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Following in the Footsteps: An Empirical Model of Leader-Signaled Knowledge Hiding by Subordinates



Abstract

Knowledge hiding depresses outcomes at the individual, team, and organizational levels, yet its causes are not sufficiently studied. This research studied numerous vital antecedents of knowledge hiding that are previously not examined together. We used social learning theory to explain the mechanism and conditions that induce knowledge hiding. The three-phased data were collected from 121 sales and marketing employees working in life insurance companies of Pakistan through an online survey using the measures validated in prior research. The results supported that self-serving leadership propels knowledge hiding in subordinates by signalling tolerability of such behavior. The employee Machiavellianism and a competitive work environment strengthened this relationship. The findings add to the literature on leadership and knowledge hiding behavior by examining how workers perceive knowledge hiding signals from their leaders, especially when the leader himself demonstrates self-serving conduct. The implications of these findings for theory and practices are discussed.

Key Words: Self-Serving Leadership, Leader-Signaled Knowledge Hiding, Machiavellianism, Competitive Work Environment

Introduction

Notwithstanding the organizational initiatives taken to smooth knowledge transfer, there is ample space for discretionary knowledge hiding by the employees. There is a dire need to recognize different types and approaches of knowledge-hiding and eliminate the roadblocks to smooth the knowledge-sharing process for the ultimate benefit of employees and their organizations. Knowledge hiding refers to an individual's effort to obscure their knowledge upon other's request (Connelly et al., 2012, 2019). It prevails as a significant issue of managerial concern in organizational life, and research in this domain is nascent (Offergelt et al., 2019). Organizations undertake interventions to promote knowledge sharing (Abbasi et al., 2020) and reduce the negative effects of knowledge hiding (Butt & Ahmad, 2021; Huo et al., 2016). However, most efforts to facilitate the transfer of knowledge end up without success as employees show unwillingness to share their knowledge.

Previous research on knowledge hiding shows that it undermines employees' social relationships, creativity, and innovation, thereby blocking the organization's performance and achievements (Černe et al., 2017). The concealment of knowledge reduces innovative behavior (Černe et al., 2017), creativity (Rhee & Choi, 2017), and work performance (Wang et al., 2019). It also suppresses absorptive capacity and creativity at the team level (Fong et al., 2018). In this context, the factors that motivate individuals to hide knowledge may persuade them to self-attribution to knowledge hiding actions (Jiang et al., 2019). Knowledge sharing is a distinct concept from knowledge hiding; the former has been widely researched than the latter (H. Peng, 2013). Therefore, more robust empirical research into why people engage in knowledge hiding behavior is vital, especially to understand the knowledge hiding process induced by leadership

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behavior, personality traits, and a competitive work environment ([Hernaes et al., 2019](#)).

Knowledge concealment behavior among subordinates can originate from their managers ([Arain et al., 2020](#)), as managerial behaviors are the role models that influence subordinates' actions. The extant research suggests that elements, structures, and conditions that signal knowledge concealment should be explored ([Bari et al., 2019](#); [Offergelt et al., 2019](#)), such as leadership styles ([Xiao & Cooke, 2019](#)), traits ([Anaza & Nowlin, 2017](#); [Pan et al., 2016](#)) and work environment ([Singh, 2019](#)). The intensification of information exchange among service employees ([Cantor & Li, 2019](#); [Cho, 2019](#)) is required for efficient services ([Kirillova et al., 2020](#)). However, knowledge hiding prevails at large, and the research lacks sufficient knowledge about the antecedents of hidden knowledge in service organizations ([Zhao & Xia, 2019](#)).

Knowledge hiding may hurt working relationships by creating a culture of distrust. Harmful leadership behaviors such as lack of care and acting in self-centred ways have a strong potential to harm subordinates' behavior, including their tendency to share or hide knowledge; however, this phenomenon has received little or no attention ([Almeida et al., 2021](#)). Similarly, employees may also adopt self-harming behaviors from their leaders ([Offergelt et al., 2019](#)). This study intended to fill the stated knowledge gaps by adding new insights into the development of knowledge hiding behavior, specifically how and when self-serving leadership behavior induces knowledge hiding in the service domain of the insurance sector in Pakistan.

We proposed an overarching model based on social learning theory to explain how subordinates receive knowledge hiding signals from their self-serving leaders ([Offergelt et al., 2019](#)) and engage in knowledge hiding at work considering the same as tolerable by the leaders. In addition, we studied how this leader-signalled knowledge hiding is influenced by subordinates' Machiavellian personalities and the competitive

work environment, indicating the extent to which subordinates would actually involve in knowledge hiding.

Literature and Hypotheses

Knowledge Hiding

Knowledge hiding refers to the intentional acts of withholding knowledge when it is sought after by others ([Pan et al., 2016](#)). There may be different reasons behind people's motivation for hiding their knowledge, despite clearly knowing that knowledge increases with sharing. Whatever the reason may be, most people hide knowledge at work in three different ways. They may play dumb by showing a lack of awareness of the information required by the others, evasively hiding by giving misleading and manipulated information, and rationalized hiding by giving their limits and shifting the obligation to others to share requested information ([Connelly et al., 2012](#)). [Nonaka \(1994\)](#) distinguished tacit knowledge from explicit knowledge. He described that tacit knowledge, which cannot be easily imitated, resides in individual minds. In contrast, explicit knowledge can take any form that is easy to imitate, including textbooks and databases ([Harvey, 2012](#)). Accordingly, the reasons for knowledge hiding may vary, and people may choose different strategies to hide tacit and explicit knowledge held with them. Recent research unveiled that firms can opt for one or more of the six strategies to lessen knowledge hiding behavior ([Butt & Ahmad, 2021](#)): a shorter chain of command, increased informal interaction, incentive policy, easy performance appraisal systems, higher interdependency among employees and open space workstations. However, any strategy could be effective only when contextual causes of knowledge hiding are well understood. This research conceptualized knowledge hiding as an outcome of self-serving leadership, which is likely to be higher in employees who possess Machiavellian personalities and a highly competitive work environment.

Self-Serving Leadership and Subordinate's Knowledge Hiding

Self-serving leadership is characterized by placing the personal interests and well-being of a leader above those of followers and the organization (Camps et al., 2012). Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) guides that subordinates imitate their leader's behavior as leaders serve as role models for them. Therefore, followers of self-serving leaders tend to be self-serving and hold whatever they have, including knowledge, to benefit themselves. This approach hinders creativity as self-serving leaders can encourage team members to hide their knowledge (J. Peng et al., 2019). They use institutional resources (Rus et al., 2012) and positions to profit from them. Such conduct sabotages employee functioning and organizational performance (Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2009; Kalshoven et al., 2013).

Managers have an impact on subordinates to rehearse and follow. Leaders who seek personal advantage make their subordinates narrow-minded and limit their likelihood of advancing valuable ideas (Liu et al., 2017). Leadership behaviors have an incredible impact on general hierarchical settings (Bryant, 2003), influencing subordinate practices (Ruiz et al., 2011), such as misuse (Marwritz et al., 2012) or unfairness (Aryee et al., 2007) and propensity to hide knowledge (Offergelt et al., 2019). The self-serving leaders may exercise power in arbitrary ways to oppress and control others, achieving their personal goals, which negatively influences subordinates' improvement-oriented behaviors (Boudrias et al., 2020), increasing the tendency of hiding helpful knowledge. Accordingly, we have assumed that:

H1: Self-Serving Leadership has a Positive Association with Subordinates' Knowledge Hiding Behavior

Mediating Role of Leader-Signaled Knowledge Hiding

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) explains that people replicate the behaviors and actions of their leaders. Individuals evaluate their behavior based on environmental contributions, such as

colleagues and managers. At work, supervisors are moral examples, instructors, and sources of hierarchical input, thus impacting worker behavior (Marwritz et al., 2012). Leader-signaled knowledge hiding denotes the subordinates' perception that their leader practices, resists, and expects knowledge hiding (Offergelt et al., 2019). It negatively influences employees' job attitudes by suppressing their feelings of empowerment. It encourages employees to perceive, rather than believe, that practicing and tolerating knowledge hiding is acceptable within their specific context and thus induces them to practice such behavior by creating a collective sense of motivation for knowledge hiding.

The leaders' identity, such as self-serving behavior, may lead them to adopt abusive approaches to achieve their self-centered goals, reducing the leader's effectiveness (Johnson et al., 2012). It creates distrust among employees, leading to knowledge-hiding behavior (Farooq & Sultana, 2021). The leaders' harmful behaviors, such as acting in self-centred ways, can harm subordinates' behavior (Almeida et al., 2021). We expected employees to adapt their behavior similarly when the leader shows signs that knowledge hiding is worthy, either directly through specific directions or indirectly through instances of participation or concealment of knowledge. Therefore, we hypothesized that:

H2: Leader-signaled knowledge hiding mediates the link between self-serving leadership and subordinates' knowledge hiding behavior

Moderating Role of Employee Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism is recognized as one of the dark personality traits that manipulate others for personal gain, even at the expense of others' interests (Jones & Paulhus, 2009). Machiavellian people strive to accomplish their objectives by all means (Bagozzi et al., 2013; Shultz, 1993), even with limited resources (Kuyumcu & Dahling, 2014). Most self-serving leaders demonstrate Machiavellian behavior. The Machiavellian employees working with Machiavellian leaders

also adopt such behaviors and become self-seeking and therefore start hiding knowledge for their self-advantages (Karim, 2020). Leaders' role modelling and behavior shaping influence people's behavior from a social perspective (Bandura, 1977). People tend to replicate role models (Marwitz et al., 2012; Schaubroeck et al., 2012). The social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) signifies that people follow their leaders when they possess matching personalities and interests. Machiavellians are more tuned to behave in unethical manners when their superiors set an example through unethical workplace behavior (Greenbaum et al., 2017). Machiavellians are less likely to practice helping behavior (Wolfson, 1981); therefore, they are more apt to engage in knowledge hiding behavior (Karim, 2020 (Pan et al., 2018)). So, we expected that the workers high in Machiavellianism would see strong knowledge hiding signals from their leaders who demonstrate or tolerate hiding knowledge.

H3: A high level of employee Machiavellianism interacts with self-serving leadership and creates stronger signals for knowledge hiding.

Moderating Effect of Competitive Work Environment

The psychological climate wherein the employees believe that their rewards mainly depend on their relative performance to their peers is referred to as a competitive work environment (Brown et al., 1998). In most organizations, interdependent individuals and teams are required to collaborate for achieving desired goals. However, the competitive pressure within the teams motivates individuals to

outperform (Hernaus et al., 2019), especially where creativity and innovation are highly valued and rewarded. The competitive working conditions can influence mindset, actions, and a person's performance. Intensive performance competition leads to job insecurity, motivating to hide knowledge (Riege, 2005). Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) supported that people get influenced by their environment and choose situationally more appropriate behaviors. Existing research has shown that the competitiveness of colleagues affects employee behavior. In knowledge-intensive companies, individuals can hide knowledge to secure their positioning (Fletcher & Nusbaum, 2010). In a competitive environment, people would pursue their survival (Nowlin et al., 2015) by hiding knowledge to maximize their performance (Singh, 2019; Xiong et al., 2021). A competitive environment continues to cultivate opportunistic behaviors (Černe et al., 2014), which can validate and reinforce leaders' current propensity for self-service. Indeed, Nerstad et al. (2018) have shown that a competitive climate promotes self-serving behavior, as it allows workers to prioritize their interests opportunistically. Therefore, we supposed that Machiavellian employees who work in a competitive environment and get knowledge hiding signals from their self-serving leaders would hide knowledge to gain more rewards than their peers.

H4: A high level of competitive work environment interacts with leader-signalled knowledge hiding and induces more knowledge hiding.

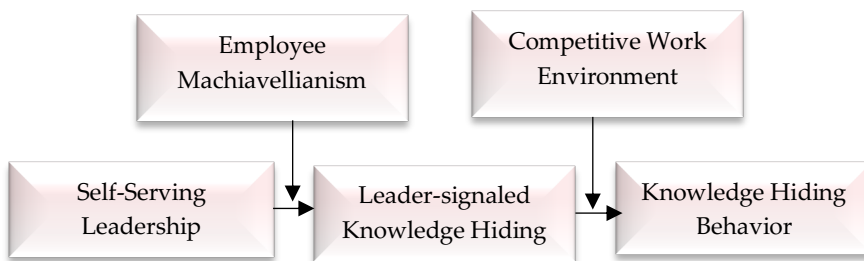


Figure 1: Research Framework

Methodology

Procedure and Sample

We conducted a three-stage quantitative survey, each separated by a period of three weeks. The self-reported data was collected from sales and marketing employees of different insurance companies in Pakistan. A random list of 400 potential participants was prepared by obtaining their email addresses and/or contact numbers through the authors' networks in the insurance industry. The online questionnaires were created using Google forms. At time 1, the link of a questionnaire on self-serving leadership behavior and employee Machiavellianism and demographic information was sent to 400 potential participants on their available email or contact number. In return, we received 286 responses (65% response rate). At time 2, the respondents of time 1 were sent a questionnaire on leader-signaled knowledge hiding and the competitive work environment, of which 194 were returned (68% response rate). Finally, at time 3, the survey to record knowledge hiding behavior was sent by email to the respondents of time 2. The final sample comprised 121 employees with an overall response rate of 30%.

The respondents' profiles showed participation by men (64.5%) and women (35.5%) with an average age of 31 years. Most of them were married (77%) and highly qualified with a Master's degree (44.6%). They worked as sales managers (52%) and divisional managers (20%). They have worked for an average of five years in their current organization.

Measures

We used existing measures ensuring their sufficient reliability to evaluate variables of interest in this study. To control common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012), we collected data at three phases; the independent, mediating, and dependent variables were assessed at three different time points. The moderating variable one was assessed at time 1, while the moderating variable 2 was assessed at time 2.

Demographic Controls (Time 1)

We collected data on demographic variables at time 1, such as gender, age, education, and experience. A one-way ANOVA test was performed to ascertain if any variation occurs in mediating or the dependent variables due to these variables. The results indicated no significant variations resulting from any of these demographic factors. Therefore, we excluded these variables from further analysis.

Self-Serving Leadership (Time 1)

Employee perceived self-serving leadership behavior ($\alpha=0.910$) was evaluated at time 1 using four items of Camps et al. (2012), such as "My manager would forge a document when this could improve his/her position", rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale assessed the extent to which leaders exhibit self-serving behavior at work, as perceived by their subordinate employees.

Employee Machiavellianism (Time 1)

Employee Machiavellianism ($\alpha=0.863$) was evaluated at time 1 using 20 items (Christie & Geis, 1970), such as "Never tell anyone the real reason you did something unless it is useful to do so", rated on a point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). This scale measured the extent to which employees possess and exhibit Machiavellian personality traits in their relations and communications with others at work.

Leader-Signaled Knowledge Hiding (Time 2)

Leader-signaled knowledge hiding ($\alpha=0.837$) was assessed at time 2 through five items (Offergelt et al., 2019), such as "Sometimes my boss wants me to hide my knowledge.", rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The scale evaluated the perception of subordinate employees regarding the signals from their leaders that explicitly or implicitly endorse practicing and accepting knowledge hiding behavior at work.

Competitive Work Environment (Time 2)

The competitive work environment ($\alpha=0.852$) was tapped at time 2 using 20 items (Fletcher & Nusbaum, 2010), such as "I receive higher pay when I perform better than my coworkers", rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale measured the extent of competitiveness at work where employees' success depends on their performance relative to others around them.

Knowledge Hiding (Time 3)

The knowledge hiding behavior of employees ($\alpha=0.825$) was gauged at time 3 using 12 items (Connelly et al., 2012) on a point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The

measure was used twice for tapping the tacit and explicit knowledge separately (Hernaes et al., 2019). In addition, the short definitions of tacit and explicit knowledge were added to the questionnaire. The scale gauged the level of knowledge hiding behavior practiced by the employees at work.

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We assessed discriminant validity by comparing the proposed 5-factor model against the one-factor model. All factor loadings fulfilled the threshold of 0.700. Table 1 illustrates that our hypothesized model showed a better fit with all indices within the acceptable (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 1. Model Fit Indices

Model	χ^2	Df	χ^2 / Df	CFI	GFI	AGFI	NFI	RMR	RMSEA
Proposed 5-Factor Model	770.25	325	2.37	.954	.866	.807	.851	.077	.051
One-factor model (SSL, MAC, LSKH, CWE, KHB)	809.12	778	1.04	.772	.656	.579	.735	.131	.103
Acceptable Range*			1-3	>0.95	≥ 0.90	>0.80	>0.90	<0.09	<0.08

Note: CWE= competitive work environment, KHB= knowledge hiding behavior, LSKH= leader-signalled knowledge hiding, MAC= employee Machiavellianism, SSL= self-serving leadership.

Table 2 shows the descriptive results and the outcomes of convergent validity. The composite reliability and average variance extracted exceeded the minimum of 0.7 and 0.5, respectively. The composite reliability coefficients for all variables were greater than their average variance extracted, indicating convergent validity. The inter-construct correlations were within the range of -0.101 and 0.452, indicating no multicollinearity. The self-serving leadership was positively linked with leader-signalled knowledge hiding ($r=.386$,

$p<.05$) and employees' knowledge hiding behavior ($r=.361$, $p<.05$). The employee Machiavellianism was also positively correlated with leader-signalled knowledge hiding ($r=.231$, $p<.01$) and the knowledge hiding behavior of employees ($r=.120$, $p<.01$). Finally, the competitive work environment indicated a positive linkage with employees' knowledge hiding behavior ($r=.116$, $p<.05$). These correlations indicated the possibility of accepting the proposed hypotheses.

Table 2. Descriptive and Convergent Validity Analysis

S No.	Variables	CR	AVE	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1	SSL (Time 1)	.900	.526	3.97	0.97	(.910)				
2	MAC (Time 1)	.856	.623	4.07	0.55	.452*	(.863)			
3	LSKH (Time 2)	.841	.704	5.01	1.08	.389**	.231*	(.837)		
4	CWE (Time 2)	.858	.582	3.49	0.63	.131	.204	-.101	(.852)	

5	KHB (Time 3)	.820	.719	5.11	0.75	.361**	.120*	.386**	.116*	(.825)
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n=121, **p*<.05, ***p*<.01, ****p*<.10, diagonal bold values are Cronbach’s alpha reliabilities, CWE= competitive work environment, KHB= knowledge hiding Behavior, LSKH= leader-signaled knowledge hiding, MAC= Machiavellianism, SSL= self-serving leadership.

Hypotheses Testing

In this study, we used Process Model 4 (Hayes, 2013) to examine the mediation model (Table 3) and model 1 to examine simple moderation (Table 4). We used 5000 bootstrapped samples to examine the confidence intervals for the indirect effects. Table 3 demonstrates that self-serving leadership has positive and significant direct

($\beta=0.115$, $p<0.01$) and indirect effects ($\beta=0.074$, 95% confidence interval [0.013, 0.064]) on knowledge hiding behavior. This provided support to accept the hypothesis 1 and 2. Hence, we concluded that self-serving leadership has a significant positive association with subordinates’ knowledge hiding behavior. This relationship is explained through the mediation of leader-signalled knowledge hiding.

Table 3. Direct and Indirect Effects

Variables	R	R ²	B	SE	t	p
SSL → LSKH	.151	.023	.167	.102	2.66	.009
SSL → KHB	.169	.029	.115	.071	1.61	.000
LSKH → KHB			.244	.064	2.79	.000
5000 Bootstrap Results for Indirect Effects			M	SE	LL CI	UL CI
SSL → LSKH → KHB			.074	.012	.013	.064

Note: *n* = 121, Bootstrap Sample Size=5000, **p*<.05, ***p*<.01, ****p*<.10, CI= Confidence Interval, KHB=knowledge hiding behavior, LL=lower Limit, LSKH=leader-signaled knowledge hiding, SSL=self-serving leadership.

Table 4 displays that employee Machiavellianism has an insignificant contribution to leader-signalled knowledge hiding ($\beta=-0.407$, $p>.10$). However, its interaction term with self-serving leadership significantly predicted positive leader-signalled knowledge hiding ($\beta=0.019$, $p<.05$). The interaction plot (Figure 2) shows this moderated relationship, providing support to accept hypothesis 3. Table 4 also illustrates that a

competitive work environment significantly contributes to the employee knowledge hiding behavior ($\beta=0.012$, $p>.10$). However, its interaction term with leader-signalled knowledge hiding ($\beta=0.078$, $p<.05$) significantly influenced employees’ knowledge hiding behavior. The interaction plot (Figure 3) shows this moderated relationship, proving support to accept hypothesis 4.

Table 4. Moderated-Mediation results Analysis

Predictors	Leader-Signalled Knowledge Hiding	Knowledge Hiding Behavior
Constant	3.77***	2.43*
SSL	.092***	
MAC	-.407	
Interaction 1 (SSL x MAC)	.019*	
LSKH		.042*
CWE		.012

Interaction 2 (LSKH x CWE)		.078*		
R ²	.139***	.011*		
ΔR ² (interaction terms)	.009	0.004		
Conditional effects of X on Y at values of the moderator	Moderator	Effect	Moderator	Effect
	MAC (-1.14)	.231*	CWE (-1.08)	.019*
	MAC (0.00)	.347*	CWE (0.00)	.122
	MAC (1.14)	.457*	CWE (1.08)	.262***

Note: n = 121, Bootstrap Sample Size=5000, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.10, CWE=competitive work environment, LSKH=leader-signaled knowledge hiding, MAC=Machiavellianism, SSL=self-serving leadership.

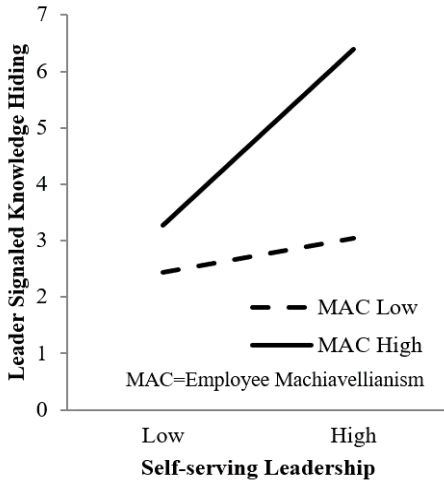


Figure 2: Moderating effect of Machiavellianism on leader-signalled knowledge hiding

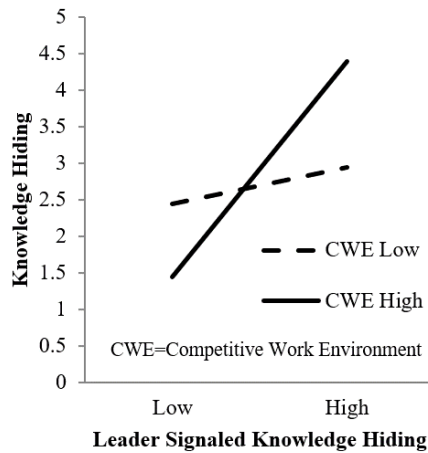


Figure 3: Moderating effect of competitive work environment on knowledge hiding behavior

Discussion

We anticipated and examined a moderated mediation model of knowledge hiding, using the social learning theory of Bandura (1977). We examined the conditional mechanism explaining how and when self-serving leadership induces knowledge hiding among subordinates. We found that leader-signalled knowledge hiding mediates the proposed relationship. The findings explain that employees engage in knowledge hiding behavior when receiving such signals from their self-serving leaders (Offergelt et al., 2019). We also found a strong effect of self-serving leadership on leader-signalled

knowledge hiding in highly Machiavellian employees.

Further, the effect of leader-signalled knowledge hiding becomes stronger when employees work in a highly competitive environment. The overall results indicate that subordinates hide knowledge when exposed to self-serving leaders. This relationship is substantial in the case of Machiavellian employees (Karim, 2020; Pan et al., 2016) and the context of a competitive working environment (Hernaes et al., 2019; Nerstad et al., 2018). These findings offer important theoretical and practical insights, which are discussed as follows. Leaders have a reward or coercive powers. Employees

will hide knowledge when leaders send signals that such behavior is desired, acceptable, or tolerable in certain situations, as they will prefer to align themselves with the direction or expectations of their leaders.

Self-serving leaders stick to what suits them. They build themselves even at the cost of others. They are preoccupied with their own interests, focusing on acquiring material things. Under their personal interests, they disregard the truth and well-being of others ([Offergelt et al., 2019](#)). Therefore, they ignore the needs and challenges of their teams instead of supporting them and developing their well-being. Self-serving leaders serve as wrong role models in organizational social life. They can inspire desired positive behaviors as well as induce undesired negative behaviors. If managers actively withhold information to complete a job or want their subordinates not to share their knowledge with other departments to remain unable to complete their job, which may benefit the knowledge hiding managers. When in Rome, the people learn to do what Romans do. The knowledge hiding signals may be implicit as well as explicit. Occasionally, leaders ignore the subordinates with the intention that they should not speak up. They sometimes discourage them by saying, 'you don't know anything about the subject issue' or 'I know more than you. Some leaders hide their knowledge by putting counter questions to the knowledge seekers instead of responding to their queries. The knowledge hiding behavior resulting from the self-serving leadership coupled with subordinates' Machiavellianism in a competitive environment may lead to depletion of mental resources, adversely affecting learning, innovational and operational effectiveness of teams and the organizations. Therefore, our findings are relevant for the theory and the practice to understand better and take measures to cope with this phenomenon.

Theoretical Implications

This study plays an essential role in the development of literature in many ways. First, leader-signaled knowledge hiding is a new

concept introduced by [Offergelt et al. \(2019\)](#). Second, we examined its mediating role for the first time. Earlier studies on self-serving leaders have examined the antecedents of knowledge hiding and associated cost ([Camps et al., 2012](#)). Third, we contribute to this literature by explaining employee's reactions towards self-serving leadership and that contextual factors influence outcomes of self-serving approaches to leadership. Leader-signaled knowledge hiding occurs when leaders implicitly signal to expect, practice and tolerate knowledge hiding behavior. This perception of encouragement for destructive behavior (knowledge hiding) spread through the organization and affects subordinates' behavior ([Marwitz et al., 2012](#); [Schyns & Schilling, 2013](#)).

Our results extend the research on the causes of knowledge hiding. The present study has given the researchers a more in-depth understanding of how and when knowledge hiding occurs in organizational settings. Although research on knowledge hiding is emerging, it is still at an initial stage. Nevertheless, this study has given an essential insight into the factors that induce knowledge hiding behavior due to the observed behavior of a role model ([Offergelt et al., 2019](#)), such as a leader or the manager at work.

Lastly, we have discussed some critical boundary conditions for these relationships. In particular, we found that employees high on Machiavellianism and who work in a highly competitive environment may perceive more knowledge hiding signals from their respective leaders and indulge in knowledge hiding behavior. Our findings support the theory of social learning ([Bandura, 1977](#)) that environmental and personal factors influence behavior. The concepts inspected in this study are aligned with past extant research and develop the same in better understanding the phenomenon of knowledge hiding within organizations.

Practical Implications

Our research entails relevant perceptions of organizational practice. First, we have explained

an initial downward spiral effect when leaders signal acceptance of knowledge concealment, harming work attitudes. Second, we recommend that organizations deliberately conduct workshops and seminars to shed light on systems that decide achievement and failure regarding empowerment perceptions, employee satisfaction, and knowledge transfer. In addition, decision-makers should consider the significance of LSKH when delegating to the new leaders. For instance, they should consider a candidate's personality who withholds the knowledge and gain the advantage.

Additionally, self-serving leaders are considered bad moral characters, negatively influencing subordinates. To provide a specific perspective into previous actions, different references must be consulted, with questions such as: did the individual specifically require the information be retained? Has anyone complained of information being withheld? Organizations should be conscious that knowledge hiding has unique characteristics and has different implications. Leaders must lead by example, so they must explicitly demonstrate that knowledge hiding is unacceptable and avoided.

Third, managers must recognize that knowledge hiding does not only rely on situational factors. It also represents broader personality differences among workers. Therefore, employers should conduct a personality test to check whether the candidate is high on Machiavellianism traits or not. Fourth, self-serving behavior should be prevented in order to mitigate knowledge hiding. Initially, organizations should not recruit and promote self-serving leaders. Fifth, in hiring practices, managers should avoid candidates who have undesirable personalities, such as narcissists, and a person with low agreeableness possesses self-interest behavior (Nevicka et al., 2018). Sixth, ethical training sessions should be arranged for employees and their leaders as only effective hiring and selection models are insufficient. These training programs should be designed to make leaders good role models and teach them

that their actions will considerably impact employees.

This paper has significant implications for sales management as it investigates predecessors and mechanisms explaining how and when the sales and marketing employees engage in knowledge hiding. Sales managers/leaders should know that salesmen do involve knowledge hiding even though knowledge hiding among salesmen may not be separated from the work environment, as sales managers may alleviate its adverse effects. Supervisors would be urged to cultivate a sharing culture and a helpful environment to amplify team capability and, conceivably, diminish the propensity of employees to hide their knowledge. The increasing level of perceived knowledge hiding may hurt team performance and career development. There is no doubt that employees who hide knowledge can have a competitive advantage in the short term, but it also damages their career image (Combs et al., 2006). Thus, the companies operating in large groups would encourage less knowledge hiding, providing benefits for competitive corporations instead of pursuing short-term interests.

Limitations and Future Research Direction

Our findings have certain limitations to be considered. First, although the theory and data support our hypotheses, future studies using longitudinal or experimental designs would better assess and predict the knowledge hiding behavior at work. Second, we used self-report data, which increases the likelihood of misleading responses. Therefore, we recommend dyadic data collection to verify and better understand the constructs and proposed relationships. Third, we assessed knowledge hiding as a single construct. Future research may consider examining this construct's multidimensionality (Kumar Jha & Varkkey, 2018), differentiating between tacit and explicit knowledge hiding. Fourth, we collected data only from the life insurance companies and that too from a small sample of 121 participants. Like prior research in the insurance sector (Gangil &

[Vishnoi, 2020](#)), the sample for this study was considered suitable for Bartlett's sphericity test and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was significant and acceptable. However, the findings cannot be confidently generalized to other service organizations. A more robust study involving a diverse sample from different sectors of the economy would provide better generalizability of these findings. Fifth, we have checked the moderated effect of employee Machiavellianism and a competitive work environment. Future studies can examine the role of a leader's Machiavellianism, as the same induces moral disengagement among subordinates ([Fatima & Mariam, 2021](#)) and is likely to persuade knowledge hiding. Lastly, we believe that different communication channels such as online, oral, or written forms may reflect different levels of knowledge hiding. Therefore, a large room exists to examine other conditions and processes that may augment knowledge hiding across various communication channels and strategies.

Conclusion

Leaders act as role models. This study elaborates the conditional mechanism explaining how and when subordinates follow the footsteps of their self-serving leaders in knowledge hiding. The results revealed that self-serving leaders signal their subordinates that knowledge hiding is acceptable behavior. Resultantly, the subordinates exhibit knowledge hiding behavior. Thus, the leader-signaled knowledge hiding bridges the relationship between self-serving leadership and subordinates' knowledge hiding behavior. The findings further indicated that knowledge hiding behavior is forceful where employees have Machiavellian traits and work in a competitive environment. These findings are expected to enhance practitioners' and researchers' understanding of the undesired phenomenon of knowledge hiding occurring at work.

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