

Knowledge Hiding in Organizations: Antecedents, Consequences, and an Integrative Theoretical Framework

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Abstract

Knowledge hiding, as an intentional and interactive behavior, has received widespread attention in organizational behavior and knowledge management in recent decades. Despite the rapid growth of related research, existing findings remain fragmented in terms of theoretical perspectives and research conclusions, and insufficient attention is paid to new forms of knowledge hiding in the context of artificial intelligence. Therefore, this paper reviews and integrates representative research in the field of knowledge hiding, providing a comprehensive assessment of existing literature from the perspectives of conceptual definition, theoretical foundation, antecedent mechanisms, and outcome effects. Research shows that knowledge hiding differs from knowledge withholding, knowledge non-sharing, or knowledge hoarding; its occurrence is mainly influenced by social exchange relationships, resource threat perception, motivational structures, and social learning processes, producing a series of negative consequences at the individual, interpersonal, and organizational levels. Based on this, the paper constructs a comprehensive and integrated theoretical framework that reveals the behavioral mechanisms of knowledge hiding. Finally, this paper proposes a future research agenda in the context of artificial intelligence, providing a reference for deepening theory on knowledge hiding and optimizing organizational knowledge management practices.

Keywords: Social Exchange Theory, Conservation Of Resources Theory, Social Learning Theory, Knowledge Hiding, Literature Review

Introduction

In recent years, the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) and related digital technologies has been profoundly reshaping how knowledge is created, stored, shared, and applied within organizations. This technological revolution has not only changed the tools and carriers of knowledge management but has also had a substantial impact on the manifestations, motivational structures, and mechanisms of knowledge hiding, as an administrative behavior, thus bringing new theoretical challenges and research opportunities to this field (Kim & Lee, 2025). However, despite the rapid growth of related empirical research, existing findings show significant divergence in theoretical explanations. On the one hand, research based on social exchange logic emphasizes the role of relationship quality and reciprocity norms (Jahanzeb et al., 2019; Shen et al., 2025). On the other hand, resource preservation and threat perception perspectives view knowledge hiding as a defensive strategy for individuals to cope with resource uncertainty (De Clercq et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2025). Therefore, a literature review on knowledge hiding in this context is particularly necessary and urgent.

Knowledge has long been recognized as an ultimate strategic asset for organizational competitiveness and innovation (Nonaka, 1994). Despite extensive efforts to foster knowledge sharing through formal knowledge management systems, individuals within organizations often engage in behaviors that inhibit effective knowledge transfer. Among these behaviors, knowledge hiding, which is conceptualized as the intentional attempt to conceal knowledge requested by others, has emerged as a relevant and subsequent phenomenon in organizational research (Connelly et al., 2012). Specifically, knowledge hiding occurs when an individual refrains from providing requested information, even though they possess it, and may demonstrate in forms such as evasive hiding, playing dumb, or rationalized hiding (Connelly et al., 2012).

Empirical research has recognized its adverse consequences on interpersonal trust, team performance, creativity, and organizational learning processes (Černe et al., 2014; Fong et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2025). For example, knowledge hiding has been shown to wear down workplace relationships and generate cycles of distrust that further hide collaborative knowledge exchange (Connelly et al., 2012; Černe et al., 2014). In addition to individual outcomes, broader organizational impacts include diminished absorptive capacity and reduced innovation effectiveness (Zhang & Min, 2021). However, despite this burgeoning interest, the nomological network of knowledge hiding remains fragmented (Zhang et al., 2025), with theoretical perspectives and empirical findings strewn across multiple subdomains of inquiry.

Existing literature reviews on knowledge hiding have provided valuable syntheses of research trends, conceptualizations, and thematic clusters (e.g., Anand et al., 2022; Khizar et al., 2024). However, the current review landscape has notable limitations. First, some reviews have adopted purely descriptive frameworks that do not integrate the theoretical mechanisms underlying the antecedents and consequences. Second, much of the existing synthesis emphasizes bibliometric patterns or disciplinary trends rather than explicating the

conceptual and explanatory coherence among theories. Third, few reviews critically evaluate the boundary conditions and multilevel processes that shape knowledge-hiding behaviors in contemporary organizational contexts (Kim & Lee, 2025), such as digital work environments or AI-mediated work contexts.

To address these gaps, this paper provides a literature review of knowledge hiding research with three primary objectives.

1. This study aims to clarify the conceptual boundaries and theoretical foundations of knowledge hiding, distinguishing it from related constructs such as knowledge withholding and knowledge hoarding.
2. This study synthesizes extant evidence on the antecedents and outcomes of knowledge hiding, with an emphasis on underlying mechanisms, from the perspectives of multiple levels.
3. This study proposes a theoretical framework that integrates multilevel drivers, behavioral processes, and organizational consequences, thereby offering a cohesive foundation for future empirical and theoretical work.

By doing so, this review not only establishes current understanding but also advances a unified perspective to guide subsequent research and practice, especially in the context of the development of AI and related digital technologies. Finally, this study outlines promising avenues for future research in the context of AI.

Conceptualization and Theoretical Foundations of Knowledge Hiding

There are many terms related to knowledge hiding, so this study emphasizes the comparison and characteristics of knowledge hiding in the context of conceptualization.

The Evolution of the Conceptualization of Knowledge Hiding

Connelly et al. (2012, p. 65) defined knowledge hiding as “an intentional attempt by an individual to withhold or conceal knowledge that has been requested by another person”. Knowledge hiding represents three closely related behavioral strategies: playing dumb (feigning ignorance about the knowledge requested), evasive hiding (giving incomplete or misleading information), and rationalized hiding (justifications are given for not sharing the knowledge) (Connelly et al., 2012). Khoreva and Wechtler (2020) emphasize that knowledge hiding does not refer to situations where the employee failed to share the knowledge unintentionally, since the employee did not possess either awareness or the ability. In essence, knowledge hiding includes deliberately concealing knowledge after an explicit request by another party seeking it (Černe et al., 2014). Knowledge hiding has been conceptualized and measured as a situation where information is requested but not shared (Evans et al., 2015). In summary, the intentional nature and wide range of possible strategies (playing dumb, evasive hiding, rationalized hiding) people use in order to be able to perform such behavior define knowledge hiding (Khoreva & Wechtler, 2020). Such a definition points to the fact that such knowledge was explicitly requested, but the holder of the knowledge intentionally does not share it for various reasons (Serenko & Bontis, 2016). Knowledge hiding has been defined by scholars consistently as a deliberate behavior of concealing valuable knowledge and information.

Some related terms must be clearly recognized in knowledge management. First, knowledge hoarding is a strategic retention of knowledge unrequested by other people

(Evans et al., 2015; Bilginoğlu, 2019; Oliveira et al., 2021). On the other hand, knowledge hoarding may also be referred to as the collection of knowledge that may or may not be shared at any time (Bilginoğlu, 2019; Serenko & Bontis, 2016). This behavior is typified by various elements: retention (the failure to disseminate) and lack of solicitation (no one requests the knowledge) (Oliveira et al., 2021). Second, other than knowledge hiding, there is also knowledge withholding, which is a broader concept than knowledge hiding. Knowledge withholding is the valuable knowledge that is not shared with others intentionally or unintentionally, which could have been helpful to others (He et al., 2021). Notably, knowledge hiding is not the simple absence of knowledge sharing. Sharing may also be done when no individual has asked them explicitly to share (Zutshi et al., 2021). Figure 1 illustrates how knowledge hiding, knowledge hoarding, knowledge withholding, knowledge sharing, and knowledge non-sharing are distinct yet related.

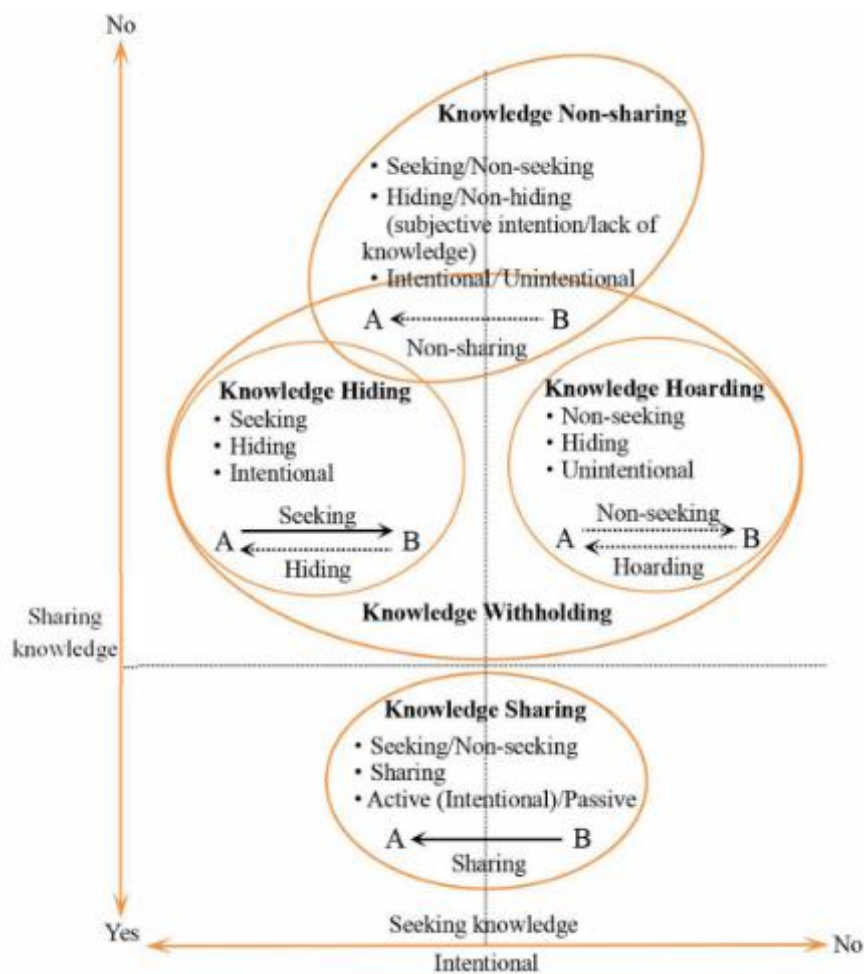


Figure 1 Comparison between Knowledge Hiding, Knowledge Hoarding, Knowledge Non-Sharing, and Knowledge Sharing

Source: He et al. (2021)

According to Silva De Garcia et al. (2022), Figure 2 illustrates how knowledge hiding, knowledge hoarding, knowledge collection, and knowledge donation differ from the perspective of whether knowledge is requested or concealed.

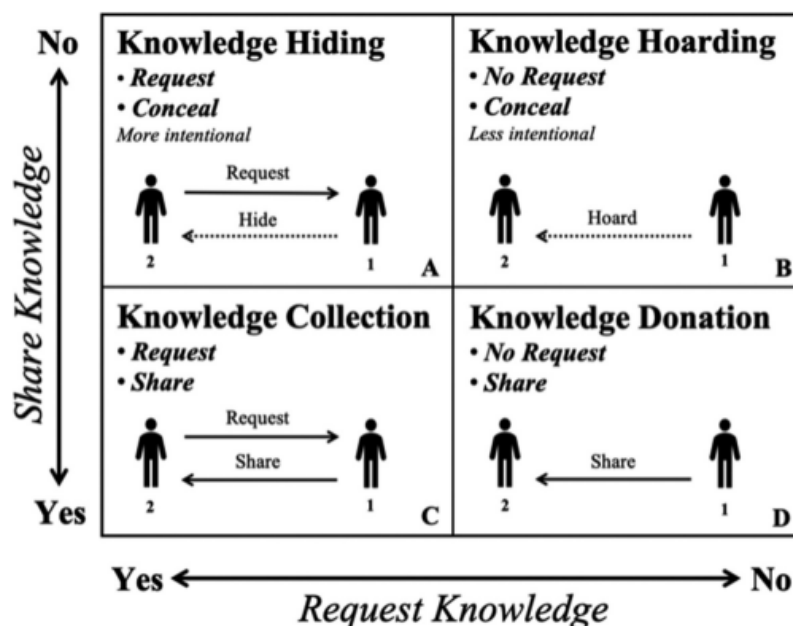


Figure 2 Knowledge Hiding, Hoarding, Collection, and Donation Framework
 Source: Silva De Garcia et al. (2022)

Based on the views highlighted above, the current study operationalizes knowledge hiding as the intentional and strategic concealment of knowledge or information for personal gain, even though such knowledge could benefit their organization. Four key aspects of this definition are as follows:

- 1) Intentionality: Knowledge hiding involves a deliberate choice by the individual to withhold knowledge rather than their unintentional failure to share (Connelly et al., 2012; Černe et al., 2014; Anand et al., 2020; Zutshi et al., 2021).
- 2) Strategic concealment: The knowledge holder actively conceals or hides the information, employing various tactics such as playing dumb, evasive hiding, or providing rationalizations (Connelly et al., 2012).
- 3) Potential benefit: The hidden knowledge has the potential to benefit the organization and contribute to its performance if shared (Bilginoğlu, 2019).
- 4) Exclusion of unintentional failures: Situations where individuals intend to share knowledge but are unable to share due to a lack of ability or opportunity (Khoreva & Wechtler, 2020).

The Main Theoretical Foundations of Knowledge Hiding

Previous research on knowledge hiding has drawn upon various theoretical perspectives to explain why individuals intentionally conceal requested knowledge in organizational contexts. Among these, social exchange theory, conservation of resources theory, and social learning theory constitute the most influential explanatory frameworks.

Social Exchange Theory: Reciprocity Imbalance

Social exchange theory (SET) is a sociological and psychological framework that elucidates social behavior from the perspective of resource exchange. In this theory, individuals aim to maximize benefits while minimizing costs in their interactions. SET was initially developed by George Homans in 1958 and subsequently expanded by various researchers, such as Thibaut and Kelley (1959), Blau (1964, 1967), and Emerson (1976). This theory states that relationships are developed and maintained on the basis of perceived rewards and costs (Homans, 1958; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), as well as the power dynamics and dependencies (Blau, 1964, 1967; Emerson, 1976) inherent in social exchanges. SET is based upon the concept that the exchange of resources forms the basis for human relationships, and a substantial amount of interaction is involved between people. This theory places great emphasis on the view that the assessment of rewards against costs is the major determinant of the viability and longevity of relationships.

Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that individuals maintain and strengthen social relationships in the work environment by exchanging resources such as knowledge, support, and trust (Shen et al., 2025). Jahanzeb et al. (2019) also indicate that when this exchange is disrupted or perceived as inequitable, negative outcomes are likely to occur. From this perspective, SET explains knowledge hiding primarily as a reaction to reciprocity imbalance.

Conservation of Resources Theory: Resource Threat

Conservation of Resource (COR) Theory is a widely recognized theory in organizational psychology, which focuses on how individuals strive to obtain, protect, and build resources to maintain their well-being and achieve their goals (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Knowledge, as a form of personal capital, represents a critical resource that may enhance individuals' position, job security, and career effectiveness (Liu et al., 2025). The COR theory argues that individuals endeavor to acquire, protect, and retain valued resources, and experience stress when these resources are threatened or diminished (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Knowledge hiding can be interpreted as individuals adopting a protective strategy under stressful situations, potentially responding to resource threats.

The COR Theory emphasizes the notion of resource investment and recovery. Employees invest their resources, such as time, effort, and cognitive energy, into various tasks and activities. Employees who perceive that self-serving organizational decision-making undermines their work functioning will likely experience resource losses and fear that their diligent efforts are not recognized based on merit (Hobfoll, 2001). Consequently, when employees perceive that sharing knowledge may undermine their relative advantage, increase workload, or expose them to exploitation, they are more likely to engage in defensive knowledge hiding (De Clercq et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2025). Knowledge hiding thus functions as a defensive strategy to protect personal resources, particularly in situations of scarce or uncertain resources. By engaging in knowledge hoarding, employees attempt to conserve their resources and prevent potential resource depletion. The COR theory, therefore, abstracts knowledge hiding as a reaction to perceived resource threat, rather than purely relational or moral concerns.

Social Learning Theory: The Diffusion of Knowledge Hiding

Social learning theory suggests the relationship among individual behavior, intrinsic motivation, and social contexts through observation, simulation, and reinforcement (Bandura, 1977). In organizational environments, employees learn which behaviors are permitted, rewarded, or punished by observing others' behaviors and their consequences, thus internalizing their own behaviors.

At the team level, social learning theory helps explain the collective and normative processes of knowledge hiding. If knowledge hiding occurs frequently and is not explicitly punished, team members may gradually develop a shared perception that hiding knowledge is reasonable or even necessary, thus adopting knowledge hiding as an informal norm (Zhou et al., 2025). This process explains why knowledge hiding often demonstrates contextual clustering and remains in certain climates.

Furthermore, social learning theory reveals the crucial factor of leadership behavior in the diffusion of knowledge hiding. If leaders indirectly strengthen knowledge hiding through their behavioral demonstrations or differentiated resource distribution, it significantly increases the probability of employees imitating that behavior (Arain et al., 2020; Michalová et al., 2024). Conversely, leaders' explicit demonstrations and reinforcement of knowledge sharing help inhibit the learning path of knowledge hiding.

The Antecedence of Knowledge Hiding: An Analysis Based on Motivation

One of the important areas researched involves understanding the reasons why employees motivate themselves to hide their knowledge. Knowledge hiding, according to Anand et al. (2020) and Zutshi et al. (2021), may be voluntary, situational, or enticed through a combination of internal and external motivational factors.

External Motivational Factors (Organizational and Interpersonal Levels)

Employees engage in knowledge hiding driven by external motivational factors such as a competitive climate, lack of time, leadership, social exclusion, and job insecurity.

A Competitive Climate

Existing research has indicated that social comparison and competition are usually the leading factors in knowledge-hiding incidences (Shukla et al., 2024). In this respect, the scholars argue that such findings are contingent upon the motivational climate: the undesirable influence of knowledge hiding on individual creativity would be higher in a performance climate (situations that emphasize success) and reduced in a mastery climate (situations that support effort and cooperation) (Černe et al., 2014). On the contrary, employees may exhibit knowledge-hiding behaviors to improve their expertise, demonstrate their value to the employer, protect their own interests, or gain an advantage over colleagues (Peng, 2013; Anand et al., 2020) in certain situations, such as during financial hardships or in organizations with competitive work cultures (Serenko & Bontis, 2016). Moreover, knowledge hiding has been associated with an organizational context of a competitive climate. Furthermore, a performing goal would prerequisite an increase in knowledge hiding tendency (Xiong et al., 2021). In summary, a competitive work environment and perceived career insecurity are significant contributing factors among employees to knowledge-hiding behavior (Kumar Jha & Varkkey, 2018).

Time Stress

Time scarcity, tight work-related schedules, and inappropriate workplace environments will serve as significant barriers to sharing knowledge and will result in hiding when an employee requests information from a colleague. In this respect, perceived time pressure has been found by Škerlavaj et al. (2018) in his empirical research to be a high-magnitude antecedent positively related to knowledge hiding. Specifically, employees with higher levels of time pressure have a greater likelihood of engaging in knowledge hiding, particularly when their prosocial motivation is low. These situational factors do not necessarily signify intentional knowledge hiding on the part of the employee. Nevertheless, they reflect unintentional knowledge withholding due to external pressure. Once the situation changes, the knowledge hider may change their behavior and may eventually share this knowledge (Anand et al., 2020). Knowledge hiding is more likely to occur under situations of constraints of time or perceived legitimacy, such as high levels of time stress. Nonetheless, this is not a constant behavior. Knowledge hiding may be reduced when there is no time factor and ample opportunities are present to share knowledge and collaborate.

Different Styles of Leadership

Different styles of leadership can substantially impact the knowledge-hiding behaviors of employees in the workplace. Previous studies have found that exploitative, passive, differential, humble, and unethical styles of leadership are related to higher levels of knowledge withholding among employees (Xu et al., 2022). The circumstance would arise from the fact that the leaders have influential power to inspire or punish their followers, and these factors define their approach to leadership, hence occasionally affecting the work strategy of the employees. By external resources, such as Guanxi (Qin et al., 2023) and internal psychological resources (psychological safety) (Men et al., 2020), the relationship between leadership and knowledge hiding was moderated in previous research.

On the contrary, ethical leadership (Men et al., 2020), servant leadership (Zada et al., 2022), and transformational leadership (Mittal & Dhar, 2015) have been found to result in less knowledge hiding. The results of leadership in knowledge hiding identify the key function of leaders within organizations in the shaping of organizational culture and knowledge management practices. Different styles of leadership have different influences on the behavior of employees in relation to knowledge hiding.

Social Exclusion

The knowledge-hiding behavior of employees is significantly influenced by workplace ostracism or social exclusion, rejection, and isolation. Under these conditions of workplace ostracism, people will more likely hide knowledge as a form of defensive coping mechanism, with the purpose of safeguarding themselves against this exclusion and further negative emotional consequences (Fatima et al., 2024). Those employees who are being ostracized, criticized, harassed, abused, intimidated, or bullied by coworkers or superiors will certainly create a sense of distrust towards colleagues and the organization (Arain et al., 2020). A high level of distrust sets off a self-preserving behavior whereby individuals withhold and protect their knowledge, skills, and expertise (Boz Semerci, 2019). Such exclusion can make the employees feel threatened or a crisis waiting to happen at their workplace (Lanke, 2018). Therefore, they will have greater incentives to conceal their information lest it become the reason for their exploitation or bargaining power weakening (El-Kassar et al., 2022). This

behavior can be described as defensive since they are unable to exert control over their knowledge assets and decrease the assumed risks of knowledge-sharing behavior in hostile working environments.

Job Insecurity and Pressure

Furthermore, job insecurity and increased pressure to compete for better performance are major influences on hiding one's knowledge (Anand et al., 2020). The insecure outside environment, characterized by uncertainty and high-pressure expectations on performance, affects an individual's job security. Such a scenario can trigger a mechanism of self-protection in the form of knowledge-hiding behaviors (De Clercq et al., 2022). Knowledge and information might be withheld as a tool for competition, at least to protect their position within the organization, or when survival or the continuation of job security is seen as threatened. Individuals have job insecurity and can practice knowledge hiding to secure their accumulated knowledge so that they become irreplaceable within the organization (Anand et al., 2020). They hide their expertise and think about making themselves more precious to the employer through a decreased threat of replacement. They focus on raising the expert power and value that can be shown to the employer (Serenko & Bontis, 2016). The employees withhold their expertise as a self-protective strategy that allows them to protect their expert power and make the organization realize how important they are for the continuity of the business. Nevertheless, this self-protective mechanism can substantially harm organizational knowledge sharing, collaboration, and innovation.

Internal Motivational Factors (Individual Psychology and Personality)

Internal factors contributing to knowledge hiding include self-efficacy, perceived organizational politics, psychological knowledge ownership, lack of trust, and the need for power and control.

Occupational Self-Efficacy

Evidence shows that knowledge-hiding behaviors might be associated with low self-efficacy. In general, low self-efficacy, which refers to a perceived inability to act effectively in a given task, was related to several adverse perceived emotions, namely, perceived loss of knowledge power, perceived loss of face, perceived lack of reciprocal benefits, and perceived lack of organizational incentives (Koay et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2026). These adverse perceived emotions have been shown to positively influence knowledge-hiding behaviors materially. Hence, self-doubt leads to less active behavior and less search for social support, resulting in less collaboration and knowledge sharing because of lacking confidence in one's capabilities (Alisic et al., 2024). Thus, a circle arises where people stop doing certain things or sharing due to low levels of confidence in themselves. In addition, according to Chow et al. (2015), ego depletion, which refers to a decline in self-efficacy, has been shown to decrease the levels of self-control and motivation, thereby further illustrating that a lack of belief in one's ability may lead to knowledge hiding as a form of protection from harm. Collectively, these findings have suggested that diminished self-efficacy creates a cycle of avoidance and knowledge withholding because of perceived deficiencies in their capabilities and the negative feelings that come with it.

Perceived Organizational Politics

Research has shown that knowledge hiding increases in contexts characterized by a high perception of organizational politics (Malik et al., 2019). The perception of organizational politics was described by Ferris et al. (2000) as the attribution of self-serving intent to the behaviors of coworkers and supervisors, which is defined as their subjective assessment of how much the work environment is influenced by such behaviors. On the other hand, when they perceive a lower degree of organizational politics, employees respond to negative organizational decision-making that jeopardizes their work functioning by engaging in knowledge-hiding behavior (De Clercq et al., 2022). These motivations, such as revenge, resource acquisition, and feeling good about oneself or personally fulfilled and deserving to hoard their knowledge (Hobfoll, 2001), can rationalize the knowledge-hiding behaviors of the employees (Serenko & Bontis, 2016). On the other hand, employees who fail to perceive their organization's decisions as politically influenced are less likely to be motivated or feel the right to refuse the request of their colleagues to provide knowledge (Zhao et al., 2019). This defensive behavior often emerges from the desire to maintain control over valuable information in a competitive and uncertain workplace.

Psychological Knowledge Ownership

In addition, employees who have issues acquiring knowledge often develop a form of psychological ownership whereby they develop possessive feelings toward the acquired knowledge. This sense can reduce their willingness to share knowledge with other colleagues (Li et al., 2015), thus making the behaviors of knowledge-hiding rational. Other studies have identified psychological ownership as among the major drivers of knowledge hiding. In some cases, individuals may conceal knowledge to defend their perceived territory (Peng, 2013). When employees have a stronger identification with the knowledge they possess, they are more likely to regard such knowledge as an outcome of their efforts and capabilities. Such a feeling of ownership is strong when employees or teams invest extensive time and energy into developing knowledge in some domain, regarding the results as hard-earned (Anand et al., 2020). As a result, individuals may hide knowledge when approached by others or by different teams seeking information.

Lack of Trust

Knowledge hiding can turn into a form of self-defense when employees do not trust their coworkers or the management (Ghani et al., 2020). Distrust was found to be a major precursor of different types of knowledge hiding, while each type of knowledge hiding was related to specific organizational and interpersonal factors (Connelly et al., 2012). Distrust refers to a lack of confidence in individuals due to the fear that they may cause harm (Di Vaio et al., 2021). Disapproval is a common cause of distrust in the workplace (Bogilović et al., 2017). This behavior typically occurs when a person does not share the values of the community to which he belongs (Sitkin & Roth, 1993). Knowledge-hiding behavior can result from distrust, the inherent characteristics of the knowledge itself, and the broader social environment (Bogilović et al., 2017; Malik et al., 2019). For instance, if an employee does not trust a fellow colleague, they would not share relevant information related to their job with that individual out of fear of being threatened. Where there are inconsistent attitudes or opinions on a sensitive issue, higher levels of distrust will further raise the propensity for knowledge hiding as a means of conflict avoidance.

The Need for Power and Control

Moreover, knowledge hiding could be a tool to receive and maintain one's power and control within an organization. Knowledge is a powerful resource that workers use to develop their status and influence. Ironically, individuals may choose to conceal knowledge to increase their perceived importance and become indispensable (Zhao et al., 2016). The hidden knowledge might thus serve as a bargaining chip, providing the means to convey his value and impress the organization that he is important in the workplace. A variety of factors act as triggers for knowledge hiding. The dominant factor is considered to be the fear of losing control, power, and status, along with threats of peer evaluation (Guo et al., 2022). Employees may develop anxiety over their replaceability. Thus, knowledge hiding allows them to advertise their individuality and sense of mystique within organizations (Anand et al., 2020). As a result, individuals tend to withhold their knowledge to strengthen their grasp on power and control in the workplace.

The Consequences of Knowledge Hiding and the Mechanisms

Existing research consistently demonstrated that knowledge hiding produces negative consequences at multiple levels, including individual, interpersonal, and organizational levels.

Impact on the Individual Level

Knowledge hiding is negatively associated with employees' attitudes. Although individuals may initially engage in knowledge hiding to protect personal interests, such behavior often generates guilt and envy, which in turn reduces well-being in the workplace (Connelly et al., 2012; Serenko & Bontis, 2016; He et al., 2025). Employees who frequently hide knowledge report higher turnover intentions (Serenko & Bontis, 2016; Syed et al., 2021), lower subjective career success (Chavali et al., 2024), and lower perceived employability (Jiang et al., 2025), due to worsened social relationships and increased psychological tension.

From the perspective of resources, knowledge hiding is psychologically taxing. Maintaining dishonesty, avoiding requests, and managing interpersonal consequences require sustained self-regulation, which hinders self-efficacy (Arain et al., 2020). Moreover, empirical evidence (He et al., 2025) shows that knowledge hiding significantly predicts perceived loss of moral credits, which subsequently impairs workplace helping behavior.

Knowledge hiding undermines individual creativity by containing access to diverse perspectives and reducing cooperative problem-solving (Černe et al., 2014; Bashir & Saleem, 2024). If an employee plans to hide knowledge relevant to their work unit, it hinders the exploration of different categories and may reduce the production of divergent solutions (Bogilović et al., 2017). Knowledge hiding limits opportunities for brainstorming or group projects that would allow for the co-occurrence of diversified thought and the generation of ideas (Yao et al., 2023). The studies of Černe et al. (2017) and Arain et al. (2020) reveal that knowledge hiding negatively impacts innovative work behavior.

Moreover, knowledge hiding signals a competitive and distrustful climate, which suppresses feedback avoidance behavior (Akhtar et al., 2022) and task performance (Hernaus et al., 2019). Longitudinal studies further indicate that employees involved in knowledge hiding exhibit declining performance trajectories over time (Jiang et al., 2025) and motivation (Di Vaio et al., 2021).

Knowledge hiding also generates a series of counterproductive knowledge behaviors, including career networking behaviors (Jiang et al., 2025), feedback avoidance behavior (Akhtar et al., 2022), and silence behavior (Chen et al., 2022). These behaviors may further contribute to stress and identity inconsistency.

Impact on Interpersonal Relationships

Knowledge hiding damages interpersonal trust (Khan et al., 2022). Once targets perceive intentional concealment, they are likely to question the hider's reliability and compassion, leading to rapid trust erosion (Connelly et al., 2012). When an individual may be mistreated, such as having their knowledge withheld, they may develop a sense of distrust towards that coworker (Černe et al., 2014; Bashir et al., 2025). Trust loss is particularly severe in continuing collaborative relationships, where expectations of reciprocity are strong. Knowledge hiding leads to reduced cooperation and further subsequent knowledge concealment (Serenko & Bontis, 2016; Chatterjee et al., 2021). This diffusion explains the reason that knowledge hiding tends to spread within teams.

Furthermore, knowledge hiding increases both task conflict and relationship conflict. This conflict often results in cycles of reciprocal knowledge hiding, further deteriorating relational quality (Connelly et al., 2019). This behavior can trigger a chain reaction of knowledge-hiding behaviors among team members. For example, when one party engages in knowledge hiding, other members may interpret it as a sign of non-cooperation or unfairness, thereby turning good counter-knowledge into bad counter-knowledge within the team (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2022). The study of He et al., (2025) reveals that knowledge hiding not only undermines interpersonal reciprocity norms but also significantly reduces employees' workplace helping behavior.

For teams or groups, previous studies indicate that knowledge hiding affects team creativity and project performance (Bashir et al., 2023; Joo et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2026). Research demonstrates that knowledge hiding reduces individuals' absorptive capacity. When teams possess high absorptive capacity, team members can relatively easily explore new knowledge and utilize existing knowledge (Fong et al., 2018). Conversely, organizations with lower absorptive capacity produce fewer technically and economically valuable innovations, thereby reducing team creativity. Bari et al. (2019) suggest that the effectiveness of absorptive capacity may depend on whether managers pay attention to and actively invest in cultivating absorptive capacity, thus leading to different research results in different research contexts. Moreover, knowledge hiding also influences performance through the mediation of employee creativity in project teams (Nauman et al., 2024). Therefore, knowledge hiding is the primary factor influencing performance and creativity.

Impact on Organizational Level

Knowledge hiding hinders organizational performance. At the organizational level, knowledge hiding disrupts coordination, reduces information integration, and weakens collective problem-solving capacity. Empirical evidence (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Rong & Liu, 2021) demonstrates that teams characterized by high levels of knowledge hiding show significantly lower organizational performance and enterprise innovation performance.

Knowledge hiding obstructs organizational learning by preventing knowledge collection and knowledge recombination. When employees hide experiential knowledge, organizations lose opportunities to improve routines and update practices (Hernaus et al., 2019). Over time, this undermines absorptive capacity (Fong et al., 2018; Bari et al., 2019). A cyclical interaction mechanism centered on information distrust gradually forms among employees. This mechanism continuously reinforces itself through knowledge hiding and negative responses, which not only inhibits the effective operation of the organization’s knowledge management system but also declines the overall workplace environment (Di Vaio et al., 2021), thereby weakening the flow of knowledge within the organization.

Innovation depends on knowledge recombination and open exchange. Knowledge hiding reduces idea diversity, limits boundary-crossed learning, and weakens the learning climate, ultimately impairing organizational innovation (Kim & Lee, 2025). Chatterjee et al. (2023) reveal that firm innovativeness is negatively impacted by knowledge hiding. Therefore, at an organizational level, individuals’ knowledge hiding influences innovation in a large setting.

Summary of Key Findings

In summary, the main findings on knowledge hiding are illustrated in Table 1, including the discussion on conceptualization, underpinning theories, antecedents, and consequences of knowledge hiding.

Table 1
Summary of Key Findings

The comparison of related definitions	knowledge hiding knowledge hoarding knowledge withholding	knowledge non-sharing knowledge sharing	knowledge collection knowledge donation
The antecedence of knowledge hiding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● External Competitive climate lack of time Leadership social exclusion job insecurity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Internal Self-efficacy perceived organizational politics psychological knowledge ownership lack of trust the need for power and control 	
The consequences of knowledge hiding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Individual level well being, turnover intentions, career success, self-efficacy, cooperative problem solving, innovative work behavior, feedback avoidance behavior, task performance, motivation, career networking behaviors, feedback avoidance behavior, and silence behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Interpersonal level distrust, relational quality, interpersonal reciprocity norms, employees’ workplace helping behavior, team creativity, project performance, and absorptive capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Organizational level information integration, collective problem-solving capacity, organizational performance, enterprise innovation performance, organizational innovation, knowledge management system, workplace environment, and learning climate

Source: Authors

Limitations of the Study and Future Research Directions

First, from a theoretical perspective, this literature review remains in social exchange theory, conservation of resources theory, and social learning theory, which assume stable

reciprocity expectations and clearly bound resource ownership. The growing integration of AI into organizational knowledge processes challenges these assumptions by adjusting how knowledge is generated, controlled, and exchanged. Future research should explore whether the explanatory framework based on exchange and resources remains applicable in the new knowledge ecosystem dominated by AI, in which knowledge is increasingly embedded in algorithms, platforms, and human-AI collaborative systems.

Second, although previous research offers a valuable lens for understanding how knowledge hiding is acquired and diffused, empirical research has largely overlooked its dynamic implications. Most studies adopt cross-sectional designs that do not capture how individuals learn knowledge hiding through observation, simulation, and reinforcement over time. Future research could employ longitudinal and multilevel approaches to examine how knowledge hiding becomes normalized within teams, particularly in digital environments where behavioral clues and outcomes are more visible.

Previous research has primarily focused on traditional organizational environments, with limited attention to hybrid or virtual work scenarios enabled by artificial intelligence.

Third, this review depends on the generalizability of current findings, which is constrained by methodological and contextual limitations. Previous research has primarily focused on traditional organizational situations, with limited attention to hybrid or virtual work contexts enabled by AI. Future studies should delve deeper into how technological infrastructures interact with exchange relationships, resource threat perceptions, and social learning processes across diverse cultural, industrial, and occupational environments, thereby advancing a more context-sensitive understanding of knowledge hiding.

Conclusion

This review synthesizes research on knowledge hiding over the past sixty years, integrating conceptual development, theoretical explanations, and empirical findings into a coherent framework. The literature demonstrates that knowledge hiding is an intentional, interactive behavior that cannot be simply attributed to a lack of knowledge sharing. Research shows that knowledge hiding is consistently influenced by exchange relationships, perceived resource threats, and motivational drivers, exerting profound impacts at the individual, interpersonal, and organizational levels. This review organizes previous research around these core mechanisms, clarifying fragmented insights.

This review makes several theoretical contributions. First, it integrates social exchange theory, resource conservation theory, and social learning theory to propose a multi-theoretical explanation that elucidates both the motivational roots of knowledge hiding and reveals its dynamic diffusion process. Second, this integrated framework explicitly positions knowledge hiding as a complicated process, connecting individual motivation, interpersonal interaction, and organizational outcomes. Third, considering the emerging AI-assisted work environment, this review proposes future research directions based on the AI era.

From a practical perspective, the research results indicate that organizations should not merely focus on promoting knowledge sharing but should instead address factors such as relational, resource-based, and learning-based factors that lead to knowledge hiding.

Interventions aimed at enhancing perceived justice, reducing resource insecurity, and building transparent knowledge practice models may be particularly effective.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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