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# Does ethical leadership always improve individual competitive productivity? Examining knowledge management behavior via motivational pathways

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – In the contemporary knowledge-centric economy, unraveling the intricacies of knowledge sharing and hiding is paramount. Yet, extant studies often evaluate knowledge sharing and hiding on a standalone basis, overlooking the distinctive constructs that drive both behaviors. This study aims to delve into the nuanced relationship between ethical leadership and individuals' inclinations to share or withhold knowledge, assessing the consequent implications for their individual competitive productivity.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study encompasses two phases of data collection conducted through online surveys involving a total of 408 employees from the private sector.

**Findings** – The findings underscore ethical leadership positively correlates with knowledge sharing but not with knowledge hiding. Autonomous motivation bolsters knowledge sharing and mitigates knowledge hiding, whereas controlled motivation exhibits contrasting tendencies.

**Originality/value** – This research contributes novel insights into the complex interplay between leadership style, motivation, knowledge sharing, knowledge hiding and individual performance outcomes within organizational settings. It challenges conventional assumptions by demonstrating that ethical leadership fosters knowledge sharing, yet not knowledge hiding. In addition, it unveils the nuanced effects of different motivational orientations. The unexpected positive association between knowledge hiding and individual and collective performance underscores the complexity of knowledge dynamics within organizations, challenging prevailing views and suggesting avenues for further



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exploration. Overall, this study advances our understanding of the multifaceted dynamics shaping knowledge management practices and their implications for organizational performance.

**Keywords** Controlled motivation, Autonomous motivation, Knowledge sharing, Knowledge hiding, Ethical leadership, Individual competitive productivity

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Knowledge plays a significant role in the new economy, driving organizational development, success, and performance(Cabrera and Cabrera, 2007). Although literature, such as Chaman *et al.* (2021), identified various antecedents encouraging knowledge management culture, Lei *et al.* (2021) argued that the phenomenon involving drivers and outcomes of it remain insufficiently understood. Tan *et al.* (2024) lent weight to this perspective arguing that knowledge management is not a destination that organizations strive to arrive at, but rather a process of bringing together disparate processes to shape the culture.

Many organizations face an added layer of complexity as they do not own the knowledge, and knowledge owners are not obligated to share it. As Connelly *et al.* (2019) explained, this reflects the phenomenon of knowledge hiding, which impair trust among the organizational members that result in the weakening of quality relationships (Nguyen *et al.*, 2022). Consequently, it is unsurprising that researchers such as Tan *et al.* (2024) are taking an interest in examining knowledge hiding in workplaces. Despite that, there are several limitations that this paper will address.

First, existing research often examines knowledge hiding and knowledge sharing in isolation, thereby missing the potential interdependencies and nuanced dynamics between them (Tan *et al.*, 2024). In particular, limited attention has been paid to how leadership influences both behaviors simultaneously (Sun *et al.*, 2024). Besides, research by Silva de Garcia *et al.* (2020) underscores that knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding are not simply opposite ends of a continuum, but distinct behaviors with different antecedents. As Gagné *et al.* (2019) argue, individuals may engage in both behaviors simultaneously depending on the context, and therefore, analyzing them together offers a more comprehensive view. In response to this gap, we aim to develop an integrative model that examines both knowledge sharing and hiding within a unified leadership and motivational framework.

Second, research on the influence of leadership styles on knowledge management behaviors remains fragmented (Agarwal *et al.*, 2022). And within the limited literature, studies focusing on ethical leadership are few and far between. Men *et al.* (2020) argued that knowledge sharing is a form of donation for the benefit of others beyond one's self-interest, while knowledge hiding is an act of selfishness. Therefore, ethical leadership is an appropriate construct to consider when examining knowledge-sharing or hiding behavior. Besides, our focus on ethical leadership aligns with calls from different scholars, including Ali *et al.* (2023) emphasizing the need to understand value-based leadership styles in relation to knowledge behaviors.

Third, motivation is central to understanding why individuals choose to share or withhold knowledge. Prior research such as Swift *et al.* (2010) and Stenius *et al.* (2016) acknowledged the importance of motivational factors, yet there remains inconsistency in how different types of motivation – particularly autonomous versus controlled motivation – relate to knowledge behaviors (Fan and Beh, 2024; Quigley *et al.*, 2007; Kankanhalli *et al.*, 2005). While autonomous motivation has received relatively more attention, the role of controlled motivation remains under-theorized, especially in the context of ethical leadership. Drawing

on self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan (2008), we argue that ethical leaders may influence both types of motivation differently by fostering intrinsic values that enhance autonomous motivation, and by setting expectations or consequences that activate controlled motivation. In turn, these motivational pathways may have differential effects on knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding. By explicitly theorizing and testing the role of both motivation types, our study contributes addresses the current research gap by having a more nuanced and empirically grounded understanding of the mechanisms through which ethical leadership affects knowledge behaviors.

Fourth, the relationship between knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding, and an individual's competitive productivity (ICP) is not well understood with inconsistent findings across literature (Bernatović *et al.*, 2021). While Serenko and Bontis (2016) and Černe *et al.* (2017) discover that knowledge hiding negatively influences productivity, Wang *et al.* (2019) found that it motivates employees to work even harder. These inconsistent outcomes underscore the need for further investigation.

Finally, many studies, including Durst *et al.* (2024), have used cross-sectional designs that inherently risk common method bias. This methodological issue arises when the data for both independent and dependent variables are collected from the same source simultaneously, potentially leading to inflated relationships due to shared variance. Consequently, the findings might not accurately reflect true causal relationships but rather artifacts of the measurement method. This reliance on cross-sectional data presents a significant gap in the current research landscape. By leveraging a two-wave data collection method, this study addressed this gap toward gaining more reliable and actionable insights, ultimately contributing to the development of robust theoretical frameworks and practical applications.

## Theoretical framework

Following Bandura (1977) social learning theory and Gagne *et al.* (2022) self-determination theory, Figure 1 posits that motivation to share serves as the underlying mechanism that explains the relationship between ethical leadership and employees' knowledge hiding and knowledge sharing, and eventually influencing their individual performance. By integrating these two theories, our study provides a novel perspective on how ethical leadership shapes employees' knowledge behaviors through both observational learning and intrinsic motivation.

The social learning theory posits that people learn by observing and imitating others, which focus on the significance of modeling behaviors attitudes and emotional reactions. In the context of ethical leadership, employees witness ethical behaviors demonstrated by leaders and are encouraged to internalize these values. In this respect, the ethical climate provided in the model serves as a key factor that shapes employees' autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. As employees observe ethical behaviors and practices within their organization, they are more likely to internalize these behaviors, enhancing their willingness to share. This aligns with the theory's assertion that individuals emulate behaviors they perceive as valued within their organizational context. However, social learning theory alone does not fully explain the psychological mechanism that manifest employees' decisions to share or hide knowledge.

On this note, Gagne *et al.* (2022) have highlighted that motivations are key in driving human behavior. According to the self-determination theory, a work environment that fulfill the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness would foster motivation to perform actions that would benefit the organization (Gagné *et al.*, 2019). By incorporating self-determination theory, our study extends prior research by explaining how ethical leadership not only provides external role models but also influences employees' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. In this respect, our argument is employees who are

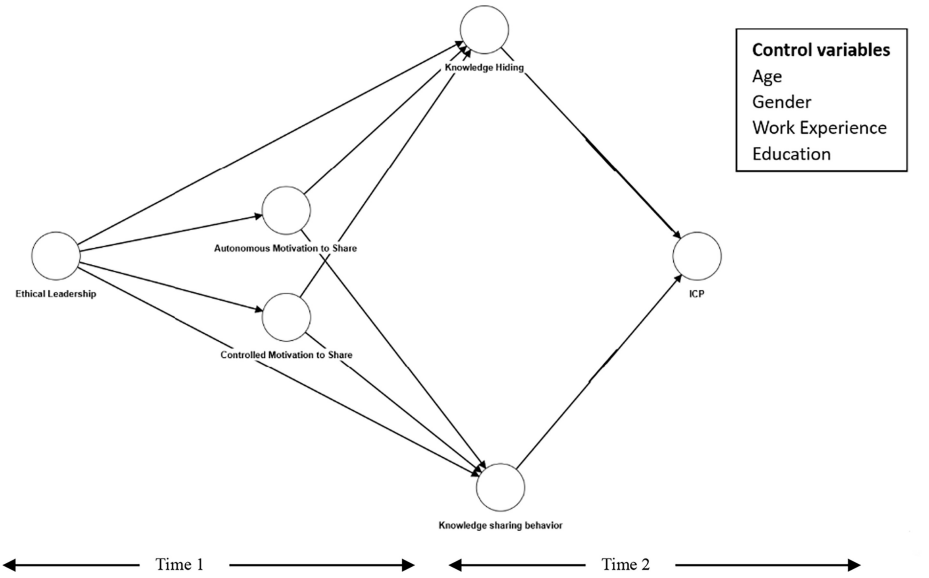


**Figure 1.** Conceptual model
**Note:** ICP = Individual competitive productivity
**Source:** Created by authors

intrinsically motivated are more likely to engage in knowledge sharing and contribute to ICP. This theory underscores the role of an ethical work environment in nurturing employees' internal motivations, ultimately leading to more collaborative and innovative behaviors.

Thus, the integration of these two theories offers a deeper theoretical insight: while social learning theory explains how ethical leadership externally shapes knowledge behaviors through role modeling, self-determination theory explains the internal motivational processes that drive these behaviors. In sum, these theories underscore the role of an ethical work environment in nurturing employees' internal motivations, ultimately leading to more collaborative and innovative behaviors.

## Literature review

### *Ethical leadership on knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding*

Ethics is a central tenet of this leadership style. It reflects two key themes – ethical leaders are people who uphold high moral standards, and they lead people with guiding principles of morality (Demirtas *et al.*, 2017). When ethical leaders display trustworthiness, honesty and integrity in their behavior, followers would likewise uphold these principles in their behaviors, reflecting the principles of social learning theory (Su *et al.*, 2021; Durst *et al.*, 2024).

To illustrate, ethical leaders can leverage their authority and normative influence to establish guidelines that encourage knowledge sharing within the organizations (Agarwal *et al.*, 2022; Xie *et al.*, 2024). Ethical leaders strengthen the established standards by reinforcing the right behavior and imposing penalties on those who flout it (Abdullah *et al.*, 2019; Junaidi, 2024). Considering that knowledge sharing is pro-social and moral in nature (Su *et al.*, 2021), it leads us to infer that ethical leadership encourages the sharing of knowledge. Recent studies show that leadership styles significantly influence knowledge-sharing

tendencies including visionary leadership (Alobeidli *et al.*, 2024) and transformational, transactional and creative leadership (Nguyen *et al.*, 2023).

At the same time, it is also essential to recognize that ethical leadership not only encourages knowledge sharing but also mitigates knowledge hiding within the organization. Knowledge hiding, characterized by the intentional concealment or withholding of information, can undermine trust, collaboration and organizational performance (Connelly *et al.*, 2019). A meta-analysis by Yang *et al.* (2025) highlights that leadership styles play a pivotal role in shaping knowledge-hiding tendencies. Other studies supported this proposition spotlighting that self-serving and tyrannical leadership increasing knowledge hiding (Zhang *et al.*, 2024). On the other hand, humble leadership (Al Hawamdeh, 2022) and ethical leadership (Xie *et al.*, 2024) mitigates it. These insights reinforce the notion that through setting clear expectations regarding ethical behavior and communication norms within the organization, it is sending a clear message that knowledge hiding is incompatible with the organization's values and mission.

However, it is also critical to recognize that knowledge hiding is not always dysfunctional or counterproductive. In some contexts, it can be strategic or functional. For instance, Heizmann and Olsson (2015) emphasized that in knowledge-intensive and politically charged environments, knowledge hiding may serve as a strategic mechanism for preserving power asymmetries and controlling access to scarce expertise. Similarly, Husted and Michailova (2002) and Frazier *et al.* (2017) found that organizational cultures prioritizing knowledge protection over sharing – especially where psychological safety is lacking – can normalize knowledge hiding as a defensive or self-preserving behavior.

In fact, such behavior aligns with the game theory, which posits that in competitive or low-trust environments, individuals act rationally to maximize personal gain (Al-Gharaibeh and Ali, 2021). Under conditions of perceived risk or low reciprocity, knowledge withholding may represent a dominant strategy, especially when knowledge is tightly linked to personal status, performance rewards or political leverage. From this perspective, knowledge is seen as a strategic asset, and knowledge hiding can be understood as a form of resource control aimed at sustaining competitive advantage – not just at the organizational level but also at the individual level (Nguyen *et al.*, 2022).

This phenomenon can be further explained using the dynamic capabilities theory that highlights individuals sensing and seizing opportunities while managing knowledge flows. In dynamic, high-velocity contexts, selective knowledge sharing may be seen as part of a strategic adaptation process to changing environments.

Considering these dichotomy view, we investigate if ethical leadership can positively influence employees' knowledge behaviors. After all, ethical leadership not only promotes a culture of openness and trust but may also counterbalance the rational, self-interested motivations that often drive knowledge hiding in competitive or low-trust environments(Durst *et al.*, 2024). Following the above arguments, our first set of hypotheses is:

*H1a*. Ethical leadership negatively influences knowledge hiding.

*H1b*. Ethical leadership positively influences knowledge sharing.

*Ethical leadership on motivation to share*

A vital aspect of successful knowledge management is the willingness of employees to actively participate in these processes, i.e. the motivation to share. Motivation plays a key role in generating task engagement and energizing behavior toward executing an action that leads to the desired outcome (Gagné *et al.*, 2019). Motivation to share can arise from various

intrinsic and extrinsic factors, such as altruism, the desire for social recognition, a sense of duty and the expectation of reciprocal knowledge exchange (Stenius *et al.*, 2016).

To this end, the self-determination theory explained that human motivation can be measured from autonomous to controlled (Hon *et al.*, 2021). Autonomous motivation refers to individuals are performing works that are aligned with their personal values (Nguyen and Watanabe, 2020). On the other hand, one would experience controlled motivation when it is acting under duress or for specific benefits. From these perspectives, ethical leadership plays a key role in fostering autonomous motivation to share among employees and reduce controlled motivation. Ethical leaders establish a supportive and ethical organizational culture, which becomes fertile ground for fostering the motivation to share (Su *et al.*, 2021). Besides, it creates an environment where employees are more likely to collaborate, share their knowledge and collectively contribute to the organization's success (Men *et al.*, 2020; Abdullah *et al.*, 2019). The next set of hypotheses is:

*H1c*. Ethical leadership positively influences autonomous motivation to share.

*H1d*. Ethical leadership negatively influences controlled motivation to share.

*Motivation to share on knowledge management behavior*

Following our earlier arguments, individuals who exhibit an autonomous motivation to share are more likely to actively participate in knowledge-sharing activities, contributing their expertise, insights, and experiences to the collective knowledge pool (Swift *et al.*, 2010; Vesal *et al.*, 2024). Conversely, individuals who lack motivation to share may be less inclined to participate in knowledge-sharing efforts (Fan and Beh, 2024; Zhu *et al.*, 2024). Addressing and understanding an individual's motivation to share is vital for organizations seeking to foster a culture of knowledge sharing. However, knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding are not merely opposing behaviors but rather coexist as distinct constructs influenced by different motivational drivers. When individuals are under the influence of controlled motivation, they would "assume an avoidance orientation toward work activities, and tend to experience more negative effects, all of which are detrimental to engagement in knowledge sharing" (Hon *et al.*, 2021, page 4).

As a result, it is not unexpected to posit that autonomous motivation encourages knowledge sharing and reduces knowledge hiding, whereas controlled motivation does the opposite. This highlights the complex interplay between knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding. Autonomous motivation, driven by personal interest and internal values, encourages proactive sharing while simultaneously reducing the inclination to hide knowledge. In contrast, controlled motivation, influenced by external demands and pressures, not only limits knowledge sharing but also fosters knowledge hiding behaviors as individuals seek to protect their resources or avoid additional workloads. Therefore, we propose:

*H2a*. Autonomous motivation to share negatively influences knowledge hiding.

*H2b*. Autonomous motivation to share positively influence knowledge sharing.

*H3a*. Controlled motivation to share positively influences knowledge hiding.

*H3b*. Controlled motivation to share negatively influences knowledge sharing.

*Knowledge sharing and hiding behavior on individual competitive productivity*

The individual competitive productivity (ICP) is a positive individual workplace-related outcome. According to Ding (2021), ICP serves as a measure to assess how an action

demonstrated by employees would impact their job performance on both a relative and absolute scale. In this context, Baumann *et al.* (2019) explained that ICP is a critical construct as, when it is aggregated at an individual level within the organization, it plays a significant role in shaping the organization's overall CP.

To this end, the investigation of competitiveness and productivity has long been a subject of research in business fields. For example, Haque *et al.* (2021) conducted a cross-sectional study, demonstrating that basic psychological needs have a positive impact on work-unit productivity. In addition, several studies, such as McAdam *et al.* (2012), focused on the role of knowledge-sharing and innovation processes in organizations. Chen and Lin (2020) emphasized the central role of an organization's competitiveness and productivity through facilitating and enhancing innovation and knowledge sharing. Besides, Asrar-ul-Haq *et al.* (2016) highlighted that knowledge sharing fosters networking and collaboration, which in turn, leverages the collective expertise of the network, leading to mutual growth and improved productivity.

Based on this literature, we have reasonable grounds to assume that through the sharing of knowledge, ICP would improve, as individuals would gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter and reinforce their expertise. Similarly, individuals displaying knowledge hiding would not see an improvement to ICP as it could result in eroding trust among teammates that hinders teamwork and knowledge exchange, as well as missing out opportunities for mutual learning:

*H4a*. Knowledge hiding negatively influences ICP.

*H4b*. Knowledge sharing positively influences ICP.

*Mediating effect of motivation to share*

The core premise of self-determination theory is that individuals are active agents with inherent potential for growth and development, which must be cultivated through the environment (Deci *et al.*, 2017). For individuals to realize their full potential, the environment must meet their basic psychological needs (Tan *et al.*, 2023). Hence, in this context, it is posited that ethical leadership can indirectly influence individual's knowledge-related behaviors through the promotion of motivation.

We have earlier argued that motivation is an important determinant that drives knowledge sharing behavior. The role of motivation in driving intention is well documented in studies across different fields. For instance, Hsu *et al.* (2009) found that motivation is the underlying psychological mechanism that influences consumer behaviors by shaping their attitudes. Likewise, in organizational settings, Hon *et al.* (2021) highlighted that knowledge sharing is driven by individual motivation, which can either facilitate or hinder their willingness to share knowledge. These studies highlighted a commonality that external factors and different value-based outcomes could further enhance or diminish one's motivation.

Ethical leadership fosters a work environment that emphasizes fairness, transparency and ethical behavior (Durst *et al.*, 2024). As such, ethical leaders can create conditions that either promote autonomous motivation or controlled motivation in employees. When ethical leaders create an environment that supports employees' psychological needs, they can cultivate a sense of autonomous motivation that drives knowledge sharing (or reduces knowledge hiding) without the need for external incentives. When ethical leaders set expectations that are tied to rewards or consequences, employees may develop controlled motivation, driven by external pressures such as fear of sanctions or

the desire for rewards. This type of motivation may lead to compliance-driven knowledge sharing but can also contribute to knowledge hiding due to a lack of genuine commitment to collaborative efforts. Following Deci and Ryan (2008) self-determination theory, our next set of hypotheses is:

*H5a*. Autonomous motivation to share mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and knowledge hiding.

*H5b*. Autonomous motivation to share mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and knowledge sharing.

*H6a*. Controlled motivation to share mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and knowledge hiding.

*H6b*. Controlled motivation to share mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and knowledge sharing.

## Methodology

### *Participants and procedures*

Using purposive sampling, data were collected via online survey from 408 private sector employees in a postpandemic work environment. The private sector employees have faced significant job insecurity due to pandemic-related disruptions such as restructuring and downsizing (Smite *et al.*, 2023). The recent mass layoffs among different companies in Singapore across industries are manifestations of these uncertainties. Unlike them, the public sector employees, on other hand, enjoy greater job security as many government agencies are playing a crucial role in rebuilding the economy and keeping the government functioning (OECD, 2020). As such, this volatility means that private sector employees are likely to have different perspectives on knowledge sharing and hiding, offering valuable insights into their sentiments during the current work climate.

Prior to the data collection, we pretested the study with three academics and two industry experts to ensure that any forms of ambiguities in the survey form were removed. Subsequently, an invitation letter was sent to the respective human resource departments requesting their permission to gather the data from the employees. With permission, a URL link was provided to the participants. In the URL link, it leads them to a cover page highlighting the nature and objective of the study, researchers involved, assurance of data confidentiality, voluntary participation and risks associated with participating in the study. With explicit consent, the respondents would proceed to access the survey form. We implemented filters to ensure that only respondents ensuring understand the concept of knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding participate in this study.

To minimize common method bias, the surveys were conducted in two separate phases, spaced six weeks apart. This temporal separation is consistent with methodological recommendations by Podsakoff *et al.* (2012), who suggest that the time lag between measurements should be sufficient to reduce immediate consistency motives without being too far apart that participants disengage from the study. On this note, the study adopted a six-week interval following precedents set in similar studies, such as Men *et al.* (2020), striking a balance between reducing recall bias and maintaining participant retention. At Time 1 (T1), we invited 600 employees to report their perspectives on ethical leadership, motivation to share, as well as demographic details. Out of the 600, 527 (87.8%) responded. In Time 2

(T2), we distributed the 527 containing items for knowledge hiding, knowledge sharing and ICP. A total of 408 of the 472 responses corresponded to the data collected in T1 as verified via the use of identification codes. The final sample size of 408 represents a response rate of 86.4%. Based on the G*power analytics, the minimum response required for an 80% power at 0.15 effect sizes is 85. Hence, the sample size of 408 represents 99.9% power. At the same time, the sample size of 408 also exceeded the minimum recommended size of 160 by Kock and Hadaya (2018). Table 1 summarizes the respondents' profiles.

*Measures*

The 15-item instrument measuring *ethical leadership* was adapted from Yukl *et al.* (2011). The Cronbach's alpha score is 0.974. The items are measured on a five-point Likert scale. Items o*n autonomous motivation to share* and *controlled motivation to share* are adapted from Harder (2008). The Cronbach's alpha score for autonomous motivation and controlled motivation are 0.894 and 0.921, respectively. The items are measured on a five-point Likert scale. The 12 items o*n knowledge hiding* were measured based on Connelly *et al.* (2011) and Abdullah *et al.* (2019) and the five items measuring *knowledge sharing* were adapted from Chatzoglou and Vraimaki (2009) and Henttonen *et al.* (2016). The Cronbach's alpha score for knowledge hiding and knowledge sharing are 0.929 and 0.895, respectively. The items are measured on a seven-point Likert scale. *ICP* is measured using five items adapted from Baumann *et al.* (2019). Measured on a seven-point Likert scale, the Cronbach's alpha score is 0.920.

**Table 1.** Respondents' details ($n = 408$)

| Demographic | Count | % |
|---|---|---|
| *Gender* | | |
| Male | 182 | 44.6 |
| Female | 226 | 55.4 |
| *Age* | | |
| Below 25 years old | 42 | 10.3 |
| 26–29 years old | 100 | 24.5 |
| 30–35 years old | 154 | 37.7 |
| 36–39 years old | 46 | 11.3 |
| 40–45 years old | 31 | 7.6 |
| 46–49 years old | 18 | 4.4 |
| 50–55 years old | 11 | 2.7 |
| 56 years old and above | 6 | 1.5 |
| *Highest education* | | |
| Doctorate | 26 | 6.4 |
| Master | 67 | 16.4 |
| Bachelor's degree | 214 | 52.5 |
| Diploma | 79 | 19.4 |
| Certificate | 22 | 5.4 |
| *Work experience* | | |
| 4 years and below | 102 | 25.0 |
| 5 – seven years | 102 | 25.0 |
| 8–10 years | 90 | 22.1 |
| More than 10 years | 114 | 27.9 |

**Source(s):** Created by authors

*Control variable*

In this study, several variables (i.e. age, gender, experience and education) were controlled. Several scholars such as Feng and Savani (2020) emphasized that men and women have distinct priorities when it comes to work and family roles, which naturally leads to different interpretations of work productivity. Moreover, individuals with more experience, higher education and greater age might approach their jobs differently, which can influence their ability to acquire additional resources and enhance their productivity. This, in turn, affects their knowledge behaviors (Bernerth *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, to investigate the relationships effectively, it is crucial to include gender, age, work experience and education as control variables to understand their influence. To this end, Table 4 shows that none of the control variables have a confounding effect on the results.

*Data analysis strategy*

We have used the partial least squares of structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) procedures recommended by Hair *et al.* (2017) to assess the structural model. PLS-SEM was chosen as the analytical method primarily as it has been found to work with small sample sizes with no distributional assumptions. Besides, it has been widely deployed across different studies including consumer behavior (Le *et al.*, 2021), human resources (Tan and Yeap, 2021), technology acceptance (Tan *et al.*, 2019), entrepreneurship (Alim *et al.*, 2022) and education management (Tan *et al.*, 2025). Following this, the next section presents the empirical evidence gathered from the analysis, shedding light on the relationships between the constructs.

## Results

*Measurement model*

We examined the measurement model according to Hair *et al.* (2017). As shown in Table 2, most of the items meet the required thresholds suggested by Hair *et al.* (2017), in which the items' factor loading is at least 0.708, the average variance extraction (AVE) is at least 0.50, the Cronbach's alpha is above 0.70, and the composite reliability is at least 0.70. For items that did not exceed 0.708, they were retained because of AVE and other indexes have met the threshold (Hair *et al.*, 2017) At the same time, Table 3 shows that discriminant validity has been achieved using the heterotrait–monotrait ratio test, as it did not exceed the cutoff value of 0.85. Putting these together, we can conclude that the model is reliable and valid.

*Structural model*

To ensure multicollinearity does not exist, we assessed the variance inflation score. Results from Table 4 demonstrate that all values are less than 3.3, which, according to Hair *et al.* (2017), indicate that multicollinearity is not a serious threat in this model. Regarding the effect of ethical leadership on knowledge behaviors, Results in Table 4 show that ethical leadership has a significant positive relationship with knowledge sharing (*H1b*. $\beta = 0.210$, $p < 0.001$) but not with knowledge hiding (*H1a*. $\beta = -0.041$, $p = 0.210$). At the same time, ethical leadership was found to positively influence both autonomous motivation to share (*H1c*. $\beta = 0.474$, $p < 0.001$) and controlled motivation to share (*H1d*. $\beta = 0.156$, $p < 0.05$). Hence, *H1a*, *H1c* and *H1d* are supported.

Table 4 also shows the effect of both forms of motivation on knowledge hiding and sharing. On autonomous motivation to share, our results reveal that it negatively influences knowledge hiding (*H2a*. $\beta = -0.415$, $p < 0.001$) and positively influences knowledge sharing (*H2b*. $\beta = 0.363$, $p < 0.001$). On the other hand, controlled motivation to share produces the opposite results in which it positively influences knowledge hiding (*H3a*. $\beta = 0.424$,

**Table 2.** Convergent validity

| Items | Outer loading | Cronbach's alpha | Composite reliability | Average variance extracted (AVE) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ETH1 | 0.783 | 0.974 | 0.976 | 0.735 |
| ETH2 | 0.884 | | | |
| ETH3 | 0.900 | | | |
| ETH4 | 0.895 | | | |
| ETH5 | 0.897 | | | |
| ETH6 | 0.848 | | | |
| ETH7 | 0.852 | | | |
| ETH8 | 0.912 | | | |
| ETH9 | 0.828 | | | |
| ETH10 | 0.868 | | | |
| ETH11 | 0.873 | | | |
| ETH12 | 0.767 | | | |
| ETH13 | 0.871 | | | |
| ETH14 | 0.810 | | | |
| ETH15 | 0.855 | | | |
| KH1 | 0.686 | 0.929 | 0.935 | 0.563 |
| KH2 | 0.787 | | | |
| KH3 | 0.812 | | | |
| KH4 | 0.708 | | | |
| KH5 | 0.803 | | | |
| KH6 | 0.818 | | | |
| KH7 | 0.696 | | | |
| KH8 | 0.830 | | | |
| KH9 | 0.669 | | | |
| KH10 | 0.665 | | | |
| KH11 | 0.736 | | | |
| KH12 | 0.765 | | | |
| KS1 | 0.783 | 0.895 | 0.915 | 0.701 |
| KS2 | 0.791 | | | |
| KS3 | 0.861 | | | |
| KS4 | 0.892 | | | |
| KS5 | 0.854 | | | |
| AMOT1 | 0.820 | 0.894 | 0.900 | 0.654 |
| AMOT2 | 0.763 | | | |
| AMOT3 | 0.834 | | | |
| AMOT4 | 0.789 | | | |
| AMOT5 | 0.876 | | | |
| AMOT6 | 0.764 | | | |
| CMOT1 | 0.826 | 0.921 | 0.925 | 0.726 |
| CMOT2 | 0.864 | | | |
| CMOT3 | 0.932 | | | |
| CMOT4 | 0.891 | | | |
| CMOT5 | 0.922 | | | |
| CMOT6 | 0.643 | | | |
| ICP1 | 0.907 | 0.920 | 0.920 | 0.759 |
| ICP2 | 0.889 | | | |
| ICP3 | 0.898 | | | |
| ICP4 | 0.809 | | | |
| ICP5 | 0.849 | | | |

**Note(s):** (1) ETH = Ethical leadership; KH = Knowledge hiding; KS = Knowledge sharing; AMOT = Autonomous motivation; CMOT = Controlled motivation; ICP = Individual competitive productivity
**Source(s):** Created by authors

**Table 3.** Discriminant validity using heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations

| | Constructs | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | AMOT | | | | | | | |
| 2 | CMOT | 0.328 | | | | | | |
| 3 | ETH | 0.503 | 0.160 | | | | | |
| 4 | ICP | 0.311 | 0.318 | 0.164 | | | | |
| 5 | KH | 0.337 | 0.318 | 0.207 | 0.078 | | | |
| 6 | KS | 0.464 | 0.087 | 0.370 | 0.114 | 0.340 | | |

**Notes(s):** (1) ETH = Ethical leadership; KH = Knowledge hiding; KS = Knowledge sharing; AMOT = Autonomous motivation; CMOT = Controlled motivation; ICP = Individual competitive productivity (2) Discriminant validity achieve at $HTMT_{0.85}$
**Source(s):** Created by authors

**Table 4.** Structural model

| Hypothesis | | Path coefficient | SE | *t*-value | 5.0% | 95.0% | VIF | $f^2$ | $R^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *H1a* | ETH → KH | −0.041 | 0.050 | 0.807 (NS) | −0.125 | 0.037 | 1.291 | 0.002 | 0.260 |
| *H1b* | ETH → KS | 0.210 | 0.055 | 3.806*** | 0.120 | 0.301 | 1.291 | 0.044 | 0.224 |
| *H1c* | ETH → AMOT | 0.474 | 0.061 | 7.763*** | 0.370 | 0.573 | 1.000 | 0.290 | 0.223 |
| *H1d* | ETH → CMOT | 0.156 | 0.062 | 2.533** | 0.050 | 0.253 | 1.000 | 0.025 | 0.022 |
| *H2a* | AMOT → KH | −0.415 | 0.051 | 8.080*** | −0.501 | −0.329 | 1.366 | 0.171 | |
| *H2b* | AMOT → KS | 0.363 | 0.060 | 6.035*** | 0.268 | 0.466 | 1.366 | 0.125 | |
| *H3a* | CMOT → KH | 0.424 | 0.041 | 10.346*** | 0.352 | 0.486 | 1.086 | 0.225 | |
| *H3b* | CMOT → KS | −0.121 | 0.054 | 2.236** | −0.211 | −0.032 | 1.086 | 0.018 | |
| *H4a* | KH → ICP | 0.153 | 0.050 | 3.080** | 0.069 | 0.231 | 1.146 | 0.028 | 0.274 |
| *H4b* | KS → ICP | −0.038 | 0.054 | 0.705(NS) | −0.124 | 0.053 | 1.327 | 0.002 | |
| *H5a* | ETH → AMOT → KH | −0.197 | 0.042 | 4.672*** | −0.279 | −0.139 | | | |
| *H5b* | ETH → AMOT → KS | 0.172 | 0.041 | 4.184** | 0.115 | 0.255 | | | |
| *H6a* | ETH → CMOT → KH | 0.066 | 0.027 | 2.454** | 0.021 | 0.111 | | | |
| *H6b* | ETH → CMOT → KH | −0.019 | 0.011 | 1.690* | −0.045 | −0.006 | | | |
| | *Control variables* | | | | | | | | |
| | AGE → ICP | −0.093 | 0.061 | 1.521 (NS) | | | | | |
| | Education → ICP | −0.018 | 0.051 | 0.360 (NS) | | | | | |
| | Experience → ICP | 0.110 | 0.059 | 1.867 (NS) | | | | | |
| | Gender → ICP | −0.026 | 0.085 | 0.302 (NS) | | | | | |

**Note(s):** (1) ETH = Ethical leadership; KH = Knowledge hiding; KS = Knowledge sharing; AMOT = Autonomous motivation; CMOT = Controlled motivation; ICP = Individual competitive productivity (2) $p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$; NS = Not significant
**Source(s):** Created by authors

$p < 0.001$) and negatively influences knowledge sharing (*H3b*. $\beta = -0.121$, $p < 0.05$). Hence, *H2a*, *H2b*, *H3a* and *H3b* are all supported. In addition, our results display that knowledge hiding positively influences ICP (*H4a*. $\beta = 0.153$, $p < 0.05$), whereas knowledge sharing does not have a significant relationship with ICP (*H4b*. $\beta = -0.038$, $p = 0.240$). Hence, only *H4b* is supported.

Our results support *H5a*, *H5b*, *H6a* and *H6b*. Table 4 demonstrates that both forms of motivation function as mediators in the relationships between ethical leadership and respective knowledge management behaviors. Specifically, autonomous motivation

mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and both knowledge hiding (*H5a*. $\beta = -0.197$, $p < 0.001$) and knowledge sharing (*H5b*. $\beta = 0.172$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, results show that controlled motivation mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and both knowledge hiding (*H6a*. $\beta = 0.066$, $p < 0.05$) and knowledge sharing (*H6b*. $\beta = -0.019$, $p < 0.05$).

Finally, the $R^2$ values for most of the constructs range from 22.3% to 27.4%, representing a medium effect. On the effect size ($f^2$) to $R^2$, Table 4 shows that ethical leadership produces a moderate effect on autonomous motivation. Likewise, the effect size ($f^2 = 0.225$) produced by controlled motivation on knowledge hiding is classified as medium. According to Cohen (1988), the rest of the effect sizes are classified as small. Of them, the effect sizes produced by knowledge sharing on ICP ($f^2 = 0.002$) and ethical leadership on knowledge hiding ($f^2 = 0.002$) are negligible which can be attributed to their nonsignificant relationship.

## Discussion

To recapitulate, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between ethical leadership, the two forms of motivation, and how they influence employees' knowledge hiding and knowledge sharing, and ultimately their ICP. First and foremost, ethical leadership is found to manifest both autonomous and controlled motivation to share. While it is a common finding in the literature, such as Abdullah *et al.* (2019), that ethical leaders, through their actions and behaviors, foster autonomous motivation to share knowledge and ideas, our finding regarding controlled motivation is surprising. A possible explanation is that ethical leaders would set expectations and norms that encourage knowledge sharing. As such, employees may feel a sense of obligation to share information due to the established ethical norms. This controlled motivation arises from a sense of external pressure or expectations set by ethical leadership.

This explanation could also be the reason our results demonstrate that ethical leadership leads to knowledge sharing but has no significant effect on knowledge hiding. Moreover, this result reflects the multifaceted nature of knowledge hiding. As highlighted by Connelly *et al.* (2019), such behavior can stem from various reasons, including job insecurities, competition, fear of loss of power or even organizational norms. Therefore, ethical leadership may not directly address all these underlying factors that contribute to knowledge hiding. In contrast, the positive impact of ethical leadership on knowledge sharing might be more straightforward, as it aligns with the leader's emphasis on transparency, integrity and cooperation (Chaman *et al.*, 2021).

The results on the role of autonomous and controlled motivation on knowledge hiding and sharing align with existing literature including Hon *et al.* (2021). It is expected that autonomous motivation fosters a positive environment for knowledge sharing, where individuals willingly contribute, driven by intrinsic satisfaction, empowerment, collaboration and a sense of psychological safety. On the other hand, controlled motivation can contribute to knowledge hiding, as individuals driven by external rewards, fear of consequences, lack of trust or competition may be inclined to withhold valuable information.

At the same time, our results also indicate that motivations serve as key psychological mechanisms that mediate the link between ethical leadership and knowledge sharing or hiding. These results align with self-determination theory, which highlights different types of motivational factors, along with ethical leadership styles, manifest in different behaviors. Specifically, ethical leadership promotes an environment where employees feel valued and fairly treated (Durst *et al.*, 2024), reinforcing autonomous motivation and thereby enhancing knowledge-sharing behaviors. When employees perceive their leaders as ethical, they are more likely to develop a sense of motivation to contribute to collective knowledge. This

fosters a workplace culture where knowledge sharing is not only encouraged but also perceived as a meaningful activity. Conversely, in workplaces where leadership practices induce controlled motivation, employees may prioritize self-preservation, leading to increased knowledge hiding. This is consistent with self-determination theory, which posits that controlled motivation stems from external or introjected regulation, such as complying due to external expectations, evaluation pressure or the desire to avoid guilt (Deci and Ryan, 2008).

Interestingly, our findings revealed that knowledge sharing does not have a significant relationship with ICP. This suggests that the benefits of knowledge sharing may not directly translate into competitive gains at the individual level. One possible explanation is that knowledge sharing often enhances collective or team productivity rather than individual advantage (Danko and Crhová, 2024). In highly competitive environments such as those influenced by postpandemic economic uncertainty, employees may not perceive shared knowledge as a source of personal recognition or promotion opportunities, thus weakening its linkage to ICP. Another possibility is the notion of diminishing returns, where the positive impact of knowledge sharing plateaus or becomes less salient when individuals are already overloaded with information or when contributions are not distinctly attributed to a single person. In addition, the effectiveness of knowledge sharing could be context-sensitive, depending on factors like organizational culture (Zhang *et al.*, 2020), leadership support (Sun *et al.*, 2024) or the degree of reciprocity among team members (Shehab *et al.*, 2023). This suggests that while knowledge sharing is widely promoted as a desirable behavior, its impact on individual outcomes may be conditional and indirect.

Another unique finding we observed is that knowledge hiding improves one's ICP. This is not found in many of the existing studies, which generally agreed that knowledge hiding would result in dysfunctional corollaries including a decline in employees' work performance and an increase in workplace deviance (see Singh, 2019; Issac *et al.*, 2021; He *et al.*, 2021; Bernatović *et al.*, 2021). One possible reason for this phenomenon is the specific time period during which this study was conducted. The aftermath of a major event like a pandemic can indeed influence behaviors and dynamics in the workplace. Economic uncertainty and insecurity in the job market could lead to heightened competition for jobs, promotions and opportunities (Hillebrandt and Barclay, 2022). Such times create a sense of self-preservation, where individuals may prioritize their own career prospects over collective success. As such, employees may perceive knowledge as a valuable resource that can be selectively withheld to maintain a competitive edge, thus engaging in protective behavior and resource hoarding to safeguard their position or opportunities. This mindset could lead to behaviors like knowledge hiding as a means of enhancing personal competitive productivity.

Besides, the increased popularity of remote working makes it more challenging to assess employees' contributions and performance (Pew Research Center, 2022; Zampetakis, 2022). This lack of visibility could potentially encourage some individuals to hide their knowledge to gain an advantage when performance evaluations or opportunities arise. Moreover, research suggest that remote work environments, which rely heavily on online meetings, may limit the informal exchange of knowledge, skills and experiences among employees (Abidi *et al.*, 2023). Unlike conventional workplaces where employees engage in spontaneous discussions outside formal meetings, virtual interactions tend to focus on information delivery rather than active participation from all members. This shift in communication dynamics could further reinforce knowledge hiding behaviors, as employees may also benefit from reduced cognitive load by withholding information, allowing them to selectively focus on tasks that directly enhance individual outcomes.

**Theoretical implications**

Several contributions have been made to the existing literature on ethical leadership and knowledge management behaviors. First, by integrating two distinct but interrelated theories, namely, social learning theory and self-determination theory, our research offers a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between ethical leadership, knowledge sharing, knowledge hiding and ICP among employees. This integration goes beyond previous research by illustrating not only how ethical leadership serves as a model for employees' knowledge management behaviors (social learning theory) but also how it fosters intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (self-determination theory) that determines whether employees engage in knowledge sharing or hiding. Drawing on these theories, we unveil the underlying mechanisms that drive employees' knowledge management behaviors and their subsequent impact on employees' productivity. This study contributes new theoretical perspective and advances our understanding of how ethical leadership shapes knowledge behaviors in organizations through both observational learning and intrinsic motivation.

Second, our research improves comprehension regarding how positive leadership behavior contributes to the emergence of knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding. Previous studies exploring the connection between leadership and knowledge management have solely focused on identifying behaviors related to either knowledge sharing (see Xu *et al.*, 2023; Shehab *et al.*, 2023; Chaman *et al.*, 2021) or knowledge hiding (see Nguyen *et al.*, 2022; Hilliard *et al.*, 2022; Venz and Nesher Shoshan, 2021). We embrace the multifaceted nature of knowledge behaviors within organizations by jointly investigating both positive and negative aspects of knowledge exchange. By doing so, we provide a more nuanced perspective on the dynamics of knowledge management, acknowledging that employees may engage in both knowledge-sharing and knowledge-hiding behaviors, depending on the context and motivations involved.

Third, our research is the first few in its examination of the relationship between ethical leadership, both forms of knowledge behaviors, and ICP, while also taking into account the mediating influence of both autonomous and controlled motivation. This approach addresses Gagné *et al.* (2019) call on the need for more comprehensive investigations that incorporate diverse measures of motivation to gain a deeper understanding of outcomes in the workplace. By expanding the theoretical lens on knowledge management behaviors, our study offers a new perspective on how leadership style and motivation types interact to shape workplace productivity. This insight can inform future theoretical developments in leadership, motivation, and knowledge management literature.

As highlighted by Zacher and Rudolph (2021), crises like the COVID-19 pandemic present both opportunities and challenges for research and practice in fields such as human resource management, organizational behavior, and industrial, work and organizational psychology. These crises create a platform for investigating how events stemming from the crisis, such as outbreaks, lockdowns, remote work mandates and shifts in working conditions, impact the dynamic changes in employee experiences and behaviors at an individual level. In response to this call, our study stands as the first few contributions to the existing literature that delves into the phenomenon of knowledge hiding and knowledge sharing, their underlying causes and their effects right after the COVID-19 pandemic. The distinctive insights gleaned from this research, such as the finding that knowledge hiding can enhance ICP, offer valuable understanding of employee conduct amidst the present crisis and help in preparing for and anticipating potential future crises.

Following Tan *et al.* (2024) call, our study has made the final theoretical contribution by using a time-lagged data collection method. By incorporating time-lagged data, we are able to capture the temporal sequence of events and behaviors, allowing for a more nuanced

understanding of the relationships and dynamics under investigation, thereby contributing to the advancement of knowledge in this field.

**Managerial implications**

This study offers practical insights for organizational leaders and managers seeking to cultivate a knowledge-sharing culture that positively impacts work performance. First, managers can prioritize the development and promotion of ethical leaders within the organization. Implementation of ethical leadership in day-to-day practices, such as setting a clear ethical standard, providing support and guidance or demonstrating transparency and fairness, should be encouraged among all leaders and managers. This can foster an environment of trust and openness, thereby encouraging employees to freely share their knowledge and expertise. These ethical leaders could also serve as role models for knowledge-sharing behaviors, setting an example for other employees to follow and promoting a culture of collaboration.

Second, strengthening employees' self-belief and motivation is critical to reducing knowledge hiding. Employees who lack confidence in their contributions may resort to withholding knowledge as a form of self-preservation, particularly in competitive environments. Hence, managers can proactively invest in providing additional resources and support to strengthen employees' self-belief and confidence. This can include offering training programs and coaching sessions that focus on developing employees' self-belief. By equipping employees with the necessary skills and knowledge, managers can empower them to overcome barriers related to knowledge sharing. Regular feedback and recognition for their contributions can also play a vital role in reinforcing employees' self-belief and motivation to engage in knowledge-sharing behaviors. In addition, fostering a growth mindset through continuous learning and development programs can help employees view knowledge exchange as a mutually beneficial process rather than a competitive threat.

Third, managers should recognize and address the underlying reasons for knowledge hiding. While some employees may hide knowledge due to fear of losing their competitive advantage, others may do so because they feel their contributions are not adequately recognized or valued. Implementing formal recognition systems, such as career advancement opportunities and peer acknowledgment programs, can encourage employees to contribute knowledge without hesitation. Beyond financial rewards, symbolic recognition such as highlighting knowledge-sharing contributions in company meetings or internal newsletters can also enhance employees' sense of ownership and pride in contributing to the organization's success.

Finally, psychological safety should be a priority in knowledge management strategies. Employees are more likely to share knowledge when they feel secure in their workplace relationships and confident that their contributions will not be used against them. Managers can cultivate psychological safety by promoting open communication, actively listening to employees' concerns, and ensuring that knowledge-sharing behaviors are not only encouraged but also protected from misuse. This can be reinforced through team-building activities, transparent performance evaluations, and clear policies that discourage negative consequences for those who share valuable insights. Creating a supportive work environment where employees feel encouraged to share their knowledge openly can stimulate a sense of trust and psychological safety, further enhancing their confidence in contributing to the organization's knowledge-sharing initiatives.

## Limitations and future research directions

This study has several limitations that warrant consideration in future research. First, this study primarily relies on self-reported data, which may introduce potential biases. Future research could adopt multi-source approaches such as collecting supervisor or peer evaluations of knowledge behaviors, or integrating objective performance indicators and archival data to triangulate findings. These strategies would enhance the robustness of the results. Second, the study was conducted within a specific country, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Exploring these relationships in diverse cultures could offer a more comprehensive understanding of knowledge-sharing dynamics. Moreover, our study identifies a significant relationship between variables but does not determine whether this effect is temporary or context-dependent. Future research could explore how factors such as pandemics, economic conditions, industry-specific characteristics, organizational culture and competitiveness influence this relationship over time. In addition, this study mainly focuses on individual-level factors and does not extensively explore organizational-level influences on knowledge sharing and hiding behaviors. Future studies could examine the impact of organizational culture or structures on knowledge behaviors to provide a more holistic perspective.

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