

The Mediating - Moderating Model of Interpersonal Conflict and Knowledge Hiding: Evidence from Advertising Agencies



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Abstract: *This research paper aimed to develop a framework to test the mediation of interpersonal distrust between interpersonal conflict and knowledge hiding. This study also intended to test the moderation of organizational-based psychological ownership between interpersonal distrust and knowledge hiding linkage. A two-wave design was utilized in this study for data collection with a one-month time interval between both waves. Using purposive sampling, 341 employees were drawn from advertising agencies located in Pakistan. A self-reported survey was used for the collection of data. Results from variance-based structural equation modeling demonstrated that interpersonal conflict is directly as well as indirectly related to knowledge hiding through interpersonal distrust. Moreover, moderation analysis revealed that organizational-based psychological ownership buffers the influence of interpersonal distrust on knowledge hiding behavior. The present study uncovered the mediation of interpersonal distrust and examined the moderation of organizational-based psychological ownership between interpersonal distrust and knowledge hiding.*

Key Words: Knowledge Hiding, Interpersonal Conflict, Interpersonal Distrust, Organizational-Based Psychological Ownership, Advertising Agencies

Introduction

In contemporary's organizations the work-related proficiency, knowledge, and creative ideas are assumed as influential resources for attaining and sustaining of competitive edge in the market. Subsequently, organizations attempt to extend knowledge sharing among employees by developing optimum knowledge management systems (Agarwal et al., 2021). Although organizations spend sufficient valuable resources to induce the process of knowledge exchange at work, however, the issue of knowledge hiding has not been completely wiped out from the work setting (Semerci, 2019). Connelly et al. (2012) described knowledge hiding as an intentional aspect conducted by individuals to refuse or decline the information requested by fellow(s). Evidence suggests the adverse effects of knowledge hiding on overall organizational outcomes; therefore, this area warrants additional research attention to identify factors that facilitate such negative behaviors at the workplace, like knowledge hiding.

Research has identified various deleterious effects of interpersonal conflict on employees' job

performance (Jiang et al., 2021), provoke counterproductive behaviors (Kundi & Badar, 2021), knowledge sabotage (Srenko, 2020), hampers employee creativity (Pitafi et al., 2020), and induce turnover intention (Langove & Isha, 2017). Recently, Peng and colleagues (2020) established the direct linkage between interpersonal conflict and knowledge hiding. However, still, the underlying mechanism through which interpersonal conflict leads to knowledge hiding remains under research. To fill this void, we propose to inspect interpersonal distrust as mediating variable between interpersonal conflict and knowledge hiding behavior. To formulate this hypothetical relationship, we used social exchange theory (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Experiencing interpersonal conflict at the workplace, triggered by competition and perceived differences with others, induces stress and ego-threat, which depletes psychological resources (Peng et al., 2020). To maintain and secure control over certain personal resources, target employees generally develop a basic mindset of distrust which ultimately leads them to

withhold information sharing process from the offending individual(s).

An additional objective of the present investigation is to evaluate the buffering role of an individual's OBPO between interpersonal distrust and knowledge hiding relationship. Evidence suggests that individuals owning feelings of psychological ownership for their organization would engage in valuable activities and behaviors which bring benefits to the organization (Peng, 2013). According to self-consistency theory (Lopez, 1982), employees possessing resilient feelings of OBPO will maintain their consistent self-image, that is, a "valuable organizational member." Such employees will emphasize the constructive aspects at the workplace and evade themselves from the aberrant behaviors that would negatively affect their positive image. Research has demonstrated that feelings of organizational-based psychological ownership (OBPO) are positively associated with self-esteem, extra-role behavior, and work attitudes (Peng & Pierce, 2015).

In a nutshell, this research extends prior work in the field by offering valuable insights to understand the underlying intervention explained as an indirect effect of interpersonal distrust in the linkage of interpersonal conflict and knowledge hiding. Besides, this study enriches the domain of knowledge hiding by investigating the buffering effect of OBPO between interpersonal distrust and knowledge hiding, such that individuals high on OBPO are not expected to involve in knowledge hiding acts in response to interpersonal distrust. Moreover, the integrated approach of social exchange theory and self-consistency theory provides deeper insight regarding the mediation moderation model of knowledge hiding in the significant context of advertising agencies in Pakistan.

Literature

Direct Association between Interpersonal Conflict and Knowledge Hiding

The occurrence of interpersonal conflict is a frequently encountered phenomenon in the workplace, particularly between individuals or groups who are in interdependent interactions (Barki & Hartwick, 2004). As a work-related stressor, interpersonal conflict pessimistically affects individuals and organizations (Bruk-Lee & Spector, 2006). It is evaluated as a dynamic, shared, stressful interactional process that evolves between individuals/parties (Barki & Hartwick, 2004; Spector & Jex, 1998). Social

exchange theory (Cropanzano et al., 2017) suggests that instigations of negative behaviors (or positive behaviors) are more likely to be reciprocated by the target individuals with bad behaviors (or good behavior). Building on this assumption, we can expect that target employees choose to retaliate with negative behaviors against the interpersonal conflict that they face at the workplace (Venz & Nesher Shoshan, 2021). For instance, research suggests that target employees reciprocate to mistreatment by engaging in negative behavioral responses like knowledge hiding behaviors (Akhlaghimofrad & Farmanesh, 2021). Knowledge hiding is an intended behavior that employees follow to conceal the requested knowledge/information from organizational colleagues (Černe et al., 2014). Notably, knowledge hider displays certain overt or covert behaviors to withhold information (Connelly & Zweig, 2015). Particularly in the workplace, the problematic relationships between organizational members (e.g., supervisor-subordinates, employee-colleagues) trigger target employee choice to hide information (Connelly & Zweig, 2015). In the field of knowledge hiding, a broad range of factors has been highlighted which are positively associated with knowledge hiding. A recent systematic review identified several prominent factors that contribute to and are derived by knowledge hiding (Oliveira et al., 2021). Similarly, Anand et al. (2021) documented the personal and organizational factors related to knowledge hiding. By reviewing the existing research evidence on knowledge hiding, we found that knowledge hiding has been significantly predicted by interpersonal conflict (Akhlaghimofrad & Farmanesh, 2021; Venz & Nesher Shoshan, 2021). Drawing on the theoretical and empirical evidence discussed above, we assumed the following relationship:

H1: There is a positive association between interpersonal conflict and knowledge hiding.

Mediating Effect of Interpersonal Distrust

The social exchange process is an important element of the organization because it depicts resource exchanges and relational interactions among organizational members (Danner-Schröder, 2021). Positive reciprocity brings beneficial outcomes, and negative deeds would lead to negative ones. Generally, target individuals are preferably retaliating aggressively against the experienced negative actions of the perpetrator (Zhao et al., 2016). Frequent deploying of retaliation strategies in stressful situations

would lead to deleterious outcomes for both individuals and organizations. For instance, when individuals involved in some relational conflict with their fellow(s) would experience the feeling of negative emotions and engender grievances which eventually affect performance (Pitafi et al., 2020). Exchange relationships build on the foundation of trust (Massey et al., 2019). However, in exchange, relationships among individuals/groups exposed to the conflict would reduce their trust level and thus escalate further conflict among them (Pitafi et al., 2020). Interpersonal distrust in exchange relationships might be engendered by individual experience or the threat of being treated unfairly by other people. Distrust in the interactional relationships leads to trigger knowledge hiding acts (Xiao & Cooke, 2019). That is to say, the individuals' thwart to share knowledge when they disbelief or have a lack of confidence in other people (Khalid et al., 2018). Interpersonal distrust between individuals is the prime indicator that influences the individuals' decision to whether share or withhold information from the opponent (Farooq & Sultana, 2021). By doing so, knowledge hider triggers a distrust loop among their social relationships, and when the target individual discover that their colleagues are deliberately hiding knowledge from him/her, the target also reacts to hide the knowledge in exchange, which eventually induce more distrust among both involved individuals (Kremers, 2018). In this regard, we can expect that interpersonal distrust transmits the effect of interpersonal conflict on knowledge hiding between employees. Past empirical studies provide support to our assumption; for instance, Yuan and fellows (2020) demonstrated a significant linkage of interpersonal distrust with knowledge hiding. Similarly, a systematic review based on 72 research studies conducted by Farooq and Sultana (2021) found that interpersonal distrust significantly explains the influential effect of supervisory abuse on knowledge hiding behaviors. Considering the above argumentations, we concluded that

H2: Interpersonal distrust explains the indirect association between interpersonal conflict and knowledge hiding.

Buffering Effect of Organizational based psychological ownership (OBPO)

Job resources are organizational aspects of the work that enables organizational members to meet defined

job-related milestones, and/or decrease stressful effects and related psychological and physiological cost, and/or contribute to individuals' own growth and development at work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Organizational-based psychological ownership is one of such job resources that psychologically empower an employee to meaningfully fulfill and execute their job commitments (Chai et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2019). Those individuals who maintain high psychological ownership for their respective organizations will act more generously and develop high psychological attachment for their job (Peng, 2013). Consistent with the self-consistency theory of work (Lopez, 1982), people are compelled to sustain a positive self-image of themselves by strongly associating themselves with their workplace. By doing so, such individuals develop enriching feelings of ownership and accumulate a sense of obligations toward their organizations which normalizes the situation across time (Lopez, 1982). Psychological empowered individuals are more likely to exhibit consistent behavior, which develops their self-constructed image in front of others (Tavares et al., 2016). Therefore, they are more inclined to retain a positive image by exhibiting attitudes and behaviors that reflect their best images. Such individuals can easily relate themselves with their work and consistently perform that bring favorable outcomes for their organizations (Heine et al., 1999). The psychologically empowered employees respond more resiliently when facing unfavorable situations and problems at the workplace (Liu et al., 2019). Sense of ownership is commonly linked with proactive behaviors that encourage employees to invest their energy and time for the welfare of the organization (Zhang et al., 2021). Moreover, Wang et al. (2019) revealed that those employees who maintain ownership for their organizations psychologically would go beyond the mandatory task by performing productive work and cooperative attitudes at the workplace. Such individuals with a high sense of psychological ownership may be less expected to experience negative attitudes at work (Arshad & Abbasi, 2014). The existing empirical study examined the moderating role of OBPO and found that individuals having high psychological ownership can react against the mistreatment more constructively and innovatively (Kong & Kim, 2017). Thus, by summing up all the argumentation, we can hypothesize that:

H3: OBPO buffers the association between interpersonal distrust and knowledge hiding.

Methods

Our hypotheses were tested using a time-wave design with a lag of one month. For this study, Pakistan-based advertising agencies were targeted to study the sample of employees. Our sample selection was performed using the purposive sampling technique. The selection criteria were (a) having one year of experience and (b) at least participating in two projects. A self-reported survey was used to measure all the scales. At time1, 588 participants were requested to report on the independent variable (i.e., interpersonal conflict) and demographic information. A sum of 387 filled questionnaires was returned, yielding a response rate of 65.81%. At time2 with a lag of one month, we measured interpersonal distrust, OBPO, and knowledge hiding. We distributed our second survey form to the respondents who participated at time1. Out of which 341 completed questionnaires were returned, having a response rate of 88.11%. The respondents of both waves were matched using a unique identification number filled by participants at each wave. The final dataset comprised 341 participants, of which 43.7% were female, and 56.3% were male. The reported average age of the study's participants was 31 years, with an average work experience of 5 years. The majority of the participants were bachelor's degree holders.

Measures

The interpersonal conflict was assessed using four items given by [Pooja et al. \(2016\)](#). An example item is "My colleagues and I often get angry while working together". The composite reliability was 0.929. We used five questions from the scale of [McAllister et al., \(2000\)](#) to evaluate interpersonal distrust. An example indicator is "the more I know about this person, the more cautious I become ."The composite reliability was 0.940. Knowledge hiding was evaluated with three items adapted from the original scale ([Peng, 2013](#)) with slight modifications as "Withhold helpful information or original scale hers" to "I withhold helpful information or knowledge from others" ('I' is

added before the start of scale items). The composite reliability was 0.915. To measure the moderation effect of OBPO, we used a four-item scale ([Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004](#)). An example item is "I feel a very high degree of personal ownership for this organization ."The composite reliability was 0.870. A five-point Likert scale was used to assess all the constructs under study, anchors ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). In the data analysis, we controlled the demographic characteristics (age, gender, and job experience). The available literature on knowledge management specifies that these demographic factors may influence the studied variables.

Results

Estimation of Measurement Model

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to evaluate the properties of the estimating scale. We computed alpha coefficients (> 0.7), average variance extracted (AVE >0.50), and composite reliability (CR >0.7) to evaluate the goodness of the measuring scale ([Legate et al., 2021](#)). For descriptive statistics (See Table 1). Convergent validity was analyzed by evaluating the factor loadings of scale indicators on their corresponding factor; results showed that all the indicator loadings exceeded the defined value of > 0.7. Thus, the scores show a strong correlation of indicators with their respective constructs. Besides, the AVE values for interpersonal conflict (0.767), interpersonal distrust (0.760), organizational-based psychological ownership (0.627), and knowledge hiding (0.781) were greater than the recommended cut-off values >0.50. Discriminant validity was determined using the Fornell Larcker criterion; the square root of each construct's AVE should be higher than the construct's respective correlation with all other latent variables. Furthermore, this study employed the Harman single factor test for the identification of the issue of common method variance (CMV) ([Podsakoff et al., 2012](#)). The results of the test revealed that the variance accounted for by the common method factor was substantially below the 50% criterion. Thus, we concluded that CMV had no substantial effects on study findings.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistic and Correlational Values

	Latent Variable	Mean (STD)	Coefficient Alpha (α)	1	2	3	4
1.	Interpersonal conflict	3.381(0.913)	0.898	0.876			

Latent Variable	Mean (STD)	Coefficient Alpha (α)	1	2	3	4
2. Interpersonal distrust	3.346(0.916)	0.921	0.520	0.872		
3. Knowledge hiding	3.205(0.991)	0.860	0.455	0.529	0.884	
4. OBPO*	3.732(0.789)	0.809	0.093	0.049	0.053	0.792

Note: *Bold diagonal values are square root of AVE; *OBPO= Organization-based psychological ownership

Hypotheses Testing

Variance-based structural equation modeling (SEM) approach was followed for the inspection of the proposed hypothetical relationships utilizing PLS-bootstrapping in Smart-PLS. To estimate the structural paths, we determined the path coefficients (β) with standardized value ($\beta > 0.10$) along with their respective significance value ($p < 0.05$) and T-value ($t > 1.96$) (Hair et al., 2014). We controlled for demographic variables in our analysis. The statistical analysis depicted that the coefficient of total effect (i.e., interpersonal conflict -> knowledge hiding) was substantially significant ($\beta = 0.462, t=8.250,$

$p < 0.00$). The results supported our hypothesis 1. Furthermore, with the inclusion of mediator (interpersonal distrust) in the model, the relationship between interpersonal conflict and knowledge hiding remains significant ($\beta=0.249, t=3.798, p < 0.00$). Assessment of an indirect effect for Hypothesis 2 revealed that the paths from interpersonal conflict to knowledge hiding via interpersonal distrust was significant ($\beta=0.214, t=5.206, p < 0.000$), supporting hypothesis 2. Based on the significance level, we concluded that the linkage between interpersonal conflict and knowledge hiding is partially mediated by interpersonal distrust (see Table 2).

Table 2. Results of Mediation and Moderation Effects

Effects	Path	Coefficient	P	T Value	Confidence Interval
Total Effects	IC -> KH	0.462	0.000	8.250	0.347 0.568
Direct Effect	IC -> KH	0.249	0.000	3.798	0.132 0.396
Indirect effect	IC -> ID -> KH	0.214	0.000	5.206	0.133 0.290
Moderation effect	The interaction term (ID x OBPO)	-0.113	0.016	2.407	-0.199 -0043

Note: * $p < 0.05$; IC=Interpersonal Conflict, KH=Knowledge Hiding, ID=Interpersonal Distrust

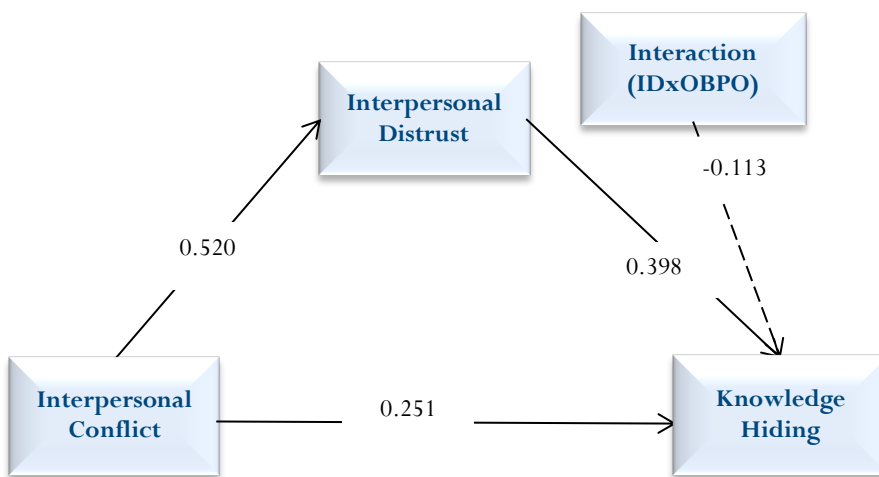


Figure 1: Moderated Mediation Model with Standardized Path Coefficients ($p < 0.05$)

To determine the moderating effect of OBPO in the linkage between interpersonal distrust (ID) and knowledge hiding. We followed the guidelines given by Chin and fellows (2003) to estimate the moderation model using PLS product indicator approach. The significance of the interaction term (i.e., OBPO x ID) was detected using a bootstrapping resembling procedure (Chin, 2010). The results of bootstrapping resampling showed that the path coefficient of ($\beta =$

0.113) for the interaction term is significant ($p < 0.016$; $t = 2.407$; supporting hypothesis 3). Besides, Figure 2 depicts the moderation relationship. The results demonstrate that the employees who score on a high level of OBPO are less likely to exhibit knowledge hiding behavior when experienced interpersonal distrust compared to those with a low organizational-based psychological ownership.

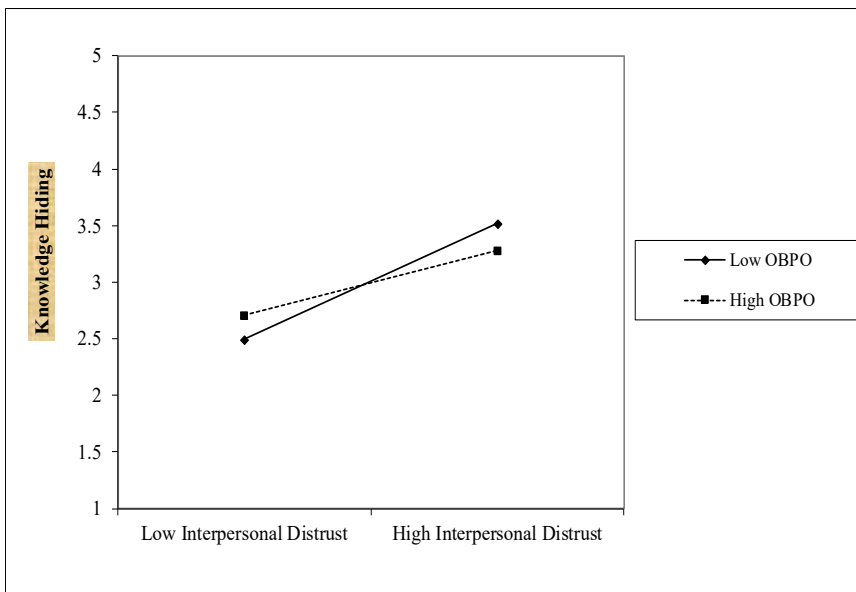


Figure 2: Moderation effect of OBPO between Interpersonal Distrust and Knowledge Hiding Relationship

Discussion

This research study intended to identify the association between interpersonal conflict and knowledge hiding through interpersonal distrust and to assess whether OBPO buffers the association of interpersonal distrust with knowledge hiding using a time-wave design. The results demonstrated that an incident of interpersonal conflict increases the interpersonal distrust among employees, which in turn influences the decision to hide the knowledge. Additionally, the moderation analysis showed that OBPO lessens the effect of interpersonal distrust on knowledge hiding. These findings add to the existing literature by revealing that poor relationships among employees significantly predict knowledge hiding by increasing the level of distrust among them. Interpersonal conflict among employees seems to be a responsible factor of knowledge hiding act. Since employees are reluctant to share knowledge with others when they have a lack

of trust in their colleagues. In line with the social exchange theory (Cropanzano et al., 2017), results revealed that knowledge hiding is a counter-reaction of employees towards conflict that they have with their coworkers. This finding is consistent with the prior research reports, which showed the positive linkage between interpersonal conflict and knowledge hiding behaviors (Semerci, 2019; Venz & Neshor Shoshan, 2021). Our study extended the existing literature by integrating interpersonal distrust as an intervening variable in interpersonal conflict and knowledge hiding association. This finding showed that engendering of interpersonal distrust due to interpersonal conflict leads to trigger knowledge hiding among employees.

The findings also demonstrated that OBPO buffers the effect of interpersonal distrust on knowledge hiding. Employees who possess high OBPO are less expected to display behaviors like

knowledge hiding that engender due to interpersonal distrust among both individuals compared with those who possess low organizational-based psychological ownership. The finding of buffering hypothesis is in line with the self-consistency theory (Lopez, 1982), suggesting that individuals are motivated to psychologically attach themselves to their organizations. Such employees urge to fulfill their work requirements more effectively irrespective of difficulties they face in the workplace. Our results are similar to existing related studies, which revealed that individuals with high psychological ownership buffer the adverse influence of customer mistreatment on knowledge hiding (Kong & Kim, 2017).

Our findings provide useful insights to management and employees who are exposed to or engage in knowledge hiding behaviors. Prior evidence, for instance, Connelly et al. (2019), showed that the presence of knowledge hiding worsens organizational productivity because these behaviors reduce organizational innovativeness and competitiveness. The findings of the present study provide awareness to the concerned managers of the advertising organization that interpersonal conflict among employees increases interpersonal distrust and that, in turn, triggers knowledge hiding as an act of negative reciprocity. Therefore, managers can take precautionary measures to prevent conflict by identifying the source. It could be possibly achieved by a design reward system which solely based on cooperation rather than competition among employees (Losada-Otálora et al., 2020). Also, to promote the cooperative reward system, managers can align the goals among employees involved in the productive tasks. Besides, managers should provide awareness about the benefits of knowledge sharing. Managers can design open norms of knowledge-sharing systems to encourage the exchange of valuable information/knowledge in the workplace (Semerci, 2019). Exchanging knowledge could also be possible if managers can introduce incentives for the effective utilization of information-sharing systems. Besides, the study findings demonstrated that the buffering effect of OBPO in the association between interpersonal distrust and knowledge hiding. It is

suggested that psychological ownership is a vital job resource that should engender and be promoted among employees. To stimulate this resource, managers should invite and involve their employees in the decision-making process. Additionally, managers can enhance psychological ownership by providing autonomy and freedom at work or redesigning their work (Peng & Pierce, 2015).

Limitation and Future directions

Although the study findings provide certain managerial implications, it has certain limitations. First, all the measures were self-reported. Although we employed the "Harman single factor test," the estimated statistics of the one-factor model revealed that common method variance causes no risk to the study findings. Besides, we applied a time-lagged design, which reduces the problem associated with self-reported measures. However, to completely rule out the risk of common method variance, we invite future research to employ multi-rater data. Second, the cross-sectional nature of this study confines to address the causality issue. We encourage future research to apply longitudinal design to depict the directionality of the association between study variables. Third, our study indicated the significant buffering effect of OBPO in the distrust-knowledge hiding relationship. Our study can be extended further by including other promising job-related resources (e.g., organizational support and supervisory support), which could potentially promote trust and knowledge sharing behaviors in work.

Conclusion

Knowledge hiding can be a costly phenomenon for advertising organizations. The study findings demonstrate that interpersonal conflict is significantly associated with knowledge hiding via interpersonal distrust. Also, the results show that OBPO moderates the interpersonal distrust and knowledge hiding relationship. It is suggested that managers may devise effective strategies to establish the norm of open knowledge exchange process.

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