Effect of Perceived Negative Workplace Gossip on Trickle-Down Effect of Knowledge-Hiding within the Organizations

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Abstract

Knowledge hiding has emerged as a real challenge in today's knowledge economies, curbing an organization's ability to attain sustainable growth and adversely affecting individuals and organizational culture, performance, and retaining talent. This study explores the effect of perceived negative workplace gossip (PNWG) on supervisors' knowledge-hiding (SKH) behavior and how supervisors' knowledge-hiding behavior trickles down into the behaviors of subordinates. Based on the conservation of the resource and social cognition as a theoretical lens, this study examines the relationship between PNWG, SKH, and subordinates' knowledge-hiding from co-workers (SKHC) with a mediating role of subordinates' moral disengagement (MD) using a multilevel approach. Data were collected from 108 supervisors and 492 subordinates of employees of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Mplus software was used to analyze the multilevel relationships. The results of this study reveal that PNWG influences SKH; SKH is positively associated with SKHC; finally, we found that MD mediates the relationship between SKH and SKHC. This study brings new insights by uncovering the relationships between the studied variables using a multilevel approach and the underexplored trickle-down effects of knowledge-hiding in SMEs. This study has important theoretical implications and practical suggestions for organizations and human resources managers to develop policies and procedures to overcome this issue and make organizations and individuals more productive and valuable.

Keywords: Knowledge-hiding, workplace gossip, moral disengagement

Introduction

In today's competitive global economy, organizational knowledge is a critical strategic resource for organizations to sustain (Hamilton & Philbin, 2020). Organizations seeking to acquire new knowledge and maintain existing knowledge must optimally and effectively use their available knowledge resources. (Arain et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2018). Research highlights the role of investment in knowledge management systems for knowledge sharing as a critical factor in gaining competitiveness in complex knowledge-based economies, but challenges related to fostering knowledge sharing still haunt the majority of organizations around the globe (Nidhra et al., 2013; Zahedi et al., 2016).

The importance of sharing knowledge within the organization is well established in the literature, but knowledge-hiding (KH) is a prevailing phenomenon that must be traced. KH refers to an intentional attempt by an individual to withhold or conceal knowledge that another person has requested (Connelly et al., 2012). Impeding knowledge transfer is a routine part of work life. However, the problem becomes more complex when it flows from upper to lower management. Arain et al. (2019) argue that top-down knowledge-hiding influences managers' ability to enhance, implement change, generate new ideas, and gain higher organizational performance through new knowledge and improved processes. Top-down knowledge is like a double-edged sword, where it affects the capabilities of the upper management on one side and harms the subordinates' potential and their ability to contribute on the other (Arain et al., 2020; Atif, 2019). Thus, to understand the facilitating transfer of knowledge within organizations, researchers and practitioners need to understand why and when people hide knowledge in the workplace (Connelly et al., 2012) and the potential consequences of KH at the firm level.

KH can severely threaten a firm's reputation, which may result in higher turnover (Peng, 2013). The consequences of KH are not limited to the individual level only. Instead, they may affect the organization at the multilevel, i.e., individual, interpersonal, and firm. Top-down knowledge-hiding impairs the knowledge seeker's potential and ability to contribute. In the presence of top-down knowledge-hiding, the knowledge seeker has to put in extra time and effort and rely upon additional resources to gain the required knowledge, which exerts extra effort and time pressure on him (Atif, 2019). Since knowledge-hiding creates a trust deficit between both associates, they disengage from working together (Serenko & Bontis, 2016). That may result in voluntary turnover, leaving the organization to bear the costs (Atif et al., 2020).

Despite the interesting empirical evidence, research focusing on the adverse work events responsible for the trickle-down effect of supervisor knowledge-hiding the

behavioral response of the subordinates is scarce. We, therefore, aim to address the critical research gaps identified in the literature.

First, prior research on the causes of knowledge-hiding has primarily focused on psychological entitlement (Khalid et al., 2020), organizational environments (Connelly et al., 2012; Kadam & Kareem Abdul, 2024; Kaur & Kang, 2023), leadership styles (Abdillah et al., 2022; Al Hawamdeh, 2023). However, the researchers paid less attention to how unfavorable work events impact employees' knowledge-hiding behaviors (Yao et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2016). Negative workplace gossip belongs to unfavorable workplace events (Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2021). Perceived negative workplace gossip (PNWG) harms employees' psychological well-being, behavioral patterns, and job performance (Cheng et al., 2023; L. Zhao et al., 2024). Researchers have also reached a consensus regarding the need to improve the understanding of negative workplace gossip by focusing on how gossip affects targets' work behavior (Li et al., 2023). The rationale behind the current study is that it looks at how PNWG influences supervisors' knowledge-hiding behavior.

Second, existing studies on top-down KH have contributed valuably to KH literature. However, there is a dearth of research regarding the trickle-down defect, i.e., the relationship between the unethical behavior of subordinates and managers (Arain et al., 2022). Remarkably, research on the impact of top-down KH on victims' behavioral responses is still lacking (Zulfiqar et al., 2023), and it is necessary to find this effect in order to forecast the degree of loss (Connelly et al., 2019). Furthermore, it is also less known about what procedures and circumstances underlie the link between SKH and SKHC (Khan et al., 2023b).This study aims to examine the direct impact of SKH on SKHC and the underlying mechanism.

Third, KH is a relatively new research area, and previous studies primarily considered knowledge-intensive industries in their investigations (Arain et al., 2019; Černe et al., 2017; Gagné et al., 2019). Very few studies have investigated KH in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) (Xu et al., 2022). SMEs belong to the category of organizations that are exposed to limited resources (Thornhill & Amit, 2003), and they need to rely mainly on the trickle-down effect of leadership resources to achieve long-term competitive advantages (Xu et al., 2022). In the presence of knowledge-hiding from the senior leadership, the top-down transmission of knowledge may halt SMEs' progress, making it difficult for them to survive in a competitive world. Hence, studying the antecedents and consequences of knowledge-hiding in SMEs is imperative.

This study draws on the conservation of resource (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and social cognitive theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1991) to explore how PNWG triggers SKH and how SKH trickles down in the behaviors of the subordinates in the context of SMEs. In compliance with COR theory, SME employees are exposed to

limited resources (French et al., 2016), making it difficult to maintain and defend against losses. Hence, when a supervisor perceives negative gossip from his subordinates at the workplace, he considers it a risk to his reputation (Naeem et al., 2020), leading him to struggle to reduce the loss through an intentional effort to hide knowledge. In addition, SCT extends the social learning processes by opening up new paths (Scott et al., 2022) and presenting moral disengagement (MD) as a cognitive mechanism through which individuals selectively disengage from self-regulatory mechanisms of internal moral standards in order to rationalize and justify morally questionable behaviors (Bandura, 1990, 1999). Therefore, when subordinates observe their supervisor's unethical behavior (like KH), they selectively disengage from the internal self-regulatory mechanisms of moral standards through MD to replicate the behavior of supervisors.

The main research question of this study is to examine whether the perceived negative gossips at the workplace (PNGW) initiate a knowledge-hiding process from supervisors' knowledge-hiding (SKH) behavior to subordinate knowledge-hiding behaviors from their co-workers, thus creating a trickle-down effect. First, PNWG should be presented as an antecedent to SKH to address the main research question. Secondly, we show that SKH behavior creates a trickle-down effect of knowledge hiding towards SKHC. Thirdly, we show that MD mediates the relationship between SKH and SKHC. Finally, the study presents a comprehensive model of PNWG that causes the trickle-down effect of KH in SMEs that may be generalized to other disciplines where the hierarchical management model applies.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Perceived Negative Workplace Gossips and Supervisors' Knowledge-Hiding

KH is a purposeful attempt by an individual to conceal or withhold knowledge requested by a colleague (Connelly et al., 2012). It is a three-dimensional construct, where two of its dimensions (evasive hiding and playing dumb) are considered to have a deceptive motive. The third dimension, rationalized hiding, is considered nondeceptive as there is a motive for confidentiality. The relationship between negative workplace gossip and KH behavior is primarily negative. This relationship can be explained with the help of COR theory.

The COR theory assumes that individuals actively strive to build, maintain, and protect the resources they perceive valuable and the loss of which is a significant threat to them (Hobfoll, 2001). The COR theory is widely used in studies where the effects of stressful situations are expected to be explained. These situations include workplace ostracism (Xia et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2017), abusive supervision (Feng & Wang, 2019), and organizational exploitation (Cheng et al., 2023). These stressors

threaten the victims with the depletion of their valuable resources and push them into a state of resource deprivation, causing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes (Hobfoll, 1989).

Gossip refers to "a sender communicating to a receiver about a target who is absent or unaware of the content" (Dores Cruz et al., 2021, p. 256). Likewise, negative gossip transmits negative information about an individual in his absence. Gossiping is a typical social behavior (Grosser et al., 2012) and an essential part of organizational life (Kniffin & Sloan Wilson, 2010). A conventional workplace setting allows team members and supervisors to constantly interact to share information and coordinate efforts to complete assigned tasks, and this interaction often involves gossip (Sun et al., 2023). In their recent study, (L. Zhao et al., 2024) concluded that unfavorable events or occurrences at work, such as negative workplace gossip, influence targets' perceptions of reciprocity, causing them to withhold crucial resources to balance the uneven exchange relationship. Therefore, it is pretty evocative to discover the mechanism of negative workplace gossip from the "perceived" perception.

Following COR theory, the victim resource loss at a specific time cannot be replenished, which makes it fall into the loss spiral by increasing stress levels (Hobfoll, 1989). It makes him preserve the remaining resources to deal with the harm. Perception of PNGW consumes an individual's reputation, emotions, time, and energy, which makes him work on the stress and reserve unused resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989). In such a situation, the individual experiencing PNGW hides knowledge even if his colleague requests to protect his knowledge resources (Park et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2018a). PNGW stimulates targets' emotions with an external locus of control, encouraging them to conceal information (H. Zhao et al., 2024). The PNGW might lead the supervisors to hide knowledge from co-workers to avert further resource depletion.

H1: The perception of negative workplace gossip (NWGS) is positively related to supervisor knowledge-hiding behavior (SKH) behavior.

The Trickle-down effects of Knowledge-hiding

In a hierarchical organizational structure, some employees are placed at a higher level and others at a lower level according to their knowledge, abilities, skills, and experiences. People at a higher hierarchical level are the leaders who have significant influence over others who are subordinates and lower in the hierarchy. Lower-hierarchical members follow and imitate their leader's behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions. This transmission of attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions from leaders to subordinates is termed the "trickle-down" effect (Masterson, 2001). The trickle-down effect has been studied in several phenomena, including ethical leadership (Mayer et

al., 2012), organizational justice (Wo et al., 2015), abusive supervision (Mayer et al., 2012), work engagement (Lu et al., 2018) and AI job crafting (Li et al., 2024).

The trickle-down effect is an evolving area of research in management literature (Chi et al., 2018; Wo et al., 2015). A trickle-down model posits that upper management's attitudes and behaviors transmit to their subordinates' behaviors (Aryee et al., 2007; Rice et al., 2021). The trickle-down effect has been elaborated in the literature with the help of different theories, such as social exchange and displaced aggression theory (Wo et al., 2015), social justice and cognitive theory (Ambrose et al., 2013), social learning theory (Mawritz et al., 2012) to explain positive or harmful behavior. The trickle-down effect can be termed positive when the flow of positive organizational behaviors flows from upwards, such as perceived supervisory/organizational support, supervisor behavior (Wo et al., 2015), employee justice perception (Masterson, 2001), public service motivation (Chen et al., 2024), and psychological capital (Gojny-Zbierowska, 2024).

In contrast, when employees are abused or mistreated by their managers, they are less likely to show positive behaviors (Rice et al., 2021), creating a negative trickle-down effect. Literature often uses SCT to explain the negative trickle-down effect, which states that employees learn the appropriateness of their behaviors by replicating the behaviors of their role models at the workplace (Mawritz et al., 2012). Supervisors who work higher in the hierarchy often serve as their followers' role models (Liao & Chuang, 2007). Learning is a cognitive process in which social context plays an important role, where individuals reinforce the learned behavior, either positive or negative, during social interactions (Pratt et al., 2010). Later, Mawritz et al. (2012) revealed that the supervisor's control over the supervisee's reward and punishments motivates him to imitate the supervisor's behavior, even the negative ones like abusive supervision.

The top-down effect of behavioral exchange is well aligned with the norm of reciprocity, and the trickle-down effect can be better explained through SCT (Blau, 1964) and the combination of reciprocity norms (Gouldner, 1960). Together, both theories help to understand the effect of a leader's behavior and attitudes on subordinates (Shore et al., 2009). The combination of a theoretical framework and research on supervisor-subordinate relationships suggests that positive supervisory behavior leads subordinates to reciprocate it until the perceived exchange level is achieved (Newman et al., 2017). Similarly, negative treatment from the supervisor motivates subordinates to reciprocate it negatively until the exchange balance is achieved (Arain et al., 2019; Mackey et al., 2018).

Following this stream of literature, this study seeks to extend the literature by arguing that KH is somehow or another form of unethical behavior, whether in the form

of evasive hiding, rationalized hiding or playing dumb. This argument can be further supported by the literature on knowledge management, where a supervisor is designated as a legitimate source of knowledge and is supposed to share it with others working under him (Mary MacNeil, 2004). By hiding requested knowledge from subordinates, supervisors put the legitimacy of social exchange at stake. So, it is plausible to hypothesize that, as the subordinates cannot reciprocate the SKH behavior to him due to his higher position in the organization, they transfer the reciprocal effect towards their co-workers to maintain the balance of exchange. So, it is plausible to hypothesize that as the subordinates cannot reciprocate the SKH behavior to him due to his higher position in the organization, they transfer the reciprocal effect towards their co-workers to maintain the exchange balance.

H2: The supervisor's knowledge-hiding behavior is significantly related to the subordinate's knowledge-hiding behavior from a co-worker.

Mediating Role of Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement (MD) extends social cognitive theory, which is based on the perspective of moral agency associated with human behavior that monitors the feelings and behaviors of individuals through self-regulatory mechanisms (Bandura, 1991)This theory further states that the moral agency mechanism employs moral standards to regulate and react to certain behaviors. This means that people are more likely to behave ethically when the self-regulatory mechanism is activated. However, the extended social cognitive theory allows individuals to selectively deactivate the moral self-regulatory mechanism through MD, which allows them to consider unethical and counterproductive behaviors acceptable.

Literature has warranted the connection between MD and deviant behaviors in the workplace (Barsky, 2011; Bonner et al., 2016; Rice et al., 2020). The negative consequences of MD impair the psychological health of individuals and result in the adoption of counterproductive behaviors. The relationship between negative experiences and negative behaviors is widely clear in the literature (Caprara et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2017). Moreover, MD satisfactorily explains the link between negative organizational experiences and deviant behaviors (Abbasi et al., 2024). In the case of supervisor-subordinate relationships, leaders are a vital influence on the extent to which their subordinates become habituated to using morally disengaged cognitions in the workplace. The alignment of the self-regulatory mechanisms of subordinates widely depends on the internal moral standards of the supervisors (Moore et al., 2019). An empirical study has also found a significant relationship between a leader's KH and employees' MD (Zulfiqar et al., 2023).

Social cognitive theory suggests that employees are likely to engage in morally disengaged behaviors in organizations where deviant behaviors are tolerated. The concept of MD is based on the reconstruction of the cognitive process, where destructive behaviors are accepted as morally justified behaviors (Bandura, 1999; Shu et al., 2009). Further, Rice et al. (2020) argue that subordinates view the unethical behavior of the manager as permission to practice the same, considering the manager's behavior as credible. Therefore, subordinates interpret the supervisor's KH as tolerated behavior in the organization and are hence involved in KH behavior (Khan et al., 2023a). The deviant behaviors provoke moral leniency and deliberately encourage people to overlook moral and ethical rules and norms (Shu & Gino, 2012). When continuously observing their supervisor's unethical behavior, subordinates are likely to forget moral norms via moral disengagement (Rice et al., 2020). Thus, the unethical behavior of the supervisors triggers the psychological process of the subordinate's MD. The subordinate's MD facilitates them to exhibit deviant behavior, which is transmitted from supervisors to co-workers.

Arain et al. (2020) argued that a supervisor's KH, an unethical supervisor behavior, augments MD among subordinates. This argument was not only justified by social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1990) but also by modern studies that state that subordinates are likely to engage in MD when they are exposed to some pressure like abusive supervision (Rice et al., 2020), supervisor's KH from subordinates (Arain et al., 2020), and compulsory citizenship behavior (He et al., 2019). Thus, the present study suggests a positive relationship between subordinates' MD and subordinates' KH behavior from co-workers, which is the transmission of supervisors' KH behavior. Hence, it is hypothesized that:

H3: Moral disengagement mediates the relationship between supervisor knowledge-hiding behavior and subordinate knowledge-hiding behavior from co-workers.
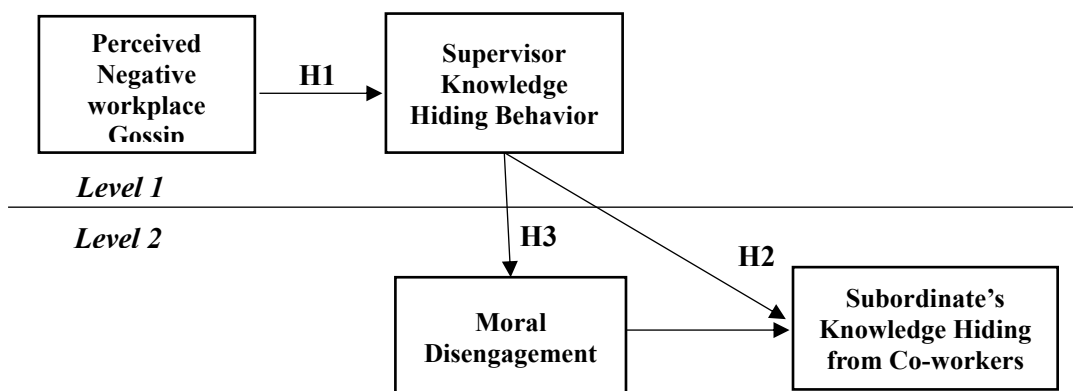

Figure 1. *Theoretical Framework*

Methodology

Research Design, Sampling Technique, and Data Collection Strategy

The study follows the correlational research design to measure the causal relationships between the study's variables using empirical data. A survey was conducted to full-time employees of SMEs in the province of Punjab, including service, construction, IT, and manufacturing industries. Since this study aimed to explore the effect of PNWG on SKH and the trickle-down mechanism of SKH, the supervisor-subordinate dyadic data was required to calculate the association between the study variables. Thus, two different questionnaires were designed to record data from supervisors and subordinates. The purpose of multisource data for a multi-level study (Molina-Azorín et al., 2020) was to avoid the common method bias in the vertical relationship and reinforce the study's significance (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Table 1
Respondent Demographics

Characteristics	Supervisor's Profile		Subordinate's Profile	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Male	101	93.5%	420	85.4%
Female	7	6.5%	72	14.6%
Age below 35	14	2.8%	212	43.1%
36-45	90	18.3%	125	25.4%
46 and above	388	78.9%	155	31.5%
Education				
Matric	23	4%	123	25%
Intermediate	176	35.7%	146	29.7%
Bachelors	184	37.4%	184	37.4%
Masters	109	22.1%	39	7.9%
Experience(in years)				
1-3				
4-7	16	3%	168	34.1%
8-12	157	31.9%	125	25.4%
above 12	218	44.3%	118	24%
	101	20.5%	12	16.5%

As the study's objective was to collect dyadic data nested in the supervisor-subordinate level, the consent of both supervisors and subordinates was mandatory. So, convenience sampling was used to collect multilevel data. Researchers further argue that a larger sample size ensures confidence in data and reduces the chances of error. Therefore, a research project must have an increased response rate and a more extensive sample size (Saunders, 2012). The present study adheres to the rule of thumb of 10 responses per item suggested by Hair et al. (2010) and also validated the sample size of 7.4 responses per item suggested by (Sameeni et al., 2024) because the studied

variable's factor loading was above 0.7. Data were collected from Pakistan's most populated province, Punjab. The SMEs' human resources (HR) departments were contacted, detailing the study's aims and objectives. The dyadic data was collected through self-administered surveys.

Since two different survey questionnaires were designed, one for supervisors and the other for their subordinates, each survey was assigned a unique code to help match the relevant subordinates with their supervisors later. The supervisors rated PNWG and SKH, whereas the subordinate's rated MD and SKHC. After screening the filled responses, we had 108 supervisor responses and 492 subordinate responses. Fortunately, all our responses were matched with the adequacy of three to five responses for multilevel studies (Yang & Yang, 2007). The demographic profiles of the supervisors and subordinates are exhibited in the Tables.

Measures

This study used a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" to measure the responses of both supervisor-level and subordinates.

Supervisor-Level Measures

Supervisor knowledge-hiding (SKH) consisted of eight developed by Connelly et al. (2012), including two dimensions (Evasive hiding and playing dumb) because the third dimension (rationalized hiding) is considered to be nondeceptive (Connelly et al., 2012). A sample item is "*I agree to help him/her but never really intend to*" ($\alpha = 0.98$ between).

Perceived negative workplace gossip (PNWG) was measured using a three-item scale developed by Chandra and Robinson (2009). A sample item is "*My subordinates spread unfavorable gossip about me*" ($\alpha = 0.97$ between).

Subordinate-Level Measures

The subordinates' Moral Disengagement (MD) scale developed by Moore et al. (2012) comprises eight items. A sample item is "It is okay to spread rumors to defend those you care about" ($\alpha = 0.91$ within, 0.99 between).

The Knowledge-hiding from co-workers (SKHC) scale was developed by Connelly et al. (2012) and consists of eight items related to evasive and rationalized hiding (α= = 0.92 within, 0.99 between).

Control Variables

Following the practices of previous empirical studies on the consequences of SKH (Arain et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2022), the demographic variables (like gender, age, experience, tenure, industry, etc.) were kept controlled while testing the hypotheses.

Results

Data analysis strategy

Since the data was nested in nature, multilevel structural equation modelling (ML-SEM) was adopted with the maximum likelihood method to perform multilevel confirmatory analysis (MCFA) using Mplus 7 (Muthén & Asparouhov, 2013; Muthén & Muthén, 1998) to determine the distinctiveness of the constructs. The purpose of choosing ML-SEM over the other available estimation techniques was to help overcome several limitations of multilevel modelling and is more appropriate for hierarchical modelling (Preacher, 2011; Preacher et al., 2010). It partitions the variance between and within levels by providing an opportunity to test the influences on both levels. ML-SEM is a robust technique for dealing with violations of the normality of residuals, provided the cluster size is large enough (Maas & Hox, 2005). In this study, multi-level mediation (2-2-1-1) is tested through the procedure explained by Preacher (2011).

Multilevel Confirmatory Factor Analysis (MCFA)

To perform the multilevel factor analysis, we followed the recommendations of Hair et al. (2010) to determine the distinctiveness of the items and the factor loading against all the factors was above the threshold. Model fit indices are reported in Table 3, where four-factor MCFA showed a better fit compared with other alternate measurement models performed (i.e. ($\chi 2$ /d.f. = 1.08, CFI = 0.995, TLI = 0.994, RMSEA = 0.01, SRMRwithin = 0.023, SRMRbetween = 0.109). The four-factor model was compared with two alternatives, subordinate-level and supervisor-level measurement models, to test the validity of the constructs. The model with four constructs showed a better fit than the two-factor and three-factor models on both subordinate and supervisor levels.

While running MCFA, intra-class correlations (ICC) were calculated for within-level to determine the proportion of subordinate-level responses explained by group-level responses. ICC coefficient measures the extent to which the importance of clustering regarding a specific variable is defined in terms of variance (Leyland et al., 2020). Table 4 provides the results of Muthén's ICC that suggest sufficient variations in variance proportion between cluster variations required for multilevel analysis (Bliese, 2000).

The average variance extracted from all constructs also met the recommended cut-off of 0.50 and above values (Hair et al., 2019). Following Fornell-Larcker's criterion of discriminant validity of the constructs was established. Where the square roots of average variance extracted scores exceeded the paired correlation coefficients in all cases (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), the reliability of the constructs was established through Cronbach's Alpha (α) and composite reliability values (higher than 0.70), as the criterion suggested by Hair et al. (2019). Table 5 shows the reliability and validity test values.

Table 3

Fit Indices of Measurement Model

Measurement model	CMIN/DF	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
Four factors	1.05	0.01	0.992	0.991	0.023_w; 0.109_B
Three-factor model	3.12	0.066	0.865	0.850	0.114_w; 0.018_B
Two-factor model	4.11	0.079	0.801	0.781	0.116_w; 0.186_B

Table 4

Factor Loadings and Intra-Class Correlations

Constructs	F. Loadings	S.E.	P-value	95% C. I.	Muthen's CC
Subordinate Level					
MD1	0.818_w	0.019_w	0.000_w	$[0.79,0.82]_w$	0.108
	0.992_B	0.121_B	0.000_B	$[0.79,1.19]_B$	
MD2	0.699_w	0.027_w	0.000_w	$[0.66,0.74]_w$	0.096
	0.997_B	0.157_B	0.000_B	$[0.74,1.26]_B$	
MD3	0.705_w	0.027_w	0.000_w	$[0.66,0.75]_w$	0.107
	0.993_B	0.147_B	0.000_B	$[0.75,1.24]_B$	
MD4	0.753_w	0.024_w	0.000_w	$[0.71,0.79]_w$	0.109
	0.984_B	0.129_B	0.000_B	$[0.77,1.19]_B$	
MD5	0.767_w	0.023_w	0.000_w	$[0.73,0.81]_w$	0.126
	0.997_B	0.093_B	0.000_B	$[0.85,1.15]_B$	
MD6	0.812_w	0.021_w	0.000_w	$[0.78,0.84]_w$	0.126
	0.996_B	0.088_B	0.000_B	$[0.85,1.14]_B$	
MD7	0.764_w	0.023_w	0.000_w	$[0.73,0.80]_w$	0.141
	0.999_B	0.113_B	0.000_B	$[0.82,1.18]_B$	
MD8	0.774_w	0.022_w	0.000_w	$[0.74,0.81]_w$	0.157
	0.999_B	0.061_B	0.000_B	$[0.88,1.11]_B$	
SKHC1	0.740_w	0.024_w	0.000_w	$[0.70,0.78]_w$	0.105
	0.997_B	0.124_B	0.000_B	$[0.79,1.20]_B$	
SKHC2	0.742_w	0.024_w	0.000_w	$[0.70,0.78]_w$	0.135
	0.996_B	0.076_B	0.000_B	$[0.87,1.20]_B$	
SKHC3	0.694_w	0.027_w	0.000_w	$[0.65,0.73]_w$	0.114
	0.996_B	0.158_B	0.000_B	$[0.74,1.25]_B$	
SKHC4	0.758_w	0.024_w	0.000_w	$[0.72,0.80]_w$	0.118
	0.997_B	0.092_B	0.000_B	$[0.85,1.15]_B$	
SKHC5	0.789_w	0.023_w	0.000_w	$[0.75,0.82]_w$	0.138
	0.995_B	0.068_B	0.000_B	$[0.88,1.11]_B$	
SKHC6	0.785_w	0.021_w	0.000_w	$[0.75,0.82]_w$	0.148
	0.988_B	0.053_B	0.000_B	$[0.90,1.07]_B$	
SKHC7	0.772_w	0.022_w	0.000_w	$[0.74,0.81]_w$	0.126
	0.997_B	0.078_B	0.000_B	$[0.87,1.12]_B$	

SKHC8	0.753_W	0.023_W	0.000_W	$[0.71,0.80]_W$	0.159
	0.998_B	0.069_B	0.000_B	$[0.89,1.11]_B$	
Supervisor Level					
PNWG1	0.957_B	0.011_B	0.000_B	$[0.94,0.98]_B$	-
PNWG2	0.972_B	0.009_B	0.000_B	$[0.96,0.99]_B$	-
PNWG3	0.912_B	0.018_B	0.000_B	$[0.89,0.94]_B$	-
SKH1	0.957_B	0.09_B	0.000_B	$[0.94,0.97]_B$	-
SKH2	0.935_B	0.014_B	0.000_B	$[0.91,0.95]_B$	-
SKH3	0.946_B	0.011_B	0.000_B	$[0.93,0.97]_B$	-
SKH4	0.934_B	0.013_B	0.000_B	$[0.91,0.96]_B$	-
SKH5	0.898_B	0.020_B	0.000_B	$[0.87,0.93]_B$	-
SKH6	0.886_B	0.022_B	0.000_B	$[0.85,0.92]_B$	-
SKH7	0.928_B	0.015_B	0.000_B	$[0.91,0.95]_B$	-
SKH8	0.920_B	0.016_B	0.000_B	$[0.90,0.95]_B$	-

Table 5

Reliability and Validity

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Composite Reliability(ω)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
MD	0.923_W	0.916_W	0.577_W
	0.998_B	0.998_B	0.988_B
SKHC	0.938_W	0.922_W	0.568_W
	0.988_B	0.999_B	0.991_B
SKH	0.981_B	0.980_B	0.858_B
WG	0.971_B	0.964_B	0.899_B

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation

Table 6 shows the Descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables. The correlation between predictor variables (MD) and the criterion variable (SKHC) at the first level and the predictor variable (PNWG) and criterion variable (SKH) at second level were statistically significant, which provides the preliminary evidence and support for the relationship between variables at both levels.

However, except for age and experience, none of the control variables were significantly related to the outcome variable. Therefore, all control variables were omitted in hypothesis testing for being so impotent that they would not have any additional values in the hypothesis testing and can cause biased estimated parameters by inflating degrees of freedom (Becker, 2005).

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Constructs	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Level-1													
Gender	-	-	1										
Age	28.25	0.345	.023	1									
Education	-	-	-0.039	-0.027	1								
Experience	9.27	1.09	0.006	-0.026	0.008	1							
MD	3.02	1.26	0.053	0.034	-0.037	0.076	1						
SKHC	2.56	1.23	0.086	0.000	0.057	0.028	0.568**	1					
Level-2													
Gender	-	-	-0.013	0.319	0.065	0.015	-0.003	0.015	1				
Age	48.70	0.49	-0.013	0.020	0.044	-0.056	0.008	-0.007	0.068	1			
Education	-	0.161	0.027	-0.035	-0.039	-0.046	0.011	0.035	-0.062	0.010	1		
Experience	11.67	0.845	-0.068	0.025	-0.023	-0.043	0.046	0.022	0.000	-0.16*	-0.023	1	
PNWG	2.10	1.054	0.085	0.049	0.390	0.121	0.284**	0.38**	0.035	0.033	-0.044	0.004	1
SKH	1.98	0.951	0.012	0.092	0.039	0.109*	0.194**	0.24**	0.039	-0.063	-0.041	0.004	0.62**

Hypotheses testing

The multilevel SEM technique was applied for hypotheses testing using Mplus Version 7 (Muthén & Asparouhov, 2013; Muthén & Muthén, 1998). We used Maximum Likelihood estimation to calculate the multilevel mediation model. For the direct pathways, (1) SKH was regressed on PNWG, and (2) SKHC on SKH. For the indirect pathways, (3) SKHC was regressed on MD, and MD was regressed on SKH.

A 2-2-1-1 mediation analysis was performed to determine the mediation analysis of the latent variables. The standardized coefficients of the two-level path model, shown in Table 7, support all three conjectured hypotheses generated in the theoretical model. SKHC is positively related to MD at the within-group level (β_w=0.518; p=0.000; CI95% = [0.44,0.60]). The direct relationship of SKHC with SKH is also significantly positive (β=0.126; p=0.050; CI95% = [0.02,0.23]), and the relationship between SKH and PNWG is also positively significant (β=0.601; p=0.000; CI95% = [0.48,0.72]. In mediation analysis, the relationship between SKHC and MD at between levels is meaningfully associated (β_B=0.539; p=0.012; CI95% = [0.19,0.90]). The association between MD and SKH is also positive (β_w=0.262; p=0.001; CI95% = [0.14,0.39]). The indirect relationship in the mediation analysis was also performed using three variables: SKHC→MD→SKH. The total effect of the mediation analysis is also positively significant (β=0.141; p=0.031; CI 95% = [0.03,0.25]).

Table 7

Moderated-Mediation Analysis

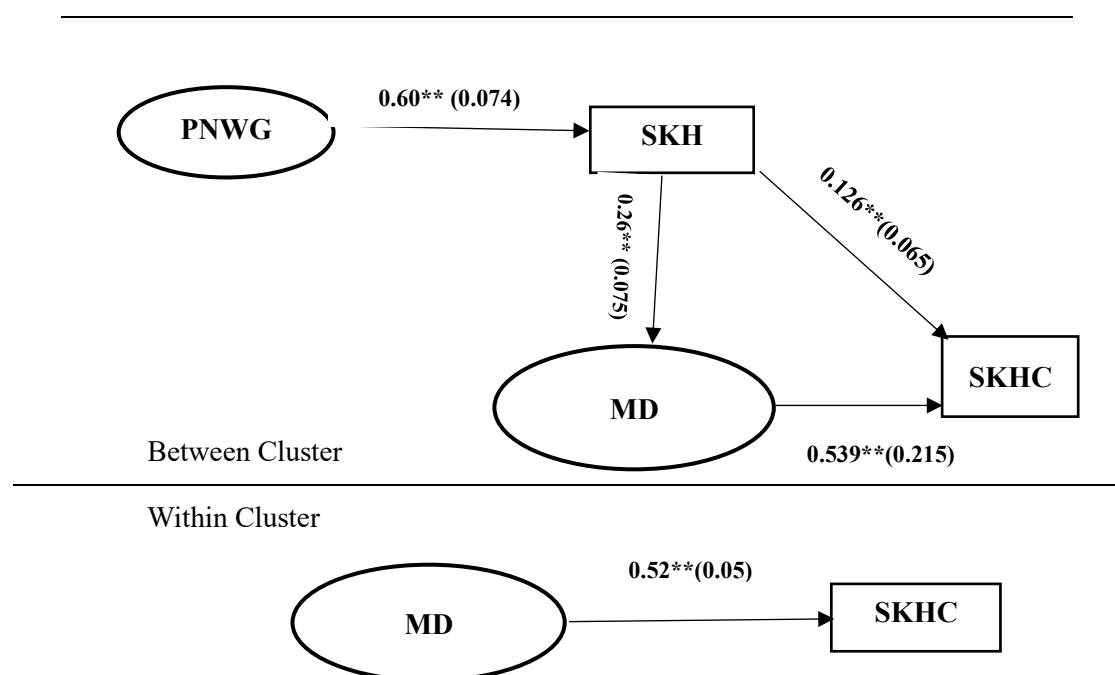| Paths	Estimates	Standard Error	95% CI
SKHC→MD	0.518**	0.050	[0.44,0.60]$_w$
SKHC→MD	0.539**	0.215	[0.19,0.90]$_B$
SKHC→SKH	0.126**	0.065	[0.02,0.23]$_B$
MD→ SKH	0.262**	0.075	[0.14,0.39]$_B$
SKH→PNWG	0.601**	0.074	[0.48,0.72]$_B$
SKHC→MD→SKH	0.141**	0.065	[0.03,0.25]

Figure 2. *Multilevel Path Analysis Results*

Discussion

Based on COR theory and SCT, the current study was conducted with three objectivess its base. First, we will explore the role of PNWG in affecting supervisors' KH behavior in SMEs. The study's second objective was to study the impact of SKH on SKHC in the context of SMEs. Finally, a linking mechanism must be established through which a supervisor's knowledge-hiding trickles down to his subordinates, instigating them to hide knowledge from their co-workers. In order to achieve these objectives, the study employed a multilevel model to develop and test three hypotheses.

The study's findings add to the growing body of research on the effects of negative workplace gossip on workers' attitudes and behaviors (Liu et al., 2021; Yao et al., 2020; L. Zhao et al., 2024). The results demonstrate that adverse events at work, such as PNWG, cause the supervisors to feel it is a loss of personal reputational resources. To cope with the loss and preserve the remaining resources, a supervisor must hide knowledge of his intellectual resources. Moreover, negative workplace gossip breaches targets' privacy and makes them feel ostracized by their colleagues (Ye et al., 2019). This impression of unfair treatment lessens one's sense of obligation to the other person and the organization, which subsequently translates into KH behavior.

Negative workplace gossip is a process of social undermining (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005) that positively influences the supervisor abuse (Ye et al., 2022), negatively affects the target's helping behavior, and positively affects his KH behavior (Cheng et al., 2023; Yao et al., 2020).

The findings of the trickle-down effect of KH are consistent with the prior studies that examined the relationship between a leader's behavior and a subordinate's behavior, where the abusive behavior of a leader trickles down to the behavior of subordinates (Hon & Lu, 2016; Mawritz et al., 2012). Further, the study of Arain et al. (2022) also showed that leaders' knowledge-hiding behavior triggers knowledge-hiding behavior among tourism employees. The results of this study are also consistent with the findings of Tang et al. (2022), who suggest that aggression becomes the bridge to describe the top-down relationship of supervisor-subordinate knowledge-hiding behavior.

The mediating effect of moral disengagement between the relationship of SKH and SKHC, the first part of the relationship, showed that the relationship between the supervisor's KH and the moral disengagement of his subordinates was substantiated. This finding is consistent with Khan et al. (2023a) and Zulfiqar et al. (2023), who suggest that leaders' knowledge-hiding is a cause behind morally disengaged employees. The second part of the mediated relationship, proposing the relationship between moral disengagement and subordinates' knowledge-hiding from co-workers, was also supported. This finding is in sync with (Koay & Lim, 2022) and Khan et al. (2023a), who established that moral disengagement is related to an employee's knowledge-hiding behavior. Further, the hypothesis claiming the mediation of moral disengagement between the relationship of supervisory knowledge-hiding and subordinates' knowledge-hiding from co-workers was also upheld. Negative contextual factors are responsible for the employee's moral disengagement at the workplace, and the leader's knowledge-hiding behavior is transferred to the employees through moral disengagement Khan et al. (2023a).

Theoretical Implications

The study makes multiple contributions to the existing stock of knowledge. First, even though the research on knowledge-hiding has outgrown its infancy, the research on its predictors is still insufficient (Offergelt & Venz, 2023). In this vein, this study established a correlation between PNWG and SKH. Although PNWG is a well-researched area and many of the researchers have previously explored its effect on employee behaviors such as organizational citizenship and in-role behaviors, it is less researched in connection with colleagues (Babalola et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2019). Based on the COR theory, SME employees have limited intellectual resources (French et al., 2016). When an individual encounters a finite number of resources, he tries to preserve

them by employing all efforts (Hobfoll, 1989). To avoid the loss or consumption of physical or emotional resources, individuals hide knowledge to deal with the shortage of resources. Hence, this research extends not only the research on the impact of PNWG on SKH behavior but also follows the research suggestions suggested in the literature that draw attention to the correlation between PNWG and work behaviors (Wu et al., 2018b).

Second, the study also extends the literature on the trickle-down effect of knowledge-hiding by responding to the research call of Arain et al. (2022) and spreading its effects from supervisors to subordinates and co-workers. It is a significant relationship to investigate in small and medium businesses, as SMEs are dynamic, complex operational systems (Cortes & Herrmann, 2020), and the "trickledown effect" from solid leadership is what SMEs need to rely on to create long-term competitive and developmental benefits. In the studies on the trickle-down effect of knowledge-hiding, the effects are limited to supervisees only (Arain et al., 2022). A few studies found that the extending effect of a supervisor's knowledge-hiding from subordinates flows towards subordinates' knowledge-hiding from colleagues (Khan et al., 2023a) have used single-level data, which might not accurately depict the reality. Since knowledge-hiding is an intentional act of an individual (Connelly et al., 2012), to assess a supervisor's KH behavior, it is vital to get it evaluated through a supervisor-reported measure to represent the novel conceptualization of KH (Arain et al., 2021). Multilevel, multi-sourced, or multi-timed data is a source of robust assessment of the constructs with minimized self-reported biases and a threat of common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2012). So, the current study also makes a methodological contribution by incorporating all these suggestions from the literature using a hierarchical model with multilevel data to get vigorous results.

Third, the study contributes to the literature by providing a linking mechanism through which the supervisor's knowledge-hiding trickles down to the subordinates and co-workers. The trickle-down effect of a leader's knowledge-hiding on subordinates and co-workers has been extensively called for in literature (Arain et al., 2022; Offergelt & Venz, 2023). Following their role model, employees adopt the knowledge-hiding behavior of their supervisors and make it a routine part of their work behavior to be morally disengaged. When moral disengagement tends to unhook employees from internal moral standards, it makes it easier for them to justify their knowledge-hiding behavior from co-workers (Khan et al., 2023a).

Practical Implications

The study findings have important implications for SMEs managers and policymakers. Individual willingness to communicate effectively and share information with others is a prerequisite for firms to maintain their competitiveness in

the long run due to the rapid advancement of technology and increased competition (Lee et al., 2021). People cannot develop a stable core competitiveness by holding immutable knowledge; instead, learning new things all the time and sharing what you know is a crucial first step towards achieving value. However, individual spontaneity alone will not be sufficient to encourage knowledge sharing. It is a synthetic process encompassing internal personal traits and exterior environmental influences. In this connection, the perception of negative workplace gossip is highly relevant to the impact of supervisors' knowledge-hiding behavior. Businesses should first improve the way their management system is built. In order to foster an environment of mutual understanding and forgiveness, businesses should actively cultivate a harmonious and inclusive organizational culture and provide a fair and equitable work environment.

On the other hand, businesses must maximize communication channels between peers, superiors, and both. It helps the organization avoid the growth of non-verbal group dynamics (NGG) and fosters positive interpersonal relationships among its members. However, managers should also support staff members' regular communication to clear up everyday confusion and reasonably handle PNWG to improve interpersonal bonds among co-workers (Xie et al., 2019).

Additionally, when a supervisor withholds information from subordinates, subordinates will covertly replicate the same behavior following their leader. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the motivation behind the supervisor's knowledge-hiding behavior to stop it before it starts. Businesses should implement preventive steps to enhance the relationship between managers and staff and allay managers' worries regarding sharing knowledge and information. Businesses should also establish a clear and efficient employee feedback system, implement severe penalties for managers who use ineffective methods, and shield staff members from a supervisor's retaliatory actions.

This study also demonstrates that when a boss conceals information, it will encourage subordinates to do the same. Therefore, to prevent the negative consequences caused by the supervisor's unethical behavior in withholding knowledge, its intermediate mechanism must be disabled. In reaction to the moral disengagement caused by managers withholding information, businesses should put in place mechanisms to detect and handle the unfavorable emotions of their staff swiftly and efficiently. In order to mitigate the situation in which supervisors withhold knowledge, organizations ought to establish multi-level and multi-dimensional support systems that offer adequate assistance to employees for improving their learning and advancing their careers.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The current study has reasonably presented PNWG and the trickle-down effect of a supervisor's KH behavior from the COR theory and SCT standpoint, respectively.

Despite the novel theoretical and practical contributions, there is still room for further development. First, the study has analyzed the effect of KH behavior on the individual effects of the two dimensions. Future research can work on the individual effects of the dimensions on the outcome variable to explore the intensity of their individual effects.

Second, the processes and contingencies connecting a leader's KH to affect employees' KH are unexplored (Khan et al., 2023a). In the current study, social cognition was used to describe the underlying mechanism of the trickle-down effect. However, emotions play a vital role in individual actions. Emotional exhaustion plays an alternative trigger when an individual confronts a negative behavior (Liu et al., 2015). So, to further establish the relationship between SKH and SKHC, future researchers may consider the emotional mechanisms that path the direct and indirect relationship of SKH behavior. In addition, Wo et al. (2015) also highlighted "multiple mediation processes" to explain the trickle-down effect, which can help future research extend the trickle-down effect of KH from the viewpoint of various trickle-down theories and improve the understanding of the mediating processes, allowing it to manage counterproductive behaviors in organizations.

Third, this study was conducted in Pakistan, which may question the generalizability of its findings to other contexts. So, it is suggested for future research to replicate this study in other countries or conduct cross-cultural comparative studies to develop an in-depth understanding of how contextual and cultural differences can hamper negative and counterproductive behaviors, which may validate the results through a greater generalization of the findings.

Conclusion

This study explored the perception that negative workplace events negatively affect individuals' behaviors. When considering PNWG as a loss of resources, supervisors hide knowledge from subordinates to protect their remaining resources. The study further studied the effect of SKH on SKHC. We used MD as a mediating mechanism to examine how SKH trickles down towards SKHC, and the study introduces MD as a mediator. The research confirmed that PNWG causes supervisors in SMEs to hide knowledge from subordinates, and the trickle-down effect of SKH behavior enhances SKHC and influencing mechanisms and offers more knowledge about organizational behavior.

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