

Knowledge Concealment in the Malaysian Public Administration: The Roles of Rewards, Internal Competition, and Interpersonal Distrust

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Abstract: Knowledge sharing is essential for an efficient and innovative public sector, yet it is often hindered by knowledge concealment. This study examines knowledge concealment as an outcome of the lack of rewards for knowledge sharing and internal competition, with interpersonal distrust as the mediating mechanism, within the framework of the Social Exchange Theory (SET). Data were collected from 276 Malaysian Administrative and Diplomatic Officers (ADOs) and analysed using SPSS and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The findings reveal that both the lack of rewards for sharing knowledge and internal competition significantly increase knowledge concealment. Mediation analysis shows that interpersonal distrust significantly mediates the relationship between lack of rewards and knowledge concealment, indicating that perceived inequity in reward systems weakens trust, which subsequently increases knowledge concealment. However, interpersonal distrust does not mediate the relationship between internal competition and knowledge concealment. This suggests that in highly structured public sector environments, internal competition operates as a direct structural driver of knowledge concealment rather than through relational trust mechanisms. This study extends the SET by proving that exchange-based mechanisms operate differently in bureaucratic contexts. Specifically, lack of rewards triggers relational distrust that leads to knowledge concealment, while internal competition directly influences knowledge concealment. This suggests that the applicability of the SET may vary in highly bureaucratic contexts, where institutional rules, hierarchical structures, and formalised career systems shape employee behaviour beyond relational exchange processes. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening reward systems and trust-building mechanisms in public sector organisations. Transparent recognition, fair performance appraisal, and collaborative incentives are essential to encourage knowledge sharing and reduce knowledge concealment. By improving both structural incentives and relational trust, public organisations can support more effective knowledge sharing practices.

Keywords: Knowledge management, Knowledge concealment, Reward, Competition, Public sector

1. Introduction

Increasing attention has been given to knowledge as a key organisational asset supporting innovation and performance (Anand et al., 2020). However, organisations often fail to fully utilise employee knowledge due to knowledge concealment behaviours (Connelly et al., 2012), which reduce collaboration and performance (Kurniawanti et al., 2023). Even so, most studies focus more on individual and leadership factors rather than relational exchange conditions in highly bureaucratic contexts (Osman et al., 2025; Mahmood et al., 2023). In the Malaysian Public Administration (MPA), Administrative and Diplomatic Officers (ADOs) are key actors in policy implementation (Osman et al., 2025), yet their knowledge sharing is often hindered by knowledge concealment (Safiee et al., 2025). Globally, public servants also report trust-related concerns in knowledge sharing (Deloitte, 2022), highlighting the importance of examining contextual and relational factors.

Prior research has mainly focused on private or general organisational settings instead of highly bureaucratic systems characterised by formal rules, hierarchy, and constrained career progression. Resultantly, the influence of reward structures and internal competition on knowledge concealment through relational mechanisms remains underexplored in the MPA context where employees' interpretations of fairness, reciprocity, and interpersonal relationships are shaped by formalised procedures and hierarchical structures. ADOs operate in a structured yet competitive environment, where limited promotion opportunities and performance pressures intensify social comparison processes. However, empirical understanding of how these structural conditions translate into knowledge concealment through relational mechanisms remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining the effects of the lack of rewards for knowledge sharing and internal competition on knowledge concealment, with interpersonal distrust as a mediating mechanism, within the Social Exchange Theory (SET) framework. The study extends the knowledge concealment literature by demonstrating how relational mechanisms operate in highly bureaucratic MPA settings, thereby refining the boundary conditions of the SET.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Social Exchange Theory

The Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) explains organisational behaviour as a reciprocal exchange process in which individuals seek to maximise rewards and minimise costs in social relationships. Employees evaluate their contributions based on expected returns such as recognition, fairness, and career advancement (Cook & Rice, 1995). When reciprocity is perceived as fair, employees are more likely to engage in cooperation, trust, and knowledge sharing; conversely, perceived imbalance may lead to withdrawal behaviours such as knowledge concealment (Ahmad et al., 2023; Viot & Benraiss-Noailles, 2024). This perspective is reductionist, as it overlooks behaviour shaped by norms and institutional pressures, particularly in bureaucratic public sector settings (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Emerson, 1976). In ADOs, behaviour may also stem from rule compliance, professional identity, and institutional expectations rather than deliberate cost–benefit evaluation.

Alternative perspectives such as Institutional Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Psychological Ownership Theory suggest that behaviour is shaped by rules, learned experiences, and identity-based attachment to knowledge (Scott, 2014; Bandura, 1986; Pierce et al., 2001). Together, these perspectives suggest that knowledge concealment may arise from both rational (exchange-based) and non-rational (normative, cognitive, and identity-based) mechanisms. Nevertheless, the SET remains the primary theoretical lens in this study because it provides a clear foundation for examining how perceived reward structures and relational trust influence knowledge-related exchange behaviour.

2.2 Knowledge Concealment

Knowledge concealment is the intentional act of hiding or concealing knowledge when it is requested by others (Haar et al., 2021). From a SET perspective, it is a withdrawal response when perceived reciprocity in exchange relationships is violated. Employees may engage in this behaviour as a self-protective strategy to maintain power, status, or competitive advantage within the organisation (Tokyzhanova & Durst, 2023). Connelly et al. (2012) conceptualise knowledge hiding into three behaviours: playing dumb, evasive hiding, and rationalised hiding. Meanwhile, knowledge concealment is the intentional restriction of knowledge access, whether active or passive, involving both explicit and tacit knowledge. While explicit knowledge can be codified and easily transferred, tacit knowledge is more difficult to articulate and therefore more likely to be retained or concealed (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). This makes tacit knowledge particularly vulnerable in competitive and hierarchical environments where knowledge is a source of power linked to authority and career progression. Recent studies further argue that knowledge concealment is not purely an individual cognitive decision, but is shaped by organisational context, relational dynamics, and institutional pressures (Issac et al., 2020; Siachou et al., 2021). This reflects a shift from purely rational assumptions to a more contextual and socially embedded understanding of knowledge behaviour.

2.3 Hypothesis Development

Knowledge concealment is not limited to explicit knowledge hiding; it also involves tacit knowledge embedded in employees' experience and organisational practices. Such behaviour may also arise from routine compliance with institutional norms and professional expectations rather than deliberate cost–benefit evaluations. Although prior studies have established relationships among the key variables, their applicability in highly bureaucratic public sector settings remains uncertain. In the MPA, organisations are characterised by formal procedures, hierarchical authority, and limited performance-based rewards (Amran et al., 2021), shaping how employees interpret fairness, reciprocity, and trust within social exchange relationships. Lack of rewards for knowledge sharing and internal competition may function differently in environments where career progression is constrained and interactions are strongly guided by formal authority structures. Re-examining these relationships in the MPA context is necessary to assess whether established theoretical assumptions remain valid under bureaucratic conditions and to capture context-specific dynamics of knowledge concealment.

2.3.1 *Lack of rewards for knowledge sharing and knowledge concealment*

Previous studies have largely focused on enablers of knowledge sharing rather than factors that discourage it (Yeboah, 2023). One key discouraging factor is the lack of rewards for knowledge sharing, which reduces employees' motivation to contribute knowledge openly (Rezaei, 2024) as they perceive limited benefits from doing so (Min & Zhang, 2023). This relationship is particularly relevant in the MPA due to a highly structured

reward system where recognition is often formalised, standardised, and promotion-based rather than immediate or performance-linked. Such competitive institutional arrangements may weaken perceived reciprocity, prompting employees to retain knowledge as a form of self-protection and career preservation (Osman et al., 2025). Therefore, H1 is proposed:

H1: Lack of rewards for knowledge sharing positively and significantly affects knowledge concealment.

2.3.2 Internal competition and knowledge concealment

Employees who use their expertise to gain competitive advantage are more likely to conceal knowledge to maintain superiority (Anaza & Nowlin, 2017). Competitive organisational climates increase knowledge concealment as colleagues are perceived as rivals (Shamsudin et al., 2022). This positive relationship has been confirmed across multiple sectors (Iqbal et al., 2022), but evidence remains mixed regarding its underlying mechanisms. In MPA, internal competition is intensified by limited promotion opportunities, hierarchical career progression, and performance-based ranking systems, prompting employees to treat knowledge as a strategic asset for career advancement (Phookan & Sharma, 2025). Testing this relationship in MPA could reveal how institutional constraints shape competitive knowledge behaviour. The second hypothesis is hence proposed:

H2: Internal competition positively and significantly affects knowledge concealment.

2.3.3 Interpersonal distrust and knowledge concealment

When employees lack trust in colleagues, they tend to conceal knowledge to avoid exploitation or reputational harm (Liu et al., 2020). Distrust weakens collaboration and increases knowledge concealment (Miao et al., 2022). In MPA, interpersonal distrust is highly relevant due to bureaucratic hierarchies, cross-departmental rotations, and performance-based evaluation pressures that can weaken interpersonal relationships (Wu et al., 2022). Therefore, H3 is proposed:

H3: Interpersonal distrust positively and significantly affects knowledge concealment.

2.3.4 Lack of rewards for knowledge sharing and interpersonal distrust

When knowledge sharing is not rewarded, employees develop distrust towards their organisation, triggering their unwillingness to share knowledge with colleagues (Elita et al., 2021). Consequently, cooperation weakens whilst distrust rises (Mthombeni & Chizema, 2022). Lack of rewards has been positively linked to interpersonal distrust among employees (Farooq & Sultana, 2021), ultimately disrupting collaboration and hinder effective knowledge sharing (Khan et al., 2022). H4 is hence proposed:

H4: Lack of rewards for knowledge sharing positively and significantly affects interpersonal distrust.

2.3.5 Internal competition and interpersonal distrust

Internal competition may increase workplace rivalry and interpersonal tension, leading to distrust (Zhou, 2022). However, this relationship is context-dependent. In MPA, internal competition is formally institutionalised through performance evaluation systems and structured promotion pathways which reduce ambiguity and perceptions of unfair interpersonal threat, potentially allaying distrust. There is a need to re-examine whether competition in MPA truly translates into relational breakdown. H5 is therefore proposed:

H5: Internal competition positively and significantly affects interpersonal distrust.

2.3.6 Lack of rewards for knowledge sharing, interpersonal distrust, and knowledge concealment

Lack of rewards discourages knowledge sharing (Haesebrouck et al., 2021) and fosters interpersonal distrust, subsequently promoting knowledge concealment (Dash et al., 2022). In MPA, where reward systems are highly formalised, the absence of immediate recognition may intensify distrust, translating into protective behaviours such as knowledge concealment (Miao et al., 2022). Thus, H6 is proposed:

H6: Interpersonal distrust significantly mediates the relationship between lack of rewards for knowledge sharing and knowledge concealment.

2.3.7 Internal competition, interpersonal distrust, and knowledge concealment

Internal competition may influence knowledge concealment through interpersonal distrust (Gonçalves et al., 2024). In MPA, strong institutional governance, formalised promotion systems, and structured career paths

may weaken emotional or relational interpretations of competition. Instead, employees may respond to competition through strategic knowledge protection rather than distrust-based reactions. This justifies testing whether interpersonal distrust truly functions as a mediator in this context. Therefore, H7 is proposed:

H7: Interpersonal distrust significantly mediates the relationship between internal competition and knowledge concealment.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

This study proposes seven hypotheses to examine the drivers of knowledge concealment. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework.

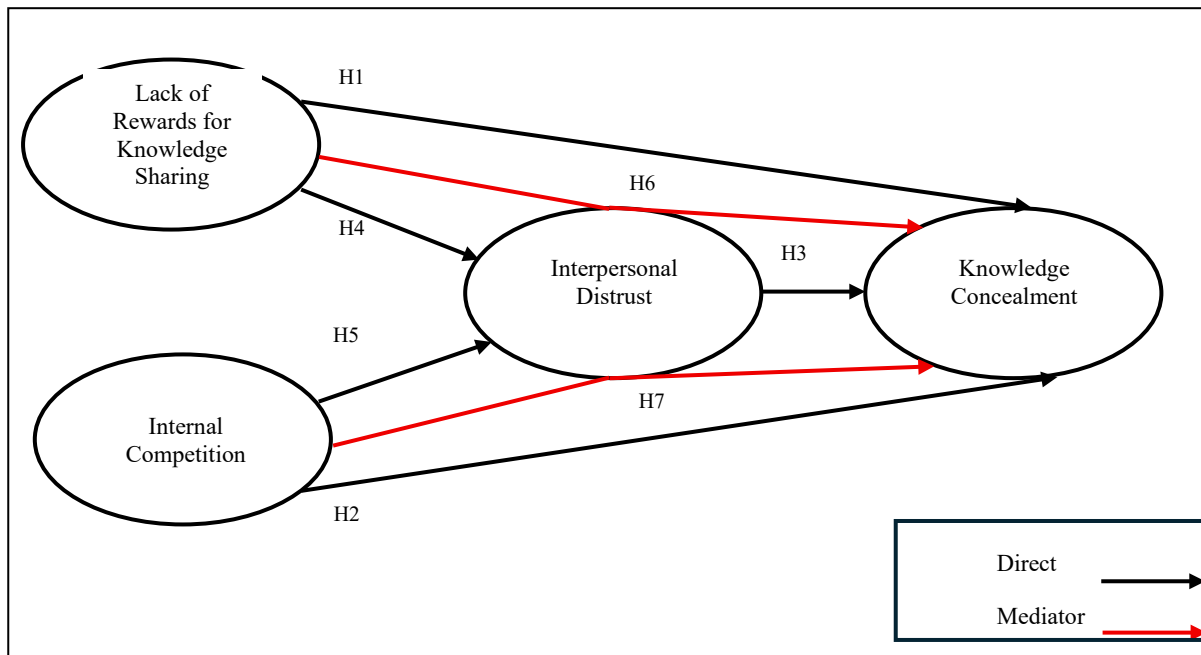


Figure 1: The conceptual framework

3. Methodology and Data Collection Procedure

A quantitative survey design was employed to examine the drivers of knowledge concealment among Administrative and Diplomatic Officers (ADOs) in Malaysia from the Ministry of Finance (MoF), Ministry of Economy (MoE), and Ministry of Investment, Trade, and Industry (MITI). Proportional stratified sampling was used to ensure representation across ministries (Iliyasu & Etikan, 2021). Data were collected using online questionnaires, resulting in 278 responses, out of which 276 were retained after screening. Knowledge concealment was measured using Connelly et al.'s (2012) 7-point Likert scale, while lack of rewards for knowledge sharing, internal competition, and interpersonal distrust were measured using 5-point Likert scales (Anaza & Nowlin, 2017; McAllister et al., 2000). The usage of different Likert scales followed prior validated studies and helped reduce common method bias. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was used due to its suitability for complex predictive and mediation models, particularly with non-normal data.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistic

SPSS version 29 was used to analyse the respondents' profiles. Out of the 276 participants, 59.1% were female ($n = 163$) and 40.9% male ($n = 113$). About 9.4% were aged 23–33, 52.9% aged 34–44, and 37.4% aged 45–55. About 49.3% of the respondents were MoF employees, 26.8% MITI employees, and 23.9% MoE staff. The ensuing analysis results can be properly interpreted using these demographic profiles.

4.2 Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was found to be highly reliable and valid, after tested using Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step approach. The internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.839$ – 0.931 ; CR = 0.866 – 0.951) and convergent validity (factor loadings >0.70 ; AVE = 0.618 – 0.829) for all constructs were satisfactory, following

the removal of the low-loading ID4. Discriminant validity was supported using HTMT, with all values <0.90, confirming construct distinctiveness. These results indicate that the measurement model is robust and suitable for subsequent structural model analysis.

4.3 Structural Model Assessment

The structural model was assessed using PLS-SEM with a bootstrapping procedure of 10,000 resamples. The results (see Table 1) indicate that four out of the five hypothesised direct relationships are statistically significant and supported, confirming the robustness and validity of the structural model.

Table 1: Hypothesis testing for direct effect / structural model assessment

Hypothesis	Relationship	B	Std. Dev	p	t	Lower level	Upper level	f ²	R ²	VIF	Decision
H1	TLRKS-> KC	0.550	0.052	0.001	10.577	0.467	0.638	0.653	0.804	2.372	ACCEPTED
H2	IC -> KC	0.125	0.055	0.011	2.277	0.035	0.215	0.030		2.604	ACCEPTED
H3	ID -> KC	0.258	0.045	0.001	5.694	0.181	0.331	0.172		1.983	ACCEPTED
H4	TLRKS -> ID	0.314	0.078	0.001	4.033	0.185	0.439	0.088	0.474	2.158	ACCEPTED
H5	IC -> ID	-0.036	0.090	0.345	0.399	-0.186	0.110	0.001		2.608	NOT ACCEPTED

Note: TLRKS - Lack of rewards for knowledge sharing; IC - Internal Competition; ID - Interpersonal Distrust

4.4 Mediation Analysis

The mediation analysis showed that interpersonal distrust mediated the relationship between lack of rewards and knowledge concealment ($\beta = 0.076$, $p = .001$). However, interpersonal distrust had an opposite mediating effect on internal competition ($\beta = -0.009$, $p = .344$). Table 2 presents the results.

Table 2: Hypothesis testing for indirect effect

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std. Beta	Std. Dev	p-value	t-value	Lower Level	Upper Level	Decision
H6	TLRKS -> ID -> KC	0.076	0.024	0.001	3.216	0.043	0.123	ACCEPTED
H7	IC-> ID -> KC	-0.009	0.022	0.344	0.402	-0.047	0.025	NOT ACCEPTED

Note: TLRKS - Lack of reward for knowledge sharing; IC - Internal Competition; ID - Interpersonal Distrust

4.5 PLS Predict

Shmueli et al.'s (2019) PLS-Predict procedure was used to assess the model's predictive power of case-level outcomes, focusing on the endogenous variable, i.e., knowledge concealment. Predictive capability was strong, with all constructs showing Q^2 values beyond zero. Knowledge concealment had high predictive power ($Q^2 = 0.750$, $RMSE = 0.504$), whilst interpersonal distrust had acceptable predictive accuracy ($Q^2 = 0.438$, $RMSE = 0.759$), confirming the model's robustness in explaining knowledge concealment behaviour.

5. Discussion

Blau's (1964) Social Exchange Theory (SET) underpins the interpretation of the findings. Overall, the results demonstrate that knowledge concealment in the Malaysian public sector is shaped by both structural exchange conditions and relational mechanisms, with interpersonal distrust operating as a partial mediating factor. The finding that lack of rewards significantly increases knowledge concealment (H1) is consistent with the SET, supporting prior evidence that reward systems are critical in shaping knowledge exchange behaviour (Vesal, Gohary & Rahmati, 2024). Similarly, internal competition significantly increases knowledge concealment (H2). In MPA, where promotion opportunities are limited and career progression is highly structured, knowledge is treated as a strategic asset that should be concealed to maintain individual advantage (Phookan & Sharma, 2025). Knowledge concealment, hence, is driven primarily by structural and career-related pressures.

Interpersonal distrust is also positively associated with knowledge concealment (H3). In bureaucratic environments characterised by hierarchical distance and performance pressure, employees may perceive colleagues as unreliable, reducing willingness to share knowledge and increasing concealment behaviour (Wu

et al., 2022). Lack of rewards significantly increases interpersonal distrust (H4). Perceptions of unfairness may be interpreted as relational inequity, weakening organisational and relational trust (Kaushal & Nyoni, 2022), a phenomenon amplified in the ADO context.

Surprisingly, internal competition does not significantly influence interpersonal distrust (H5), challenging the SET's assertion that competition erodes relational trust due to perceived threats and reduced reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This can be explained by the institutionalised nature of competition within the public sector, where performance evaluation systems and structured promotion pathways clarify career progression and reduce perceptions of interpersonal unfairness (Amran et al., 2021; Osman et al., 2025), subsequently allaying interpersonal distrust. Strong norms of professionalism, merit-based assessment, and procedural fairness within the civil service further stabilise interpersonal relations (Osman et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2022). Next, interpersonal distrust significantly mediates the effect of lack of rewards on knowledge concealment (H6). Insufficient rewards firstly undermine trust, then drives knowledge concealment. Perceptions of fairness and recognition reinforce trust and mitigate concealment behaviour (Zhu et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, the non-significant mediating effect of interpersonal distrust in the relationship between internal competition and knowledge concealment (H7) reinforces the structural nature of competition in the MPA, challenging prior evidence that competition indirectly drives knowledge-related behaviour via interpersonal distrust (Gonçalves et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2022). This suggests that employees do not necessarily develop interpersonal distrust as a psychological response to competition. Instead, they respond strategically by protecting knowledge as a career resource (Phookan & Sharma, 2025; Osman et al., 2025). In highly bureaucratic environments, behaviour is shaped by relational exchange processes as well as institutional structures and formal career incentives (Scott, 2014; Amran et al., 2021). Thus, interpersonal distrust does not mediate this relationship, indicating that internal competition bypasses relational pathways in shaping knowledge concealment behaviour in this context.

6. Conclusion

Knowledge concealment among ADOs in Malaysia was examined, specifically its driving factors of lack of rewards for knowledge sharing, internal competition, and interpersonal distrust. Lack of rewards was found to significantly drive knowledge concealment and interpersonal distrust, aligned with the SET's assertion that knowledge sharing only occurs when the perceived benefits of doing so outweigh the costs (Blau, 1964). Internal competition was found to drive knowledge concealment without eroding trust, indicating the professional setting in which competition operates in this study's context. Interpersonal distrust mediates the effect of lack of rewards on knowledge concealment, but not the effect of internal competition on knowledge concealment. This means that distrust is mainly caused by insufficient incentives, not competition. These findings highlight the cruciality of having effective reward systems and trust-building mechanisms to foster knowledge sharing and reduce concealment behaviours among Malaysian public service sector employees.

6.1 Limitations, Future Research, and Practical Implications

Firstly, the use of self-reported questionnaires may have introduced social desirability bias, where respondents underreport knowledge concealment behaviour. Secondly, the sole focus on Administrative and Diplomatic Officers (ADOs) from three ministries in Malaysia may limit the generalisability of the findings. Future research can extend this study by examining other institutional settings to improve external validity. Longitudinal or mixed-method approaches can capture changes in knowledge concealment over time to better understand the underlying relational and structural mechanisms. Future studies may further investigate the non-mediating role of interpersonal distrust in the relationship between internal competition and knowledge concealment.

Practically, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening reward systems for knowledge sharing, as perceived unfairness can weaken trust and increase knowledge concealment. Transparent and merit-based recognition systems can encourage a knowledge-sharing culture. Organisations should build interpersonal trust through ethical leadership, clear communication, and supportive work environments. Internal competition should not be removed despite its direct influence on knowledge concealment. Instead, it should be managed through structured performance systems that balance individual achievement with collaboration. Teamwork indicators alongside leadership development and ethical training could reduce the negative effects of competition while maintaining performance accountability.

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Ethics Declaration: Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) with the approval number REC/12/2024 (PG/MR/624).

AI Declaration: AI tools such as ChatGPT were used for language refinement only.

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