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"The Role of Respectful Leadership in Fostering Employee Innovation: A Mediation Analysis of Knowledge Sharing and Ethical Climate"

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ABSTRACT

The following thesis explores the impact of Respectful Leadership (RL) on employees' Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB), with a particular focus on the mediating role of Knowledge Sharing (KS) and Ethical Climate (EC). Grounded on existing literature and empirical findings, the study addresses a gap in the literature by investigating the role of this leadership style, rooted in dignity, fairness, and interpersonal respect, in fostering innovation at the employees' level.

For the empirical study, a quantitative approach was employed. Through a survey, a heterogeneous sample of 161 professionals was reached to gain insights into their perceptions of the variables under analysis. To measure the main constructs, validated scales were used to capture employees' perceptions, and regression-based analyses (including Hayes' PROCESS Model 4) were conducted to test direct and indirect effects. Objective indicators of organisational innovation (e.g., R&D intensity, patents) were also analysed to conduct an exploratory analysis.

The findings reveal that RL significantly enhances KS and EC, while only KS shows a statistically significant mediating effect on IWB. EC, despite being positively associated with both RL and IWB in simple regressions, does not play a mediator role in the tested model. Additionally, RL, KS, and EC show no significant correlation with macro-level innovation indicators; however, this result is likely attributable to the limited statistical power of the analysis, rather than indicating a genuine disconnect between individual behaviours and organisational innovation outcomes.

This research contributes theoretically by positioning RL as a strategic enabler of innovation and empirically by validating a mediation framework linking leadership, climate, and employee behaviour. Methodologically, it integrates subjective and objective measures, adds methodological value to current research models and offers practical insights for organisations seeking to promote innovation through relational leadership practices.

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1. Introduction

In today's global scenario, characterised by rapid dynamics and knowledge-based economies, organisations must innovate in order to remain competitive and responsive in this complex and fast-changing environment. The concept of innovation can be interpreted in several ways, yet it is increasingly recognised as a social and collaborative process, in which the behaviours, attitudes, and interactions of employees play a central role (Anderson et al., 2014; Damanpour, 1991). Among these behaviours, Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB), the generation, promotion, and realisation of new ideas, has gained substantial scholarly attention as a core driver of organisational adaptability and long-term success (Janssen, 2000).

In this context, leadership is positioned as one of the critical antecedents of innovation at the individual and collective level. In the current literature, most empirical research has focused on leadership styles such as transformational, transactional, or ethical leadership, while relational approaches grounded in respect, dignity, and fairness have received less attention. Therefore, Respectful Leadership (RL), which is based on showing esteem and recognition to employees, represents a promising but underexplored construct with the potential to influence innovation-related behaviours in meaningful ways (Gerpott et al., 2020; van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010).

The present study aims to contribute to this branch of the subject by analysing how Respectful Leadership influences employees' innovative behaviours, with particular focus on the mediating roles of Knowledge Sharing (KS) and Ethical Climate (EC). These two variables are theorised as facilitating mechanisms that put the right conditions in place for employees to behave innovatively. While KS has been identified as a proximal antecedent of IWB, EC is understood to influence broader organisational norms and value systems that may indirectly shape individual behaviour.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research aims to expand the literature on relational leadership styles by positioning RL within the domain of organisational innovation. While prior studies have explored the role of RL in shaping workplace climate, motivation, and well-being, its relationship with innovation-oriented outcomes remains poorly understood. By integrating RL into existing innovation frameworks, this study addresses a relevant gap in organisational behaviour and leadership research.

From a practical perspective, the research addresses the growing interest of managers and HR professionals in fostering respectful, inclusive and innovation-friendly work environments. As innovation becomes more and more fundamental, and is increasingly based on trust, collaboration, and knowledge exchange among employees, understanding the relational factors behind Innovative Work Behaviour becomes a priority issue for managers.

To guide the analysis, the study is driven by the following research question:

How does Respectful Leadership influence employees' Innovative Work Behaviour, and to what extent is this relationship mediated by Knowledge Sharing and Ethical Climate?

To address this research question, a quantitative research design was employed. Data were collected via an online survey administered to managers and employees, reaching a valid sample of 161 respondents. Validated instruments were employed to measure the key constructs under investigation. To analyse the data and test the hypothesis, a series of regression-based analyses, including PROCESS Macro (Model 4), were conducted to test both direct and indirect effects, while controlling for relevant demographic and organisational variables. Additionally, publicly available objective indicators (e.g., R&D intensity, patents, product launches) were analysed to complement subjective measures of innovation.

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical background, the existing literature on the topics in question, and the development of the research hypotheses. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, including the research design, sample characteristics, measurement instruments, data analysis strategy, and reports the results of the empirical analyses. Chapter 4 discusses the findings and their implication, outlining also the limitations of the study and the directions for future research. The last chapter concludes the thesis by summarising the main contributions.

The findings suggest that RL plays a significant role in promoting innovation-related behaviours among employees, particularly through the facilitation of Knowledge Sharing. Ethical Climate, while relevant and positively influenced by RL, does not act as a

significant mediator in the tested model. Additionally, no significant associations between RL, KS, EC and the objective innovation indicators were found. This result suggests a disconnect between micro-level behaviours and organisational-level performance metrics.

This study contributes to the scientific debate by positioning RL as a strategic relational enabler of innovation. It also highlights the importance of KS in transforming leadership into innovation. It further advances methodological approaches by integrating both subjective and objective indicators of innovation.

2. Literature Review

This chapter provides a detailed overview of the current literature on the main constructs examined in this study: Respectful Leadership (RL), Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB), Knowledge Sharing (KS) and Ethical Climate (EC). The following section aims to establish the theoretical basis for understanding how respectful interpersonal dynamics promote innovations in companies and how this relationship could be shaped by mediating organisational mechanisms. This section is structured to initially describe what is meant by leadership and the historical evolution of the main leadership theories. It focuses on relational and ethical styles that promote employee engagement and creativity. This focus results from a deeper analysis of Respectful Leadership as a unique approach based on integrity, justice, and interpersonal respect.

Following, the literature explores the concept of innovation both at the organisational and individual behavioural levels. The goal is to highlight the crucial role of innovation in business competitiveness and the psychological conditions that enable innovative behaviours in employees.

In the last part of the chapter, the mediating variables (Knowledge Sharing and Ethical Climate) are analysed to assess their impact on Respectful Leadership and how their relations could impact the employees' Innovative Work Behaviour.

2.1. Leadership

Leadership is a crucial and central topic concept in the study of organisational dynamics, and its understanding requires an in-depth analysis of its origins, its theoretical evolutions and its concrete impact on the behaviours of employees. This section explores the theoretical aspect and its facets, leading to an analysis of Respectful Leadership as the central object of the study.

Over time, the concept of leadership has significantly evolved based on the ever-changing dynamics of human societies and as a reflection of the historical contexts in which it has emerged. Since the elaboration of the "Great Man" theory, one of the first to want to explain the concept of leadership, which states that leaders are inherently destined to lead, to the contemporary perspective that leadership is a relational and context-

dependent construct, researchers have endeavoured to define and explain its meaning and implications (Hunt & Fedynich, 2018). Although it is difficult and context-dependent, leadership can be viewed as a contextually rooted, informal or formal, goal-directed process of influence between the followers and the leader that affects individual, group, or organisational outcomes (Antonakis & Day, 2018).

Throughout history, there has been a sequence of paradigm shifts within leadership theory. In the early XX century, the Trait Theories emerged focusing on the idea that leaders possess inborn features that separate them from non-leaders. This leadership style, where leadership effectiveness was established merely on the basis of traits, was then countered by Behavioural Theories that emphasised learned behaviour and leadership style (Dias et al., 2022). This transition between the two theories was supported by some empirical research conducted by Derue et al. (2011). Meta-analytic findings demonstrated that leader behaviours, particularly task-oriented (i.e., initiating structure) and relationship-oriented (i.e., consideration) behaviours, explain more variance in leadership effectiveness than leader traits alone (Derue et al., 2011). This change in studies on leadership focused more on the actions of leaders than their personalities. Behavioural Theories, compared to trait theories, shift the focus from innate characteristics to observable behaviour. With this approach to leadership, individuals can become leaders by developing effective behaviours through learning and experience. These theories laid the groundwork for later styles such as transformational and servant leadership (Derue et al., 2011).

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the emergence of the Contingency Theory, which believed the efficacy of leaders was contingent upon the situation such as the followers' characteristics and the organisation (Hunt & Fedynich, 2018). Models such as Fiedler's Contingency Model and the House's Path-Goal Theory, refer to the idea that a leader's effectiveness is determined by how well their leadership style aligns with situational factors, the employee's needs, and the work environment (Antonakis & Day, 2018). More recently, Relational Leadership Theories have shifted attention from individual traits or context alone to the quality of the relationships between leaders and followers. The relationship between the management and the employees is the success factor of effective leadership. Leadership becomes a social process grounded in mutual trust, collaboration, and shared purpose (Antonakis & Day, 2018).

The presented analysis helps one to grasp the evolution of leadership theories and approaches over the years. This overview displays that leadership is not a one-size-fits-all approach but rather a dynamic process that must adapt to organisational needs, employee expectations, and ethical considerations.

Despite the many theories that have been developed over time, a common element can be recognised: leadership is a vital element of organisational success, directly influencing employee performance and the organisation's ability to innovate. Numerous studies indicate that the type of leadership styles adopted by an organisation can have an impact on employee engagement, motivation and innovation while also influencing the corporate climate and organisational culture (Yukl, 2008). These perspectives align with leadership models such as servant leadership, ethical leadership, and respectful leadership, which prioritise employee well-being, fairness, and inclusion (Antonakis & Day, 2018).

2.1.1. Overview of Major Relational Leadership Styles

The theories described above not only have been the foundation of the different leadership styles that have been formulated over the years, but can also help understand why certain leaders are more effective in specific contexts than others.

With the flourishing of new leadership theories, numerous leadership styles have developed at the same time, each with its own characteristics and peculiarities. Having a comprehensive overview of these models gives the tool to be able to assess their impact on effectiveness in promoting workplace engagement, ethical behaviour, and innovation. The following styles are the most relevant for our analysis of Respectful Leadership.

Transformational Leadership is one of the most renowned and validated leadership styles in the literature. This leadership style aims at empowering employees to contribute to organisational goals by going beyond mere self-interest. This approach, through compelling vision, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration, focuses on enhancing values such as the inspiration and motivation of employees. Thanks to the climate this approach brings to the organisation, transformational leadership enhances employee engagement, organisational commitment, and knowledge-sharing behaviour,

making it particularly relevant for innovation-driven industries (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Samad, 2012).

The Ethical Leadership approach is a leadership model that is based on sound moral values and responsibility to do what is right. The attitudes of this style are committed to leading with integrity, honesty and respect for others. They provide moral models for their subordinates so that their methods of decision-making complement ideas of responsibility, honesty, and fairness. The basis of this strategy was to lower unethical behaviour in companies, increase employee confidence, and create psychological safety that would enable staff members to be more at ease sharing their ideas and concerns (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Servant Leadership style is an approach that prioritises the needs of followers over those of the leader. It is a model that focuses on serving others, rather than commanding or controlling. It is characterised by selflessness, empathy, and a focus on the growth and well-being of employees. This leadership style leads to higher levels of employee job satisfaction, trust, and organisational citizenship behaviours (Eva et al., 2019). Furthermore, the study by Alheet et al. (2021) suggests that servant leadership is particularly effective in organisations that rely on collaborative teamwork and employee empowerment.

The Inclusive Leadership model has gained attention in recent years due to the growing organisational diversity and the need for equitable workplaces. According to Carmeli et al. (2010), this style is characterised by an open approach of the leaders to empathise with the point of view of others, to try to create a sense of belonging among employees and to be as accessible as possible. Compared to the other leadership styles, the Inclusive one places diversity as a central tool for innovating and being effective. Randel et al. (2018) suggest that this model fosters behaviours that invite and appreciate others' contributions while at the same time focusing on making the employees feel respected and valued. Researchers support the role of this style in enhancing psychological safety among organisational members, fostering employees' creative self-efficacy, and ultimately supporting innovative work behaviour (Javed et al., 2019).

Respectful Leadership differs from the leadership styles discussed that focus on vision, moral conduct or service to employees. This approach is characterised by mutual

recognition, fairness, and dignity in daily leader-follower interactions (van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010). One of the key elements of this style is to see followers not as a means to reach the organisational goals but as an end in themselves. Adopting this leadership style leads to the improvement of the levels of employee engagement, knowledge-sharing behaviours, and ethical climate formation, which are critical for sustaining long-term organisational success.

The inclusion of different leadership styles provides a comparative framework that highlights the added value that Respectful Leadership has in shaping innovation-oriented behaviours.

2.1.2. Leadership and Workforce Productivity

Leadership profoundly influences individual and collective employee performance, impacting motivation, job satisfaction, and organisational commitment (Madanchian et al., 2017; Yukl, 2008). Yukl (2008) contends that leaders influence organisational success through three principal mechanisms: i., operational efficiency, which involves optimising processes and resources; ii., adaptability to change, which is essential for responding to competitive dynamics and uncertainty; iii., human capital development, which relates to skill growth, motivation and employee engagement, crucial elements for the long-term sustainability of the organisation.

Research by Madanchian et al. (2017) shows a significant association between leadership effectiveness and organisational outcomes. In addition, the research conducted by Yukl (2008) emphasises that the characteristics of an effective leader are not related only to setting clear goals but also to creating a supportive environment that enables employees to reach their potential. This fosters trust and collaboration, enhancing the overall effectiveness of the organisation by boosting job satisfaction and productivity.

Current literature indicates that leadership styles that value employee well-being, psychological safety, and organisational equity not only bring various benefits to the company but also play a crucial role in improving long-term commitment and motivation to work (Antonakis & Day, 2018). By fostering a work environment that encourages trust and respect, leaders can positively influence employees' willingness to engage in innovative behaviour and contribute to a collaborative culture (Alheet et al., 2021).

2.1.3. Leadership and Organisational Innovation

The leadership style adopted by management plays a crucial role within the organisation, not only in determining workforce productivity but also in fostering the company's innovation outcome. The study from OKE et al. (2009) points out that leadership plays an important role in creating an environment that fosters innovation, where employees feel encouraged to share ideas and solve problems creatively. Furthermore, the authors identify that collaboration, open communication and knowledge sharing, when promoted by the leadership, are essential characteristics that a firm has to possess in order to have a higher ability to innovate (OKE et al., 2009).

Additionally, other research points out that there are several dynamics within a firm that can enhance innovation. The leaders who foster psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) and ethical decision-making (Brown & Treviño, 2006) create conditions that encourage experimentation and risk-taking, both essential elements of an innovative culture (Alheet et al., 2021).

The first two studies analyse, respectively, how the leaders who create an environment of trust and respect, create a circumstance where the employees feel free and safe to voice their ideas without fear of negative consequences, promoting creativity and long-term organisational growth. While the second one describes the situation where leaders emphasise fairness and ethical responsibility, employees are more likely to engage in responsible innovation, strengthening collaboration and shared learning within the organisation.

2.1.4. Respectful Leadership

Respectful Leadership emerges as an essential leadership style in a context where ethical leadership, trust-based leader-follower relationships, and employee well-being are crucial success factors. Respectful Leadership assumes a fundamental role in companies that are knowledge-based and foster innovation due to the fact that encouraging psychological safety and an ethical environment improves knowledge sharing and creativity among the organisational members. The following sections will delve more into

these features, connecting Respectful Leadership to organisational innovation through the mediating function of knowledge sharing and ethical environment.

2.1.4.1. Definition and Theoretical Foundations

Respectful Leadership (RL) can be defined, for the purpose of this study, as a leadership style in which leaders consistently demonstrate behaviours and attitudes that communicate respect, fairness, and dignity, treating employees as equally valuable individuals regardless of hierarchy.

In modern organisational settings, the functions of work values are continuously gaining attention in the firm's governance and at the employee level. These values play a crucial role in shaping employee satisfaction, motivation, and overall performance (van Quaquebeke et al., 2009).

Taking a step back, values, at a general level, are perceived as deep and enduring beliefs that individuals cultivate throughout the different stages of their lives. According to Locke (1976, p. 1304) they refer to "what a person consciously or subconsciously desires, wants, or seeks to attain."

In this context, work values represent this idea in an applied setting, they refer to the fundamental beliefs that influence individuals' attitudes and behaviours at work. Generally, these values are assessed as people's preferences for certain objects or outcomes, such as job security, salary, etc. These values have a direct and an indirect impact on the way individuals act in their workplace, they shape how employees perceive leadership, workplace interactions, and ethical standards within organisations (van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010).

Among these values, the research from van Quaquebeke et al. (2009) shows that employees value interpersonal respect from their leaders more than financial incentives, career growth, or job security.

In their research, van Quaquebeke et al. (2009), identify two different dimensions of respect: Recognition respect and Appraisal Respect. Where the former refers to the general acknowledgement of the equivalence of another person, and the latter entails the acknowledgement of expertise or skill. In an organisational setting, the first dimension of

respect deals with the employee's expectation that supervisors do not only focus on the performance aspects of their subordinates but also on their human side, while Appraisal Respect is about the esteem that employees receive related to their work, they should be treated as valuable members of the organisation (van Quaquebeke et al., 2009).

This conceptualisation of respect aligns with the renowned self-determination theory of Deci & Ryan (2000). This theory suggests that employees have a psychological need to feel competent (Competence), thus feeling capable and effective in their work, to feel autonomous (Autonomy), to have control over their actions and decisions and, finally, to be related to others (Relatedness), thus feeling connected and valued in the workplace. Respect fulfils these psychological needs since Respectful Leadership recognises the employee's achievement and encourages skill development, it allows the subordinates to work independently, trusts their judgment, and fosters a culture of open communication, fairness, and recognition (van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010). These needs are crucial prerequisites for subordinates' independent and proactive reactions to changing organisational circumstances, thus, they lead to higher engagement, increased intrinsic motivation, and enhanced well-being (van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010).

Van Quaquebeke et al. (2009) conducted a large-scale study on the role of respect in the workplace, demonstrating that leaders who embody a respectful leadership style create a work environment where employees have greater job satisfaction, feel a major commitment to the firm's mission, and improve their performances (van Quaquebeke et al., 2009).

Based on the theoretical formulation of respect in organisational contexts, Respectful Leadership is an identifiable leadership style focusing on the value and dignity of employees. Van Quaquebeke and Eckloff (2010) have described Respectful Leadership as a leader's attitude and behaviour that recognises the inalienable value of subordinates, treating them not as means to an end but as ends in themselves, making certain that they value and get recognition in the organisation.

This definition is in alignment with philosophies and ethical standards of respect, most notably Kantian ethical standards emphasising individuals should not only be treated as organisational means but treated as ends in themselves (van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010). Respectful Leadership is not politeness or courtesy; it is about an organisational

system of conduct actively communicating respect, fairness, and recognition to employees.

Over time, leadership theory has created various paradigms to discuss methods through which leaders can inspire, guide, and support workers to achieve organisational performance. Many modern leadership paradigms emphasise workers' welfare, moral choices, and change leadership (Bass, 1990; Brown et al., 2005). However, Respectful Leadership (RL) is distinctive in that it is not primarily about performance maximisation, moral exemplarity, or service to employees, but rather about ensuring that respect and fairness are embedded in daily leader-follower interactions (van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010). Unlike Transformational, Ethical, Servant and Inclusive paradigms emphasise workers' motivation, moral conduct, or leadership through serving, Respectful Leadership is only concerned with treating workers in ordinary dealings in ways emphasising mutual recognition, fairness, and respect towards humanity (van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010).

Transformational leadership (TL) is goal-directed and vision-directed leadership that inspires workers through intellectual stimulation, charisma, and goal-directed practices (Bass, 1990). Transformational leaders succeed in fostering innovation and risk-taking behaviours among employees by creating a compelling vision that leads the followers to pursue the organisational objective (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Choi et al., 2016). Respectful Leadership, on the other side, does not aim to inspire workers through vision or performance maximisation; rather, RL emphasises respect, fairness and dignity in day-by-day interpersonal relations between leaders and followers (van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010). Respectful Leadership focuses on constructing psychological safety through fairness and mutual recognition. This psychological safety is a crucial element in organisations where employees need to feel respected and valued to engage in open knowledge-sharing and collaboration (Stephens & Carmeli, 2017).

Ethical leadership (EL) also shares with Respectful Leadership an emphasis on values like fairness and integrity. However, while ethical leaders have the duty to apply moral standards and, above all, set an example in acting ethically and making decisions in accordance with fairness and justice (Brown & Treviño, 2006), respectful leaders go beyond ethical compliance by stressing individual recognition outside of set ethical rules and by firmly instilling respect into daily contacts (LaGree et al., 2023). Ethical

Leadership relies on ethical codes and structured decision-making, and RL creates a work culture where respect is naturally embedded in all interactions, regardless of formal ethical guidelines (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Servant Leadership (SL) similarly focuses on employee well-being and empowerment by placing self-sacrificing and prioritising employee well-being over organisational goals (Eva et al., 2019). Servant Leaders prioritise workers before everything to empower employees through humbleness, listening, and development through individual growth (Eva et al., 2019). While both the Servant and the Respectful Leadership have value placed upon employees, the former identifies as a subservient leader's position, prioritising the followers' needs, while the latter does not identify either the follower or the leader in a serving position, developing mutual respect and equity in leader-follower relationships (van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010). The goal is not to serve or be served but to relate on the basis of equity and mutual recognition.

The Inclusive Leadership style (IL), on the other hand, focuses on the creation of an environment where employees feel accepted and valued for their uniqueness, promoting openness, accessibility, and inclusion in organisational activities (Javed et al., 2021). The two leadership styles under analysis have several points of contact, among them giving value to listening, open communication, and recognising individual differences work as critical mechanisms to pursue their leading goal (LaGree et al., 2023). Nonetheless, as discussed above, Respectful Leadership places the enhancement of personal dignity and respect at the centre of its approach as fundamental relationship principles. Inclusive leadership places aspects such as inclusion and diversity appreciation at the centre of its way of leading employees to obtain innovative outcomes. From this comparison, it can be deduced that RL could enhance its effectiveness by adopting inclusive elements from IL to create a more collaborative and innovative environment (LaGree et al., 2023).

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Leadership Styles and Respectful Leadership

Leadership Style	Core Focus	Means of Influence	Relationship to Employees	Differentiation from Respectful Leadership (RL)
Transformational (TL)	Vision, inspiration, motivation	Charisma, vision, intellectual stimulation	Inspires through vision and goal alignment	RL does not rely on vision or performance pressure, but on fairness and psychological safety
Ethical (EL)	Moral behaviour, ethical standards	Role modelling, adherence to codes and fairness	Sets ethical examples, focuses on justice and compliance	RL goes beyond compliance by embedding dignity and respect in every interaction
Servant (SL)	Service to employees, humility, employee development	Listening, service, empathy, support	Puts employees' needs first; leaders act as stewards	RL is based on equality and mutual respect, not hierarchal service roles
Inclusive (IL)	Openness, diversity, belonging	Accessibility, inclusive decision-making	Values uniqueness, promotes participation	RL shares values of inclusion at focuses on dignity and personal recognition as guiding principles
Respectful (RL)	Interpersonal respect, fairness, recognition	Daily respectful behaviour, listening, fairness	Recognises employees as ends in themselves, not as means	RL integrates psychological safety, autonomy, and intrinsic value without focusing on hierarchy

Note: Table created by the author for illustrative purposes, based on the conceptual distinctions discussed in section 2.1.4.1.

While Transformational, Ethical, Servant, and Inclusive Leadership influence organisational culture and workers' engagement in their own way but also with common traits, Respectful Leadership is distinctive in making leadership effectiveness hinge upon respect among individuals in working relationships. Unlike vision, ethics, or service, fairness, respect for dignity, and trust in regular working life have priority in RL in fostering an affirmative work environment in which workers have respect and psychological safety (Stephens & Carmeli, 2017; van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010). Since psychological safety and overall employees' well-being in workplaces are becoming increasingly important and discussed topics within companies, RL offers an

attractive leadership paradigm to keep pace with work demands in contemporary workplaces.

2.1.4.2. Mechanisms through which Respectful Leadership Influences Organisational Behaviour

The respectful leadership style, as analysed, is capable of influencing various organisational behaviours by emphasising and focusing the leader's attention on aspects such as mutual respect, psychological safety, and open communication. A setting where these characteristics are present fosters a positive employee attitude and behaviours that are essential to innovation and performance (Adams et al., 2020; Basit, 2019).

The first concept to introduce is relevant to the positive influence that Respectful Leadership has on employee resilience and engagement, through respectful communication practices. LaGree et al. (2023), in their research, support that when leaders adopt an approach of communication devoted to respect, they manage to create a supportive workplace environment that promotes occupational resilience, engagement, and overall employee well-being. Adopting respectful communication between the leaders and the followers creates the perfect condition where the employees can feel valued and psychologically secure, enabling them to effectively handle job-related stress and become more engaged in their work (Willett et al., 2023). The establishment of this type of relationship within the organisation is a crucial dynamic from the perspective of the innovation process since resilient and engaged employees are more likely to proactively contribute new ideas and engage actively in collaborative innovation efforts (LaGree et al., 2023; Willett et al., 2023).

Additional effects related to the implementation of Respectful Leadership have been studied and analysed in recent years. Referring to the enhancement of task performance and affective organisational commitment. In this regard, Basit (2019), through his research, supports the statement that respectful engagement from leaders positively affects employees' task performance by fostering greater motivation, increased effort, and emotional commitment toward their organisation. The rise of this commitment is related to the perception that the employees have about being recognised and valued by others

for their individual contributions and identities. In turn, employees experiencing high affective commitment are more motivated to support organisational goals, including innovation-oriented objectives (Basit, 2019; Hai et al., 2022; LaGree et al., 2023).

Respectful Leadership has an important role related to facilitating employee creativity and innovative behaviour. RL practices have the ability to create a psychologically safe climate, which is essential for the organisation to enable employees to feel comfortable in sharing novel ideas and taking risks (Andersson et al., 2020; Carmeli et al., 2015; Hai et al., 2022). This mechanism will be further analysed in the section dedicated to the innovation enablers. However, a preview can be drawn from recent evidence. The research by Hai et al. (2022) is a valuable study in the literature since it states that respectful interactions encourage subordinates to voice creative suggestions and novel approaches without fear of negative repercussions or interpersonal threats. The reduction of fear and enhanced psychological safety are directly reflected in increased innovativeness, as creativity flourishes in contexts where different ideas and experimentation are freely supported (Baer & Frese, 2003; Detert & Burris, 2007; Edmondson, 1999).

Furthermore, RL has an additional effect on the employee's willingness to engage in constructive voice behaviour. This attitude refers to the proactive expression of ideas, concerns, and suggestions aimed at improving organisational functioning. While a full discussion is presented in the following section, a brief anticipation is helpful here. Ng et al. (2021), through their analysis, demonstrate that employees who experience respect from their leaders exhibit higher proactive motivation and constructive voice behaviour, marked by open suggestions of improvements and solutions targeted at organisational development. A constructive voice, promoted through respectful engagement, is a crucial mechanism that can foster innovation processes since it encourages employees to identify and propose innovative solutions proactively. Zhao et al. (2022) further confirm that perceived respect fosters a psychologically safe climate that enhances employees' ability to generate and implement creative ideas.

An additional mechanism through which RL fosters innovative behaviour within organisational members is the promotion of perceived fairness, which can also be interpreted as organisational justice. When employees perceive that they are treated fairly

in various aspects, such as the distribution of rewards, recognition, and decision-making, they are more likely to feel respected and valued (Coad, Segarra, et al., 2016; Janssen, 2000). RL fosters this perception by consistently modelling ethical conduct, transparent communication, and equal treatment in everyday interactions. This mechanism will be delved into in the Ethical Climate section. However, it is important to anticipate its central role. Brown & Treviño (2006) and Janssen (2000), in their studies, underline how perceived organisational justice within the firm fosters employees' trust and risk-taking, which are crucial variables for promoting new ideas in the company.

Another important characteristic that RL brings to the follower's relationship is its indirect correlation in enhancing organisational innovation through its positive impact on knowledge sharing. Respectful interactions generate trust and openness among employees, essential prerequisites for effective knowledge sharing (Carmeli et al., 2013). This inclination to share knowledge openly with the other members of the organisation, without fear of criticism or ridicule, significantly strengthens organisational learning and collaborative innovation processes. Indeed, knowledge sharing is considered one of the core mechanisms mediating the positive relationship between RL and organisational innovation, making RL critical in enhancing collective knowledge capabilities (Carmeli et al., 2015).

In summary, the mechanisms through which Respectful Leadership influences organisational behaviours—resilience and engagement, task performance and affective commitment, creativity and innovation, constructive voice, and knowledge sharing—collectively contribute toward a favourable environment for innovation. These behaviours and attitudes, fostered by an organisational climate characterised by mutual respect and psychological safety, underline the critical importance of Respectful Leadership as a foundational element for promoting sustained organisational innovation.

2.1.4.3. Empirical evidence regarding the impact of Respectful Leadership in organisations.

Respectful Leadership (RL) has received increasing attention in recent years for its potential to shape positive organisational environments. While theoretical contributions

offer a conceptual foundation, empirical research provides critical insights into how this leadership style translates into tangible organisational outcomes. According to van Quaquebeke & Eckloff (2010), as mentioned above, RL is grounded in the recognition of followers' dignity and worth, and its application is associated with constructive leader–follower relationships that enhance organisational functioning.

Several studies suggest that RL fosters conditions such as psychological safety (LaGree et al., 2023), employee well-being (Basit, 2019), and constructive interpersonal relationships (Carmeli et al., 2015). These conditions are essential for nurturing a climate of fairness, trust, and open communication, elements widely recognised as fundamental for effective collaboration and sustained performance. For instance, employees who perceive high levels of respect from their leaders tend to experience greater emotional well-being and show higher levels of organisational commitment and job satisfaction (Hai et al., 2022).

Although the mechanisms through which RL produces these outcomes will be explored in greater detail in the following sections, the existing empirical evidence supports the idea that RL contributes to the development of workplace cultures where individuals feel valued, supported, and psychologically safe. Such climates are conducive to engagement, ethical conduct, and a shared sense of responsibility, all of which align with broader organisational goals such as adaptability, resilience, and long-term effectiveness.

Moreover, respectful leadership has been empirically linked to behaviours that promote organisational learning and continuous improvement, creating fertile ground for innovation-related processes (Ng et al., 2021; van Gils et al., 2018). While these innovation-relevant mechanisms will be addressed in depth later, it is worth noting here that RL plays an enabling role in shaping employee attitudes and behaviours in a direction that aligns with the demands of dynamic and knowledge-intensive work environments.

This overview confirms that RL is not only a theoretically robust concept but also a practically impactful leadership style, offering promising avenues for promoting organisational health and effectiveness. The subsequent sections will further elaborate on how RL influences specific behavioural and contextual variables linked to innovation.

2.2. Innovation in Organisations

This section will analyse the concept of innovation as a key element for the competitiveness and survival of organisations and its interpretation for the purposes of this study's analysis.

2.2.1. Definition and relevance of innovation in the organisational context

The field of innovation is very broad, and many authors have conducted different types of analyses to understand this concept and its facets. In today's scenario, firms have the duty to pursue internal and external innovations to be competitive and to survive the frequent changes that the market requires (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010). In their work, the authors highlight innovation as a key determinant of organisational performance, encompassing the development and implementation of novel ideas, processes, products, or practices that yield significant value. In the present study, innovation is conceptualised at the employee level, evaluating behaviour expressions, such as proposals of ideas, their promotion and implementation. This view of innovation aligns with the Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB) framework, which captures bottom-up innovation processes (Janssen, 2000).

Since innovation is not a singular concept and has different fields of application, it can be analysed from different perspectives. The literature presents various analyses and definitions for the different dimensions of this notion. Analysing Organisational Innovation, two key studies provide definitions that, when combined, offer a comprehensive understanding of the concept. Damanpour (1991, p.556) define innovation as: "*the adoption of an internally generated or purchased device, system, policy, program, process, product, or service that is new to the adopting organisation"*. Crossan & Apaydin (2010, p.1155), on the other hand, define innovation as: "*The production, adoption, assimilation, and exploitation of a value-added novelty in economic and social spheres; the renewal and enlargement of products, services, and markets; the development of new methods of production; and the establishment of new management systems. It is both a process and an outcome."*

From these two perspectives, we can understand that innovation is not only regarding the adoption of internal or external innovations from the organisation but also includes

the production, assimilation and exploration of innovations. Furthermore, innovation is not limited to systems, policies, programs, processes, products or services but also includes the renewal of products, services and markets, the development of new production methods and the introduction of new management systems. It is emphasised that innovation is both a process and an outcome. This implies that organisational innovation is not limited to the introduction of something new but also to its implementation and the effects it generates over time. Finally, it is ascertained that innovation is aimed at improving the organisation's performance, both in terms of internal efficiency and market competitiveness.

Damanpour (1991) analysed different types of innovation, showing that Organisational innovation can take different shapes depending on what is innovated, how revolutionary it is, where it is applied and why it is introduced. When the innovation is focused on technology and operational efficiency, it is classified as technical innovation, whereas administrative innovation refers to changes in management structures, policies, and processes. Similarly, innovation can be distinguished based on its scope of application: product innovation involves improvements or the development of new goods and services, while process innovation enhances production methods or operational workflows.

Another key distinction is based on the degree of change that innovation brings, about this, the author identifies also incremental and radical innovation. The first type consists of gradual improvements to existing products, services or technologies without changing their nature. The second, on the contrary, refers to drastic paradigm shifts, leading to new concepts, products or processes. While the former is easier to achieve and less costly, the latter for a greater risk can lead to greater benefits. The ability of an organisation to balance both forms of innovation is crucial for long-term growth (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010).

2.2.2. Importance of Innovation for Business Competitiveness

As previously discussed, innovation is considered a central element for business competitiveness, as it allows companies to differentiate themselves and respond to market changes proactively. Schumpeter (1934) is one of the first economists who analysed and

emphasised the crucial role of innovation in the economic cycle and in business competitiveness. In his study of Economic Development, he introduces the concept of Creative destruction, based on the idea that the firms that innovate by introducing new products, processes or business models gain a competitive advantage, while those that cannot adapt are progressively eliminated from the market. For the author, innovating is the engine of economic growth and business survival. This idea has been the basis for further research on this topic that has been done through the years. Tushman & Nadler, (1986) take up and expand this vision; they analyse innovation from the organisation's point of view, emphasising that the ability to innovate is essential for the survival and growth of companies. In their research, the authors see innovation as a discontinuous process in which companies must continuously adapt to new technologies, market changes, and customers' needs to be competitive. The researchers underline that having a flexible business structure and leadership capable of managing changes are crucial characteristics that firms nowadays have to obtain to be competitive. In addition, to pursue this goal, companies must balance stability and transformation, adapting quickly to new technologies and market needs.

The analysis of how innovation is a crucial factor in pursuing the competitive advantage has evolved over time. More recent studies continue to highlight this point, confirming the critical role that innovation plays within firms. (Lengnick-Hall, 1992), in his research, states that innovation is not an isolated event but rather a continuous process that allows companies to differentiate themselves and respond to market changes. This study views innovation as a strategic capacity where the companies that continuously innovate develop a sustainable advantage over competitors. Furthermore, it attributes to the topic at hand the capacity to proactively anticipate market changes rather than suffer them. From his analysis, the author shows how innovation is not only a defensive strategy but a fundamental strategic resource to build a sustainable competitive advantage. Distanont & Khongmalai (2020) studied the role that innovation plays in small and medium-sized companies in differentiating them in competitive markets. The authors suggest that internal factors, such as leadership and knowledge management, but also external factors, such as customer expectations and global competition, have an essential function in shaping the organisation's innovation capacity. These analyses reinforce the idea that innovation is a determinant factor for long-term strategic growth.

2.2.3. Facilitators and Barriers to Innovation in Organisations

In the process of implementing innovation within organisations, companies may have to manage factors, both internal and external, that can facilitate or limit this process. Various researchers over the years have tried to study these facilitators and barriers. Koberg et al. (1996) analyse in their study how different factors act as facilitators or inhibitors of innovation depending on the life cycle stage of the company. The authors compare a young firm with an established one. In the first context, formalisation limits innovation, making an informal and flexible structure crucial to fostering innovation, while in the second case, financial incentives and systematic knowledge acquisition become key enablers of innovation strategy. The research conducted by Donate & Guadamillas (2011) examines how knowledge management, leadership, and HR practices influence innovation. The authors achieve important results, they establish that a knowledge-sharing culture works as a facilitator since an environment that encourages information flow and collaboration boosts innovation. In addition, when a leader encourages learning and taking risks, employees feel comfortable making novel suggestions. Some HR practices, such as training and incentives, can enhance knowledge sharing and creative problem-solving. To further support the factors that facilitate innovation effort-reward fairness is crucial to allow employees to engage in innovative behaviours (Janssen, 2000). A direct positive relationship occurs when employees perceive that their contributions are fairly recognised and rewarded, in this case, they are more likely to take the initiative and propose novel solutions. Furthermore, beyond organisational culture and leadership, it has been studied that technological advancements also play a crucial role in fostering innovation. Big data analytics and IT skills improve organisational agility, enabling companies to respond effectively to turbulent environments (Ciampi et al., 2022). The research conducted by Rivera-Vazquez et al. (2009) identifies three factors that facilitate innovation within the organisation. Organisational cultures, such as shared norms and values, that shape how employees interact, and work can influence whether employees feel encouraged to share ideas and take risks or whether they fear failure and avoid innovation. Additionally, Leaders and employees with high Emotional Intelligence, which is the ability to recognise, understand, and manage emotions, can navigate interpersonal relationships more effectively, fostering an environment that supports innovation. Lastly, the authors state that leadership

actively supports and drives innovation within an organisation and allows employees to be more inclined to engage in creative problem-solving and contribute new ideas.

While these factors promote innovation, several barriers can significantly hinder progress if not properly managed. The analysis conducted by Donate & Guadamillas (2011) identified a rigid culture as a factor that discourages experimentation and failure tolerance. In addition, a leadership that focuses on short-term efficiency damages the will of employees to foster innovative behaviour. Janssen (2000) shows that when employees perceive unfair effort-reward systems, they become reluctant to contribute innovative ideas inside their teams. Some additional barriers that hinder innovation and damage the company's performance are related to the financial side of an organisation, such as the cost and availability of funds, and the knowledge of a firm, such as lack of skilled personnel and lack of information on technology/markets (Coad, Pellegrino, et al., 2016). Contrary to the above description of the innovation's facilitator, a rigid culture combined with low emotional intelligence in leadership creates a hostile environment for innovation (Rivera-Vazquez et al., 2009).

Recent studies confirm that interpersonal climate plays a crucial role in shaping the organisational innovative outcome. In this regard, the research of Newman et al. (2020) makes a great contribution, supporting that perceived fairness, psychological safety, and respect are fundamental aspects that remove the barrier to innovation. This view is further supported by Chen et al. (2022) who empirically demonstrate that when leaders manage to foster ethical and inclusive behaviours in the organisation there is a direct and positive effect on the level of constructive voice and employee willingness to take initiative. These results further confirm that social and relational dynamics are useful tools to break down the barrier to innovation.

2.2.4. Connecting Respectful Leadership to Innovation

Respectful Leadership is an approach that places the principle of interpersonal respect as a central managerial behaviour. Recent research highlights that Respectful Leadership plays a distinctive and underexplored role in fostering innovation within organisations. Unlike other leadership styles, RL promotes innovation not through visionary motivation or ethical modelling but by cultivating a workplace grounded in dignity, fairness, and

trust in everyday leader-follower interactions (van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010). Thus, adopting a leadership style that pursues respect differs from other approaches due to the implementation of respectful daily practices that improve employees' autonomy and psychological involvement (Ng et al., 2021). The environment brought by this style empowers employees to contribute creatively and confidently, knowing that their contributions are valued and respected (Hai et al., 2022; LaGree et al., 2023). RL is related to the formation of favourable relational environments that enable people to communicate, work together efficiently and actively face the challenges of the organisation. In this context, LaGree et al. (2023) emphasise the importance of this type of environment to foster innovation. They explain that organisations can create the right conditions to encourage innovative thinking by improving emotional well-being and reducing stress in the workplace.

In line with this behavioural focus, in this study, innovation is conceptualised as an employee-level behavioural construct. This approach focuses on how individuals engage in the innovation process within their roles. In this regard, the model developed by Janssen (2000) is used to conduct the empirical analysis of the variable. The author describes the Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB) as a three-phase process. Idea Generation, which refers to coming up with novel and useful ideas; Idea Promotion, which is about gaining support and convincing others of the idea’s value; and Idea Realisation, which refers to implementing ideas into practical solutions. Widely validated in organisational psychology literature, this paradigm divides innovation into observable employee actions.

In recent years, several empirical studies have supported the link between RL and IWB. Among them, Basit’s (2019) research shows that respectful engagement increases employees' intrinsic motivation, thereby enhancing their discretionary effort and long-term organisational commitment. Similarly, Hai et al. (2022) support the view that perceived respect from leaders contributes to greater collaboration and alignment with organisational goals. In environments focused on innovation, where initiative, flexibility and proactive contributions are fundamental success elements, these impacts resulting from RL become highly significant.

Moreover, RL helps build a shared climate of fairness and openness, which reinforces employees' confidence to act creatively and responsibly. When workers find the respect and support of their managers, they are more likely to question habits, present innovative ideas and participate in actions that foster constant progress (Ng et al., 2021). These dynamics establish RL as a fundamental enabler of behavioural innovation, especially in environments that require flexibility, collaboration, and knowledge-based contributions.

Given these theoretical and empirical premises, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. Respectful Leadership is positively associated with employees' Innovative Work Behaviour.

2.3. Operationalising Innovation and Related Constructs

To empirically examine the relationship at the core of this research, the effect of Respectful Leadership on Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB) with the mediating role of Knowledge Sharing and Ethical Climate, it is important to identify valid and reliable measurements for these variables. The following subsection briefly introduces the validated scales that will be employed in this research.

Respectful Leadership will be analysed using the 12-item scale developed by van Quaquebeke & Eckloff (2010). This scale has demonstrated strong internal consistency and construct validity in previous studies. This tool aims to examine the extent to which leaders engage in treating employees with fairness, dignity and respect in their daily interactions. This scale examines how respectfully a leader behaves towards his or her followers, including aspects such as active listening, appreciation of contributions and recognition of each person's worth.

Knowledge Sharing will be assessed with the scale developed by Lu et al. (2006). This scale evaluates how frequently and openly employees exchange knowledge and expertise with their colleagues. It assesses the employee's behaviour within the firm where they are currently working in. It includes items related to knowledge donation and collection, both of which are critical for fostering innovation through collaborative learning and information integration.

Ethical Climate will be measured using the Ethical Climate Index (ECI), in its short form, developed by Arnaud (2010). An 18-item scale will analyse the employee's perception of the ethical context within the firm are currently working. This scale captures dimensions such as collective moral awareness, shared ethical values, and adherence to moral norms.

Organisational Innovation will be assessed through the employee's level of Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB) developed by Janssen (2000). This instrument assesses the full cycle of innovation at the individual level, including idea generation, idea promotion, and idea realisation. The IWB is an indicator of an organisation's innovative potential and responsiveness to change.

Each of these scales has been widely adopted in organisational research and provides a solid empirical foundation for the constructs explored in the theoretical framework. Their inclusion in this study supports both the internal validity and the generalizability of the findings, which will be further detailed in the methodology chapter.

2.4. Mediating Variables

A central element of this study concerns the role of certain mediating variables in the link between Respectful Leadership and innovation. This section analyses two key variables – knowledge sharing and the ethical climate – which act as intermediate mechanisms in the relationship between leadership and innovative behaviours.

2.4.1. Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing (KS) has been studied across different studies in different fields over the years. In the organisational literature, it is widely recognised as one of the key enablers of innovation, learning and overall performance. The research by Lu et al. (2006) defines this behaviour as the process through which individuals exchange knowledge, skills, and experiences with others to create new understanding, create value, solve problems, or enhance productivity. Van Den Hooff & De Ridder (2007) introduced the distinction of Knowledge Sharing in two distinct but interrelated dimensions: knowledge donation and knowledge collection. The former refers to the voluntary provision of one's

knowledge to others, and the latter refers to the colleague's consultations in order to get them to share their intellectual capital. This dual structure shows the proactive and receptive characteristics of the knowledge exchange (Castaneda & Cuellar, 2020).

2.4.1.1. The Strategic Importance of Knowledge Sharing for Innovation

In an innovative-driving context, Knowledge Sharing plays a crucial role in fostering organisational ambidexterity (Kamaşak & Bulutlar, 2010). This term refers to "the organisation's ability to be aligned and efficient in management to meet business needs while simultaneously adapting to environmental changes" (Yunita et al., 2023). Where the first refers to refining and improving existing products, processes, or capabilities, and the second refers to developing radically new ideas, technologies or markets. According to the authors, KS acts as a facilitator in enabling people to obtain new ideas with respect to their functional areas and in stimulating the reuse of internal knowledge already present.

The research conducted by Castaneda & Cuellar (2020) suggests that organisations with a high level of KS practices tend to demonstrate higher levels of innovation capability, adaptability, and competitive advantage. Knowledge Sharing brings various benefits to the organisation's teams; among these, enabling individuals to build on existing ideas, recombine insights across functions, and co-develop novel solutions are some of the essential ones to spread knowledge across the organisation. This is further confirmed when both tacit and explicit knowledge are mobilised since the former enhances intuition and experience-based insights, while explicit knowledge supports standardisation and scalability (Castaneda & Cuellar, 2020; Small & Sage, 2006).

2.4.1.2. Knowledge Sharing in Complex Organisational Contexts

The importance of knowledge sharing becomes even more pronounced in complex organisational environments, such as multinational corporations and knowledge-intensive firms. In such situations, it is essential to maintain a competitive advantage through the ability to share knowledge across geographies and cultural barriers within companies. Swart & Kinnie (2003) underline that in knowledge-intensive firms, a continuous mobilisation of human capital and effective knowledge exchange are two

essential criteria that enable these organisations to overcome fragmentation and sustain innovation. From the multinational corporation's side, it has been analysed by Gupta & Govindarajan (2000) that the success of innovation initiatives often hinges on the firm's ability to manage internal knowledge flows across diverse units. Therefore, in this context, having a high level of KS is a strategic necessity for coordinating efforts, combining diverse expertise, and fostering collaborative innovation.

According to Leonardi (2014), Knowledge Sharing should not be understood as a purely technical or transactional activity but rather as a socially embedded and relational process. The effectiveness of this capability within organisational teams depends on the presence of communication visibility, shared norms, and mutual accountability, which enable the timely exchange of relevant knowledge across functional and hierarchical boundaries. Organisations that effectively integrate KS features and are present in high-task interdependence and rapid market change contexts succeed in benefiting from the positive effects of the mechanism as they are able to adapt and innovate in response to dynamic challenges.

2.4.1.3. The Role of Respectful Leadership in Fostering Knowledge Sharing

Leadership plays a decisive role in creating the conditions to develop knowledge-sharing behaviour among employees. Respectful Leadership has been shown to create the interpersonal and psychological conditions necessary for KS to thrive. RL promotes fairness, dignity and openness, which are essential for developing a climate of trust and inclusion (van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010). Leaders who demonstrate respect through active listening, acknowledgement of contributions, and validation of concerns contribute to what Edmondson (1999) defines as *psychological safety*, a widespread conviction that the surroundings are safe for interpersonal risk-taking. Promoting this climate of safety increases employees' willingness to participate in collaborative knowledge processes (Carmeli et al., 2015; Stephens & Carmeli, 2017). In addition, the research conducted by LaGree et al. (2023) supports the positive correlation between RL and the enhancement of psychological safety, emotional well-being, and trust within teams. The authors underline how these elements are essential for innovation, and, more directly, for

fostering open and altruistic knowledge sharing, as employees feel more confident and less exposed to judgment when contributing ideas.

Stephens & Carmeli (2017) additionally analyse how RL plays a key role in impacting sustained innovation through the enhancement of collaborative learning and continuous improvement. In common with related leadership approaches, RL fosters trust and mutual respect, diminishing the fear of judgment or exploitation that often inhibits knowledge sharing (Ng et al., 2021).

Gerpott et al. (2020) conducted a study that framed the relationship between Respectful Leadership and Knowledge Sharing through the lens of social mindfulness. The research shows that RL impacts two components of prosocial motivation. These dimensions are perspective-taking and empathic concerns, which refer to the ability to understand others' needs and viewpoints and to the reflections of the emotional inclination to care about others' well-being. These dimensions allow the employee's willingness to offer help and support to their peers and be more connected with their colleagues' needs. Through these mechanisms, the leaders are able to enhance employees' willingness to share knowledge altruistically, even in the absence of a formal obligation to do so. The authors validated this statement through two rigorous studies that demonstrated that RL indirectly promotes KS via enhanced social mindfulness.

Given these dynamics, it is reasonable to hypothesise that Respectful Leadership fosters Knowledge Sharing within teams and across the organisation:

H2. Respectful Leadership is positively associated with Knowledge Sharing among employees.

2.4.1.4. Knowledge Sharing and Its Role in Innovation

Knowledge Sharing is recognised as a key enabler of organisational innovation at different levels. Through the active exchange of information, employees are able to build upon each other's ideas, identify patterns, and co-create novel solutions (Wang & Noe, 2010). Empirical studies have demonstrated that when employees engage in knowledge-sharing activities, they are more inclined to generate, promote, and implement new ideas

and behaviours central to the construct of Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB) (Janssen, 2000). Organisations that embrace this exchange behaviour are more agile and responsive to external changes and competitive pressures. Based on these factors the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. Knowledge Sharing is positively associated with employees' Innovative Work Behaviour.

Building on this, the mediating role of KS between leadership and innovation has been empirically supported by several studies. Lin (2007) and Udin et al. (2022) provide empirical evidence to argue that knowledge sharing functions as a key mediating mechanism through which leadership behaviour influences innovative work behaviour (IWB). Thus, their findings refer to the leader's ability to directly and indirectly influence innovation through the exploitation of knowledge sharing within organisational teams. This effect enables employees to build on shared insights and co-develop creative solutions. Additionally, Hai et al. (2022) confirm that the strengthening of the relational quality and emotional engagement, encouraged by Respectful Leadership, indirectly promotes innovative behaviours through the facilitation of KS. The study conducted by Haider et al. (2023) empirically supports the role of KS as a mediator of the effect of ambidextrous leadership on IWB. These findings support the idea that knowledge sharing is essential for unlocking the creative potential of employees.

Knowledge Sharing is not only a value characteristic that can be established within the organisation but is also a key mediating factor through which Respectful Leadership fosters innovation. The effects of RL, such as the stimulation of trust, social mindfulness and mutual respect, indirectly enhance innovation performance through improved knowledge flow. Based on this, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H4. Knowledge Sharing mediates the relationship between Respectful Leadership and Innovative Work Behaviour.

2.4.1.5. Constructive Voice Behaviour as a Facilitator of Knowledge Sharing

Beyond direct mechanisms, Respectful Leadership also fosters relational behaviours that facilitate the emergence of knowledge-sharing dynamics within organisations. Such behaviour is the constructive voice, which indicates the proactive expression of suggestions, and the voluntary sharing of proposals aimed at improving organisational functioning (Ng et al., 2021). This behaviour is not a form of knowledge sharing per se but contributes to the creation of an open and trustful environment in which information and insights are more likely to circulate.

Zhao et al. (2022) and Ng et al. (2021) suggest that in an environment where dissent or risk-taking is discouraged, a respectful approach by the leaders bring the employees to more inclined to speak up In this regard, Respectful leadership alleviates these inhibitions by promoting fairness, attentiveness and helpfulness, creating the psychological conditions essential for employees to express their ideas without worrying about negative consequences.

Constructive voice plays a supportive role in knowledge-sharing processes by enhancing team learning, collaboration, and proactive communication. As Detert & Burris (2007) point out, the free expression of suggestions contributes to better decision-making and stronger organisational adaptability. In addition, workers who receive respectful treatment often display more moral courage, emotional vitality and a sense of community, elements that make them more inclined to engage in collective learning and disseminate valuable knowledge with others (Zhao et al., 2022).

Thus, constructive voice behaviour can be considered a relational facilitator that amplifies the impact of Respectful Leadership on knowledge sharing, reinforcing the social conditions under which employees are more likely to exchange knowledge openly and effectively.

2.4.2. Ethical Climate

According to Victor & Cullen (1987), Ethical Climate (EC) concerns the common perceptions among organisational members about what constitutes proper ethical behaviour and how ethical issues should be addressed within the organisation. This term

refers to the moral atmosphere of the workplace and the ethical norms that guide decision-making and interpersonal conduct. In their successive work, Victor & Cullen (1988) combined three ethical criteria, egoism, benevolence, and principle, with three loci of analysis, individual, local and cosmopolitan, to develop a typology of ethical climate. This generates nine distinct ethical climate types, such as caring, instrumental, law and code. This framework provides a structured understanding of how different organisational values shape ethical decision-making. Their model has laid the foundation for subsequent empirical research; it has provided the conceptual basis for the development of tools such as the Ethical Climate Questionnaire (ECQ) and inspired modern approaches like Arnaud (2010) Ethical Climate Index. Building on this, Arnaud (2010) developed a multidimensional model of Ethical Climate based on the structure of collective moral character, which includes moral awareness, moral reasoning, and moral intent as dimensions embedded in organisational systems. The author discusses that ethical climates are not only the result of formal codes but also emerge from how ethical principles are shared, enacted, and reinforced across teams.

2.4.2.1. The Relevance of Ethical Climate for Organisational Functioning

The Ethical Climate within a firm plays a crucial role in influencing and shaping the leader's and employees' behaviours, especially in relation to ethical decision-making, cooperation, and engagement. This climate has the capability of not only affecting employees' moral decision-making and reducing deviant conduct but also promoting job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and trust (Simha & Cullen, 2012; Treviño et al., 1998). The moment employees perceive that their company follows moral principles, integrity and mutual accountability, they are more likely to behave ethically, cooperate with colleagues, and align their actions with the organisation's values (Treviño et al., 1998). Ethical Climate not only serves as a mechanism that aligns employee behaviour with ethical principles but also acts as an informal control mechanism that guides employees when formal rules may be absent or ambiguous (Wimbush & Shepard, 1994). Along with this statement, Appelbaum et al. (2005) demonstrate that weak ethical climates are associated with higher levels of deviant workplace behaviour, including dishonesty, rule-bending, and opportunistic conduct. Thus, this organisational setting

contributes not only to employee well-being and collaboration but also to the organisation's risk management and long-term integrity.

2.4.2.2. Ethical Climate in Complex and Dynamic Work Environments

The role of Ethical Climate becomes a crucial organisational factor in dynamic, knowledge-intensive, or globally dispersed organisations, characterised by an environment where employees must often navigate ambiguous or ethically sensitive terrain in the absence of formal procedures. In these contexts, this climate provides normative clarity, psychological safety, and shared standards that are crucial mechanisms to facilitate decision-making under pressure (Cullen et al., 2003). Moon & Choi (2014) empirically show that organisations with a strong ethical climate tend to exhibit higher levels of perceived innovation and organisational commitment, especially in volatile industries. A fundamental effect of EC concerns not only behaviour regulation but also the empowering of employees to take morally grounded initiatives, enhancing organisational adaptability and innovation outcomes. In this regard, Swart & Kinnie (2003) analysed that in knowledge-intensive firms, ethical climates reduce fragmentation and enable cross-functional collaboration and the diffusion of shared norms, while Gupta & Govindarajan (2000) assessed that in multinational corporations, ethical climate facilitates knowledge integration and coordination across geographically dispersed units.

2.4.2.3. The Role of Respectful Leadership in Shaping Ethical Climate

An important effect that RL brings to the organisation is the development of an ethical climate within the relationship between company members. Ethical climate refers to a shared perception among employees of what is considered ethically appropriate behaviour and how ethical issues should be handled within the organisation (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Through the leader's attitude of fostering fairness and recognition, they act as moral exemplars for modelling the values and norms to which employees will conform and will expect from their colleagues (van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010). The leader's behaviour within the organisation and their relationship with the followers help establish what is morally acceptable in the organisation.

The development of a collective sense of moral responsibility and fairness, which is fostered by Respectful Leadership, allows the leaders to strengthen the ethical sense of the entire organisation. Gerpott et al. (2020), through their research, further demonstrate that RL enhances employees' moral awareness and prosocial orientation, facilitating ethical decision-making and empowering employees to engage in constructive voice behaviour.

Consequently, organisations that foster respectful leadership are more likely to develop cultures in which ethical norms are internalised rather than imposed. This internalisation fosters accountability, mutual trust, and a willingness to act ethically even in the absence of external monitoring, a key condition for sustainable innovation and integrity.

H5. Respectful Leadership is positively associated with the development of an Ethical Climate.

2.4.2.4. Ethical Climate and Its Role in Innovation

A strong ethical climate can provide the psychological basis for promoting innovation within the company. Concerning this, EC ensures that employees feel free to express original ideas and challenge established practices. In organisations where fairness, accountability, and support for ethical conduct are evident, employees are more likely to take risks and engage in innovative behaviours without fear of retaliation (Janssen, 2000; Kalshoven et al., 2011). An ethical environment is a prerequisite for knowledge sharing and creativity, and when employees perceive their organisation as ethically sound, they are more intrinsically motivated to contribute to its improvement, including through innovation (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Consequently, we propose:

H6. Ethical Climate is positively associated with employees' Innovative Work Behaviour.

Building on these associations, recent research confirms the decisive role of Ethical Climate as a mediating mechanism between innovative outcomes and leadership. Different researchers suggest the positivity of leadership in influencing innovation in different ways. Kalshoven et al. (2011) analyse that ethical leadership enhances

innovative work behaviour (IWB) by fostering climates of fairness and care. This mechanism encourages risk-taking, open dialogue and creative thinking. Haider et al. (2023) reach an important result by stating that the ethical climate reinforces the positive influence of moral and inclusive leadership on innovative work behaviour, confirming its role as a contextual facilitator. Moon & Choi (2014) empirically support that Ethical Climate enhances organisational commitment and perceived innovation. These findings reinforce the notion that firms that want to promote behaviours such as idea generation, experimentation, and collaborative problem-solving should exploit the EC as a strategic tool to achieve their goals. In this context, it is evident that innovation is not only the result of individual creativity, but more a combination of ethical, relational and psychological factors influenced by leadership. These dynamics indicate that the ethical climate influences the relationship between respectful leadership and innovative work behaviour, fostering fairness, integrity and collective moral responsibility. In consideration of this, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H7. Ethical Climate mediates the relationship between Respectful Leadership and Innovative Work Behaviour.

The Ethical Climate is a critical variable that mediates the relationship between leadership and innovation. In this context, it represents a dynamic relational framework that facilitates voice, initiative and responsible experimentation. This environment, characterised by ethical behaviour, enables respectful leadership to foster sustainable innovation. In addition to knowledge sharing, it complements the theoretical basis that this research uses to investigate the mechanisms linking leadership to innovative outcomes.

2.5. Research Gap and Justification of the Study

Despite the growing interest in positive leadership styles and their influence on innovation, several gaps remain in the literature. While leadership styles such as transformational, ethical and inclusive have been extensively explored in the literature, the promising model of Respectful Leadership remains relatively understudied. Respectful leadership differs from the other styles mentioned above in that, rather than

relying on charisma, control, or the enforcement of norms, it prioritises dignity, fairness, and the acknowledgement of individuals' intrinsic worth in everyday interactions. This foundation aligns with the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), as it fosters employees' autonomy, competence, and relatedness—three psychological needs that are crucial for engaging in innovative behaviours. Given its distinctiveness and alignment with innovation-enabling conditions, RL deserves deeper investigation as a potential strategic driver of innovation.

Additionally, its relation and effect on innovation are not fully understood and analysed. Most existing studies focus on general innovation climate or creativity without examining specific psychological and relational processes, such as Knowledge Sharing and Ethical Climate, as mediating variables. These factors have rarely been tested within a unified empirical framework.

Finally, the existing studies tend to study innovation at an organisational level. This study addresses this limitation by adopting the Innovative Work Behaviour model aimed at assessing the behaviour perspective at an employee level.

By filling these gaps, this research aims to provide both theoretical insights into the relational foundations of innovation and practical implications for leadership development in organisations.

These theoretical foundations support the proposed conceptual framework, which is illustrated in the following diagram (Figure 1).

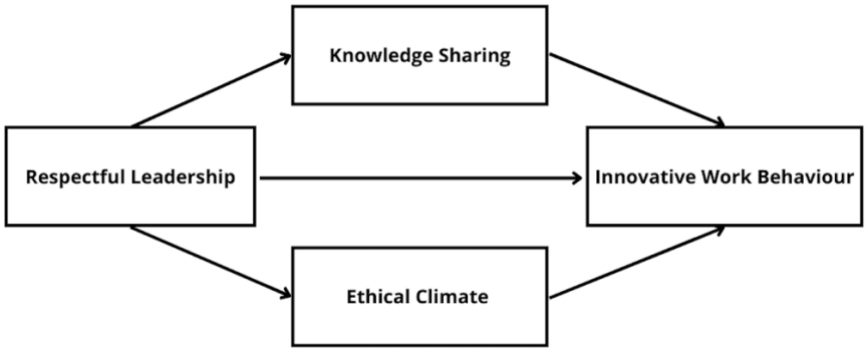

Figure 1. The relationship between Respectful Leadership and Innovative Work Behaviour, mediated by Knowledge Sharing and Ethical Climate

3. Empirical Study

3.1. Methodology

3.1.1. Research Objectives

The increasing complexity and dynamism of today's working environment demand that organisations continuously adapt and innovate to remain competitive. The function of leadership in this area is considered very significant not only from a strategic point of view, but also in fostering working environments that encourage experimentation, exchange of ideas and risk-taking (Anderson et al., 2014; Crossan & Apaydin, 2010). The present study investigates the potential of Respectful Leadership (RL) in fostering employees' Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB).

The theoretical model developed in this research is grounded in prior studies that suggest that respectful leader-follower interactions can influence innovation through indirect psychological and organisational mechanisms, such as Knowledge Sharing (KS) and ethical climate (EC) (Carmeli et al., 2015; Ng et al., 2021; van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010). Due to these findings, this research additionally aims to study the mediating role of these two variables in fostering Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB) among employees. The aim is to have a deep understanding of how leadership fosters respect and fairness in the company and can create the psychological and right conditions that enable employees to express their innovative potential.

The investigation is guided by the following Research Question: *How does Respectful Leadership influence employees' Innovative Work Behaviour, and to what extent is this relationship mediated by Knowledge Sharing and Ethical Climate?*

From this question, the following research objectives are derived:

- To analyse the direct relationship between Respectful Leadership and employees' Innovative Work Behaviour.
- To examine the mediating role of Knowledge Sharing in the relationship between RL and IWB.
- To examine the mediating role of Ethical Climate in the relationship between RL and IWB.

- To explore the extent to which RL contributes to shaping both Knowledge Sharing and Ethical Climate within the organisational context.
- To empirically validate a conceptual model that integrates relational leadership practices with innovation-enabling organisational mechanisms.

3.1.2. Research Design

For the purpose of this research, to address the above objectives, a quantitative and cross-sectional design using a parallel multiple mediation model (Model 4, Hayes PROCESS) has been considered to be the most appropriate for examining relationships among theoretical constructs and testing hypotheses derived from established literature (Creswell, 2003). The cross-sectional approach allows for the collection of a broad sample at a single point in time. This model allows for the analysis of intricate relational dynamics such as leadership behaviour, perceived organisational climate and innovation-related outcomes (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

The research relies on the administration of a structured online survey composed of validated scales for each construct. The survey was distributed to a heterogeneous sample of professionals working across different organisational roles, including non-managerial employees, team leaders, middle managers, and executives. This diversity among the sample enables the study of how Respectful Leadership and its supporting processes operate at multiple hierarchical levels, hence generating increased generalisability of results (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008).

The proposed model is theory-driven and draws upon established conceptual frameworks related to leadership, organisational behaviour, and innovation. The hypotheses have been formulated based on a comprehensive literature review and were presented progressively throughout Chapter 2.

In line with the quantitative model approach, the data collected through the survey will be analysed using correlational and regression-based statistical methods. Specifically, mediation effects will be tested using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4), which enables the estimation of indirect effects via bootstrapping procedures (Hayes, 2022). This approach is suitable for addressing the relationship and the mechanism between leadership behaviours and innovation-related outcomes. Prior to the analysis,

data will be screened for missing values and outliers, and the internal consistency of all measurement scales will be assessed using Cronbach's alpha.

For the listed companies and the ones included in in public dataset, secondary innovation indicators (e.g., R&D expenditure, patent count, innovation index) may be integrated at a later stage to enrich the interpretation of self-reported behaviours.

3.1.3. Sample and Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through an online survey, created and administered via the Qualtrics platform, and distributed between 13 March and 10 April 2025. Using a snowball sampling technique, the questionnaire was distributed through various platforms, including LinkedIn and WhatsApp, enabling it to reach a wide range of people. Participation was restricted to individuals over 18 years old; it was entirely voluntary and anonymous, and no incentives were offered. Participants, before the start of the questionnaire, were informed about the aims of the research and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All the data provided was processed exclusively for scientific and non-commercial research purposes. Under full accordance with the EU Regulation 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of personal data (GDPR), all answers were handled in aggregate form, ensuring complete anonymity and confidentiality. This approach was in line with the global ethical guidelines for social research, which stress respect for participant autonomy, informed consent, and protection of personal data ("The Belmont Report. Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research," 2014).

A total of 321 participants took part in the study. After preliminary data cleaning and screening for completeness, a final sample of 161 valid responses was retained for analysis. Specifically, 117 did not complete the survey, and 43 did not pass the screening questions. There were three requirements to answer the survey: to be employed, to have a leader, and not to be self-employed. The invalid responses refer to the participants who did not complete the survey or did not fit the inclusion criteria. The survey was sent across various organisational roles, from non-managerial employees to middle management and executives. This heterogeneity enables a deeper understanding of the relationship

between Respectful Leadership and Innovative Work Behaviour (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). To describe the composition of the sample, descriptive statistics were computed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 29.0.1.0 (171)).

The survey could be conducted in Italian or English, with 55.9% opting for Italian and 44.1% for English. The demographic composition of the sample was fairly balanced, with 50.93% male, 48.45% female and 0.62% non-binary or choosing not to reveal their gender.

The age of the sample was between 23 and 52 years old (m = 44.38 and s.d. = 11.68). Regarding marital status, 58% were married (N = 94), 19% were in a relationship (N = 30), 15% were single (N = 25), and 7% were separated or divorced (N = 12). Among the participants, 69.6% reported having children (N = 112), while 30.4% (N = 49) did not. In terms of educational background, the majority held a master's degree (N = 82, 51%), followed by PhD or postgraduate degrees (N = 28, 17%), and bachelor's degrees (N = 27, 17%). Among the respondents, only 2 reported education levels below a high school diploma.

Income distribution showed that most participants earned more than 50,000€ annually, 63 (39%) earning over 100,000€ and 44 (27%) between 50,000€ and 100,000€.

For job position, most were senior managers or similar (N = 56, 35%), employees (N = 48, 30%), and junior managers (N = 19, 12%). Only 2 participants were trainees/interns.

Most participants worked in the tertiary sector (services, banking, consultancy, etc.; N = 112, 70%), followed by the secondary sector (N = 46, 29%). Very few came from the primary sector (N = 1) or the army (N = 2). Regarding company size, most were employed in multinational corporations (N = 93, 58%), with others in big enterprises (N = 28), medium enterprises (N = 22), and small enterprises (N = 13).

3.1.4. Measures

In this study, all the variables were measured by means of some validated scales. For participants who selected Italian as the survey language, the original English items were translated to ensure clarity and contextual appropriateness. The translation process followed a semantic equivalence approach, with the support of bilingual reviewers to

ensure both conceptual and linguistic accuracy. Unless otherwise stated, responses were collected using Likert-type scales.

Respectful Leadership has been measured using the 12-item scale developed by van Quaquebeke & Eckloff (2010). This instrument gauges employees' degree of displaying a set of behaviours and attitudes expressing respect and admiration for their superiors. Example items include: “My leader treats me in a polite manner” and “My leader recognises my work”. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly Agree”). The scale, according to the authors, has shown high reliability in past studies (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.95$).

Knowledge Sharing was measured using an 8-item composite scale from Lu et al. (2006) with three items adapted from Bock & Kim (2002). Respondents rated how frequently they engage in behaviours such as “I take the initiative to share my work-related knowledge with my colleagues” or “I share with others useful work experience and know-how”. A 7-point Likert scale was used (1 = Never, 7 = Very frequently).

The Ethical Climate has been measured with the Ethical Climate Index (ECI) developed by Arnaud (2010). It has been used the short version of 18 items to capture six dimensions of collective ethical perceptions, such as moral sensitivity, empathy, and moral character. Example items include: “People in my department recognise a moral dilemma right away” and “People around here are aware of ethical issues”. Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly Agree”).

Innovative Work Behaviour was assessed using the 9-item scale by Janssen (2000), which examines three dimensions of innovation: idea generation, idea promotion, and idea realisation. Sample items include: “I generate original solutions for problems” and “I introduce innovative ideas into the work environment in a systematic way”. Participants rated the frequency of their behaviours on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = “Never”, 7 = “Always”).

To complement the analysis of IWB, objective innovation indicators were collected for the companies indicated by the respondents. These metrics were included as part of an exploratory analysis to assess whether employees’ perceptions of innovation-related behaviours (measured via IWB) are aligned with actual innovation outputs at the firm

level. The selection of these metrics is based on their wide use in empirical research and availability in financial databases. R&D Intensity is considered a standard proxy for firms' innovation investment; Intangible Assets, with a focus on patents, reflect the knowledge-based capital of an organisation; the Environmental Innovation Score captures the firm's innovation performance related to sustainability; finally, the presence of new product launches serves as a qualitative proxy for output innovation. The selection of firms was limited to the ones listed or present in the Refinitiv database. In total, 114 distinct firms were identified by the valid survey respondents. Among these, data for at least one of the selected innovation indicators were successfully retrieved for a subset ranging from 35 to 52 companies, depending on the specific metric. Every metric was extracted for the most recent available year (2023 or 2024) using Refinitiv and publicly available annual reports. The following indicators were retrieved:

- R&D Intensity: calculated as R&D expenditure / total revenue × 100
- Intangible Assets: with a focus on patents (when available)
- Environmental Innovation Score: from Refinitiv ESG metrics
- Product Innovation Presence: binary variable (1 = new products launched, 0 = none identified).

The indicators were associated with the corresponding participants in the survey dataset. Only participants whose company had at least one of these indicators available were retained for the respective analyses. Missing values were left blank to be automatically excluded by the analysis software (SPSS). Regarding the Intangible Assets, the values have been standardised in millions of US dollars (USD), using exchange rates updated to 14 April 2025, to ensure consistency across companies reporting in different currencies.

A complete list of all scale items, in both English and Italian, is available in the Appendix for reference.

Internal consistency for each construct will be assessed in the next chapter through Cronbach's alpha coefficients.

3.1.5. Data Analysis Strategy

To address the research question and the hypotheses, a quantitative data analysis strategy was developed based on regression-based mediation analysis. All data have been analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 29.0.1.0 (171)) and the PROCESS macro by Hayes (2022) model 4, which is specifically designed to assess mediation effects by using bootstrapping methods (5000 samples) to assess the significance of the indirect effects. Statistical significance was evaluated using a conventional threshold of $p < .05$ (two-tailed), unless otherwise specified.

The dataset has been screened before the analysis to check for missing values, outliers, and normality of distribution. Participants who did not complete the survey (progress 100%) and those who did not pass the initial screening questions were removed from the analysis. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum values, were used to investigate the dataset before beginning hypothesis testing. These measures provide an early understanding of the data and will help identify some possible anomalies.

Prior to conducting the analyses, all variables were standardised using z-scores to ensure comparability and to meet the assumptions of the regression models. To ensure the reliability of the measurement instruments, internal consistency has been analysed via Cronbach's alpha for each of the four scales. An alpha value of 0.70 or higher has been considered acceptable, in line with methodological standards (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

The hypotheses were tested sequentially:

- First, direct relationships were tested through simple and multiple linear regressions.
- Second, the mediating effects of Knowledge Sharing and Ethical Climate were tested via parallel mediation models (PROCESS Model 4).

In all regression models, the following covariates were included: language, gender, age, marital status, children, education, income, job level, industry, and company size. Control variables were included since prior research has shown that these demographic

and organisational factors can influence employees' perceptions of leadership (Ng et al., 2021), ethical climate (Martin & Cullen, 2006), and innovation-related behaviours (Anderson et al., 2014; Carmeli et al., 2015). Controlling for these variables helps isolate the unique effects of Respectful Leadership and its mediators on Innovative Work Behaviour.

The hypotheses have been tested as follows: H1. A multiple linear regression has been used to evaluate the direct effect of Respectful Leadership (independent variable) on Innovative Work Behaviour (dependent variable). H2. A multiple linear regression has been used to test the association between Respectful Leadership (independent variable) and Knowledge Sharing (dependent variable). H3. A multiple linear regression has been used to test the effect of Knowledge Sharing (independent variable) on employees' Innovative Work Behaviour (dependent variable). H4. A mediation analysis using PROCESS (Model 4) has been conducted to test whether Knowledge Sharing (mediator) mediates the relationship between Respectful Leadership (independent variable) and Innovative Work Behaviour (dependent variable). H5. A multiple linear regression has been used to assess the association between Respectful Leadership (independent variable) and Ethical Climate (dependent variable). H6. A multiple linear regression has been used to test the effect of Ethical Climate (independent variable) on employees' Innovative Work Behaviour (dependent variable). H7. A mediation analysis has been conducted to examine whether Ethical Climate (mediator) mediates the relationship between Respectful Leadership (independent variable) and Innovative Work Behaviour (dependent variable).

For the analyses involving objective innovation metrics, due to small sample sizes (35-50 participants, depending on the metric), exploratory multiple linear regressions were conducted rather than mediation models due to insufficient statistical power. Respectful Leadership, Knowledge Sharing, and Ethical Climate (along with covariates) were used as predictors for each objective innovation metric.

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Reliability analysis

To assess the internal consistency of the scales used in the study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each measure. All the scales demonstrated a good level of reliability with values exceeding the thresholds of 0.70 indicated by Nunnally & Bernstein (1994).

Specifically, the following alphas have been identified for the different scales: Respectful Leadership ($\alpha = 0.944$), Knowledge Sharing ($\alpha = 0.812$), Ethical Climate ($\alpha = 0.901$), and Innovative Work Behaviour ($\alpha = 0.937$). Given these results, no item deletion was necessary to improve the reliability of the scales, and all items were retained for further analyses.

3.2.2. Descriptive Statistics

Before testing the hypotheses, descriptive statistics were computed to provide an overview of the sample characteristics and the main study variables. Table 2 summarises the mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum values (raw scores) for all the key variables analysed in this study.

The analysis outcomes indicate that the average level of Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB) in the sample was 41.75 (SD = 10.98), while Knowledge Sharing (KS) showed a mean of 44.32 (SD = 6.84). The Ethical Climate (EC) dimension reported a mean value of 63.26 (SD = 10.40), and Respectful Leadership (RL) had a mean of 47.98 (SD = 9.00).

Concerning objective innovation indicators, the available data showed an average R&D intensity of 0.0673% in 2024 and 0.0590% in 2023. Intangible assets (measured in millions of dollars) showed a wide dispersion (M = 13,362.26; SD = 18,893.69), indicating a strong variability among the organisations indicated by the respondents. The Environmental Innovation Score averaged 64.24 out of 100 (SD = 30.64), suggesting a moderate orientation toward sustainability-related innovation. Among the companies analysed, 90% had launched new products recently, according to available external data. These initial results suggest substantial variability both in employees' perceptions of the

organisational environment and in the firms' external innovation outputs, offering a robust basis for the subsequent hypothesis testing.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	**Minimum**	**Maximum**	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
Innovative Work Behaviour	161	9	63	41.75	10.98
Knowledge Sharing	161	17	56	44.32	6.83
Ethical Climate	161	29	85	63.26	10.39
Respectful Leadership	161	12	60	47.98	9.00
R&D Intensity (2024)	35	0.00	0.94	0.07	0.16
R&D Intensity (2023)	35	0.00	0.81	0.06	0.14
Intangible Assets – Patents (USD M)	49	0.03	116377.00	13362.26	18893.69
Env. Innovation Score (out of 100)	42	0	96	64.24	30.639
New Products (AR)	52	0	1	0.90	0.298

3.2.3. Hypothesis Testing: Direct Effects

To test and analyse the hypothesis developed in the Literature Review chapter a series of multiple linear regressions were conducted, using z-scored variables to ensure comparability. All regressions conducted included the control variables: language, gender, age, marital status, children, education, income, job level, industry sector, and company size as covariates.

The first hypothesis was tested to evaluate the role of Respectful Leadership (RL) in predicting Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB). The regression results are summarised in Table 3. The regression model was statistically significant ($F[11, 149] = 4.93$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.267$). Respectful Leadership had a marginally significant positive effect on IWB ($\beta = 0.133$, $p = 0.077$), indicating a trend in the expected direction, but not reaching the conventional threshold of significance. Among the covariates, education had a strong and statistically significant effect on IWB ($\beta = 0{,}412$, $p < 0.001$). None of the other covariates were found to be significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is marginally supported.

Table 3 Linear Regression Y: IWB X: RL

	β	**SE**	**t**	**p**
Respectful Leadership	0.133	0.075	1.779	0.077
Language	0.124	0.154	0.806	0.422
Gender	-0.142	0.136	-1.041	0.299
Age	0.001	0.009	0.143	0.886
Marital status	-0.052	0.131	-0.394	0.694
Children	-0.182	0.251	-0.725	0.470
Education	0.412	0.087	4.754	0.000
Income	-0.016	0.079	-0.198	0.843
Job position	0.072	0.085	0.844	0.400
Industry	0.072	0.117	0.613	0.541
Size	0.103	0.072	1.433	0.154

The second regression analysis assessed the association between RL and Knowledge Sharing (KS). The overall model was significant ($F[11, 149] = 4.900$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .267$).

Respectful Leadership had a significant and positive effect on Knowledge Sharing (β = 0.265, p = .001).

In terms of control variables, education (β = 0.161, p = .065), income (β = 0.143, p = .073), and language (β = 0.292, p = .06) showed marginal effects, while other covariates were not significant (Table 4). Consequently, Hypothesis 2 is supported.

Table 4 Linear Regression Y: KS X: RL

	β	**S.E.**	**t**	**p**
Respectful Leadership	0.265	0.075	3.543	0.001
Language	0.292	0.154	1.897	0.060
Gender	0.110	0.137	0.807	0.421
Age	0.016	0.009	1.720	0.087
Marital status	0.151	0.131	1.152	0.251
Children	-0.288	0.251	-1.145	0.254
Education	0.161	0.087	1.858	0.065
Income	0.143	0.079	1.806	0.073
Job position	-0.029	0.085	-0.345	0.730
Industry	0.072	0.117	0.616	0.539
Size	-0.001	0.072	-0.007	0.994

This regression model assessed the influence of Knowledge Sharing on IWB. The model was statistically significant ($F[11, 149] = 4.943$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .304$). Knowledge Sharing had a strong, positive effect on IWB (β = 0.333, p < .001), confirming H3.

Among the covariates, education had a strong and statistically significant effect on IWB (β = 0,357, p < 0.001). None of the other covariates were found to be significant (Table 5).

Table 5 Linear Regression Y: IWB X: KS

	β	**S.E.**	**t**	**p**
Knowledge Sharing	0.333	0.075	4.468	0.000
Language	0.019	0.146	0.129	0.898
Gender	-0.184	0.129	-1.426	0.156
Age	-0.005	0.009	-0.548	0.584
Marital status	-0.081	0.122	-0.669	0.504
Children	-0.117	0.236	-0.494	0.622
Education	0.357	0.083	4.298	0.000
Income	-0.055	0.075	-0.726	0.469
Job position	0.078	0.081	0.969	0.334
Industry	0.044	0.111	0.391	0.696
Size	0.105	0.068	1.538	0.126

The regression model testing the relationship between RL and Ethical Climate (EC) was also statistically significant ($F[11, 149] = 5.477$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .287$). Respectful Leadership strongly predicted Ethical Climate ($\beta = 0.522$, $p < .001$), providing robust support for H5.

Additionally, age showed a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.027$, $p = .004$), indicating that older employees perceive a more positive ethical climate. No other control variables showed statistically significant effects (Table 6).

Table 6 Linear Regression Y: EC X: RL

	β	**S.E.**	**t**	**p**
Respectful Leadership	0.522	0.074	7.077	0.000
Language	-0.142	0.151	-0.935	0.351
Gender	-0.135	0.135	-1.000	0.319
Age	0.027	0.009	2.949	0.004
Marital status	-0.165	0.129	-1.282	0.202
Children	0.190	0.248	0.766	0.445
Education	0.097	0.085	1.131	0.260
Income	-0.081	0.078	-1.035	0.302
Job position	-0.083	0.084	-0.991	0.323
Industry	-0.041	0.116	-0.350	0.727
Size	-0.046	0.071	-0.648	0.518

Finally, the model exploring the relationship between Ethical Climate and IWB was also significant ($F[11, 149] = 5.044$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .261$). Ethical Climate was found to be a significant predictor of IWB ($\beta = 0.145$, $p = .045$), supporting H6. Education remained a significant covariate ($\beta = 0.396$, $p < .001$), suggesting its consistent role in explaining IWB across models (Table 7).

Table 7 Linear Regression Y: IWB X: EC

	β	S.E.	t	p
Ethical Climate	0.145	0.072	2.017	0.045
Language	0.134	0.154	0.875	0.383
Gender	-0.130	0.137	-0.952	0.343
Age	-0.004	0.009	-0.390	0.697
Marital status	-0.001	0.126	-0.009	0.993
Children	-0.249	0.246	-1.013	0.313
Education	0.396	0.087	4.574	0.000
Income	0.007	0.078	0.094	0.925
Job position	0.080	0.085	0.933	0.352
Industry	0.072	0.117	0.618	0.538
Size	0.112	0.072	1.560	0.121

3.2.4. Hypothesis Testing: Mediation Effects

To further understand the impact that Respectful Leadership has on the Innovative Work Behaviour, a parallel mediation model (PROCESS Model 4 by Hayes, 2022) was conducted. The model tested the mediating effects of Knowledge Sharing (KS) and Ethical Climate (EC), controlling for language, gender, age, marital status, children, education, income, job level, industry sector, and company size. All variables were standardised using Z-scores prior to the analysis. Therefore, the reported unstandardised coefficients (B) are based on standardised data.

For Knowledge Sharing (KS) as the outcome, namely, the part of the model testing the effect of respectful leadership on KS, the model was found overall significant ($F[11, 149] = 4.90$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .266$). Respectful Leadership had a significant positive effect

on KS (B = 0.265, SE = 0.074, t = 3.54, p = .0005). Among covariates, age (p = 0.09), education (p = .065) and income (p = .072) showed a marginal trend (Table 8).

Table 8. Regression coefficients for KS as outcome variable

	β	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Respectful Leadership	0.27	0.07	3.54	0.00	0.12	0.41
Language	0.29	0.15	1.90	0.06	-0.01	0.60
Gender	0.11	0.14	0.81	0.42	-0.16	0.38
Age	0.02	0.01	1.72	0.09	0.00	0.03
Marital status	0.15	0.13	1.15	0.25	-0.11	0.41
Children	-0.29	0.25	-1.14	0.25	-0.78	0.21
Education	0.16	0.09	1.86	0.07	-0.01	0.33
Income	0.14	0.08	1.81	0.07	-0.01	0.30
Job position	-0.03	0.09	-0.35	0.73	-0.20	0.14
Industry	0.07	0.12	0.62	0.54	-0.16	0.30
Size	0.00	0.07	-0.01	0.99	-0.14	0.14

For Ethical Climate (EC) as the outcome – namely, the part of the model testing whether respectful leadership predicted EC - the model was also significant ($F[11, 149] = 5.48$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .287$). RL had a strong effect on EC ($\beta = 0.522$, $p < .001$), with age again showing a positive effect ($\beta = 0.03$, $p = .004$).

Table 9. Regression coefficients for EC as outcome variable

	β	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Respectful Leadership	0.52	0.07	7.08	0.00	0.38	0.67
Language	-0.14	0.15	-0.94	0.35	-0.44	0.16
Gender	-0.13	0.13	-1.00	0.32	-0.40	0.13
Age	0.03	0.01	2.95	0.00	0.01	0.05
Marital status	-0.17	0.13	-1.28	0.20	-0.42	0.09

Children	0.19	0.25	0.77	0.45	-0.30	0.68
Education	0.10	0.09	1.13	0.26	-0.07	0.27
Income	-0.08	0.08	-1.04	0.30	-0.23	0.07
Job position	-0.08	0.08	-0.99	0.32	-0.25	0.08
Industry	-0.04	0.12	-0.35	0.73	-0.27	0.19
Size	-0.05	0.07	-0.65	0.52	-0.19	0.09

Finally, for IWB as the outcome, the overall model was significant ($F[13, 147] = 5.92$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .343$). In this full model, KS had a strong and statistically significant effect on IWB ($B = 0.31$, $SE = 0.079$, $t = 3.91$, $p = .0001$), while EC was not a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.049$, $p = .538$). RL did not have a direct effect on IWB in this model ($\beta = 0.025$, $p = .766$), suggesting potential full mediation.

Table 10. Regression coefficients for IWB as outcome variable

	β	**SE**	**t**	**p**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Respectful Leadership	0.02	0.08	0.30	0.77	-0.14	0.19
Knowledge Sharing	0.31	0.08	3.91	0.00	0.15	0.47
Ethical Climate	0.05	0.08	0.62	0.54	-0.11	0.21
Language	0.04	0.15	0.27	0.79	-0.25	0.33
Gender	-0.17	0.13	-1.30	0.20	-0.43	0.09
Age	-0.01	0.01	-0.54	0.59	-0.02	0.01
Marital status	-0.09	0.13	-0.71	0.48	-0.34	0.16
Children	-0.10	0.24	-0.42	0.67	-0.58	0.37
Education	0.36	0.08	4.27	0.00	0.19	0.52
Income	-0.06	0.08	-0.73	0.47	-0.21	0.10
Job position	0.09	0.08	1.05	0.30	-0.08	0.25
Industry	0.05	0.11	0.46	0.65	-0.17	0.27
Size	0.11	0.07	1.54	0.13	-0.03	0.24

The analyses showed that the direct effect of RL on IWB was not statistically significant (β = 0.02, p = 0.77, CI [–0.14, 0.19]). However, the analysis indicated the statistical significance of the indirect effect of Respectful Leadership on Innovative Work Behaviour via Knowledge Sharing (β = 0.08, CI [0.02, 0.17]), as the confidence interval did not include zero. This result supports Hypothesis 4, confirming the mediating role of Knowledge Sharing.

In contrast, the indirect effect through Ethical Climate was not significant (β = 0.03, CI [–0.06, 0.11]), as the confidence interval included zero (i.e., it spanned both negative and positive values), indicating that the indirect effect was not statistically significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 7 is not supported.

Table 11. Mediation Analysis, Indirect Effects

	β	**BootSE**	**BootLLCI**	**BootULCI**
Total	0.11	0.05	0.00	0.22
Knowledge Sharing	0.08	0.04	0.02	0.17
Ethical Climate	0.03	0.04	-0.06	0.11

According to these findings, the relationship between Innovative Work Behaviour and Respectful Leadership is mediated by Knowledge Sharing, whereas the relationship between the variables is not mediated by Ethical Climate.

3.2.5. Exploratory Analysis: Objective Innovation Indicators

Exploratory multiple linear regressions were conducted using objective innovation indicators as dependent variables to complement the analysis of Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB) and assess the alignment between perceived behaviours and actual firm-level innovation.

The regression analysis regarding the effect of the predictors KS, EC and RL, along with the control variables did not show any statistically significant effects on the following objective innovation indicators: R&D intensity 2024 (Table A) and 2023 (Table B), Intangible Assets – Patents (in USD million; Table C), and Environmental Innovation Score (out of 100; Table D). The count of valid observations differed by indicator because of the data available in Refinitiv and public sources: n = 35 for R&D

Intensity (2023 and 2024), n = 49 for Intangible Assets, n = 42 for Environmental Innovation Score, and n = 52 for New Product Launches.

The only significant predictor in the New Products regression model was company size, which showed a statistically significant positive association with the probability of having launched new products (B = 0.560, p = .045; Table E). RL, KS, and EC did not significantly predict this innovation output. The results presented are referenced in the appendix (Tables A-E).

4. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore the relational mechanisms through which Respectful Leadership (RL) promotes Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB) of employees, evaluating the possible mediating role of Knowledge Sharing (KS) and Ethical Climate (EC). The results provide significant insights into these dynamics.

Research results show that RL directly, positively and significantly predicted both KS and EC. This result supports the idea that respectful and fair leadership promotes both knowledge exchange and shared ethical values within organisations. A second statistically significant result was identified in the role of KS as a predictor both in direct relationship with IWB and as a mediator in the relationship between RL and IWB. Conversely, although EC was significantly related to both RL and IWB in the regression models, it did not mediate the relationship in the parallel mediation model, as its indirect effect was not statistically significant.

Finally, no significant associations were identified between RL, KS, EC and the objective innovation indicators at the company level, possibly due to the extremely low sample size, and consequently the limited statistical power of the analyses.

A key contribution of this study is the confirmation of the central role of Respectful Leadership in fostering Knowledge Sharing, a result fully aligned with prior empirical research. The study of Ng et al. (2021), analysed in the literature review chapter, supports the positive relationship of leadership that promotes respect and dignity with a greater inclination of employees to promote their ideas and fully share their knowledge. In this regard, this research confirms that when the organisational climate is characterised by

respect and fairness, knowledge sharing mechanisms are activated and disseminated among employees. Similarly, Gerpott et al. (2020) concluded that RL leads to increased moral awareness and prosocial orientation of employees, which are two fundamental antecedents of voluntary and altruistic knowledge-sharing behaviour.

The significant direct effect of RL on KS, demonstrated in this research, suggests that Respectful Leadership has a dual role within organisational settings. It not only shapes ethical perceptions among the employees but also creates psychological safety and trust, which are essential for triggering active and spontaneous KS within organisations (Carmeli et al., 2015). This result reinforces the view that RL is not merely a relational or ethical approach but also acts as a strategic driver for knowledge-related processes and, by extension, for organisational learning and innovation.

An additional finding, aligning with an extensive body of literature, demonstrates that Knowledge Sharing (KS) is a significant predictor of Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB). This evidence reinforces the key role that KS plays, as widely documented, in stimulating innovative processes at the individual level. Supporting this concept are the studies of Carmeli et al. (2015) and Stephens & Carmeli (2017) where the authors highlight that when employees freely share knowledge and ideas, they contribute to a climate of creativity, which in turn facilitates idea generation, idea promotion, and idea realisation, the core dimensions of IWB as defined by Janssen (2000). In this regard, the view that KS serves as a proximal antecedent of IWB, enhancing employees' ability to innovate and contribute creatively to organisational goals, is supported by the study's findings.

Furthermore, the analysis conducted showed a strong positive association between RL and Ethical Climate (EC), further validating existing theoretical frameworks. According to the research of van Quaquebeke & Eckloff (2010), respectful leaders act as moral role models, shaping collective norms and influencing followers' sense of what constitutes ethical conduct in the workplace. The current results corroborate this theoretical proposition, suggesting that RL plays a pivotal role in strengthening the organisation's ethical infrastructure and collective sense of moral responsibility.

Among the control variables included in the analysis, education level emerged as a consistent and significant positive predictor of IWB across multiple models. This suggests that employees with higher educational attainment may possess broader cognitive and

informational resources or hold positions that offer more autonomy and opportunities for innovation, which could explain their greater propensity to engage in innovative behaviour. The control variable age was found to be significant concerning Ethical Climate. This result suggests that older and more experienced employees perceive organisational environments based on ethical principles more, probably due to their familiarity with company norms.

These last findings offer additional insight into how demographic and professional factors shape employees' innovation-related attitudes and experiences, and they point to the relevance of individual differences in future research on workplace innovation.

These mediators were selected based on prior research suggesting that relational and ethical factors are key mechanisms through which leadership styles shape innovation processes (Carmeli et al., 2015; van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010). Considering the mediation analysis of the EC between the RL and IWB variables, a more nuanced and complex picture emerges. Although in the first instance the linear regression analysis indicates that RL impacts EC, and EC impacts IWB, the mediation effect in the relative analysis was not statistically significant.

A first possible justification for this non-significant result is based on the possible conceptual overlap between respectful leadership (RL) and ethical climate (EC). The two constructs share similar and even the same principles on which they are rooted, such as the principles of fairness, moral concern and respect for others. This similarity may explain similar psychological dynamics. This similarity might reduce the explanatory distinctiveness of EC in the mediation model, as much of the variance in IWB may already be captured by RL. A second reason could be that EC operates more effectively as a moderating variable, influencing the strength of other relationships, such as the impact of Knowledge Sharing on IWB. In other words, EC might improve the circumstances that allow relational mechanisms to lead to innovation, instead of serving as a mediating channel.

This finding, compared to the other mediating variable, Knowledge Sharing, suggests that EC may exert a less direct or immediate impact on IWB. The studies by Brown & Treviño (2006) and Arnaud (2010) suggest that EC reflects perceptions of what is ethically accepted in terms of ethical behaviour and environment within the organisation.

Therefore, these perceptions have the power to indirectly influence innovative behaviour through the promotion of trust and procedural justice, but cannot directly stimulate idea generation or risk-taking, which are more closely related to everyday interpersonal exchanges and knowledge-sharing activities. In line with this interpretation, Detert & Burris (2007) also argued that ethical climates, while important, may not always predict proactive behaviours unless combined with other enabling conditions (such as psychological safety and voice encouragement).

Additionally, the absence of a direct effect of RL on IWB in the full mediation model reinforces the idea that this relationship operates primarily through indirect mechanisms, especially via KS. This is consistent with the view that leadership styles influence innovative behaviours largely through shaping relational dynamics and knowledge processes rather than through direct influence (Carmeli et al., 2015; Stephens & Carmeli, 2017).

The analysis conducted resulted in non-significant findings regarding the impact of RL, KS and EC on objective innovation indicators (R&D intensity, Intangible Assets - Patents, Environmental Innovation Score, and New Products). Although these null results may seem inconsistent with micro-level findings, they align with prior literature that emphasises the multi-level nature of innovation. As argued by Anderson et al. (2014), innovation occurs across multiple levels, individual, team, and organisational, and while individual-level innovative behaviours (such as IWB) are essential for idea generation and local problem solving, they do not necessarily or immediately translate into macro-level outputs such as patents, R&D spending, or new product launches. Moreover, the small subsample sizes (ranging from 35 to 52 participants) used for these regressions likely reduced the statistical power of the analyses, limiting the ability to detect potential effects. This issue of limited sample size is well known in statistical modelling and suggests that findings should be interpreted cautiously, as even moderate real-world relationships can remain undetected in underpowered designs (Hayes, 2022).

Taken together, these results suggest that while RL, KS, and EC are important predictors of individual-level innovation, their influence on firm-level innovation outputs remains indirect and potentially contingent on other organisational and contextual

variables not examined in this study (e.g., organisational resources, industry characteristics, market competition).

4.1. Theoretical Contributions

The presented findings contribute to the existing literature in several important ways. By analysing and testing the relationship between Respectful Leadership and Innovative Work Behaviour, through multiple mediating mechanisms, the research fills in and adds important findings regarding the study of how relational leadership styles adopted by leaders to shape innovation processes within organisations. The existing literature has focused widely on the connection between positive leadership styles, such as transformational, ethical, and inclusive leadership, and employee creativity and innovation (Carmeli et al., 2015; Ng et al., 2021; Stephens & Carmeli, 2017). This study fills the limited attention that existing literature has given to Respectful Leadership in this domain. The aim is to extend the research on RL, seeking to highlight its relevance and explanatory power in the context of knowledge-intensive innovation processes.

Important evidence that emerges from the analysis refers to the role of Knowledge Sharing (KS) as a key mediating mechanism between RL and IWB. This aligns with and extends prior research that has conceptualised KS as a critical antecedent of innovative behaviours (Carmeli et al., 2015; Stephens & Carmeli, 2017). By integrating RL into this model, the study highlights the relational antecedents of KS, showing that respectful and fair leadership styles facilitate the interpersonal trust and psychological safety necessary for knowledge exchange to occur. As the literature has been focusing on knowledge-based companies and economies in recent years, this contribution serves as a crucial link between relational leadership theories and the mechanisms underlying knowledge-driven innovation processes. Therefore, this topic offers relevant insights for organisational behaviour research, particularly in contexts where knowledge exchange and collaboration are critical drivers of innovation.

The analysis offers some additional insights into the role of Ethical Climate in the context of the discussion. As mentioned above, EC was found to be strongly predicted by RL and to have a direct relationship with IWB in simple regressions, but despite this direct relationship, its mediating role was not confirmed in the more complex parallel

mediation model. These results align with the theoretical debate by suggesting that while ethical perceptions create important normative contexts within organisations (Arnaud, 2010; Brown & Treviño, 2006), they do not directly relate and stimulate individual-level innovative actions without being complemented by other relational or motivational drivers. This adds complexity to existing frameworks, which often assume linear and direct pathways between ethical climates and proactive behaviours. Furthermore, by incorporating objective firm-level innovation indicators alongside self-reported measures, this study advances methodological approaches in innovation research. While no significant relationships were identified between RL, KS, EC and macro-level innovation outcomes, this finding supports multi-level models of innovation that distinguish between micro-level drivers of innovative behaviour and macro-level performance outputs (Anderson et al., 2014). Although statistical significance was not reached, the observed trend between company size and new product launches suggests that, with greater statistical power, future research could uncover more nuanced relationships between organisational characteristics and innovation outcomes. The study thus reinforces the importance of recognising and theorising about the boundaries and conditions under which individual-level innovation translates (or does not translate) into organisational outcomes.

4.2. Managerial Implications

From the results of the research, managers and leaders can draw several insights into the practices and behaviours they can implement to increase organisational innovation. In this context, the research suggests that respectful and relational leadership styles may play a supporting role in fostering innovative behaviours among workers. As already mentioned, it has been highlighted that Respectful Leadership promotes Knowledge Sharing (KS), which has been shown to be an essential precursor of Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB).

In practical terms, this suggests that organisations seeking to enhance innovation should prioritise the development of respectful and fairness-oriented leadership practices. Unlike more directive or purely task-focused approaches, RL emphasises dignity, interpersonal consideration, and appreciation for employees' contributions. Such an

approach appears to create psychologically safe environments in which employees feel encouraged to openly share ideas, experiences, and expertise. This is especially valuable in knowledge-intensive industries, where innovation largely depends on employees' willingness and ability to exchange information and collaboratively solve problems.

The findings on knowledge sharing raise important perspectives for HR and business developers. The study suggests that companies should focus on surfacing interpersonal knowledge sharing processes rather than solely applying formal knowledge management systems and tools. Training programs designed to promote a respectful behaviour by the leaders, along with initiatives to promote trust and reduce knowledge hoarding, could therefore play a pivotal role in enhancing innovative outcomes.

Furthermore, although Ethical Climate (EC) did not show a mediating effect in the parallel mediation model, its positive association with RL and IWB in simpler models suggests that ethical and value-based organisational climates still matter. Concerning this, managers should still recognise that ethical standards and moral integrity are core elements for strengthening employees' sense of belonging and fairness, which indirectly support innovation-friendly environments. Notwithstanding this, the results show that ethical climates alone may not be sufficient to directly drive innovative behaviours unless coupled with relational and motivational mechanisms.

Finally, the absence of significant findings concerning the impact of RL, KS and EC on objective macro-level innovation indicators (such as R&D intensity, patents, or product launches) should not discourage managers. These results highlight how the discussed leadership style, but in general relational leadership styles, are fundamental at the level of personal perception in terms of innovation (micro), but to transform such micro perceptions into a macro level of organisational output, probably further strategic commitments and conditions are necessary. These could translate into aligning HR practices, resource allocation, and organisational structure with innovation objectives.

Ultimately, the results demonstrate how a respectful leadership style not only has an impact on the behavioural side of employees but is also a key strategic element in promoting innovation at the individual level. RL succeeds in impacting innovation processes on two distinct levels. It models individual actions, such as voice and knowledge sharing, and secondly, it promotes organisational climates characterised by

fairness and psychological safety. By cultivating leadership styles focused on relationships and facilitating contexts in which knowledge circulates freely, managers can generate the conditions for continuous innovation and organisational adaptability.

4.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although this study makes important contributions both theoretically and practically, and although rigorous and validated methodologies were applied to conduct the study, several limitations must be acknowledged.

The first limitation refers to the research design of the study, which was cross-sectional; this typology limits the ability to draw causal inferences. Although mediation analysis and theoretical framing provide support for the proposed directional relationships, longitudinal or experimental studies would be necessary to establish temporal precedence and confirm causal mechanisms.

A second limitation is related to the survey methodology. The key constructs were measured via self-report questionnaires, which may introduce common method bias and social desirability effects. Although standard techniques were applied to reduce these risks (e.g., anonymity, validated scales, item mixing), future studies could benefit from the inclusion of multi-source data (e.g., supervisor ratings, behavioural observations) to validate and enrich the findings.

The third limitation is connected to the measures of firm innovation through the use of objective innovation indicators that were derived from publicly available databases and annual reports. The selection of these indicators (R&D intensity, Intangible Assets, Environmental Innovation Score, and Product Launches), combined with their availability for only a limited subsample of respondents (ranging from 35 to 52 observations), translate in a low statistical power that could hide the ability to detect significant effects and underscores the difficulty of collecting objective performance indicators in survey-based research. Reduced statistical power, especially in complicated models with several predictors, increases the likelihood of Type II errors (i.e., failing to detect true effects). Moreover, the macro-level nature of these indicators introduces a mismatch with the micro-level constructs examined in this study (RL, KS, EC, IWB), potentially attenuating the observed relationships.

Moreover, in relation to the survey approach, a further limitation arises from the limit of the generalisability of the findings due to the non-probabilistic sampling (snowball sampling) and the use of online distribution channels (LinkedIn, WhatsApp). Despite the heterogeneity of the samples in terms of demographics and employment levels, no specific industrial or geographical context was derived. Future studies might concentrate on particular industries or national cultures, or examine cultural moderating effects, especially considering the interpersonal and ethical aspects of the variables investigated.

Another consideration should be made regarding the choice of studying the mediating effect of the two variables (KS and EC). Although the analysis led to one statistically significant result and one not with respect to the mediators, the study does not consider possible moderating variables, such as psychological safety, leadership role or organisational climate, which could influence the strength or direction of the observed relationships. Future models may incorporate aspects of interaction or moderated mediation frameworks to examine the conditions under which RL is more or less successful in promoting innovation. Future research could examine whether Ethical Climate (EC), rather than acting as a mediator, may moderate the relationship between Knowledge Sharing and IWB. EC might not introduce sufficient unique variance to function as a mediator but could instead amplify or buffer other relational processes depending on the ethical context perceived by employees.

Considering the findings, a clear answer can now be provided to the research question posed by this study: How does Respectful Leadership influence employees' Innovative Work Behaviour, and to what extent is this relationship mediated by Knowledge Sharing and Ethical Climate?

The study provides a clear answer stating that Respectful Leadership fosters employees' Innovative Work Behaviour indirectly, primarily through its ability to enhance Knowledge Sharing. In fact, the study shows that when leaders treat employees with respect and dignity, they foster a climate of trust and openness that facilitates knowledge exchange, identified here as the key mechanism translating leadership into innovation.

On the other hand, Ethical Climate, despite being significantly related to both RL and IWB in isolated regressions, did not mediate their relationship in the parallel model. This

suggests that shared ethical norms and values, while important, may not be sufficient, on their own, to stimulate innovative behaviours unless supported by relational enablers such as knowledge sharing.

These insights not only answer the core research question but also emphasise the need for future studies to explore how multiple relational, ethical, and structural factors interact to shape innovation at work.

In summary, while these limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings, they also point toward fruitful avenues for future research, including multi-method designs, higher-powered samples for objective indicators, and further exploration of contextual and cultural boundary conditions.

Conclusion

The study aimed to explore and analyse the mechanisms through which Respectful Leadership (RL) influences Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB), including the mediating roles of Knowledge Sharing (KS) and Ethical Climate (EC). Based on a robust empirical framework and using validated measurements, the study examined how relational leadership styles influence the dynamics associated with innovation in organisations.

The results demonstrated that RL significantly enhances both KS and EC. In this context, KS has a crucial and direct role in predicting IWB, and, at the same time, is a statistically significant mediator in the relationship between RL and IWB. Conversely, EC was found to be significantly influenced by RL and, in turn, showed a direct association with IWB in simple regression models, while in the mediating analysis did not prove to play a critical role. These findings suggest that ethical climates are still important within organisational settings, but their influence on innovation may depend on the presence of more proximal relational or motivational mechanisms such as KS. Finally, regarding the analysis of objective indicators of innovation, the results did not show any significant results. Therefore, a discrepancy can be observed between individual-level innovation behaviours and macro-level innovation outcomes.

This research extends the current understanding of RL by positioning it within the domain of organisational innovation, confirming the central role of KS in translating

leadership into innovative outcomes, and advancing the discussion on the complex and context-dependent function of EC. The analysis conducted for the objective innovation metrics further adds a methodological layer to the investigation, even if constrained by sample limitations.

These contributions must be interpreted considering certain limitations, including the cross-sectional design, reliance on self-report measures, limited availability of firm-level data, and reduced statistical power in certain analyses. Despite this, future research could adopt longitudinal designs, multi-source data collection, and more extensive samples to deepen understanding of the pathways from leadership to innovation.

In conclusion, the research conducted underlines how Respectful Leadership succeeds both in creating respectful and dignified relationships between members of the organisation and in being a crucial strategic element in driving innovation within the organisation. In addition to knowledge-sharing processes, the creation of environments characterised by trust, fairness and collaboration leads organisations to cultivate the conditions necessary to initiate innovative behaviour within the company.

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Appendix

Section A: Tables of Results

Table A. Multiple Linear Regression on R&D Intensity (2024)

	β	SE	t	p
Knowledge Sharing	0.280	0.306	0.917	0.370
Ethical Climate	0.023	0.291	0.080	0.937
Respectful Leadership	-0.045	0.303	-0.147	0.884
Language	-0.409	0.534	-0.766	0.452
Gender	-0.174	0.457	-0.380	0.707
Age	0.003	0.031	0.103	0.919
Marital status	-0.343	0.490	-0.701	0.491
Children	0.504	0.986	0.511	0.614
Education	0.048	0.324	0.148	0.884
Income	-0.029	0.269	-0.109	0.914
Job position	-0.012	0.253	-0.046	0.964
Industry	0.182	0.504	0.361	0.722
Size	-1.180	0.715	-1.650	0.114

Table B. Multiple Linear Regression on R&D Intensity (2023)

	β	SE	t	p
Knowledge Sharing	0.309	0.285	1.084	0.291
Ethical Climate	-0.056	0.259	-0.217	0.830
Respectful Leadership	0.243	0.301	0.807	0.429
Language	-0.683	0.467	-1.464	0.158
Gender	-0.050	0.412	-0.122	0.904
Age	0.006	0.029	0.197	0.846
Marital status	-0.514	0.440	-1.169	0.256
Children	0.784	0.946	0.828	0.417
Education	0.277	0.288	0.962	0.347

Income	-0.130	0.207	-0.628	0.537
Job position	-0.021	0.248	-0.087	0.932
Industry	0.065	0.491	0.132	0.896
Size	-0.714	0.452	-1.579	0.129

Table C. Multiple Linear Regression on Intangible Assets – Patents (USD Million)

	β	**SE**	**t**	**p**
Knowledge Sharing	0.294	0.225	1.309	0.199
Ethical Climate	-0.016	0.220	-0.074	0.942
Respectful Leadership	-0.054	0.229	-0.234	0.816
Language	-0.691	0.405	-1.707	0.097
Gender	0.564	0.361	1.563	0.127
Age	-0.014	0.020	-0.671	0.507
Marital status	-0.219	0.367	-0.598	0.554
Children	0.347	0.828	0.419	0.678
Education	-0.105	0.207	-0.508	0.615
Income	0.138	0.164	0.844	0.404
Job position	-0.067	0.198	-0.337	0.738
Industry	-0.193	0.415	-0.465	0.645
Size	0.080	0.285	0.279	0.782

Table D. Multiple Linear Regression on Environmental Innovation Score

	β	**SE**	**t**	**p**
Knowledge Sharing	0.076	0.262	0.292	0.772
Ethical Climate	-0.130	0.274	-0.473	0.640
Respectful Leadership	-0.013	0.286	-0.047	0.963
Language	-0.032	0.506	-0.063	0.950
Gender	0.398	0.403	0.988	0.332
Age	0.033	0.026	1.252	0.221
Marital status	0.203	0.444	0.457	0.651
Children	-0.773	0.896	-0.863	0.395

Education	0.137	0.264	0.519	0.608
Income	-0.047	0.213	-0.222	0.826
Job position	-0.118	0.212	-0.555	0.584
Industry	0.290	0.469	0.617	0.542
Size	0.362	0.456	0.795	0.434

Table E. Multiple Linear Regression on New Product Launches (Binary Outcome)

	β	**SE**	**t**	**p**
Knowledge Sharing	-0.125	0.215	-0.583	0.563
Ethical Climate	0.256	0.209	1.228	0.227
Respectful Leadership	-0.082	0.220	-0.375	0.709
Language	0.011	0.379	0.030	0.976
Gender	0.127	0.336	0.379	0.707
Age	-0.007	0.019	-0.355	0.724
Marital status	0.398	0.353	1.127	0.267
Children	-0.260	0.774	-0.336	0.739
Education	-0.302	0.199	-1.515	0.138
Income	0.154	0.155	0.992	0.327
Job position	-0.046	0.188	-0.242	0.810
Industry	-0.028	0.401	-0.071	0.944
Size	0.560	0.271	2.070	0.045

Section B: Survey Items and Scales

Measurement Scales:

The full list of items used to measure the four constructs (Respectful Leadership, Knowledge Sharing, Ethical Climate, and Innovative Work Behaviour) is included below, both in the original English version and in the Italian translation used in the survey.

Respectful Leadership (van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010):

Please, indicate your level of agreement with the following statements using a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 5 means "strongly agree". Select the alternative that you feel is most appropriate in relation to your current boss/supervisor/employer/leader:

My leader…

1. … trusts my ability to independently and self-reliantly perform well,
2. … expresses criticism in an objective and constructive way,
3. … recognizes me as a full-fledged counterpart,
4. … recognizes my work,
5. … shows a genuine interest in my opinions and assessments,
6. …does not try to hold me responsible for his/her own mistakes,
7. …unequivocally stands up for me and my work against third parties,
8. … treats me in a polite manner,
9. … provides me with any information that is relevant to me,
10. … takes me and my work seriously,
11. …interacts in an open and honest way with me,
12. … treats me in a fair way.

Knowledge sharing (Lu et al., 2006):

Please, indicate how often you put in place the following behaviors in your organization on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means "never" and 7 means "very frequently". Select the alternative that you feel is most appropriate to describe your behavior in the firm in which you are currently working:

1. In daily work, I take the initiative to share my work-related knowledge to my colleagues.
2. I keep my work experience and never share it out with others easily. (R)
3. I share with others useful work experience and know-how.
4. After learning new knowledge useful to work, I promote it to let more people learn it.
5. I never tell others my work expertise unless it is required in the company. (R)
6. In workplace I take out my knowledge to share with more people.
7. I actively use IT sources available in the company to share my knowledge.
8. So long as the other colleagues need it, I always tell whatever I know without any hoarding.

(Note: Items 6, 7, 8 were adapted from Bock and Kim, 2002.)

Ethical Climate (Arnaud, 2010):

The Ethical Climate Index (ECI)

Please, indicate your level of agreement with the following statements using a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 5 means "strongly agree". Select the alternative that you feel is most appropriate in relation to your current work environment:

Collective moral sensitivity—Norms of Moral Awareness

1. People around here are aware of ethical issues.
2. People in my department recognize a moral dilemma right away.
3. People in my department are very sensitive to ethical problems.

Collective Moral Sensitivity—Norms of Empathetic Concern

4. People in my department sympathize with someone who is having difficulties in their job.
5. For the most part, when people around here see that someone is treated unfairly, they feel pity for that person.
6. People around here feel bad for someone who is being taken advantage of.

Collective Moral Judgment—Focus on Self

7. People around here are mostly out for themselves.

8. People in my department think of their own welfare first when faced with a difficult decision.
9. In my department people's primary concern is their own personal benefit.

Collective Moral Judgment—Focus on Others

10. People around here have a strong sense of responsibility to society and humanity.
11. What is best for everyone in the department is the major consideration.
12. The most important concern is the good of all the people in the department.

Collective Moral Motivation

13. In my department people are willing to break the rules in order to advance in the company.
14. Around here, power is more important than honesty.
15. In order to control scarce resources, people in my department are willing to compromise their ethical values somewhat.

Collective Moral Character

16. People I work with would feel they had to help a peer even if that person were not a very helpful person.
17. People in my department feel it is better to assume responsibility for a mistake.
18. No matter how much people around here are provoked, they are always responsible for whatever they do.

Innovation – employees' side (Janssen, 2000):

Please, indicate how often you do observe/practice the following behaviors in your company, using a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means "never" and 7 means "always". Select the alternative that you feel is most appropriate to describe your current work environment:

7-point scale ranging from "never" (1) to "always" (7)

1. Creating new ideas for difficult issues (idea generation)
2. Searching out new working methods, techniques, or instruments (idea generation)
3. Generating original solutions for problems (idea generation)
4. Mobilizing support for innovative ideas (idea promotion);
5. Acquiring approval for innovative ideas (idea promotion);

6. Making important organizational members enthusiastic for innovative ideas (idea promotion);
7. Transforming innovative ideas into useful applications (idea realization);
8. Introducing innovative ideas into the work environment in a systematic way (idea realization);
9. Evaluating the utility of innovative ideas (idea realization)

Measurement Scales Italian version:

Respectful Leadership (van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010):
Per ogni affermazione, indica il tuo livello di accordo usando una scala da 1 a 5, dove 1 = "Fortemente in disaccordo" e 5 = "Fortemente d'accordo".
Il mio leader...

1. ... si fida della mia capacità di lavorare in modo indipendente ed efficace.
2. ... esprime critiche in modo obiettivo e costruttivo.
3. ... mi riconosce come un interlocutore a pieno titolo.
4. ... riconosce il mio lavoro.
5. ... mostra un genuino interesse per le mie opinioni e valutazioni.
6. ... non cerca di attribuirmi la responsabilità dei suoi errori.
7. ... mi difende senza esitazione e sostiene il mio lavoro davanti a terzi.
8. ... mi tratta con gentilezza.
9. ... mi fornisce qualsiasi informazione rilevante per me.
10. ... Prende seriamente me e il mio lavoro.
11. ... interagisce con me in modo aperto e onesto.
12. ... mi tratta in modo equo.

Knowledge Sharing (Lu et al., 2006):
Usa una scala da 1 a 7, dove 1 = "Mai" e 7 = "Molto frequentemente".

1. Nel lavoro quotidiano, prendo l'iniziativa di condividere la mia conoscenza con i colleghi.
2. Tendo a tenere per me la mia esperienza lavorativa e difficilmente la condivido con gli altri. *(R)*

3. Condivido con gli altri esperienze e conoscenze utili al lavoro.
4. Dopo aver appreso nuove conoscenze utili al lavoro, le promuovo affinché più persone possano apprenderle.
5. Non condivido mai la mia esperienza lavorativa, a meno che non sia richiesto dall'azienda. *(R)*
6. Sul posto di lavoro, cerco di diffondere le mie conoscenze a quante più persone possibile.
7. Utilizzo attivamente le risorse IT aziendali per condividere la mia conoscenza.
8. Se i colleghi ne hanno bisogno, condivido sempre tutto ciò che so senza esitazioni.

Ethical Climate (Arnaud, 2010):

Usa una scala da 1 a 5, dove 1 = "Fortemente in disaccordo" e 5 = "Fortemente d'accordo".

Sensibilità morale collettiva – Norme di Consapevolezza Morale

1. Le persone nella mia organizzazione sono consapevoli delle questioni etiche.
2. Le persone nella mia organizzazione riconoscono immediatamente un dilemma morale.
3. Le persone nella mia organizzazione sono molto sensibili ai problemi etici.

Sensibilità morale collettiva – Norme di Preoccupazione Empatica

4. Le persone nella mia organizzazione provano empatia per chi ha difficoltà sul lavoro.
5. Per la maggior parte, quando le persone qui intorno vedono che qualcuno è trattato ingiustamente, hanno dispiacere per quella persona.
6. Le persone nella mia organizzazione si sentono a disagio quando vedono qualcuno che viene sfruttato.

Giudizio morale collettivo – Orientamento all'Interesse Personale

7. Le persone nella mia organizzazione pensano principalmente ai propri interessi.
8. Le persone nella mia organizzazione mettono il proprio benessere al primo posto quando si trovano di fronte a una decisione difficile.
9. Nella mia organizzazione, la principale preoccupazione delle persone è il proprio beneficio personale.

Giudizio morale collettivo – Orientamento agli Altri

10. Le persone nella mia organizzazione hanno un forte senso di responsabilità verso la società e l'umanità.
11. La considerazione principale è ciò che è meglio per tutti nella mia organizzazione.
12. La preoccupazione più importante è il benessere di tutte le persone nell'organizzazione.

Motivazione morale collettiva

13. Nella mia organizzazione, le persone sono disposte a infrangere le regole per fare carriera in azienda.
14. Nella mia organizzazione, il potere è più importante dell'onestà.
15. Per controllare le risorse scarse, le persone nella mia organizzazione sono disposte a compromettere in parte i loro valori etici.

Carattere morale collettivo

16. Le persone con cui lavoro sentirebbero di dover aiutare un collega anche se quella persona non fosse molto disponibile con loro.
17. Le persone nella mia organizzazione ritengono che sia meglio assumersi la responsabilità per un errore.
18. Indipendentemente da quanto siano provocate, le persone nella mia organizzazione si assumono sempre la responsabilità delle proprie azioni.

Innovazione (Janssen, 2000):

Usa una scala da 1 a 7, dove 1 = "Mai" e 7 = "Sempre".

1. Creo nuove idee per affrontare problemi complessi.
2. Cerco nuovi metodi di lavoro, tecniche o strumenti innovativi.
3. Genero soluzioni originali per problemi aziendali.
4. Coinvolgo colleghi e superiori per supportare idee innovative.
5. Ottengo approvazione per idee innovative.
6. Cerco di motivare i colleghi ad adottare idee innovative.
7. Trasformo idee innovative in applicazioni utili.
8. Implemento idee innovative nel mio ambiente di lavoro in maniera strutturata
9. Valuto l'utilità delle idee innovative.