The Moderating Role of Power Distance Orientation on the Relationship between Abusive Supervision and Coworker-Directed Knowledge Hiding In the Sri Lankan Information Technology Sector

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Abstract

Knowledge hiding, a deliberate attempt to withhold critical information, becomes a passive form of resistance to perceived mistreatment. In this study, grounded in displaced aggression theory (DAT), we argue that abusive supervision fosters a psychological atmosphere where employees, feeling incapable or reluctant to challenge their supervisors, project their frustration onto their peers by withholding valuable knowledge. Furthermore, we examine power distance orientation, where employees who accept hierarchical authority may be more likely to share knowledge than hide it, aligning with organizational norms. We employed a quantitative research design using a survey methodology. Data were collected using a convenience sampling method from a sample of 215 employees in Sri Lankan IT organizations. Correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between abusive supervision and coworker-directed knowledge hiding ($r = .39$, $p < .01$). The hierarchical regression showed that abusive supervision significantly predicted knowledge hiding ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$), and moderation analysis demonstrated that power distance orientation significantly moderated the relationship between abusive supervision and knowledge hiding (interaction term $\beta = -.24$, $p < .05$). Employees with low power distance orientation showed a stronger positive relationship ($\beta = .39$, SE = 0.07, $p < .001$). Conversely, the relationship was weaker among those with high power distance orientation ($\beta = .18$, SE = 0.06, $p < .001$). These findings highlight the need for organizations to actively monitor and address abusive supervisory behavior, particularly in culturally diverse settings. This study is limited by its cross-sectional design, which restricts the ability to infer causality. Future research could adopt a longitudinal design to establish causal relationships more firmly.

Keywords: abusive supervision, displaced aggression theory, knowledge hiding, power distance orientation, Sri Lankan IT industry.

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Introduction

Knowledge management plays a critical role in enhancing organizational competitiveness and sustainability (Lopes et al., 2017). Given its significance, extensive research has examined factors that facilitate knowledge sharing (e.g., Wang & Noe, 2010; Shahzad et al., 2021; Migdadi, 2021). However, while the literature on knowledge sharing is robust, there is a notable gap regarding the factors that drive counterproductive knowledge behaviors, specifically knowledge hiding (Connelly et al., 2012; Khalid et al., 2018). Knowledge hiding, which is defined as the intentional withholding of requested information (Connelly et al., 2012), is often mistakenly seen as just the opposite of knowledge sharing (Peng, 2013). However, recent research indicates that these are separate concepts. They operate differently and lead to different results, even if the factors influencing them are similar (Gagné et al., 2019; Devi, 2024).

Past research shows that knowledge hiding is influenced by interpersonal factors (e.g., distrust, poor knowledge-sharing climate; (Farooq & Sultana, 2021; Černe et al., 2014) and knowledge-related factors (e.g., complexity, task relevance, lack of psychological ownership) (Zhang et al., 2022; Fong et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2023). However, little attention has been given to how dysfunctional supervisor behaviors, such as abusive supervision, affect knowledge hiding. This gap is important because supervisors strongly influence employees' decisions, including whether to hide knowledge (Farooq & Sultana, 2021). Thus, this study explores how abusive supervision shapes knowledge hiding and its boundary conditions.

This study investigates the potential connection between dysfunctional supervisory behavior and knowledge hiding. Specifically, it examines abusive supervision as a driver factor of knowledge hiding. Abusive supervision refers to employees' perceptions of their supervisors displaying rude and hostile behaviors (Tepper, 2000). While it is conceptually plausible that abusive supervision would contribute to knowledge hiding, the specific mechanisms and empirical evidence supporting this relationship remain unclear. Therefore, this research seeks to clarify how and to what extent abusive supervision influences knowledge concealment behaviors.

To address the research questions, we utilized the displaced aggression theory (Dollard et al., 1939) as our theoretical framework. We proposed that abusive leadership behaviors, including public ridicule, criticism, and intimidation, would positively correlate with knowledge-hiding behaviors among subordinates. Furthermore, we investigated power distance orientation (the extent to which individuals accept unequal power distribution (Hofstede, 1980) as a moderator of this relationship. In particular, we posited that individuals with a strong power distance orientation would show a lower tendency to withhold knowledge when subjected to abusive supervisory behavior. Consequently, we proposed that power distance orientation would lessen

the adverse influence of abusive supervision on the tendency to withhold knowledge, as depicted in our theoretical model (Figure 1.1).

This study extends the current understanding of abusive supervision, orientation toward power distance, and knowledge management through three distinct contributions. First, to the best of our understanding, this is the first study to investigate the link between abusive supervision and knowledge concealment within the Sri Lankan context. While prior research has examined the relationship between abusive supervision and knowledge sharing (Lee et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2018; Islam et al., 2021), those findings are not directly applicable to knowledge hiding, a unique construct (Connelly et al., 2012). Thus, our research contributes novel insights into both the precursors of knowledge hiding and the effects of abusive supervision. Second, by integrating displaced aggression theory with power distance orientation, we offer a new insight into the boundary conditions that influence the association between abusive supervision and knowledge hiding. Third, Sri Lanka's unique cultural setting is ideal for studying abusive supervision and power distance orientation. As a high-power distance culture, Sri Lanka tends to accept large gaps in power and wealth (Insights, 2024). This environment, where people often respect authority, may affect how individuals perceive abusive supervision. Additionally, Sri Lanka's high-power distance index makes it a strong choice for examining power distance orientation. This cultural context, characterized by deference to authority, may influence individuals' sensitivity to supervisory abuse. Furthermore, with a high-power distance index, Sri Lanka offers a particularly relevant environment for studying power distance orientation.

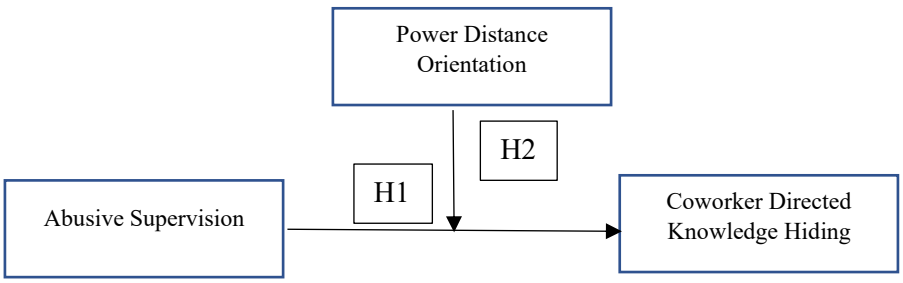


Figure 1.1: Hypothesized research model

Theory and hypotheses development

Abusive supervision and knowledge hiding behaviors

Knowledge hiding occurs when employees deliberately withhold information requested by others (Connelly et al., 2012). This behavior can range from small acts, like ignoring a request, to major ones, such as hiding critical information (Anand et al., 2022). While some employees may justify hiding knowledge, for example, to protect confidentiality (Khalid et al., 2018), it is rarely a calculated response to abusive supervision. Instead, it often emerges as a passive reaction to mistreatment, not as an intentional effort to harm coworkers.

Drawing from displaced aggression theory (Dollard et al., 1939), we argue that abusive supervision leads to knowledge hiding because employees redirect their frustration toward colleagues. Since supervisors control rewards and promotions (Park et al., 2022), employees avoid confronting them directly. Instead, they displace their frustration by withholding knowledge from peers, a safer but still damaging form of retaliation (Wu & Lee, 2016; Feng & Wang, 2019). Thus, abusive supervision fosters a toxic environment where employees resort to passive-aggressive actions like knowledge hiding.

Empirical research supports this connection. Arain et al. (2022) showed that workplace hostility, such as perceived organizational politics, increases knowledge hiding. Similarly, Weng et al. (2020) found that negative hierarchical interactions predict knowledge hiding among coworkers. Most notably, Jahanzeb et al. (2019) confirmed that abusive supervision directly leads to knowledge hiding in Pakistani workplaces.

Thus, based on displaced aggression theory and empirical evidence, we hypothesize that: -

H1: Abusive supervision is positively related to coworker-directed knowledge hiding.

Power Distance Orientation on the Relationship Between Abusive Supervision and Coworker-Directed Knowledge Hiding

This study investigates power distance orientation as a cultural factor moderating the relationship between abusive supervision and coworker-directed knowledge hiding**.** Rooted in Hofstede's (1980) framework, power distance orientation captures an individual's acceptance of hierarchical power disparities within organizations. Recent research has expanded on this foundation, demonstrating how power distance orientation shapes workplace dynamics. Specifically, our analysis delves into its role in altering the impact of abusive supervision on employees' propensity to hide knowledge from peers.

The theoretical framework highlights distinct behavioral patterns tied to power distance orientation. High-power-distance subordinates exhibit greater acceptance of hierarchy and deference to authority (Siddique et al., 2020), viewing themselves as lower-status within organizational power structures (Hussain & Sia, 2017). These employees often normalize supervisory mistreatment and avoid retaliation, including knowledge hiding from supervisors or coworkers, as such actions would violate the hierarchical order they endorse. Conversely, low-power-distance subordinates expect egalitarian treatment and perceive abusive supervision as a severe violation of workplace fairness (Li et al., 2024). Yet, fearing direct retaliation, they frequently redirect frustration laterally via coworker-directed knowledge hiding, aligning with displaced aggression theory (Dollard et al., 1939). This occurs because while they resent unfair treatment, they still recognize the risks of challenging supervisors, making coworkers a safer target for aggressive responses.

Empirical evidence supports the moderating role of power distance orientation. Studies have demonstrated that abusive supervision's negative effects are particularly pronounced among

low-power-distance employees across various organizational contexts (Li et al., 2024; Hon & Lu, 2016). Research in the hotel industry has shown how abusive supervision predicts subordinate abusive behavior, though this relationship is weaker among employees with high power distance orientation (Hon & Lu, 2016). Parallel findings emerge in manufacturing contexts, where power distance value attenuates the link between abusive supervision and turnover intentions (Richard et al., 2020). Furthermore, investigations into workplace aggression patterns confirm that employees who cannot safely retaliate against supervisors frequently displace their aggression toward peers (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007), a finding that aligns perfectly with the predicted behavior of low-power-distance individuals facing abusive supervision.

Based on this theoretical and empirical foundation, we propose:

H2: The positive relationship between abusive supervision and coworker-directed knowledge hiding will be weaker for subordinates with a low inclination towards power distance compared to those with a strong inclination.

Methodology

This study examines Sri Lanka's IT industry due to its economic significance and relevance to knowledge hiding. The sector contributes $1.5 billion in exports (2022) and employs 175,000 skilled workers (U.S. Commercial Service, 2023), making it a critical driver of national growth. IT firms are knowledge-intensive, with collaboration essential for innovation, yet competitive pressures and intellectual property concerns create conditions where knowledge hiding may thrive (Fong et al., 2018). Additionally, Sri Lanka's high-power distance culture (Hofstede Insights, n.d.) contrasts with the IT sector's globalized workforce, providing an ideal setting to test power distance moderation.

Data was collected from employees across five IT organizations in Colombo, representing diverse functional roles such as software development, network administration, quality assurance, cybersecurity, and database management. After obtaining consent from the human resources departments of each organization, we employed convenience sampling to select participants through in-person interactions in their workplace settings. While convenience sampling limits broad generalization, it was deemed appropriate given the industry's concentration in Colombo and the practical advantages of leveraging professional networks for accessibility (Etikan et al., 2016). A standardized procedure was followed for questionnaire distribution across all locations. Each participant received a package containing a cover letter (detailing the study's purpose), the questionnaire, a confidentiality assurance, and a return envelope. Completed surveys were returned to the respective HR departments, from which we collected the responses.

The survey was administered in English, which served as the primary medium of communication. Although Sinhala and Tamil are Sri Lanka's official languages, English

functions as a widely understood link language, particularly within the IT sector. Given that employees in Sri Lankan IT organizations typically possess strong English proficiency, language barriers were unlikely to affect response accuracy or participation.

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample and provide an overview of the key study variables. The final sample consisted of 215 employees. Out of the 215 participants, 63% were male and 37% were female. The average age of respondents was 30.6 years (SD = 5.2), and their average organizational tenure was 5.8 years (SD = 3.4). Regarding marital status, 56% of the participants were single, while 44% were in marital unions. Regarding occupational roles, 42% were software developers, 18% were engaged in network administration, 14% worked in quality assurance, 13% were in cybersecurity, and the remaining 13% were involved in database management. These demographic characteristics offer a snapshot of the workforce involved in the study and contextualize the analysis of the main constructs.

Measures

A seven-point Likert scale (1 = 'Strongly Disagree', 7 = 'Strongly Agree') was used for all construct measures unless otherwise specified. Example scale items are provided within each variable's description.

Abusive supervision

Abusive supervision was measured using Tepper's (2000) 15-item scale, which assesses subordinates' perceptions of sustained hostile verbal and non-verbal supervisory behaviors. A sample item includes: "My manager ridicules me." The scale exhibited strong internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.86$).

Power distance orientation

Power distance orientation was measured using Kirkman et al.'s (2009) eight-item scale. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert-type scale. A sample item from the scale is, "There is nothing wrong in manager/authority making decision without consulting subordinates." The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.75$).

Knowledge hiding

We measured knowledge hiding using the scale from Connelly et al. (2012). Participants recalled colleague knowledge-sharing requests over a 3-month period and responded to items such as "Agreed to help him/her but never really intended to." The scale exhibited acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.84$).

Control variables

To account for potential confounding effects, we controlled for key subordinate demographic characteristics: age (in years), gender (0 = female, 1 = male), organizational tenure (in years), and marital status (0 = unmarried, 1 = married).

Analysis

We employed hierarchical regression analysis to test our hypotheses using SPSS version 26.0. Before hypothesis testing, we assessed the data for assumptions, including normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity. The assumption of normality was verified by examining skewness and kurtosis values, which ranged from -0.58 to 0.64 and -0.71 to 0.88, respectively well within the acceptable range of ±1.0, as recommended by Kyriazos and Poga (2023). Multicollinearity was evaluated using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) scores, all of which were below the threshold of 2.0, indicating no serious multicollinearity issues among the independent variables (Hair et al., 2019). To assess linearity and homoscedasticity, we used scatterplots of standardized residuals against predicted values. The scatterplots showed a random and evenly distributed pattern, meeting the assumptions (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). We also checked the reliability of all measurement scales. The Cronbach's alpha values were above 0.70, which is the recommended cut-off. This confirmed acceptable internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Table 1: Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

Variables		Model 1 (Main Effects)	Model 2 (Interaction term)
Abusive Supervision		1	
Co-worker Knowledge Hiding	Directed	.39***	1

SPSS output

The correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between abusive supervision and coworker-directed knowledge hiding (r = .39, p < .01). This finding supports H1, indicating that employees who experience higher levels of abusive supervision are more likely to engage in knowledge hiding behaviors directed at their coworkers.

Table 2: Moderation Analysis – The Role of Power Distance Orientation

Variables	Model 1 (Main Effects)	Model 2 (Interaction term)
Abusive Supervision	.30***	.41***
Power Distance Orientation	.06	.19**
Abusive Supervision × PDO		-0.24**

SPSS output

The moderation analysis examined whether Power Distance Orientation (PDO) influences the strength of the relationship between Abusive Supervision and Coworker-Directed Knowledge Hiding. In Model 1, the results indicated that abusive supervision was a significant positive predictor of knowledge hiding ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$), suggesting that employees who experience higher levels of supervisory abuse are more likely to withhold knowledge from their coworkers. In contrast, power distance orientation was not a significant predictor on its own ($\beta = .06$, ns), implying that it does not independently influence knowledge hiding behavior. However, Model 2 revealed a significant and negative interaction effect between abusive supervision and power distance orientation ($\beta = -.24$, $p < .05$), indicating a moderating relationship. Specifically, the positive link between abusive supervision and knowledge hiding was weaker among employees with higher power distance orientation. This suggests that individuals who are more accepting of hierarchical authority are less likely to respond to abusive supervision by engaging in coworker-directed knowledge hiding, whereas those with lower power distance orientation exhibit a stronger retaliatory response through such behavior.

Table 3: Conditional Effects of Abusive Supervision on Knowledge Hiding at Different Levels of Power Distance Orientation.

Level of Power Distance Orientation	Effect of Abusive Supervision (β)	SE	*p*-value	Significance
Low (−1 SD)	.39	0.07	< .001	Significant
Mean (0 SD)	.30	0.06	< .001	Significant
High (+1 SD)	.18	0.06	< .001	Significant

This result showed that the effect of abusive supervision on knowledge concealment was strongest at low levels of power distance orientation (−1 SD; $\beta = .39$, SE = 0.07, $p < .001$), indicating that employees with low tolerance for hierarchical authority were more likely to respond to supervisory abuse by withholding knowledge from their colleagues. At high levels of power distance orientation (+1 SD), the relationship was still significant but significantly weaker ($\beta = .18$, SE = 0.06, $p < .001$), indicating that employees who were more accepting of power and hierarchy were less reactive to abusive supervision and less likely to engage in knowledge concealment.

Discussions

This study examined how abusive supervision affects knowledge hiding among coworkers. We focused on why employees react differently to abusive leadership by hiding knowledge. Using displaced aggression theory, we found that power distance orientation plays a key moderating role. The results show that abusive supervision leads to more knowledge hiding toward coworkers. When employees face mistreatment, such as insults, yelling, or disrespect, they

often retaliate by withholding knowledge from peers (Zhao et al., 2016). According to displaced aggression theory (Dollard et al., 1939), employees avoid confronting abusive supervisors directly due to power differences. Instead, they redirect their frustration towards coworkers, who are seen as safer targets. This is especially true in high power distance cultures, where challenging authority is risky. The moderating effect of power distance orientation supports this idea, as employees in such settings are more likely to retaliate horizontally (against peers) rather than vertically (against supervisors).

However, power distance orientation also weakens the link between abusive supervision and knowledge hiding. While past research treats abusive supervision as always harmful (Aquino & Thau, 2009), our findings show that employees with high power distance orientation hide less knowledge when mistreated. This matches Tepper's (2000) argument that such employees see hierarchy as normal and may view abuse as less unfair. As a result, they feel less need to retaliate against coworkers. In short, power distance orientation acts as a buffer, reducing knowledge hiding in response to abusive supervision.

Practical implications

The findings of this research highlight important considerations for managerial practices. Chief among them is the recognition that abusive supervisory behaviors harm an organization's financial performance (Tepper, 2000; Zhang & Liao, 2015) and encourage knowledge hiding, which undermines innovation and strategic objectives. Therefore, controlling abusive supervision is essential. Achieving this requires systematically addressing both contextual and dispositional factors that contribute to such behaviors (Breevaart et al., 2022; Khan, 2021).

Second, while organizations may struggle to eliminate abusive supervision, particularly when it is perceived to serve strategic purposes (Tepper, 2007), its negative consequences can be mitigated through several approaches. The moderating role of power distance orientation indicates that employees' cultural values shape their responses to abuse. This underscores the need to consider cultural factors in managing supervisor-subordinate relationships. For instance, organizations should actively encourage employees with high power distance orientation to voice concerns, as they rarely report abuse voluntarily. Alongside initiatives to improve supervisory skills, organizations should train subordinates in assertiveness and conflict resolution. Furthermore, fostering a supportive work environment, through moral courage, positive role models, and constructive interactions, can enhance employee well-being. These measures build resilience, boost engagement, and aid recovery (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008), reducing the harm of abusive supervision.

Most importantly, organizations must recognize that knowledge hiding stems from perceived injustice. When employees experience fair treatment, through equitable rewards, just policies, and respect, they naturally reciprocate by sharing knowledge (Tsai, 2018). To

cultivate this, organizations should implement comprehensive reward systems (including monetary and non-monetary incentives) that explicitly recognize knowledge sharing. Such systemic approaches address the root causes of knowledge hiding while promoting open knowledge exchange.

Limitations and Future Directions

Acknowledging the study's limitations is crucial when interpreting its findings. Firstly, the data's origin within the IT sector of Colombo, Sri Lanka, potentially restricts the generalizability of our findings. Future research should aim to broaden the sample to include varied industries and geographical locations. Secondly, while our focus on abusive supervision yielded valuable insights, future studies should investigate the role of alternative leadership styles, such as autocratic, transactional, benevolent, and transformational, in relation to employee knowledge hiding. Thirdly, the cross-sectional design employed precludes the establishment of causality, leaving the possibility of reverse causality. To mitigate this, future research should utilize longitudinal or experimental designs. Finally, we treated knowledge hiding as a single-dimensional construct; prospective research should examine how abusive supervision and power distance orientation influence the separate aspects of knowledge hiding to gain a broader perspective.

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