

Neighbour's Hens Looking Like Turkeys? Understanding the Effect of Envy on Knowledge-Hiding

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Abstract: The literature on knowledge hiding has been growing since the mid-2020s, with studies examining the antecedents, outcomes, and boundary conditions of knowledge hiding at workplaces. However, less empirical attention has been paid to the association between the emotions employees experience at work and knowledge hiding directed at co-workers. Accordingly, based on the Conservative Resources (COR) theory, this study aims to empirically test a novel model that examines the influence of perceived workplace envy on co-worker-directed knowledge hiding behaviour of individuals, with emotional exhaustion as the mediator. The study also examines whether supervisor undermining acts as a boundary condition in the relationships mentioned above. The authors plan to collect data by surveying 350-400 employees working in IT/ITES companies in India. The data will be collected at 2 time points – responses on workplace envy, supervisor undermining, and other demographic variables will be collected at time point 1. After a gap of 2-3 months, data on emotional exhaustion and knowledge hiding behaviour will be collected. To test the research hypotheses, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) will be employed. The authors expect the findings to reveal the following: perceived workplace envy positively correlates with co-worker directed knowledge hiding behaviour; emotional exhaustion acts as a mediator between envy and knowledge hiding; and supervisor undermining moderates the positive correlation between perceived workplace envy and emotional exhaustion. This study extends the knowledge management literature by exploring the association between employee emotions and knowledge hiding behaviour. In addition, from a conservation of resources perspective, the study uncovers a critical underlying mechanism, emotional exhaustion, and explains how comparison-based emotions like envy experienced by the envious person lead to knowledge hiding from the envied person. Furthermore, from a practical perspective, understanding the nuances of knowledge hiding among employees enables practitioners to design effective strategies to curb such behaviours in the workplace.

Keywords: Emotional exhaustion, Knowledge hiding, Perceived workplace envy, Supervisor undermining

1. Introduction

In knowledge-driven organisations, employee collaboration and knowledge sharing are considered as the cornerstone of innovation and sustained productivity. Despite organisational efforts to facilitate open communication, knowledge hiding - the intentional act of withholding or concealing knowledge that other organisational members require or expect to know (Connelly et al., 2012) – persists as a common issue in most workplaces. While recent studies have identified a range of antecedents to knowledge hiding, the role of affective responses triggered by social comparisons in workplaces remains underexplored. In particular, the influence of emotions like envy - an unpleasant and painful feeling individuals experience when they desire what their coworkers possess, but they themselves lack (Smith and Kim, 2007) – demands further scholarly attention. Past empirical studies show that to reduce the pain caused by envy, individuals try to diminish the target's strengths, especially when the perceived social gap is insurmountable (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2009). Despite the indication that envious employees engage in counterproductive behaviours like knowledge hiding, few studies have provided empirical evidence on the association between envy and knowledge hiding directed at coworkers (Peng, Bell and Li, 2021; Shamsudin et al., 2023). Also, there is a dearth of studies in extant literature that discuss how a comparison-based emotion like envy manifests into knowledge hiding.

Accordingly, this study investigates the relationship between workplace envy and knowledge hiding, addressing the key research question: *How does perceived workplace envy (PWE) influence knowledge-hiding behaviour (KHB) of employees?*. Drawing from the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, we identify emotional exhaustion (EE) as a mediator that explains the association between PWE and KHB. Furthermore, we examine how supervisor undermining (SU) as a boundary condition influences the relationship between PWE and EE, eventually leading to KHB.

2. Hypothesis Development

2.1 Perceived Workplace Envy and Knowledge Hiding

Envy, characterized by feelings of inferiority, resentment, and hostility (Vecchio, 2005), mainly emerges when the envier compares oneself with others who have something he/she desires. From a social comparison theory perspective, it can be claimed that when individuals experience envy, they feel motivated to minimize the comparison gap by engaging in dysfunctional behaviours such as undermining others or boosting their own status (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2009). Since knowledge is perceived as power, hiding it from the envied person can be gratifying for the envious person. It hinders the envied person's job performance, while preserving the envious individual's personal power and relative standing in the organisation (Peng, Bell and Li, 2021). Especially in competitive work environments that stimulate employee envy, knowledge hiding can be used as a tactic by employees to gain self-control and self-worth (Shamsudin et al., 2023). Hence, the following hypothesis:

H1: PWE is positively related to KHB

2.2 Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion

Drawing on the rationale of COR Theory, we will now examine the psychological underpinning that connects PWE with KHB of individuals. As per the theory, when individuals face a threat or actual loss of resources, they become more sensitive to resource depletion. This leads to high levels of stress, which drive them to safeguard the remaining resources (Hobfoll, 2018). Envious employees tend to perceive that they are treated unfairly, feel exploited and are more likely to feel depressed and angry. This drains their emotional energy, leading to emotional exhaustion (EE), which refers to "a state of feeling overextended and depleted of one's emotional and physical resources" (Maslach and Leiter, 2008, p. 498). Thus, employees perceive a continued loss of resources (Hobfoll, 2018), which motivates them to engage in knowledge hiding as a resource protection or resource loss prevention strategy. Based on this logic, we propose that the influence of PWE on KHB can be elucidated through EE, as emotionally exhausted employees reduce the loss of their resources by engaging in KHB. Hence, the following hypothesis:

H2: EE mediate the relationship between PWE and KHB

2.3 Moderating Role of Supervisor Undermining

Supervisor undermining can be defined as "supervisory behaviour that is intended to hinder, over time, the ability of subordinates to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, work-related success, and favorable reputations" (Duffy, Gangster and Pagon, 2002, p 332). It is a form of destructive leadership behaviour that includes both active and passive behaviours like supervisors making subordinates feel incompetent, insulting them, and dismissing their work-related queries and concerns (Duffy, Gangster and Pagon, 2002). Extant research demonstrates that victims of supervisor undermining experience depression, have lower levels of self-efficacy and job satisfaction, which eventually affects their overall job performance (Duffy et al., 2006; Eissa, Chinchanchokchai and Wyland, 2017).

In the context of workplace envy, when envious employees experience undermining, it threatens their sense of self-worth and perceived competence, and amplifies the emotional resource depletion resulting from perceived envy. The hostile environment created by SU characterized by workplace mistreatment and a lack of avenues for professional validation, make envious employees more frustrated and disengaged, thereby worsening EE. Hence, we propose that SU acts as a boundary condition that exacerbates the emotional strain experienced by envious employees who already perceive themselves as disadvantaged due to social comparison. Thus, the following hypothesis:

H3: SU moderates the direct relationship between PWE and EE such that the relationship will be stronger when the employee experiences a high level of SU.

3. Methodology

3.1 Procedure

The authors plan to test the hypothesized model by administering a two-wave survey among 350-400 employees working in Information Technology (IT) sector in India. The highly competitive and performance-driven culture of IT organizations places strong emphasis on individual accomplishments and professional growth, making it more prone to social comparison among employees, thereby forming a relevant context to

explore the relationship between envy and knowledge hiding. Employees with minimum one year of experience in the current organization will be chosen as survey participants to ensure that they have adequate exposure to team processes and peer interactions. The data will be collected using a self-administered questionnaire that will be distributed to the employees via email and other professional networks like LinkedIn. In the first wave of the survey, responses on workplace envy, supervisor undermining, and other demographic variables will be collected. The second wave of the survey will be administered 2-3 months later to assess emotional exhaustion and knowledge hiding behaviour of employees. In addition, demographic information of participants like age, gender, organisational tenure, education, and job level will be gathered, as these variables influence employees' knowledge behaviours.

3.2 Measures

Perceived workplace envy: To measure PWE, the 5-item scale developed by Vecchio (2005) will be used. A sample item is "It is somewhat annoying to see others have all the luck in getting the best assignments".

Emotional exhaustion: Maslach and Jackson's (1981) 9-item scale will be used to measure EE. Sample item includes "I feel used up at the end of the workday".

Knowledge hiding behaviour: We consider KHB as a holistic construct and plan to measure the construct using the 12-item scale developed by Connelly et al. (2012). The participants will be asked to respond to the following question: "In the past 3-4 months, when a co-worker requested knowledge from you, did you display the following behaviours?" A sample behaviour includes "Told him/her that I would help him/her out later but stalled as much as possible".

All the above constructs will be measured on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Supervisor undermining: To measure SU, we will use 13-item scale developed by Duffy, Gangster and Pagon (2002) and the items will be measured on a five-point scale with responses ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (almost every day). A sample item includes "How often has your supervisor intentionally made you feel incompetent?"

Control variables: Following past studies (Liu, Zhu and Lam, 2020, Zhao et al., 2016), we consider the participant's age, gender, education, job level and organisational tenure as the potential control variables.

4. Conclusion and Implications

From a theoretical perspective, we advance the literature on knowledge hiding by examining employee emotions as an antecedent of KHB. In addition, drawing from COR theory, the study uncovers a critical underlying mechanism, EE, to explain how comparison-based emotions like envy experienced by employees lead to knowledge hiding from the envied person. Further, we introduce SU as a boundary condition to propose a moderation-mediated model.

From a practical perspective, understanding the complexities of knowledge hiding among employees allows practitioners to develop effective strategies to curb such behaviours in the workplace.

Ethics declaration: This study is still in its conceptual stage and does not involve human participants at this phase. Once the study progresses to data collection phase, necessary approval will be sought from the relevant institutional ethics committee.

AI declaration: The authors have used AI tools (ChatGPT, Quillbot) for language refinement and grammatical corrections. The research idea and arguments remain the sole contribution of the authors.

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