knowledge sharing	0.777***	0.043	17.556	Supported
Model 6	H3b	ABT → Explicit knowledge sharing	0.787***	0.041	18.731	Supported
Model 7	H3c	CBT → Tacit knowledge sharing	0.755***	0.046	16.626	Supported
Model 8	H3d	CBT → Explicit knowledge sharing	0.733***	0.044	16.137	Supported
Model 9	H5a	DJ → Tacit knowledge sharing	0.602***	0.048	12.816	Supported
Model 10	H5b	DJ → Explicit knowledge sharing	0.566***	0.050	11.530	Supported
Model 11	H6a	DL*EL → Tacit knowledge sharing	0.167***	0.030	5.552	Supported
Model 12	H6b	DJ*EL → Explicit knowledge sharing	0.154***	0.030	5.073	Supported

Note: ***Significant at the 0.001 level

Figure 1 Path coefficients of the structural model

($\beta = 0.755$; $p < 0.001$) and explicit KS ($\beta = 0.733$; $p < 0.05$). It highlights the significant role of affective-based trust in inducing positive effects on KS behaviours of employees.

The results of the hypothesis tests were obtained after investigating the control roles of working position and experience. The results in Figure 1 do not confirm the control roles of these variables because their effects on aspects of KS behaviours are not statistically significant.

4.2.2 Test moderating effects. Models 9 and 11 used to test the moderating effect of distributive justice between EL and tacit KS. The results support the significant influence distributive justice on tacit KS ($\beta = 0.602$; $p < 0.001$). In addition, the DJ \times EL interaction also significantly affects tacit KS ($\beta = 0.167$; $p < 0.001$). Thus, *H5a* and *H6a* are supported. It reveals that distributive justice positively moderates the effects of EL on tacit KS (Figure 2).

Similarly, Models 10 and 12 used to test the moderating effect of distributive justice between EL and explicit KS. The results support the significant influence distributive justice on explicit KS ($\beta = 0.566$; $p < 0.001$). In addition, the DJ \times EL interaction also significantly affects explicit KS ($\beta = 0.154$; $p < 0.001$). Thus, *H5b* and *H6b* are supported. It confirms that distributive justice positively moderates the effects of EL on explicit KS (Figure 3). In other words, this study first confirms the moderating role of distributive justice in the relationship between EL and two aspects of KS behaviours of employees.

4.2.3 Test mediating effects. This study used PROCESS as suggestion of Hayes (2012) to test the mediational effects in research the model, and BOOTRAP confidence intervals

Figure 2 Moderating effect of distributive justice between EL and tacit KS

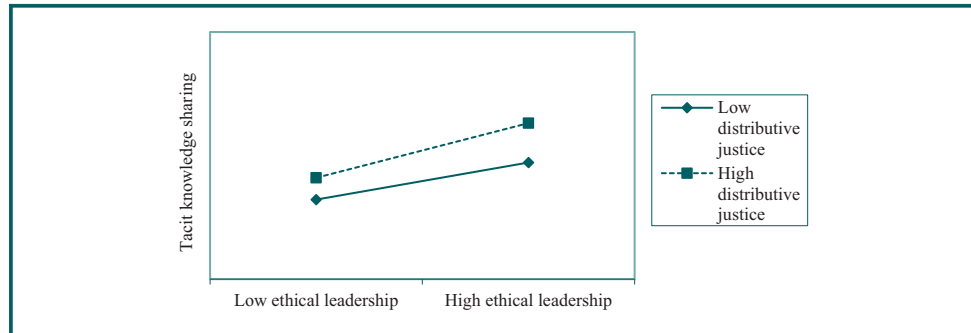
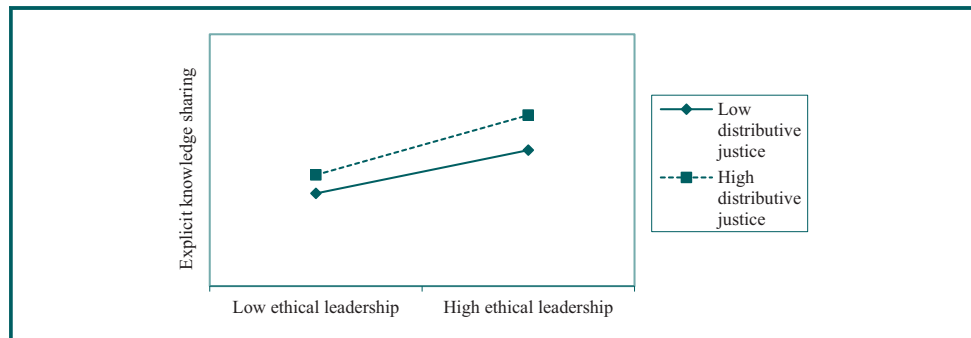


Figure 3 Moderating effect of distributive justice between EL and explicit KS



method as the suggestion of [Preacher and Hayes \(2008\)](#) to test the significance of indirect effects ([Table 5](#)).

To provides the evidence on the mediating roles of employee trust in leadership between EL and two specific aspects of KS behaviours, this study has added affective-and cognitive-based trust in leadership as mediators between EL and two aspects of KS, respectively.

[Table 5](#) indicated that after adding affective-based trust between EL and KS behaviours, the direct effect of EL on tacit KS decreases from 0.705 (Model 1) to 0.397 (Model 13); and the direct effect of EL on explicit KS decreases from 0.732 (Model 2) to 0.402 (Model 14). In addition, all indirect effects are within the bias-corrected confidence interval. These findings support mediating roles of affective-based trust between EL and KS behaviours. Thus, *H4a* and *H4b* are supported.

Similarity, the findings show that after adding the cognitive-based trust between EL and KS behaviours, the direct effect of EL on tacit KS decreases from 0.705 (Model 1) to 0.321 (Model 15); and the direct effect of EL on explicit KS decreases from 0.732 (Model 2) to 0.388 (Model 16). Moreover, all indirect effects are within the bias-corrected confidence interval. These findings support mediating roles of cognitive-based trust between EL and KS behaviours. Thus, *H4c* and *H4d* are also supported. Generally, [Table 5](#) firstly confirms the mediating roles of two aspects of employee trust in leadership between EL and two aspects of KS behaviours.

5. Discussion and implications

In the context of firms in emerging countries, companies are now facing increasing degrees of complexity and uncertainty in the environment due to competitive pressures and rapidly changing technology and customer needs ([Le, 2020](#)). Competitive advantages of organisation increasingly depend on the success of knowledge management ([Zhang and Jiang, 2015](#)). Employees' motivation and willingness to participate in sharing knowledge crucially affect the success of organisation's knowledge management and effectiveness ([Bavik et al., 2017](#)). Employees are the key factor in KS process of an organisation, so enhancing KS activities through changing their attitudes and behaviours towards KS seem to be one of the most effective solutions ([Lin and Lee, 2004](#); [Wu and Lee, 2017](#)). In this context, the assessment of the hypotheses developed in this paper have made significant contributions to both theoretical and practical initiatives on the field of leadership, organisational behaviour and knowledge management by following specific issues.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

First, [Mayer et al.'s, 2009](#) paper titled "How Low Does Ethical Leadership Flow" indicated that empirical research on EL is still in its infancy and a number of significant issues relating to consequences of leadership under the lens of ethics need to be continuously explored. In particular, [Lei et al. \(2019a, 2019b\)](#) indicated that despite the moral relevance of KS

Table 5 Confidence intervals of the indirect effects

Model	Hypothesis	Path	Direct effects	Indirect effects	Total effects	Bias-corrected confidence intervals	
						Lower confidence level	Upper confidence level
Model 13	<i>H4a</i>	EL → ABT → TKS	0.397***	0.313**	0.710***	0.253	0.386
Model 14	<i>H4b</i>	EL → ABT → EKS	0.402***	0.334**	0.736***	0.276	0.408
Model 15	<i>H4c</i>	EL → CBT → TKS	0.321***	0.404**	0.725***	0.335	0.463
Model 16	<i>H4d</i>	EL → CBT → EKS	0.388***	0.361**	0.749***	0.294	0.428

Notes: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.05$

behaviours, a lack of research has used a moral lens to clarify the influences of EL on specific aspects of KS. Therefore, the EL–KS behaviour relationship remains poorly understood. To fill these theoretical gaps, this study develops a model that proposes linking EL and aspects of employees' behaviours towards KS. The empirical findings verify significant influences of ethical leaders on both tacit and explicit KS and also indicate that EL induces a greater effect on explicit KS compared to its effect on tacit KS. This result implies that leadership based on an ethical foundation can have the considerable effect of positively altering employee behaviour towards KS activities, particularly regarding explicit KS.

Second, to respond to recommendations of scholars for finding new mechanisms aimed at reducing the vulnerability and risk that are inherent to trust (Le and Lei, 2018a, 2018b), this study examines the influence of EL on two specific aspects of employee trust in leadership, namely affective- and cognitive-based trust. On the one hand, the empirical findings showed evidence of the positive and significant impacts of ethical behaviours of leadership on both affective- and cognitive-based trust of employees. On other hand, findings indicated an effective way for managers and practitioners to successfully enhance employee trust in leadership in the workplace.

Third, by assessing the influences of EL and employee trust in leadership on two different KS behaviours, tacit and explicit knowledge, this study offers substantial contributions to the development of knowledge management initiatives. More specifically, tacit and explicit KS reflect two central yet different behavioural tendencies of sharing knowledge and information in organisations. Accordingly, clarifying the distinction of tacit and explicit KS behaviours in relation to EL and trust in leadership will yield valuable insights into how to foster efficiency for KS processes.

The empirical findings verified and highlighted the effective mediating role of affective- and cognitive-based employee trust in the EL–KS relationship. Thus, this study contributes to filling the theoretical gaps regarding the mediating mechanism of the role of trust between specific leadership styles and KS processes as suggested for future research in previous works (Berraies *et al.*, 2020; Le and Lei, 2018a, 2018b). In general, by using a moral lens to specify how ethical behaviour of leadership shapes and stimulates different KS behaviours of employees via mediators, this study extends the integrative theory of EL. Additionally, this work highlights that the application of EL style might yield significant effects for both tacit and explicit KS directly or indirectly through its significant effect on affective- and cognitive-based trust of employees.

Finally, by exploring and examining the moderating role of distributive justice in the relationship between EL and KS, this study responds to the expectations of scholars for identifying clearer mechanisms of distributive justice in moderating the relationship between organisational factors and key outcomes, such as KS activities (De Cremer *et al.*, 2004; Phong and Son, 2020; Samadi, 2018). The empirical findings provide evidence supporting the moderating effects of distributive justice in the relationship between EL and KS behaviours. Therefore, this study significantly contributes to advancing the theory of leadership and knowledge management by eliciting the situational role of distributive justice in interacting with EL to enhance KS behaviours of employees. The findings reveal that the effect levels of ethical leaders on KS processes are varied and significantly dependent on the employees' perceptions of distributive fairness. Compatible with the studies of Phong and Son (2020) and Bhatti *et al.* (2021), these results implies that if leaders can make fair and balanced decisions and have the best interests of their employees in mind, they can build strong beliefs of employees and make them willing to share knowledge with others. In particular, KS behaviours will be stronger if employees know they will be rewarded and appreciated commensurate with their efforts and contributions. That is, this study highlights the crucial roles of ethical behaviours and distributive justice in fostering KS behaviours of employees.

5.2 Practical contributions

First, in line with previous studies (Lei *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b; Xia and Yang, 2020), the empirical findings of this study highlight that EL practice might be the best way to build trust and foster KS activities of employees through role modelling of desirable traits or ethical behaviour. Baviak *et al.* (2018) also stated that “ethical leaders play an active role in motivating knowledge sharing among employees”. Thus, ethical leaders should serve as role models and inspire their employees to identify, internalise and emulate modelled moral behaviours. This practice implies that managers and practitioners need to act ethically in their daily work environment to foster KS behaviours. Such practices include listening deeply to understand the thoughts, aspirations and opinions of employees; making fair and balanced decisions; setting clear examples of how to act ethically and disciplining employees who violate ethical standards. Apart from moral behavioural practices, firms should focus on ethical standards when recruiting, selecting or promoting supervisors and managers. Moreover, applying the training, incentive mechanisms and measurement of moral aspects is also necessary to develop ethical behaviours in supervisors and managers.

Second, this study emphasises the mediating role of affective- and cognitive-based trust in connecting EL and two aspects of KS behaviours. The empirical findings show that with the exception of cognitive-based trust, the remaining antecedent factors (EL, affective-based trust and distributive justice) tend to have more significant effects on explicit KS than tacit KS. This result is consistent with the findings of Lei *et al.* (2019a, 2019b), “tacit knowledge is not easily shared and attempts to share can be slow, costly and uncertain”. The findings of this study have, therefore, outlined a new method to improve tacit KS by showing evidence of the vital role of cognitive-based trust in relation to explicit KS behaviours of employees.

Finally, although research has established that EL can influence KS (Bhatti *et al.*, 2021; Lei *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b), scant few studies have considered the contingent effect of organisational justice in this relationship. The empirical findings show that distributive justice is essential to stimulate the relationship between EL and KS behaviours. Thus, the contribution of the present study lies in the idea that the effect of EL on KS is not evenly distributed across individuals when considering distributive justice. This observation indicates that KS behaviours become greater with increasing levels of distributive justice. That is, a high degree of distributive justice can increase the effects of ethical behaviours on the KS willingness of employees. These findings are in line with the idea that ethical leaders need significant support from the organisation to strongly promote KS activities, especially policies on rewards, incentives and fairness in distribution (Le and Lei, 2019; Phong and Son, 2020). This study therefore has value to managers and practitioners in Vietnamese firms as a reference for practicing EL, building employee trust in leadership and fostering KS behaviours among employees.

5.3 Limitations and directions for future research

Although this study has obtained some meaningful findings, it also contains certain limitations. First, a potential limitation of the present study is that it relied on self-reported data and a cross-sectional design that limits any causal interpretation in the long run. A longitudinal study would overcome this limitation and consolidate the results. Second, as the data came from firms in Vietnam, the cultural effects of a developing and emerging country such as Vietnam might have affected the interactions in the leadership–employee relationship. More studies with more contexts are necessary to extend and consolidate the research findings. Third, the literature has considered organisational justice as an vital moderating or mediating factor in organisational relationships (De Cremer *et al.*, 2004; Janssen *et al.*, 2010; Oh, 2019). However, a comprehensive understanding of the moderating effects of specific components of organisational justice (e.g. distributive, procedural and interactional justice) between EL and KS is still lacking. Thus, future studies should explore more deeply the regulatory role of the aspects of organisational justice in the leadership–KS relationship. Such investigations will

help leaders and managers to identify the specific pathway and build an appropriate climate of justice for stimulating KS activities in the organisations.

Fourth, this study has examined the relationship among EL, employee trust and KS behaviours under the controlling roles of working position and experience to account for differences in KS behaviours. Contrary to the research results of [Lei et al. \(2019a, 2019b\)](#) in the Chinese context, this study does not confirm the controlling role of working position towards employees' KS activities in Vietnamese firms. This observation reveals that contextual factors can also lead to differences in employee KS behaviours. Future research needs to continue to examine the controlling role of these demographic factors to provide a clearer picture of its impact for pursuing KS behaviours in organisations.

Finally, in the scope of the leadership literature, [Uhl-Bien et al. \(2007\)](#) highlighted that leadership has moved from the industrial age towards the knowledge era. According to [Naqshbandi and Jasimuddin \(2018\)](#), knowledge-oriented leadership is the key source and solution to help firms address challenges and difficulties by developing a knowledge-oriented climate and improving organisational knowledge management capability. Knowledge-oriented leaders allow firms to use knowledge as a strategic resource for improving organisational performance and competitive advantage ([Shehzad et al., 2021](#)). However, a lack of studies have investigated the relationship between knowledge-oriented leadership and specific aspects of KS behaviours ([Donate and De Pablo, 2015](#); [Shehzad et al., 2021](#)). Future research should explore the influence of knowledge-oriented leadership on tacit and explicit KS behaviours via appropriate moderating and mediating factors to advance insight into new mechanisms for fostering KS processes in organisations.

5.3.1 Conclusions. Drawing on social exchange theory, the findings in this work have extended and refined the existing EL–KS models and show evidence that EL practices will yield significant effects on certain KS behaviours directly or indirectly through improving specific aspects of employee trust in leadership. This study also highlights distributive justice as an essential moderator that strengthens the EL–KS relationship. In general, this study is unique in its attempts to explore and produce a deeper understanding of moderated-mediation mechanisms in the relationship between EL and KS behaviours.

References

- Afshan, G., Sahibzada, U.F., Rani, H., Mughal, Y.H. and Kundi, G.M. (2021), "Supervisors' knowledge hiding and knowledge-based trust: from the lens of social impact theory", *Aslib Journal of Information Management*, Vol. 74 No. 2, pp. 332-353.
- Aguiar-Quintana, T., Araujo-Cabrera, Y. and Park, S. (2020), "The sequential relationships of hotel employees' perceived justice, commitment, and organizational citizenship behaviour in a high unemployment context", *Tourism Management Perspectives*, Vol. 35 No. 3, p. 100676.
- Akram, T., Lei, S., Haider, M.J., Hussain, S.T. and Puig, L.C.M. (2017), "The effect of organizational justice on knowledge sharing: empirical evidence from the Chinese telecommunications sector", *Journal of Innovation & Knowledge*, Vol. 2 No. 3, pp. 134-145.
- Alpkan, L., Karabay, M., Şener, İ., Elci, M. and Yıldız, B. (2020), "The mediating role of trust in leader in the relations of ethical leadership and distributive justice on internal whistleblowing: a study on Turkish banking sector", *Kybernetes*, Vol. 50 No. 7, pp. 2073-2092.
- Armstrong, J.S. and Overton, T.S. (1977), "Estimating nonresponse bias in mail surveys", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 14 No. 3, pp. 396-402.
- Bavik, Y.L., Tang, P.M., Shao, R. and Lam, L.W. (2018), "Ethical leadership and employee knowledge sharing: exploring dual-mediation paths", *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 29 No. 2, pp. 322-332.
- Bedi, A., Alpaslan, C.M. and Green, S. (2016), "A Meta-analytic review of ethical leadership outcomes and moderators", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 139 No. 3, pp. 517-536.

- Berraies, S., Hamza, K.A. and Chtioui, R. (2020), "Distributed leadership and exploratory and exploitative innovations: mediating roles of tacit and explicit knowledge sharing and organizational trust", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 25 No. 5, pp. 1287-1318.
- Bhatti, S.H., Kiyani, S.K., Dust, S.B. and Zakariya, R. (2021), "The impact of ethical leadership on project success: the mediating role of trust and knowledge sharing", *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, Vol. 14 No. 4, pp. 982-998.
- Blau, P.M. (1964), "Justice in social exchange", *Sociological Inquiry*, Vol. 34 No. 2, pp. 193-206.
- Bligh, M.C. (2017), "Leadership and trust", in *Leadership Today*, Springer, Cham, pp. 21-42.
- Brown, M.E. and Treviño, L.K. (2006), "Ethical leadership: a review and future directions", *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 17 No. 6, pp. 595-616.
- Brown, M.E., Treviño, L.K. and Harrison, D.A. (2005), "Ethical leadership: a social learning perspective for construct development and testing", *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Vol. 97 No. 2, pp. 117-134.
- Casimir, G., Lee, K. and Loon, M. (2012), "Knowledge sharing: influences of trust, commitment and cost", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 16 No. 5, pp. 740-753.
- Cheng, J.H., Yeh, C.H. and Tu, C.W. (2008), "Trust and knowledge sharing in green supply chains", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp. 283-295.
- Chang, S.J., Van Witteloostuijn, A. and Eden, L. (2010), "From the editors: common method variance in international business research", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 41 No. 2, pp. 178-184.
- Chua, R.Y.J., Ingram, P. and Morris, M.W. (2008), "From the head and the heart: locating cognition-and affect-based trust in managers' professional networks", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 51 No. 3, pp. 436-452.
- Cropanzano, R. and Mitchell, M.S. (2005), "Social exchange theory: an interdisciplinary review", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 31 No. 6, pp. 874-900.
- De Cremer, D., van Dijke, M. and Bos, A. (2004), "Distributive justice moderating the effects of self-sacrificial leadership", *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 25 No. 5, pp. 466-475.
- Donate, M.J. and de Pablo, J.D.S. (2015), "The role of knowledge-oriented leadership in knowledge management practices and innovation", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 68 No. 2, pp. 360-370.
- Du, L., Hou, J. and Lü, J. (2007), "Relationship between the development of Chinese non-state-owned enterprises and its cultivation of scientific and technological competence: an empirical study", *Journal of Technology Management in China*, Vol. 2 No. 3, pp. 237-249.
- Edú-Valsania, S., Moriano, J.A. and Molero, F. (2016), "Authentic leadership and employee knowledge sharing behavior: mediation of the innovation climate and workgroup identification", *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 37 No. 4, pp. 487-506.
- Engelbrecht, A.S., Heine, G. and Mahembe, B. (2015), "The influence of integrity and ethical leadership on trust in the leader", *Management Dynamics: Journal of the Southern African Institute for Management Scientists*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 2-10.
- Engelbrecht, A.S., Heine, G. and Mahembe, B. (2017), "Integrity, ethical leadership, trust and work engagement", *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 38 No. 3, pp. 368-379.
- Ferreira Peralta, C. and Francisca Saldanha, M. (2014), "Knowledge-centered culture and knowledge sharing: the moderator role of trust propensity", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 18 No. 3, pp. 538-550.
- Fornell, C. and Larcker, D.F. (1981), "Evaluating structural equation models with unobservable variables and measurement error", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 39-50.
- Göksel, A. and Aydıntan, B. (2017), "How can tacit knowledge be shared more in organizations? A multidimensional approach to the role of social capital and locus of control", *Knowledge Management Research & Practice*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 34-44.
- Gui, L., Lei, H. and Le, P.B. (2021), "Determinants of radical and incremental innovation: the influence of transformational leadership, knowledge sharing and knowledge-centered culture", *European Journal of Innovation Management*, in press, doi: [10.1108/EJIM-12-2020-0478](https://doi.org/10.1108/EJIM-12-2020-0478).

- Hair, J.F., Black, W.C., Babin, B.J., Anderson, R.E. and Tatham, R.L. (2006), "Multivariate Data Analysis 6th Edition, Pearson Prentice Hall, New Jersey, humans: critique and reformulation", *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, Vol. 87, pp. 49-74.
- Holste, J.S. and Fields, D. (2010), "Trust and tacit knowledge sharing and use", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 128-140.
- Ibragimova, B., Ryan, S.D., Windsor, J.C. and Prybutok, V.R. (2012), "Understanding the antecedents of knowledge sharing: an organizational justice perspective", *Informing Science: The International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline*, Vol. 15, pp. 183-205.
- Iqbal, S., Farid, T., Khan, M.K., Zhang, Q., Khattak, A. and Ma, J. (2020), "Bridging the gap between authentic leadership and employees communal relationships through trust", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Vol. 17 No. 1, p. 250.
- Islam, T., Chaudhary, A., Jamil, S. and Ali, H.F. (2021), "Unleashing the mechanism between affect-based trust and employee creativity: a knowledge sharing perspective", *Global Knowledge, Memory and Communication*, in press, doi: [10.1108/GKMC-04-2021-0071](https://doi.org/10.1108/GKMC-04-2021-0071).
- Jain, K.K., Sandhu, M.S. and Goh, S.K. (2015), "Organizational climate, trust and knowledge sharing: insights from Malaysia", *Journal of Asia Business Studies*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 54-77.
- Janssen, O., Lam, C.K. and Huang, X. (2010), "Emotional exhaustion and job performance: the moderating roles of distributive justice and positive affect", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 31 No. 6, pp. 787-809.
- Kalshoven, K. and Hartog, D. (2009), "Ethical leader behavior and leader effectiveness: the role of prototypicality and trust", *International Journal of Leadership Studies*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 102-120.
- Kalshoven, K., Den Hartog, D.N. and De Hoogh, A.H. (2011), "Ethical leader behavior and big five factors of personality", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 100 No. 2, pp. 349-366.
- Kline, R.B. (2015), *Principles and Practice of Structural Equation Modeling*, The Guilford Press, Guilford publications, New York, NY.
- Le, P.B. (2020), "How transformational leadership facilitates radical and incremental innovation: the mediating role of individual psychological capital", *Asia-Pacific Journal of Business Administration*, Vol. 12 Nos 3/4, pp. 205-222.
- Le, P.B. (2021), "Determinants of frugal innovation for firms in emerging markets: the roles of leadership, knowledge sharing and collaborative culture", *International Journal of Emerging Markets*, pp. 1-20, in press, doi: [10.1108/IJOEM-02-2021-0258](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOEM-02-2021-0258).
- Le, P.B. and Lei, H. (2017), "How transformational leadership supports knowledge sharing: evidence from Chinese manufacturing and service firms", *Chinese Management Studies*, Vol. 11 No. 3, pp. 479-497.
- Le, P.B. and Lei, H. (2018a), "Fostering knowledge sharing behaviours through ethical leadership practice: the mediating roles of disclosure-based trust and reliance-based trust in leadership", *Knowledge Management Research & Practice*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 183-195.
- Le, P.B. and Lei, H. (2018b), "The mediating role of trust in stimulating the relationship between transformational leadership and knowledge sharing processes", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 22 No. 3, pp. 521-537.
- Le, P.B. and Lei, H. (2019), "Determinants of innovation capability: the roles of transformational leadership, knowledge sharing and perceived organizational support", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 23 No. 3, pp. 527-547.
- Le, P.B., Lei, H., Le, T.T., Gong, J. and Ha, A.T. (2020), "Developing a collaborative culture for radical and incremental innovation: the mediating roles of tacit and explicit knowledge sharing", *Chinese Management Studies*, Vol. 14 No. 4, pp. 957-975.
- Lee, P., Gillespie, N., Mann, L. and Wearing, A. (2010), "Leadership and trust: their effect on knowledge sharing and team performance", *Management Learning*, Vol. 41 No. 4, pp. 473-491.
- Lee, Y.L.A., Malik, A., Rosenberger, P.J. III. and Sharma, P. (2020), "Demystifying the differences in the impact of training and incentives on employee performance: mediating roles of trust and knowledge sharing", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 24 No. 8, pp. 1987-2006.

- Lei, H., Do, N.K. and Le, P.B. (2019a), "Arousing a positive climate for knowledge sharing through moral lens: the mediating roles of knowledge-centered and collaborative culture", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 23 No. 8, pp. 1586-1604.
- Lei, H., Ha, A.T.L. and Le, P.B. (2019b), "How ethical leadership cultivates radical and incremental innovation: the mediating role of tacit and explicit knowledge sharing", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, Vol. 35 No. 5, pp. 849-862.
- Lei, H., Gui, L. and Le, P.B. (2021), "Linking transformational leadership and frugal innovation: the mediating role of tacit and explicit knowledge sharing", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 25 No. 7, pp. 1832-1852.
- Lin, C.-P. (2007), "To share or not to share: modeling knowledge sharing using exchange ideology as a moderator", *Personnel Review*, Vol. 36 No. 3, pp. 457-475.
- Lin, H.-F. and Lee, G.-G. (2004), "Perceptions of senior managers toward knowledge-sharing behaviour", *Management Decision*, Vol. 42 No. 1, pp. 108-125.
- McAllister, D.J. (1995), "Affect-and cognition-based trust as foundations for interpersonal cooperation in organizations", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 38 No. 1, pp. 24-59.
- McEvily, B. and Tortoriello, M. (2011), "Measuring trust in organisational research: review and recommendations", *Journal of Trust Research*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 23-63.
- Mayer, D.M., Kuenzi, M., Greenbaum, R., Bardes, M. and Salvador, R.B. (2009), "How low does ethical leadership flow? Test of a trickle-down model", *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Vol. 108 No. 1, pp. 1-13.
- Mo, S. and Shi, J. (2017), "Linking ethical leadership to employee burnout, workplace deviance and performance: testing the mediating roles of trust in leader and surface acting", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 144 No. 2, pp. 293-303.
- Naqshbandi, M.M. and Jasimuddin, S.M. (2018), "Knowledge-oriented leadership and open innovation: role of knowledge management capability in France-based multinationals", *International Business Review*, Vol. 27 No. 3, pp. 701-713.
- Nguyen, T.N., Shen, C.H. and Le, P.B. (2021), "Influence of transformational leadership and knowledge management on radical and incremental innovation: the moderating role of collaborative culture", *Kybernetes*, in press, doi: [10.1108/K-12-2020-0905](https://doi.org/10.1108/K-12-2020-0905).
- Nyhan, R.C. (2000), "Changing the paradigm: trust and its role in public sector organizations", *The American Review of Public Administration*, Vol. 30 No. 1, pp. 87-109.
- Oh, S.-Y. (2019), "Effects of organizational learning on performance: the moderating roles of trust in leaders and organizational justice", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 313-331.
- Phong, L.B. and Son, T.T. (2020), "The link between transformational leadership and knowledge sharing: mediating role of distributive, procedural and interactional justice", *Journal of Information & Knowledge Management*, Vol. 19 No. 3, p. 2050020.
- Phong, L.B., Hui, L. and Son, T.T. (2018), "How leadership and trust in leaders foster employees' behavior toward knowledge sharing", *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, Vol. 46 No. 5, pp. 705-720.
- Preacher, K.J. and Hayes, A.F. (2008), "Asymptotic and resampling strategies for assessing and comparing indirect effects in multiple mediator models", *Behavior Research Methods*, Vol. 40 No. 3, pp. 879-891.
- Rawung, F.H., Wuryaningrat, N.F. and Elvinita, L.E. (2015), "The influence of transformational and transactional leadership on knowledge sharing: an empirical study on small and medium businesses in Indonesia", *Asian Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 123-145.
- Samadi, S. (2018), "Theory of planned behavior and knowledge sharing among nurses in patient computer management system: the role of distributive justice", *Management Science Letters*, Vol. 8 No. 5, pp. 427-436.
- Schermelleh-Engel, K., Moosbrugger, H. and Müller, H. (2003), "Evaluating the fit of structural equation models: tests of significance and descriptive goodness-of-fit measures", *Methods of Psychological Research Online*, Vol. 8 No. 2, pp. 23-74.
- Schoorman, F.D., Mayer, R.C. and Davis, J.H. (2007), "An integrative model of organizational trust: past, present, and future", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 32 No. 2, pp. 344-354.

- Shao, Z., Wang, T. and Feng, Y. (2015), "Impact of organizational culture and computer self-efficacy on knowledge sharing", *Industrial Management & Data Systems*, Vol. 115 No. 4, pp. 590-611.
- Shariq, S.M., Mukhtar, U. and Anwar, S. (2019), "Mediating and moderating impact of goal orientation and emotional intelligence on the relationship of knowledge oriented leadership and knowledge sharing", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 332-350.
- Shehzad, M.U., Davis, K. and Shakil Ahmad, M. (2021), "Knowledge-oriented leadership and open innovation: the mediating role of knowledge process and infrastructure capability", *International Journal of Innovation Management*, Vol. 25 No. 3, p. 2150028.
- Son, T.T., Phong, L.B. and Loan, B.T.T. (2020), "Transformational leadership and knowledge sharing: determinants of firm's operational and financial performance", *Sage Open*, Vol. 10 No. 2, pp. 1-13.
- Su, X., Lin, W., Wu, J., Zheng, Q., Chen, X. and Jiang, X. (2021), "Ethical leadership and knowledge sharing: the effects of positive reciprocity and moral efficacy", *Sage Open*, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 1-12.
- Swift, P.E. and Hwang, A. (2013), "The impact of affective and cognitive trust on knowledge sharing and organizational learning", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 20-37.
- Tang, P.M., Bavik, Y.L., Chen, Y.-F and Tjosvold, D. (2015), "Linking ethical leadership to knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding: the mediating role of psychological engagement", *International Proceedings of Economics Development and Research*, Vol. 84, p. 71.
- Tangaraja, G., Mohd Rasdi, R., Ismail, M. and Abu Samah, B. (2015), "Fostering knowledge sharing behaviour among public sector managers: a proposed model for the Malaysian public service", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 121-140.
- Thompson, M. and Heron, P. (2005), "The difference a manager can make: organizational justice and knowledge worker commitment", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 383-404.
- Tu, Y., Zhang, Y., Lu, X. and Wang, S. (2019), "Differentiating two facets of trust in colleagues: how ethical leadership influences cross-team knowledge sharing", *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 41 No. 1, pp. 88-100.
- Uhl-Bien, M., Marion, R. and McKelvey, B. (2007), "Complexity leadership theory: shifting leadership from the industrial age to the knowledge era", *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 18 No. 4, pp. 298-318.
- Wang, S. and Noe, R.A. (2010), "Knowledge sharing: a review and directions for future research", *Human Resource Management Review*, Vol. 20 No. 2, pp. 115-131.
- Wang, Z., Sharma, P.N. and Cao, J. (2016), "From knowledge sharing to firm performance: a predictive model comparison", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 69 No. 10, pp. 4650-4658.
- Wu, W.-L. and Lee, Y.-C. (2017), "Empowering group leaders encourages knowledge sharing: integrating the social exchange theory and positive organizational behavior perspective", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 21 No. 2, pp. 474-491.
- Xia, Z. and Yang, F. (2020), "Ethical leadership and knowledge sharing: the impacts of prosocial motivation and two facets of conscientiousness", *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 11, pp. 1-10.
- Yang, J., Mossholder, K.W. and Peng, T. (2009), "Supervisory procedural justice effects: the mediating roles of cognitive and affective trust", *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 20 No. 2, pp. 143-154.
- Yang, Z., Nguyen, V.T. and Le, P.B. (2018), "Knowledge sharing serves as a mediator between collaborative culture and innovation capability: an empirical research", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, Vol. 33 No. 7, pp. 958-969.
- Yin, J., Ma, Z., Yu, H., Jia, M. and Liao, G. (2019), "Transformational leadership and employee knowledge sharing: explore the mediating roles of psychological safety and team efficacy", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 24 No. 2, pp. 150-171.
- Zhang, X. and Jiang, J.Y. (2015), "With whom shall I share my knowledge? A recipient perspective of knowledge sharing", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 277-295.
- Zhu, W., Newman, A., Miao, Q. and Hooke, A. (2013), "Revisiting the mediating role of trust in transformational leadership effects: do different types of trust make a difference?", *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 94-105.

Further reading

Newman, A., Kiazad, K., Miao, Q. and Cooper, B. (2014), "Examining the cognitive and affective trust-based mechanisms underlying the relationship between ethical leadership and organisational citizenship: a case of the head leading the heart?", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 123 No. 1, pp. 113-123.

Saha, R., Cerchione, R., Singh, R. and Dahiya, R. (2020), "Effect of ethical leadership and corporate social responsibility on firm performance: a systematic review", *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp. 409-429.

Corresponding author

Phong Ba Le can be contacted at: lebaphong@hau.edu.vn

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com