

Article

Driving employee innovative behavior through team norms for knowledge sharing: the moderating role of perceived status difference

Mingyeong Jeon¹, Meiling Yin^{1,*}

¹ Business School, Sejong University, Seoul, South Korea

* Corresponding author: Meiling Yin, mlyin88@sejong.ac.kr

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Abstract: Perceived status differences within teams represent a critical yet understudied factor shaping employee innovation. This study investigates how team knowledge-sharing norms foster innovation through employees' proactivity and examines the moderator of perceived status differences. We propose that team norms for knowledge-sharing foster employees to take initiative, share information, and engage in problem-solving, which in turn enhances innovative outcomes. However, when status differences are perceived as high, employees may feel reserved in expressing different ideas on existing practices. Empirical results support this model, showing that perceived status differences weaken the positive effect of knowledge-sharing norms on proactivity, thereby indirectly reducing innovation. These findings suggest that the presence of supportive norms alone is insufficient to stimulate innovation if hierarchical perceptions inhibit employee action. By highlighting the joint influence of social norms and status perceptions, this study underlines the importance of managing status dynamics to develop proactive and innovative team environments.

Keywords: Perceived status difference, Team norms for knowledge sharing, Proactivity, Innovation

Introduction

Organizations frequently attempt to reshape hierarchical structures to enhance innovative capability, for example, by encouraging employees to adopt English names or by implementing uniform job titles, reflecting the assumption that hierarchical dynamics influence how employees think, interact, and perform. Prior studies suggest that hierarchical structures can suppress creative thinking by limiting autonomy and discouraging the expression of novel ideas (Keum & See, 2017). Even when formal authority structures are flattened, emergent informal hierarchies may still hinder collaboration and innovation, particularly in high power-distance contexts (Lahiri et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2023). These dynamics underscore the significance of employees' subjective perceptions of status differences. Because perceived inequalities in authority and influence shape everyday organizational interactions (Blau, 1970; Jensen & Roy, 2008; Anderson & Brown, 2010), hierarchy is experienced not only through formal structures but also through individual interpretations. Consequently, perceived status differences may represent a critical yet underexplored factor influencing employee innovation. Despite its practical relevance, knowledge management and human resource research have paid limited attention to perceived status differences.

Existing research has predominantly examined hierarchy through formal leadership frameworks, focusing on structural authority and supervisory relationships (Gerpott et al., 2020; Lei et al., 2021; Mehmood et al., 2022; Gul et al., 2026). Such an emphasis tends to overlook relational and collectively perceived hierarchies that

emerge within teams. Although some studies have explored interpersonal dynamics, including communication patterns and social categorization processes (Phillips et al., 2009; Appelbaum et al., 2020), they rarely connect employees' perceived status differences to innovation outcomes. Only a few studies have directly addressed the relationship between status differences and innovation (Prato & Ferraro, 2018; Jeon, 2024). Consequently, our understanding of how subjective perceptions of status differences shape employee innovation remains incomplete.

To address this research gap, our study develops and tests a process-oriented model that links perceived status differences to employee innovation. Prior research consistently demonstrates that innovation depends on employees' willingness to exchange and integrate knowledge, and that strong knowledge-sharing practices facilitate innovative outcomes (Kamaşak & Bulutlar, 2010; Zhou & Li, 2012; Iqbal et al., 2026). Moreover, organizations seeking to enhance employee-level innovation must cultivate supportive climates that encourage such exchanges (Ye et al., 2022). A central component of these climates is the presence of team norms for knowledge-sharing, shared beliefs that exchanging knowledge is valued and expected within teams (Chatman & Flynn, 2001). These team norms for knowledge sharing promote information exchange and idea generation, thereby creating conditions conducive to innovation.

However, teams characterized by strong knowledge-sharing norms often exhibit substantial variation in innovation outcomes. One important explanation lies in perceived status differences within teams. When status differences are pronounced, hierarchical dynamics may discourage proactive innovative behavior, as members can perceive their contributions as carrying unequal weight and may defer to higher-status colleagues (Jeon, 2024). Such dynamics weaken the extent to which shared team norms for knowledge-sharing translate into proactive engagement in innovation. Building on this reasoning, the present study proposes a process-oriented model in which team norms for knowledge-sharing foster proactive behavior that subsequently enhances employee-level innovation. We further examine how perceived status differences within teams condition this process by strengthening or constraining the translation of shared norms into proactive and innovative action.

In doing so, our study makes several key contributions. First, it extends research on knowledge management by shifting attention from formal hierarchical structures and leader-centered perspectives to employees' subjective perceptions of status disparities within teams (Mehmood et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2023). Specifically, the study conceptualizes perceived status difference as a socially constructed form of hierarchy that reflects employees' perceptions of the unequal distribution of influence and decision-making authority. By doing so, it distinguishes perceived status difference from related constructs such as power distance, psychological safety, and leader-member exchange (LMX). More importantly, the findings suggest that the presence of knowledge-sharing norms alone is insufficient to promote innovation. Rather, employees' perceptions of status disparities determine whether such norms are translated into proactive behaviors. By identifying perceived status difference as a boundary condition that shapes the enactment of knowledge-sharing norms, the study advances a more nuanced understanding of how relational hierarchies influence employee innovation.

Second, the study develops and tests a process-oriented model that identifies employee proactivity as the mechanism through which team knowledge-sharing norms promote innovation. While prior research has largely focused on the direct

effects of knowledge-sharing norms on innovation, the present study demonstrates how these norms are translated into innovative outcomes through employees' proactive actions. By integrating social norm theory with relational hierarchy perspectives, the study reveals not only when knowledge-sharing norms are effective but also how they generate innovation.

Literature

Team norms for knowledge sharing and employees' innovation

Team norms are legitimate, socially shared standards that guide judgments about appropriate behavior within a group (Birenbaum & Sagarin, 1976). Extending this view, team norms for knowledge sharing refer to shared expectations that exchanging information, expertise, and ideas is valued, appreciated, and routinely practiced among team members (Chatman & Flynn, 2001; Bock et al., 2005). These norms signal that knowledge is a collective resource rather than an individual possession. By establishing shared expectations for open exchange, team norms for knowledge-sharing encourage open communication and collaborative problem-solving, thereby fostering conditions that support employee innovation.

Employee innovation is the creation or adoption of new ideas and information on products, services, processes, or management practices (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010). Such innovation depends heavily on employees' willingness to exchange and integrate knowledge, and team norms for knowledge sharing provide an important foundation for these behaviors. By legitimizing communication and collective learning, these norms encourage employees to share information, generate insights, and co-create knowledge (Van den Hooff et al., 2012). When team knowledge-sharing norms are strong, team members are more likely to integrate diverse perspectives, experiment with alternative solutions, and champion novel ideas, thereby enhancing innovation outcomes (West, 2000; Dahlin et al., 2005). Conversely, weak or absent norms can constrain knowledge exchange and reduce opportunities for innovation (Salehi & Sadeq Alanbari, 2024).

Recent research emphasizes the critical role of team norms in shaping knowledge-sharing behavior. Individuals' perceptions of social expectations strongly influence both their intentions and actual knowledge-sharing actions (Khalil, Marouf, & Khalil, 2021). Team norms for knowledge-sharing, in turn, are central to employee innovation because it enables the exchange and integration of diverse ideas necessary for developing novel solutions. A growing body of research shows that facilitators such as supportive climates, communication practices, and pro-sharing social norms promote knowledge exchange (Salehi & Sadeq Alanbari, 2024). Empirical evidence further demonstrates that perceived social norms and subjective expectations surrounding knowledge sharing positively lead to employees' knowledge-sharing intentions and behaviors (Obrenovic et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2023). In team settings, strong team norms for knowledge-sharing signal that exchanging information and expertise is valued and expected, thereby creating an environment conducive to collaborative learning and idea generation. Such normative environments support innovative behavior by encouraging employees to actively contribute and integrate knowledge, thereby generating innovation.

H1: Team norms for knowledge-sharing are positively associated with employee innovation.

Proactivity

Proactivity is self-initiated and future-oriented behavior in which employees take anticipatory actions to change and improve work processes (Parker et al., 2010). Proactive employees actively engage in their tasks, identify opportunities, take initiative, and persist in pursuing improvements, whereas less proactive employees tend to adopt a more passive approach. Importantly, proactivity does not happen in isolation, yet it is shaped by the surrounding social context. Prior research shows that supportive work environments and organizational factors can foster employee proactivity (Jia et al., 2020; Iqbal et al., 2023), as contextual cues such as respect, encouragement, and shared expectations signal that taking initiative is appropriate and valued. These findings suggest that social and normative conditions within teams play a critical role in stimulating proactive behavior.

Building on the view that proactivity is shaped by social context, a social norm perspective suggests that norms guide behavior by signaling which actions are expected and appropriate within a group (Cialdini et al., 1990). When teams establish strong and legitimate knowledge-sharing norms, employees receive clear cues that exchanging information and expertise is valued and appreciated. Such shared expectations encourage employees to actively seek, share, and apply knowledge to improve work processes and outcomes. In this way, team knowledge-sharing norms function as an important contextual driver of proactive behavior by legitimizing initiative-taking and collaborative problem-solving within teams.

Proactivity serves as a key psychological mechanism through which knowledge-sharing norms translate into employee innovation. From a knowledge-based perspective, tacit knowledge embedded in individuals represents a critical resource for innovation (Grant, 1996), but its effective utilization depends on employees' willingness to act on shared expectations. Proactive motivation theory suggests that environments offering learning opportunities stimulate anticipatory action and initiative (Parker et al., 2010). Employees in teams where knowledge sharing is valued and expected are encouraged to actively seek, exchange, and apply knowledge, which promotes proactive engagement (Liang et al., 2012). Proactive employees are more likely to experiment, implement creative solutions, and pursue novel approaches to improving work processes, thereby directly contributing to innovation (Rachmad, 2022). Through such proactive engagement, employees integrate diverse perspectives and transform shared knowledge into new ideas and practices, resulting in enhanced innovation outcomes (Rudawska et al., 2025).

H2: Knowledge-sharing norms positively influence employees' innovation through the mediating role of proactivity.

Boundary condition of the perceived status difference

Status refers to differences in relative prestige and influence that arise from individuals' positions within a social hierarchy (Blau, 1970). In organizational teams, status shapes whose expertise is recognized, whose opinions carry greater weight, and how decision-making influence is distributed (Bunderson, 2003; Bunderson & Reagans, 2011). Consistent with Jeon (2024), who conceptualizes status differences in relative standing between organizational members, perceived status difference refers to team members' subjective perceptions of disparities in status and influence within the team.

Critically, perceived status difference is conceptually distinct from power distance. Power distance reflects individuals' beliefs regarding the legitimacy and acceptance of hierarchical inequalities and authority relationships (Adamovic, 2023),

whereas perceived status difference captures employees' perceptions of the extent to which influence, voice, and decision-making authority are unequally distributed within their team as a function of status differences (Jeon, 2024). Thus, power distance concerns normative beliefs about how hierarchical relationships should operate, whereas perceived status difference concerns perceptions of how status hierarchies are enacted in everyday team interactions. Employees may perceive substantial status differences within their team regardless of whether they personally endorse or reject hierarchical inequality. Furthermore, perceived status difference differs from LMX, which reflects the quality of the relationship between a leader and a follower (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Rather than capturing relationship quality or interpersonal exchange, perceived status difference reflects employees' perceptions of the distribution of influence, participation, and status-based deference within the team.

Research on status highlights that relational hierarchies can shape the willingness to engage in proactive behavior. For instance, Doyle et al. (2016) demonstrate that employees tend to take initiative when status differences are moderate rather than extreme. This suggests that even strong knowledge-sharing norms may not fully translate into proactive behavior when perceived status differences are high, as employees may perceive greater social risk or hierarchical constraints.

Status expectation theory (SET) provides insights for understanding the behavioral consequences of these perceptions. According to SET, shared beliefs about status shape expectations regarding appropriate behavior, influencing who speaks, whose ideas are taken seriously, and how decisions are made within groups (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Ridgeway, 2001; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). When perceived status differences are large, lower-status members may hesitate to act proactively despite strong knowledge-sharing norms because taking initiative can involve social risk. Conversely, when perceived status differences are small, team norms are more likely to encourage broad participation, enabling members to engage proactively and support innovation.

Prior research suggests that large status differences can disrupt collaborative processes essential for proactivity. Pronounced status differences increase interpersonal tension, reduce openness, and discourage participation by lower-status members (Phillips et al., 2009; Doyle et al., 2016; Appelbaum et al., 2020). Lower-status employees may fear negative evaluation or social sanction, suppressing helping behavior, voice, and contributions to innovation (Prato & Ferraro, 2018; Jensen & Wang, 2018). Conversely, smaller status differences foster more inclusive communication and interaction, enabling employees to engage actively in team processes. These dynamics are particularly relevant for proactive behaviors such as initiating improvements or challenging existing practices, which often require employees to cross interpersonal boundaries and take social risks.

Social categorization processes further explain these effects. Large status differences reinforce in-group and out-group distinctions, weakening trust and collaboration (Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). Under these conditions, even strong knowledge-sharing norms may fail to prompt proactive action, as employees avoid behaviors that could violate hierarchical boundaries. In contrast, when perceived status differences are low, team norms for knowledge-sharing tend to be interpreted as legitimate invitations to contribute, increasing employees' willingness to act proactively and support innovation. Consistent with this reasoning, prior research shows that employees who feel socially included and perceive themselves

as insiders are more likely to engage in creative behavior (Zhang et al., 2024), suggesting that lower perceived status differences create inclusive social contexts that enable knowledge-sharing norms to translate into proactive and innovative action.

Taken together, these arguments suggest that perceived status difference moderates how knowledge-sharing norms translate into proactive and innovative behavior. High perceived status differences weaken the enactment of shared norms by heightening interpersonal risk and social division, whereas low perceived status differences facilitate the translation of these norms into action through more inclusive interaction. Accordingly, we propose:

H3: Perceived status difference moderates the indirect effect of knowledge-sharing norms on innovation via proactivity, such that the indirect effect is stronger when perceived status difference is low than when it is high.

Figure 1 presents the overall conceptual model in which team norms for knowledge sharing influence employee innovation through proactivity, and perceived status differences moderate this indirect relationship.

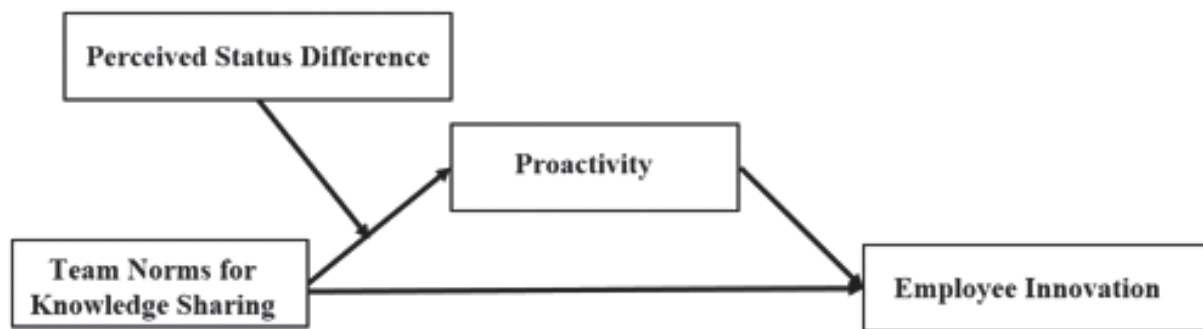


Figure 1. Research model.

Method

Sample and procedure

To investigate the factors influencing employees' innovation, we collected data targeting employees working in technology-intensive organizations in South Korea, where sustained innovation is essential for maintaining a competitive advantage. Between May and December 2025, a voluntary questionnaire survey was administered to employees in firms located in Seoul and Gyeonggi-do. These regions were selected since they constitute the primary hub of South Korea's high-technology industries, with Seoul serving as the nation's capital and Gyeonggi-do encompassing a dense concentration of technology-driven enterprises.

We initially developed an English-version questionnaire and afterwards converted it into Korean using a precise forward-backward conversion procedure to confirm linguistic accuracy and cultural equivalence (Brislin, 1980). In addition, the back-translated version was also cautiously compared with the original English instrument to discover and resolve any inconsistencies. Following minor revisions to enhance clarity and contextual appropriateness for Korean employees, the final online survey was distributed through to employees who work in high-technology firms.

Of the 252 questionnaires received, 18 were excluded for incomplete responses or failed attention checks, yielding 234 valid responses for analysis. Of these participants, females comprised 110 (47.0%), and male for 124 (53.0%). Regarding age

distribution, employees under 28 years old account for 15 (6.4%), 29 - 44 years old are 187 (79.9%), and 45 - 60 years old are 32 (13.7%). Regarding organizational size, 39 (16.7%) participants worked in firms with fewer than 50 employees; 30 (12.8%) in firms with 50 - 299 employees; 37 (15.8%) in firms with 300–999 employees; 35 (15.0%) in firms with 1,000 -4,999 employees; and 93 (39.7%) in firms with 5,000 or more employees. With respect to organizational position, 32 (13.7%) participants were general staff, 65 (27.8%) were frontline managers, 97 (41.5%) were middle managers, 23 (9.8%) were senior managers, and 17 (7.3%) held executive positions.

Measures

Team norms for knowledge sharing were measured using a three-item scale adapted from prior research (Chatman & Flynn, 2001; Van den Hooff & De Ridder, 2004; Bock et al., 2005). Participants rated the extent to which knowledge sharing was expected and valued within their team. The items were: “In this team, knowledge sharing is recognized and appreciated,” “There are clear expectations in our team for sharing useful information,” and “Knowledge sharing is a routine part of how we work together.”

Perceived status difference was evaluated using a four-item scale developed for this study to capture employees’ perceptions of hierarchical disparities in influence, authority, and participation within their teams. The scale was conceptually grounded in prior research on status hierarchies and team structure (Blau, 1970; Bunderson, 2003; Bunderson & Reagans, 2011). Specifically, the items assessed the extent to which higher-status members were perceived to hold disproportionate decision-making power and influence relative to other team members. The items were: “Team members’ opinions carry less weight than those of higher-status members in our team,” “Managers make most decisions without consulting team members,” “Communication between managers and team members is usually top-down rather than two-way,” and “Team members should not question the decisions of their managers.”

Proactivity was measured using two items adapted from prior research on employees’ constructive suggestion behaviors (Dewett, 2006; Farh et al., 2007). Consistent with the conceptualization of proactivity as self-initiated and future-oriented action aimed at improving work processes (Parker et al., 2010), the items assessed the extent to which employees put forward suggestions for organizational improvement. The items were: “I raised suggestions or ideas to improve work procedures or processes” and “I brought forward suggestions or ideas that could help the organization.” Employee innovation was measured using six items capturing employee innovative behavior and outcome (Scott & Bruce, 1994; Anderson et al., 2014). Sample items include “I often explore new ways of doing things in our work”, “I not only come up with innovative ideas, but also implement them”. “Over the past six months, I have introduced at least one important new idea or method in tasks or doing things”. A 7-point Likert scale was used to assess all items, and demographic information was also collected.

Control variables

Consistent with prior research on employee innovation, this research controlled for gender, age, firm size, and job title, as these variables may affect employees’ innovation (Bunderson & Boumgard, 2010; Zhang et al., 2024). Gender was categorized as a binary variable; age was measured in years; firm size was measured by the number of employees; and job title captured participants’ organizational

position.

Results

Assessment of common method bias

Principal Component Analysis was applied to all items to conduct Harman's single-factor test. The unrotated factor constituted 42.33% of the total variance, indicating that common method bias does not represent a significant concern. Furthermore, the four-factor model revealed poor fit ($\chi^2/df = 8.969$, $TLI = 0.662$, $CFI = 0.710$, $RMSEA = 0.185$, $SRMR = 0.136$), failing to meet the minimum acceptable threshold. In contrast, the four-factor model demonstrated a markedly better fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.888$, $TLI = 0.962$, $CFI = 0.970$, $RMSEA = 0.062$, $SRMR = 0.040$). Hence, the data does not exhibit significant common method bias.

Construct validity and reliability

The data were analyzed using a three-step procedure in SmartPLS 4.0 software (Ringle et al., 2022). First, the reliability and validity of the measurement model were evaluated using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Second, effect size (f^2) and predictive relevance (Q^2) were examined. Third, bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples was conducted to test hypothesized relationships among latent constructs.

Table 1 shows that the factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha values, and composite reliability (CR) were above 0.7, indicating acceptable reliability. The variance inflation factor values (VIF), which indicate multicollinearity, were all below 6 and therefore well below the recommended threshold of 10 (Kock, 2015), suggesting that multicollinearity was not a concern. Convergent validity was supported as the Average variance extracted (AVE) values for all constructs exceeded the recommended cutoff of 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was further confirmed using the Fornell-Larcker Criterion, which showed that the square root of each construct's AVE value was greater than its correlation with other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Additionally, the HTMT values were all below the recommended threshold of 0.9 (Henseler et al., 2015), indicating adequate discriminant validity (**Table 2**).

Table 1. Standardized factor loadings, AVE, and CR.

Constructs	Variable	Standard Loading	VIF	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Team norms	Norms_1	0.898	2.425	0.875	0.878	0.800
	Norms_2	0.910	2.840			
	Norms_3	0.876	2.130			
Status difference	Status_1	0.778	1.753	0.801	0.827	0.604
	Status_2	0.719	2.108			
	Status_3	0.890	1.946			
	Status_4	0.707	1.301			
Proactivity	Proactivity_1	0.910	1.953	0.823	0.834	0.849
	Proactivity_2	0.933	1.953			

Continuation Table:

Constructs	Variable	Standard Loading	VIF	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Employee innovation	Innovation_1	0.901	4.377	0.950	0.954	0.802
	Innovation_2	0.920	4.754			
	Innovation_3	0.924	5.063			
	Innovation_4	0.900	4.739			
	Innovation_5	0.902	4.118			
	Innovation_6	0.823	2.383			

Table 2. Discriminant validity results.

Constructs	Team Norms	Status difference	Proactivity	Innovation
Fornell–Larcker criterion				
Team norms	0.895			
Status difference	-0.274	0.777		
Proactivity	0.479	-0.126	0.921	
Innovation	0.533	-0.318	0.489	0.896
Heterotrait-monotrait ratio				
Team norms				
Status difference	0.316			
Proactivity	0.560	0.118		
Innovation	0.585	0.368	0.545	

Descriptive analyses

In **Table 3**, the present study displays the means, standard deviations (SD), and correlations for all variables. Team norms for knowledge sharing were significantly and positively correlated with proactivity ($r = 0.472$, $p < 0.01$) and employees' innovation ($r = 0.535$, $p < 0.01$). Moreover, proactivity was also significantly positively correlated with innovation ($r = 0.481$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 3. Correlations among variables.

Constructs	M	SD	Team norms	Status difference	Proactivity	Innovation
Team norms	4.937	1.192	1.000			
Status difference	4.087	1.219	-0.267**	1.000		
Proactivity	4.799	1.102	0.472**	-0.097	1.000	
Innovation	4.212	1.271	0.535**	-0.321**	0.481**	1.000

Predictive relevance

Prior to hypothesis testing, effect size (f^2), coefficient determination (R^2), and

predictive relevance (Q^2) were examined. All values were within acceptable ranges (see **Table 4**), supporting the model's predictive power (Cohen, 2013). The Q^2 values for both proactivity and innovation were significantly greater than zero, indicating the model's significance (Hair et al., 2014). Notably, the effect sizes range from small to medium, with the team norm's direct effect on innovation (H1) and mediation effect (H2) representing a medium effect size. The moderation effect (H3) is significant but exhibits relatively small effect sizes.

Table 4. Effect size, coefficient of determination, and predictive relevance.

	Effect size(f^2)		Coefficient of determination		Predictive relevance		
	Proactivity	Innovation	R-square	R-square adjust	RMSE	MAE	Q-square
Innovation			0.357	0.352	0.848	0.676	0.295
Proactivity		0.105	0.287	0.278	0.875	0.663	0.257
Status difference	0.000						
Team norms	0.237	0.190					
Team norms*Status difference	0.084						

Hypothesis testing

Afterwards, controlling for gender, age, number of employees, and position, we examined our hypothesis. All analyses were run using bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples of the PLS-SEM. **Figure 2** presents the result that team norms for knowledge sharing had a positive effect on employee innovation ($\beta = 0.368$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = [0.224, 0.502]), supporting H1. Additionally, the mediating role of proactivity between team norms and employees' innovation was significant ($\beta = 0.116$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI = [0.047, 0.196]), indicating that proactivity partially mediates the relationship between team norms and employee innovation. Therefore, H2 was supported (see **Table 5**).

Table 5. Results of the main effects and mediation effects.

Path	Standardized coefficient	Standard deviation (SD)	T values	P values	CI 5.0%	CI 95.0%
Control effects						
Gender -> Innovation	-0.254	0.115	2.203	0.028	-0.478	-0.025
Age -> Innovation	-0.055	0.052	1.054	0.292	-0.156	0.048
lg (Number of employees) -> Innovation	0.118	0.059	2.018	0.044	0.005	0.236
Grassroots manager -> Innovation	0.328	0.296	1.107	0.268	-0.258	0.917
Middle manager -> Innovation	0.207	0.232	0.894	0.371	-0.231	0.672
Senior manager -> Innovation	0.057	0.190	0.299	0.765	-0.308	0.429
Executive manager -> Innovation	-0.077	0.195	0.392	0.695	-0.453	0.305

					Continuation Table:	
Path	Standardized coefficient	Standard deviation (SD)	T values	P values	CI 5.0%	CI 95.0%
Direct effects						
Team norms ->Proactivity	0.434	0.069	6.285	0.000	0.284	0.561
Team norms ->Innovation	0.368	0.070	5.248	0.000	0.224	0.502
Proactivity -> Innovation	0.268	0.080	3.338	0.001	0.102	0.417
Status difference ->Proactivity	-0.019	0.094	0.198	0.843	-0.109	0.281
Mediating effects						
Team norms ->Proactivity-> Innovation	0.116	0.038	3.041	0.002	0.047	0.196
Status difference -> Proactivity -> Innovation	-0.005	0.026	0.189	0.850	-0.035	0.087
Moderating effects						
Team norms x Status difference -> Proactivity	-0.197	0.067	2.918	0.004	-0.305	-0.059
+1 SD Status difference	0.238	0.102	2.326	0.020	0.027	0.418
-1 SD Status difference	0.631	0.090	6.973	0.000	0.418	0.763
Moderated mediating effects						
Team norms x Status difference-> Proactivity -> Innovation	-0.053	0.026	2.030	0.042	-0.117	-0.012
+1 SD Status difference	0.064	0.032	2.009	0.045	0.014	0.139
-1 SD Status difference	0.169	0.057	2.956	0.003	0.066	0.295

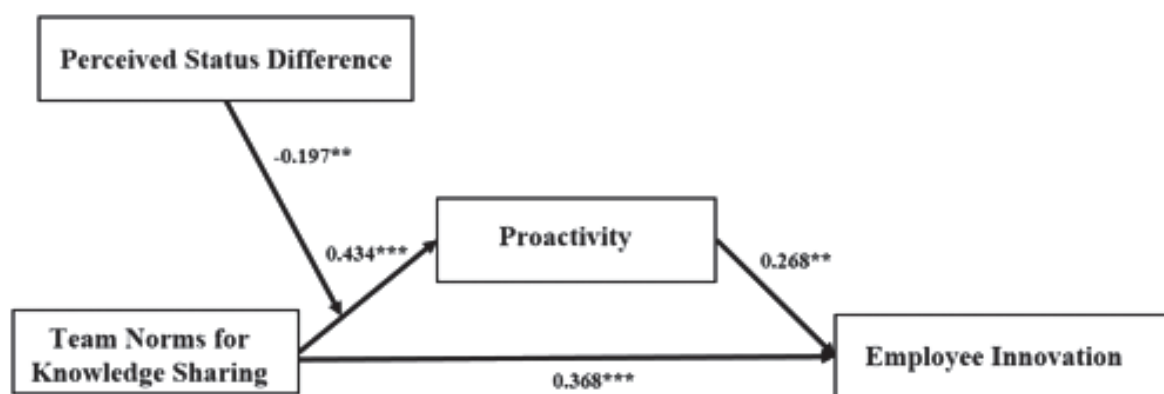


Figure 2. The PLS-SEM results.

Moreover, the interaction effect of team norms and perceived status difference on proactivity ($\beta = -0.197$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI = [-0.305, -0.059]) was significant. To further verify this relationship, we tested the effect of team norms on employees' proactivity at different levels of perceived status difference. As illustrated in **Figure 3**, the positive relationship between team knowledge-sharing norms and proactivity was

weaker when perceived status difference was high (+1 SD) ($\beta = 0.238$, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI = [0.027, 0.418]), and stronger when perceived status difference was low (−1 SD) ($\beta = 0.631$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = [0.418, 0.763]), hence, H3 was supported (see **Table 5** and **Figure 3**).

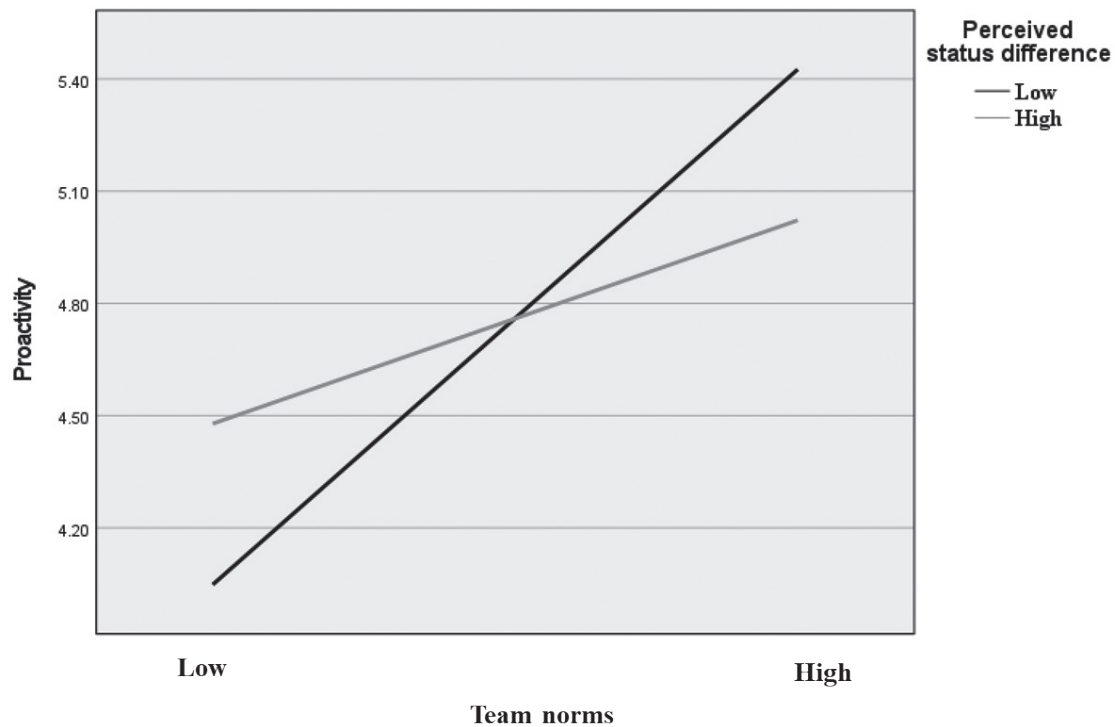


Figure 3. The interaction effect of team norms and perceived status difference on proactivity.

A moderated mediation analysis was used to examine whether perceived status difference moderated the indirect effect of team knowledge-sharing norm on employee innovation through proactivity. The analysis showed a significant moderated mediation effect ($\beta = -0.053$, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI = [-0.117, -0.012]), indicating that the indirect effect varied across levels of perceived status difference. Notably, the indirect positive influence of team norms on innovation through proactivity was weaker when the perceived status difference was high ($\beta = 0.064$, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI = [0.014, 0.139]) and was stronger when the perceived status difference was low ($\beta = 0.169$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI = [0.066, 0.295]). These findings provide support for the hypothesized moderated mediation.

Discussion and Conclusion

By integrating social norm theory with relational hierarchy perspectives, this study provides an advanced understanding of employee innovation by identifying proactivity as a key enactment mechanism and perceived status difference as a critical boundary condition. Our findings show that team knowledge-sharing norms foster employee innovation by stimulating proactive behavior, but this effect depends on the relational context in which those norms operate. Additionally, the results show that gender and firm size have significant effects on innovation, but age and most positions do not. It means that male employees may exhibit greater risk-taking tendencies or be more motivated by work performance (Zuraik et al., 2020); likewise, larger firms may

have more resources for innovation (Demirkan, 2018).

Positioning proactivity as the central behavioral mechanism clarifies how team norms are translated into innovative outcomes. When knowledge sharing is widely perceived as appropriate and valued, employees are more willing to initiate progress, challenge existing practices, and contribute ideas. Innovation thus arises not merely from the presence of shared norms, but from employees' proactive enactment of those norms. This result aligns with proactive motivation theory, which argues that environments offering learning opportunities stimulate proactivity (Parker et al., 2010), and with prior work emphasizing that innovation depends on employees' active interpretation and enactment of normative support (Van den Hooff & De Ridder, 2004).

Crucially, perceived status difference shapes whether this translation process unfolds effectively. Large perceived status gaps weaken the extent to which knowledge-sharing norms stimulate proactive behavior by introducing social risk and reinforcing hierarchical boundaries, thereby discouraging employees from voicing ideas or taking initiative. Conversely, low perceived status difference fosters inclusive interaction and shared identity, enabling norms to be more fully enacted through proactive engagement. These findings extend status expectation by demonstrating that hierarchy operates not only through formal structures but through relational perceptions that shape everyday innovation processes (Berger et al., 1972; Magee & Galinsky, 2008).

This study provides several theoretical contributions to knowledge management and human resource research. First, it introduces perceived status difference as a central relational construct for understanding innovation. Rather than treating status as an individual attribute, our results show that innovation is better explained through a relational lens capturing how hierarchical differences are experienced within teams. Second, we extend leadership-oriented innovation theories by demonstrating that peer-level status hierarchies influence proactive behavior independently of formal authority structures (Yin et al., 2020; Lei et al., 2021; Mehmood et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2023). This suggests that leadership explanations alone are insufficient and that innovation theories should incorporate informal status dynamics alongside formal structures. Third, by linking knowledge-sharing norms, status difference, and proactivity in a single framework, we advance a process-oriented account that integrates previously fragmented research streams on social norms, hierarchy, and proactive behavior.

Managerial implications

The present study underscores that fostering employee innovation requires attention not only to the establishment of knowledge-sharing norms but also to the relational dynamics of perceived status differences within teams. Our findings indicate that even when knowledge-sharing norms are strong, large perceived status gaps can inhibit proactive behaviors, thereby reducing innovation outcomes. Accordingly, managers should implement strategies that simultaneously strengthen knowledge-sharing norms and mitigate the negative effects of hierarchical disparities.

First, managers should recognize that completely eliminating perceived status differences is often unrealistic, particularly in contexts where hierarchical structures are deeply embedded in societal norms. Therefore, adopting practical strategies to encourage the participation of lower-status employees is critical. For example, managers can leverage anonymous knowledge-sharing platforms (e.g., online

suggestion systems) that allow employees to propose ideas and improvements without hierarchical pressure. This approach helps mitigate status-based biases and promotes broader participation. Managers should ensure that contributions are visibly valued and formally recognized, even when the identities of contributors are not disclosed. Such practices not only foster proactive behavior but also signal that employees' ideas are appreciated regardless of their status position.

Beyond providing knowledge-sharing platforms, organizations can also create formal opportunities for lower-status employees to contribute ideas and influence decision-making. Participative management practices, such as structured suggestion systems, cross-functional project teams, and regular idea-sharing forums, may institutionalize employee participation and reduce barriers associated with status differences. In addition, organizations can incorporate knowledge-sharing, proactive problem-solving, and idea contribution into reward systems. When employees perceive that innovative behaviors and knowledge contributions are formally recognized and rewarded, they are more likely to engage proactively regardless of their status position within the team.

In doing so, leadership modeling of inclusive behaviors remains essential. Managers who actively solicit input from all team members, publicly acknowledge contributions from lower-status employees, and respond constructively to suggestions communicate that status differences do not restrict initiative-taking. Such behaviors reinforce the message that valuable ideas can originate from any organizational level.

Our findings are particularly relevant for organizations operating in high power-distance cultural contexts such as South Korea. In such environments, employees may be less inclined to challenge authority, voice dissenting opinions, or proactively share ideas with higher-status members. Consequently, organizations cannot assume that knowledge-sharing norms alone will translate into innovative behavior. Instead, managers must actively create structures and HRM practices that reduce the behavioral constraints associated with hierarchical relationships. Leadership development initiatives, employee voice mechanisms, participative decision-making systems, and performance management practices that reward knowledge contributions can help organizations retain the coordination benefits of hierarchy while minimizing its potential negative effects on proactivity and innovation.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, we focused primarily on the negative effects of status differences as a boundary condition, yet status gaps may also have constructive roles, such as clarifying roles, reducing conflict, and guiding collaboration (Meng et al., 2024). Future research could explore these positive aspects and their impact on strategic change or decision-making. Second, the study of our data was collected from employees in high-technology firms of South Korea, which may limit generalizability due to confidentiality constraints, competitive sensitivity, and sample homogeneity. Future studies could broaden access through industry partnerships or longitudinal designs to enhance representativeness. Third, while proactivity was examined as a mediator, other mechanisms, such as intrinsic motivation and perceived psychological safety factors, may also link knowledge-sharing norms to innovation. Finally, our study was conducted with a cross-sectional survey; future studies could use longitudinal or experimental studies to help to clarify how norms, status differences, and proactivity jointly influence innovation over time.

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Appendix

All measurements used in this study.

Variables	Items
Team Norms for Knowledge Sharing (Chatman & Flynn, 2001)	Norms_1: In this team, knowledge sharing is recognized and appreciated.
	Norms_2: There are clear expectations in our team for sharing useful information.
	Norms_3: Knowledge sharing is a routine part of how we work together.
	Status_1: Team members' opinions carry less weight than those of higher-status members in our team.
Perceived Status Difference (Bunderson, 2003; Bunderson & Reagans, 2011)	status_2: Managers make most decisions without consulting team members.
	Status_3: Communication between managers and team members is usually top-down rather than two-way.
	Status_4: Team members should not question the decisions of their managers.
Proactivity (Dewett, 2006; Farh et al., 2007)	Proactivity_1: I raised suggestions or ideas to improve work procedures or processes.
	Proactivity_2: I brought forward suggestions or ideas that could help the team.
	Innovation_1: I regularly come up with new and original ideas.
	Innovation_2: I actively contribute creative solutions to problems.
Employee Innovation (Scott & Bruce, 1994; Anderson et al., 2014)	Innovation_3: I often explore new ways of doing things in our work.
	Innovation_4: I am effective at turning new ideas into practical actions.
	Innovation_5: I not only come up with innovative ideas, but also implement them.
	Innovation_6: Over the past six months, I have introduced at least one important new idea or method in tasks or doing things.