Journal of the Knowledge Economy
https://doi.org/10.1007/s13132-024-02258-4

The Masked Mentor: Unveiling the Impact of Perceived Leader Knowledge Hiding on Employee Behavior

Hafsa Bashir[1] · **Shaham Saleem**[2]

Received: 16 April 2024 / Accepted: 28 July 2024

Abstract

This study addresses the scant research on the relationship between the employees' perceived leader knowledge hiding (PLKH), mattering (feeling valued in the organization), and creativity. It further aims to examine the moderating role of task-related complexity. Based on the social exchange theory, the current study examines how PLKH impacts employees' creativity directly and indirectly through employee mattering and how task-related complexity plays a role as a moderator. By carrying out a multisource study, 340 responses from supervisors and their immediate subordinates from R&D departments of the manufacturing sector operating in Pakistan (Faisalabad, Lahore, and Rawalpindi) were considered for data collection from July to December 2023. The current study tested the proposed relationships through a partial least squares structural equation modeling technique. The findings show that PLKH negatively correlates with employees' mattering and creativity. Meanwhile, employees' low mattering negatively mediates between PLKH and creativity. Moreover, results revealed that task-related complexity is a significant moderator in this study model. These findings enrich the knowledge management literature regarding the negative impact of leaders' knowledge hiding on employee mattering and creativity. Additionally, the crucial role of task-related complexity in strengthening the negative effect of PLKH on employee creativity is an essential extension of the literature. Implications for organizations and academicians depending on outcomes are suggested.

Keywords Perceived leader knowledge hiding · Employee mattering · Employee creativity · Task-related complexity · Social exchange theory

Hafsa Bashir and Shaham Saleem contributed equally.

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

Published online: 12 September 2024

Introduction

Knowledge, being a multiplicative asset, is inextricably linked to the success of organizations (Soral et al., 2022). Knowledge sharing is a crucial asset that may provide businesses with a lasting competitive advantage (Issac et al., 2023). Although companies benefit much from employees' knowledge and experience, it may not be easy to encourage their open sharing. Employees tend to withhold their expertise from colleagues due to seeing it as a means of power distribution, highly esteemed, and offering them a personal edge over others (He et al., 2023). Consequently, they choose to retain this knowledge rather than share it. This deliberate act of concealing information among workers is often referred to as knowledge hiding (KH) in the literature.

Zhao et al. (2023) revealed that academics currently emphasize peers' KH behavior while mainly ignoring the equally essential topic of leaders' KH conduct. Further, they noticed that leaders' ability to exert influence and authority largely stems from the fact that the information stored in their brains is unique, rare, and impossible to replicate. The researchers struggle to find why leaders keep specific knowledge under wraps and how this concealing impacts work performance. Arain et al. (2022) noticed that leaders may intentionally withhold information from subordinates to preserve a knowledge advantage in the workplace and safeguard against being replaced by lower-level employees. Hameed et al. (2023) acknowledged that leaders who intentionally hide information are damaging their companies by stifling employee engagement, morale, and productivity. Therefore, one of the primary goals of this research is to evaluate how workers' perceptions of leaders' knowledge hiding (PLKH) affect their level of creativity.

Businesses worldwide are trying to innovate in a more competitive, demanding, and dynamic market by creating new methods to mix and integrate information and knowledge (He et al., 2023). However, many problems, as shown by Donate et al. (2022), arise when company leaders keep important information to themselves, including ineffective knowledge-sharing, a drop in employee dedication, a waste of intellectual capital, a hit to profits, and, most significantly, a weakening of the company's ability to innovate. Soral et al. (2022) further noticed that when employees experience counterproductive behavior from their leaders at the workplace, they may perceive it as a threat to their importance. For instance, employees will feel threatened in their sense of significance (i.e., mattering) because of the manager's KH behavior. Additionally, the extent to which superiors place value on their subordinates is communicated explicitly via interpersonal cues or indications, and the subordinate's perception of these signals is a fundamental factor in developing the subordinate's sense of identity.

The perception of mattering is crucial in shaping an individual's connectedness with others, influencing their overall sense of purpose and significance (Taylor & Turner, 2001). However, employees' sense of identity is threatened when they perceive their managers do not regard them, e.g., their supervisors are unaware of them or their contributions to information exchange are undervalued. Soral et al. (2022) further shed light on employee mattering and said it is human nature to want to

feel that their contributions are appreciated on the job. Employees feel a sense of reduction in mattering when their supervisors intentionally hide valuable knowledge and refuse their knowledge requests. The concept of mattering has influenced several aspects of the workplace, including job satisfaction and work productivity (Froidevaux et al., 2016). Therefore, determining how employees' perceptions of their leaders' knowledge-hiding behavior affect their sense of significance (mattering) is a crucial objective of the present study.

Liao et al. (2023) noticed that leaders play a pivotal role in fostering a creative work environment because they allocate the necessary resources for their employees to execute their duties. The attributes of the information being sought also impact the creative output of workers; particularly, the complexity of the knowledge concealed by the leader might affect the probability of the employee failing to adequately finish their assigned task (Connelly et al., 2012; Koay et al., 2022). Complicated jobs sometimes require the completion of many processes, including interconnections between different elements, and are characterized by uncertainty. Within these circumstances, workers may seek clear, precise guidance and assistance from their superiors to navigate intricate situations successfully (Zhang et al., 2022). Leaders who intentionally conceal knowledge may disrupt the process, resulting in workers experiencing uncertainty, dissatisfaction, and a diminished sense of belonging. Furthermore, being creative often necessitates a profound comprehension of the complexities associated with the issue at hand, and the concealment of information may impede employees' capacity to investigate inventive solutions.

Given the limitations of the previous literature that has been discussed, it is critical that this study address the following research question: How does PLKH impact employees' creativity? To answer this research question, we investigate the direct impact of PLKH on employees' creativity, the indirect effect of mattering, and the moderating effect of task-related complexity. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which PLKH influences employee outcomes and the conditions under which these effects may intensify by focusing on these relationships.

To sum up, this research adds several critical new pieces of information to the existing knowledge management work on employees' behavior. First, the literature on how subordinates' perception of their leaders' KH affects their levels of creativity is explored. Second, in the domains of organizational and social psychology, the word "mattering" is presented as a constructive idea that contributes to enhanced outcomes in terms of employee productivity and satisfaction. Soral et al. (2022) point out a scarcity of research on the variables contributing to workers' low levels of mattering. The current study introduces employee mattering as a retaliatory action of employees on leaders' KH to bridge the gap identified by Soral et al. (2022). The employees are likely to experience a threat to their perceived level of significance (i.e., mattering) in relation to their leaders when they perceive that their leaders are hiding valuable knowledge from them. Accordingly, this study attempts to find how the subordinates' PLKH paves the way for reducing employee mattering. Thirdly, this study highlights the mediating role of employees' low mattering in relationship between PLKH and employee work creativity. Finally, this study serves the literature by considering the task-related complexity as a moderating variable.

We organize the remaining portion of the paper as follows: the "Theory and Hypotheses Development" section provides an explanation of the theory and the development of hypotheses. The "Methodology" section delineates the methodology of the current investigation. The "Results" section provides a comprehensive explanation of the data analysis process and presents the findings obtained from the study. The "Discussion" section is the concluding section, which covers our research's discussion, implications, and limitations.

Theory and Hypotheses Development

Social Exchange Theory

SET places great importance on reciprocity, which is the belief that good activities will be met with favorable returns and bad actions will be met with adverse reactions (Lawler & Thye, 1999; Liao, 2008). Perceived rewards and costs are posited to influence the formation and maintenance of relationships. Rewards encompass companionship, support, and social approbation; costs comprise temporal, energetic, and emotional investment. SET posits that individuals, consciously or unconsciously, engage in a negotiation process to ensure that long-term transactions are beneficial and equitable (Blau, 1968). This dynamic is impacted by aspects such as the comparison level, a benchmark for what individuals feel they deserve or anticipate in a relationship, and the comparison level for alternatives, which considers the best possible choice outside the present relationship. SET has been used in various contexts, including interpersonal connections, working conditions, and social networks, to provide insights into how and why people begin, maintain, and terminate social interactions (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Information is a vital asset shared between leaders and workers within the present study context. When workers sense that leaders are concealing information, they may interpret this as a rise in "social cost," resulting in a decrease in their inclination to participate in advantageous organizational activities (Babič et al., 2019), such as innovation and feeling appreciated (mattering). When workers perceive a lack of knowledge sharing from leaders (a detrimental behavior), they might exhibit reluctance to contribute or diminish their level of involvement, which would directly affect their innovation and sense of significance within the establishment. Social exchange relationships are predicated on trust, and leader knowledge concealment could substantially erode this trust (Arain et al., 2020). When employees lack confidence in their supervisors, they may experience a diminished sense of dedication and worth, which can harm their sense of significance. Trust plays a pivotal role in cultivating a secure atmosphere that nurtures the growth of creativity (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009). Employees may exhibit a reduced propensity for risk-taking and innovative thinking without trust, as they may be apprehensive that their ideas will be undervalued or misappropriated.

In summary, through the lens of SET, PLKH negatively impacts employee creativity by increasing perceived costs, eroding trust, reducing social approval, and violating norms of reciprocity. These disruptions in the exchange relationship diminish

employees' motivation and willingness to engage in creative behaviors. SET emphasizes the importance of balanced exchanges between parties to maintain trust, commitment, and satisfaction (Blau, 1968). In organizational behavior, the relationship between leaders and employees is foundational to fostering a sense of belonging and value.

PLKH and Employee Creativity

The review of existing studies revealed that academics have seen information concealment as a damaging work practice that dampens employee innovation and productivity (Liao et al., 2023; Malik et al., 2019). Butt (2019) has argued that the negative consequences of information concealing are not only limited to employees but may also have an undesirable impact on businesses. Moreover, KH inside organizations might significantly contribute to increased turnover rates and decreased work productivity among knowledge seekers. Hameed et al. (2023) also noticed that the degree of trust and bonding between affiliated parties on major business tasks may be negatively impacted due to the leader's deliberate concealment of relevant information. When leaders purposely slow or stop information flow and demonstrate that they do not know what employees are saying, it weakens subordinates' ability to generate new and interesting ideas (Akhtar et al., 2022).

According to SET, interpersonal relationships in organizations are characterized by a give-and-take dynamic, where individuals engage in behaviors based on the expectation of reciprocity. Leaders engaging in KH disrupt equilibrium by violating the norm of trust and fairness within the exchange process. Employees may interpret such behavior as a psychological contract breach, leading to feelings of betrayal and a reduced willingness to invest effort in creative endeavors (Bashir et al., 2024; Liao et al., 2023). Consequently, the negative association between PLKH and employee creativity can be understood as a consequence of the breakdown in the social exchange process, where withholding knowledge diminishes the perceived benefits of contributing creatively to the organization. Accordingly, the present study posits the following hypotheses:

H1: PLKH has a negative association with employee creativity.

Perceived Leader Knowledge Hiding and Employee Mattering

Marshall and Lambert (2006) acknowledged that the ability to feel like one matters to a certain set of individuals is what we mean when we talk about mattering. Individuals' perceptions of the amount and quality of attention from certain persons play a considerable role in developing and maintaining their sense of importance or relevance to others. In theoretical terms, the focus directed towards the perception of mattering has the potential to be seen as either negative, such as being subjected to ignorance, or positive, such as receiving praise. Individuals' ideas of their importance to others come from social interactions that strengthen a sense of connection, identity, and determination (Taylor & Turner, 2001). Moreover, protecting and

enhancing the capacity to form and maintain meaningful connections with others is a primary human motivation and a fundamental human need.

Soral et al. (2022) noticed that when employees experience a perception of insignificance, characterized by their colleagues and superiors being ignorant of their presence or not considering them relevant for information transfer, they encounter a sense of personal threat. Additionally, being unimportant to others at the workplace is a miserable experience that may negatively affect employees' self-image, health, and relationships. Managers are essential in the development of their employees, both professionally and personally (Arain et al., 2021). Supervisors' interpersonal cues or signals of communication indicate their perception of their subordinates' value (Soral et al., 2022). The interpretation of these signals significantly influences the development of subordinates' self-concept. When employees feel valued by their superiors, they are more likely to act positively in the workplace. However, Akhtar et al. (2022) noticed that leaders who intentionally withhold valuable knowledge from their subordinates fail to create fruitful connections with employees. When workers see that their leaders engage in KH behaviors, they become cognizant of the insufficiency of information and resources necessary for optimal performance. Additionally, they may question their sense of worth and mattering as supervisors are the significant external factor in building employees' self-perception.

Moreover, SET emphasizes the role of social approval and recognition as key rewards in the exchange process. Employees seek validation and acknowledgment from their leaders as part of their psychological contract. PLKH can be perceived as social rejection, where employees feel ignored and unappreciated (Akhtar et al., 2022). This lack of recognition negatively impacts their self-esteem and reduces their intrinsic motivation to contribute positively to organizational innovation activities. When employees feel their contributions are not valued, their sense of mattering declines, leading to decreased engagement and job satisfaction. The concept of mattering is closely tied to the psychological rewards employees receive from their relationships within the organization. According to SET, individuals seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs in their social exchanges. Feeling valued and appreciated by leaders constitutes a significant reward that enhances employees' self-esteem and organizational commitment. However, when leaders engage in KH, they increase the social costs for employees by creating an environment of uncertainty and mistrust (Babič et al., 2019). This increased cost can erode the perceived rewards of the relationship, making employees feel less significant within the organization. Accordingly, the current study proposed that.

H2: PLKH has a negative association with employee mattering.

Mediating Role of Employee Mattering

Employees who feel they matter to their firm are more likely to take risks and use their creative abilities (Liao et al., 2023). The core principle behind this concept is that innovation and creativity flourish when workers feel their efforts are valued and appreciated. Studies in psychology, organizational behavior, and management

repeatedly find that when workers feel their contributions count, they are more likely to be creative (Soral et al., 2022). Moreover, firms that place a high priority on valuing the significance of their employees tend to see tremendous success in terms of talent retention. Research has shown that employees who see themselves as appreciated and acknowledged by their employer or leaders are more inclined to maintain a high level of commitment, decreasing turnover rates (Gelens et al., 2013). Employees with long-term working relationships may be valuable in fostering creativity as it facilitates the gradual accumulation of information and skills, providing a foundation for creative initiatives.

Sekiguchi (2007) noticed that staff members with a strong sense of personal value to the company are likelier to go the extra mile in their work. In today's ever-evolving business environment, a company's ability to comprehend and promote employee mattering is crucial to maintaining a competitive edge. Employees' full potential for creativity and progress may be acquired when companies recognize and appreciate their innovative work. However, Soral et al. (2022) observed that when workers perceive their managers do not value them, they are less likely to go the extra mile or develop innovative solutions to problems. People who do not feel appreciated lose the drive to create something new (Malik et al., 2019). If workers feel their ideas and suggestions do not matter, they will not put up the effort necessary to develop and implement them. When employees evaluate a situation where they see themselves as having little significance, they may perceive their self-concept as being vulnerable, leading to a decline in their level of work creativity.

Employee mattering is an important mediator between PLKH and employee creativity. The perception of being undervalued or neglected by managers has the detrimental effect of diminishing employees' self-esteem within the organization (Bani-Melhem et al., 2023). Workers' reduced sense of significance undermines their incentive to exert voluntary effort and contribute groundbreaking concepts. Fundamentally, when staff members perceive that their superiors neglect to share information or do not appreciate their contributions, this reinforces a sense of insignificance and reduces initiative and innovation. Employees are less inclined to dedicate their intellectual capacity and effort towards developing innovative solutions or expanding limits when they lack the perception that their contributions or suggestions are valued or recognized (Soral et al., 2022). Therefore, the significance of cultivating an environment where personnel perceive themselves as valued and appreciated is underscored by the mediating function of employee mattering, which positively influences their propensity to innovate and contribute to the organization.

SET offers a valuable framework for understanding the mediating role of employee mattering in the relationship between PLKH and employee creativity. SET posits that relationships in the workplace are built on reciprocal exchanges of resources, such as information, support, and recognition. When leaders engage in KH, they violate the reciprocity and fairness principles underpinning these exchanges, making employees feel excluded and undervalued. This perceived exclusion erodes employees' sense of mattering, which refers to their feeling of being important and appreciated within the organization. According to SET, when individuals perceive inequitable exchanges where they give more than they receive, they

experience reduced trust and self-worth. Based on the above arguments, the current study hypothesizes that.

H3: Employee mattering mediates the association between PLKH and employee creativity.

Moderating Role of Task-Related Complexity

The level of stimulation and challenges associated with a job is referred to as task-related complexity (Zhang et al., 2022). It indicates the number of factors included in an employee's work and the variety of assignments. Liu and Li (2012) noticed that multiple studies have verified the impact of varying degrees of task-related complexity on observational learning. Compared to activities with lesser complexity, learners see tasks with higher complexity as requiring a substantial amount of decision-making and offering the opportunity to use advanced abilities. Fried et al. (2002) noticed that the mental effort and mental stamina required to complete a task increase in proportion to complexity.

Increased task complexity necessitates heightened cognitive exertion, knowledge amalgamation, and inventive problem-solving approaches (Li et al., 2024). Challenging assignments require people to fully immerse themselves in their work, effectively using and integrating their talents and expertise in distinctive ways. Employees are typically required to effectively allocate resources and participate in problem-solving activities when faced with complex assignments (Tian et al., 2022). When leaders intentionally keep knowledge or information from their staff that may help allocate resources and address problems, it can make it difficult for employees to make well-informed choices, resulting in inefficiencies and declining innovation. The effect of information concealment on creativity may intensify when workers encounter complex challenges that require access to a wide range of viewpoints and specialized knowledge (Zhang et al., 2022).

The relationship between PLKH and employee creativity is significantly moderated by task-related complexity, which amplifies the effect of PLKH on creativity. The complex tasks intrinsically require greater levels of employee cognitive engagement, innovation, and information processing. Complex tasks frequently involve intricate, novel, or ambiguous problems that instantly demand applying pre-existing knowledge and generating innovative ideas and solutions. Leaders withholding essential information further complicates the assigned tasks, thereby erecting a substantial impediment to innovative thinking and the resolution of problems. Information scarcity may lead to greater cognitive load and stress among employees, which can limit their creativity as they become more focused and have fewer mental resources available for creative synthesis. Based on the above discussion, the current study hypothesizes that.

H4: Task-related complexity moderates the relationship between PLKH and employee creativity, such that PLKH influences more strongly when task complexity is higher.

Figure 1 presents the current study's theoretical model. From the lens of SET, the current research assumes that the PLKH is negatively correlated with employee creativity and mattering, and in turn, employee low-mattering mediates the association between the PLKH and employees' creativity. The current model also attempts to check the moderating role of task-related complexity.

Methodology

Sample and Procedures

This study targeted research and development departments (R&D) in manufacturing industries operating in Pakistan (Faisalabad, Lahore, and Rawalpindi) for data collection. The reason is that the R&D department investigates and experiments with new ideas, concepts, and technologies to innovate existing products. However, employees' perception of leader KH can pose potential risks (Hameed et al., 2023). For instance, the level of trust and morale within a team can significantly impact the productivity of collaboration efforts and the overall satisfaction and creativity of employees, which harms innovation in the organization (Akhtar et al., 2022). Therefore, employees from the R&D departments were selected as the target population for the present study. At first, the human resource management department head was contacted and briefed about our research aim. After gaining approval from higher authorities, they also assisted us in filling out questionnaires by disseminating and following up on responses.

Participants initially conveyed through a cover letter the aim of this study and the necessity of their voluntary participation, saying that they may discontinue their participation at any moment throughout the questioning. The participants were also assured of their confidentiality. We distributed 500 questionnaires in three waves with a 1-month gap; in the first wave, we distributed questionnaires on demographic and independent variables and gathered 389 responses; and in the second wave, we disseminated questionnaires on task-related complexity (a moderating construct) among 389 participants and received 354 responses. In the third wave, we approached those

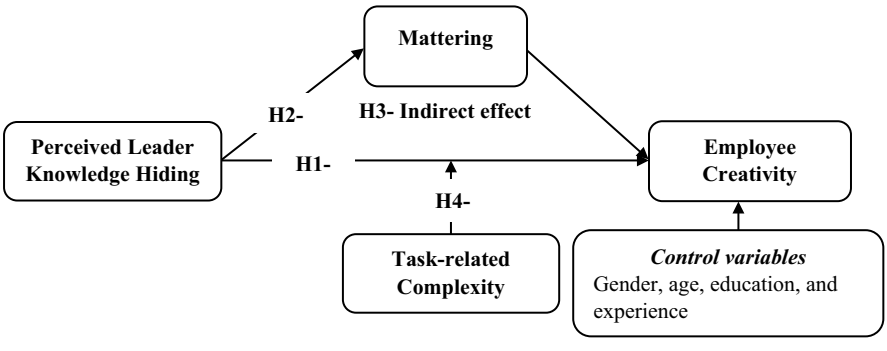

Fig. 1 Proposed model

supervisors whose immediate subordinates had validly completed the second survey to fill out questionnaires about their subordinates' creativity (dependent variable). The same respondents' responses were identified through a hidden code. This approach is helpful in reducing common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We finalized 340 responses, as 14 were incomplete and could not be included. The data collection period spanned 6 months, from July to December 2023.

To control common method bias (CMB), we did two things. First, we incorporated a time-lag and multisource data collection approaches during the data-gathering process. Second, statistically, we employed two well-known approaches to examine CMB: the Herman single factor and the full-collinearity approach. The unrotated single latent component had a value of 35.31%, below the threshold of 50% (Podsakoff et al., 2012), indicating no significant presence of common method variance (Saleem & Bashir, 2024). Furthermore, the full collinearity technique was used to assess the possible consequences of CMV (Kock & Lynn, 2012). According to the findings shown in Table 3, the evaluation of full collinearity resulted in a variance inflation factor (VIF) ranging from 1.22 to 3.02. These values were below the threshold of 3.33, indicating that common method variance (CMV) was not a concern (Kock & Lynn, 2012).

Respondents Profile

Table 1 explains the profile of the respondents. Among the 340 respondents, 228 are male, and 112 are female. Regarding age, 145 are 18 to 29, 120 are 30 to 39, 55 are 40 to 49, and 20 are 50 or older. In terms of education, 72 are graduates, 139 are postgraduates, 74 are diploma holders, and 55 have other education. Additionally, 67 have less than 2, 72 have 2 to 5, 115 have 6 to 10, and 86 have more than 10 years of experience.

Measures

The previously established scale was surveyed based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

We measured *PLKH* based on a 12-item scale presented by Connelly et al. (2012) and validated by Hameed et al. (2023). The sample item included, "My supervisor agrees to me but never really intends to provide me the requested information." *Mattering* was measured based on three dimensions (importance, awareness, and reliance) scale items adopted from Elliott et al. (2004), and to facilitate the comprehension of the construct, we used reverse coding for some scale components following the principles of Soral et al. (2022). Importance has eight items (sample item included, "My immediate supervisor does not seem to notice when I come or when I go"), awareness has ten items (sample item included, "My immediate supervisor does not care what happens to me"), and reliance has six items (sample item included, "My immediate supervisor very rarely looks to me for advice on issues of importance"). *Employee creativity* was measured with a

Table 1 Respondents' profile

Category	Frequency (%) $N=340$
Gender	
Male	228 (67.1)
Female	112 (32.9)
Age (in years)	
18 to 29	145 (42.6)
30 to 39	120 (35.3)
40 to 49	55 (16.2)
50 or above	20 (5.9)
Education	
Graduates	72 (21.2)
Postgraduates	139 (40.9)
Diploma holders	74 (21.7)
Others	55 (16.2)
Experience (in years)	
Less than 2	67 (19.7)
2 to 5	72 (21.2)
6 to 10	115 (33.8)
More than 10	86 (25.3)

Table 2 Correlations among variables, mean, and standard deviations (S.D.)

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender	1									
2. Age	−.367**	1								
3. Education	−.050	.118*	1							
4. Experience	−.392**	.391**	.016	1						
5. PLKH	−.069	.254**	.051	.071	1					
6. AWR	.101	−.166**	.091	−.147**	−.575**	1				
7. IMP	.122*	−.148**	.143**	−.152**	−.465**	.741**	1			
8. REL	.117*	−.098	.122*	−.133*	−.387**	.584**	.623**	1		
9. EC	−.016	−.108*	.015	−.105	−.513**	.648**	.571**	.414**	1	
10. TRC	−.079	.115*	.126*	−.016	−.132*	.302**	.302**	.198**	.405**	1
Mean	1.329	1.853	2.329	2.647	4.184	1.585	1.582	1.481	1.713	2.381
S.D	0.471	0.897	0.985	1.064	0.689	0.629	0.615	0.643	0.845	1.120

$N=340$, $p<0.05$*, $p<0.01$**, *PLKH* perceived leader knowledge hiding, *AWR* awareness, *IMP* importance, *REL* reliance, *EC* employees creativity, *TRC* task-related complexity

four-item scale adopted from Soda et al. (2019). The sample item included, "I provide new ideas to improve the department's performance." *Task-related complexity* was measured using a five-item scale from Li et al. (2024). The sample item included, "The tasks of my work require the assessment of a large amount of information/alternatives."

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 explains correlations among variables. There are negative correlations of PLKH with employee creativity ($r = -0.513$, $p < 0.01$), and all dimensions of mattering, i.e., importance ($r = -0.465$, $p < 0.01$), awareness ($r = -0.575$, $p < 0.01$), and reliance ($r = -0.387$, $p < 0.01$).

Results

We employed Smart PLS version 4 software for the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) data analysis technique.

Reflective Measurement Model Outcomes

The current study's reflective measurement model outcomes are explained in Table 3. The outer loadings are evaluated as all values are greater than 0.6, fulfilling the necessity criteria except one task-related complexity item (TRC1), which was excluded in the current model examination (Hair et al., 2016a, b). Convergent validity was also validated by establishing a necessary criterion of 0.50 for the average variance extracted (AVE) (Hair et al., 2016a, b). In the meantime, an evaluation was conducted to determine the internal consistency values for the reliability criteria: Cronbach's alpha (CA) and composite reliability (CR) (Hair et al., 2017). The obtained values exceeded the threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2016a, b). The discriminant validity was evaluated by assessing the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of the correlations (HTMT). The HTMT values in this study were below the threshold of 0.85, as recommended by Hair et al. (2017) (see Table 4).

Higher-Order Construct Outcomes

Employee mattering was considered a reflective-formative type 2 of the higher-order construct. Therefore, a two-stage disjoint approach was employed, and the outcomes are explained in Table 5 (Sarstedt et al., 2019). According to Hair et al. (2017), the variance inflation factor (VIF) values for the three dimensions of mattering ranged from 2.01 to 2.85. These values indicate that multicollinearity was not a concern, as they were all below the threshold of 3.33. Ultimately, all dimensions pertain to significance in employees mattering, except for the dimension referred to as "reliance." Despite the relatively insignificant weight assigned to this dimension, "reliance" was included as a dimension of importance due to its high factor loading of 0.72, which exceeds the threshold of 0.50. As recommended by Hair et al. (2017), indicators with such high factor loadings are considered crucial and typically retained.

Table 3 Assessment of convergent validity, internal consistency, and collinearity

Constructs	Items	Loadings	FC	CA	CR	AVE
Perceived leader knowledge hiding (PLKH)	PLKH1	0.709	1.608	0.926	0.936	0.552
	PLKH2	0.659				
	PLKH3	0.762				
	PLKH4	0.721				
	PLKH5	0.785				
	PLKH6	0.802				
	PLKH7	0.780				
	PLKH8	0.781				
	PLKH9	0.723				
	PLKH10	0.709				
	PLKH11	0.717				
	PLKH12	0.753				
Awareness (AWR)	AWR1	0.752	3.024	0.927	0.938	0.603
	AWR2	0.745				
	AWR3	0.737				
	AWR4	0.830				
	AWR5	0.793				
	AWR6	0.831				
	AWR7	0.787				
	AWR8	0.795				
	AWR9	0.743				
	AWR10	0.743				
Importance (IMP)	IMP1	0.770	2.617	0.870	0.897	0.521
	IMP2	0.615				
	IMP3	0.719				
	IMP4	0.702				
	IMP5	0.711				
	IMP6	0.747				
	IMP7	0.737				
	IMP8	0.764				
Reliance (REL)	REL1	0.705	1.733	0.861	0.892	0.581
	REL2	0.661				
	REL3	0.724				
	REL4	0.793				
	REL5	0.851				
	REL6	0.821				
Employee creativity (EC)	EC1	0.849	2.048	0.899	0.929	0.767
	EC2	0.894				
	EC3	0.895				
	EC4	0.865				
Task-related complexity (TRC)	TRC2	0.856	1.228	0.859	0.902	0.698
	TRC3	0.873				
	TRC4	0.779				
	TRC5	0.831				

Table 3 (continued)

FC full collinearity, *CA* Cronbach's alpha, *CR* composite reliability, *AVE* average variance extracted

Table 4 Measurement of discriminant validity

Constructs	AWR	EC	IMP	PLKH	REL	TRC
Awareness (AWR)						
Employee creativity (EC)	0.708					
Importance (IMP)	0.827	0.646				
Perceived leader knowledge hiding (PLKH)	0.621	0.565	0.526			
Reliance (REL)	0.671	0.480	0.744	0.456		
Task-related complexity (TRC)	0.345	0.467	0.350	0.171	0.228	

Table 5 Measurement properties of the formative construct

Higher-order construct	Dimensions of lower-order construct	Outer weights	Outer loadings	*T* value	Variance inflation factor
Mattering	Importance	0.24	0.86	2.44	2.85
	Awareness	0.74	0.98	7.67	2.55
	Reliance	0.07	0.72	0.99	2.01

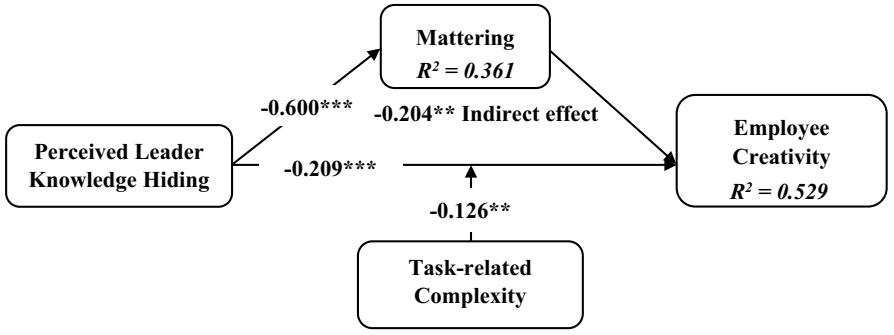

Fig. 2 Structural model. Note = $p < 0.01$**, $p < 0.001$***

Structural Model Outcomes

The 5000 re-samples bootstrapping was performed to examine the structural model (Hair et al., 2017). The structural model is presented in Fig. 2. We controlled gender, age, education, and experience, as they may influence employee creativity.

Initially, an evaluation of the VIF values was conducted within our structural model. The findings revealed that the VIF values were below the threshold of 5.0, thus showing the absence of multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2016a, b). After that, the

constructs' effect size (f^2) was examined, as explained in Table 6 (Cohen, 1988). A large impact was found among PLKH and mattering ($f^2 = 0.56$). A small effect was found among PLKH and employee creativity ($f^2 = 0.07$). Moreover, Fig. 2 explains the R^2 values, as the construct "mattering" R^2 value of 0.361 explains 36.1% due to PLKH. Similarly, the "employee creativity" R^2 value of 0.529 explains 52.9% variance due to mattering (Hair et al., 2017). Finally, the prediction accuracy (Q^2) was evaluated using the blindfolding method. The Q^2 values for both mattering (0.264) and employee creativity (0.414) were found to be more than zero, suggesting that the research model had a satisfactory level of predictive accuracy (Hair et al., 2017).

The proposed relationship results of the current study model are explained in Table 6. The H1 and H2 predict the direct negative relationship of PLKH with employee creativity and mattering, and the outcome (H1, $\beta = -0.209$, $T = 4.64$; H2, $\beta = -0.600$, $T = 8.40$) explains that PLKH has a negative impact on employee creativity and mattering, confirming that H1 and H2 are accepted.

This study used the bootstrapping technique to check the mediation role of employees mattering between PLKH and employees' creativity (Hair et al., 2016a, b). Bootstrapping indirect effects generate higher statistical power (Hair et al., 2016a, b). This study followed Preacher et al. (2008) to explain the mediation role of mattering between the independent variable (IV) and the dependent variable (DV). This study investigated the significance of direct effects (t values) by bootstrapping between IV and DV. We then examined the path coefficients using a mediator between IV and DV (Obeidat et al., 2020). According to this technique, if both indirect and direct effects are significant, it is considered partial mediation. In contrast, if the direct impact is insignificant and the indirect effect is significant, it is considered complete mediation. The direct-only impact is considered to have no mediation (Hair et al., 2016a, b). Moreover, mediation was checked through bootstrapping bias-corrected confidence intervals (95%) (Obeidat et al., 2020; Srivastava et al., 2016), as mediation is considered when a zero point is excluded from the confidence interval. The direct effect of PLKH on employee creativity was significant ($\beta = -0.209$, $T = 4.64$), and the indirect effect through employee mattering was also significant ($\beta = -0.204$, $T = 3.24$). Accordingly, employees mattering partially mediated the relationship between PLKH and employee creativity. Hence, H3 is accepted.

Table 6 also explains the outcome of the current model's proposed moderating relationship. H4 predicts the moderating role of task-related complexity in the relationship between PLKH and employee creativity. The outcomes ($\beta = -0.126$, $T = 2.79$) confirm that task-related complexity negatively moderated this relationship. Further, Fig. 3 shows that a higher task-related complexity strengthens the negative association between PLKH and employee creativity. Thus, H4 is accepted.

Discussion

The primary objective of current research is to examine the impact of PLKH on employee creativity. By following Soral et al. (2022), the present study introduces the term mattering in KH literature by assuming that PLKH increases the perception

Table 6 Hypotheses results

Proposed relationships		β	T values	P values	Confidence interval 95%	f^2	Decision
Direct relationships							
H1	PLKH → employee creativity	− 0.209	4.64	0.000	(− 0.29, − .012)	0.07	Accepted
H2	PLKH → mattering	− 0.600	8.40	0.000	(− 0.71, − 0.44)	0.56	Accepted
Indirect relationship							
H3	PLKH → mattering → employee creativity	− 0.204	3.24	0.001	(− 0.33, − 0.09)	–	Accepted
Moderating relationship							
H4	TRC*PLKH → employee creativity	− 0.126	2.79	0.005	(− 0.22, − 0.05)	–	Accepted

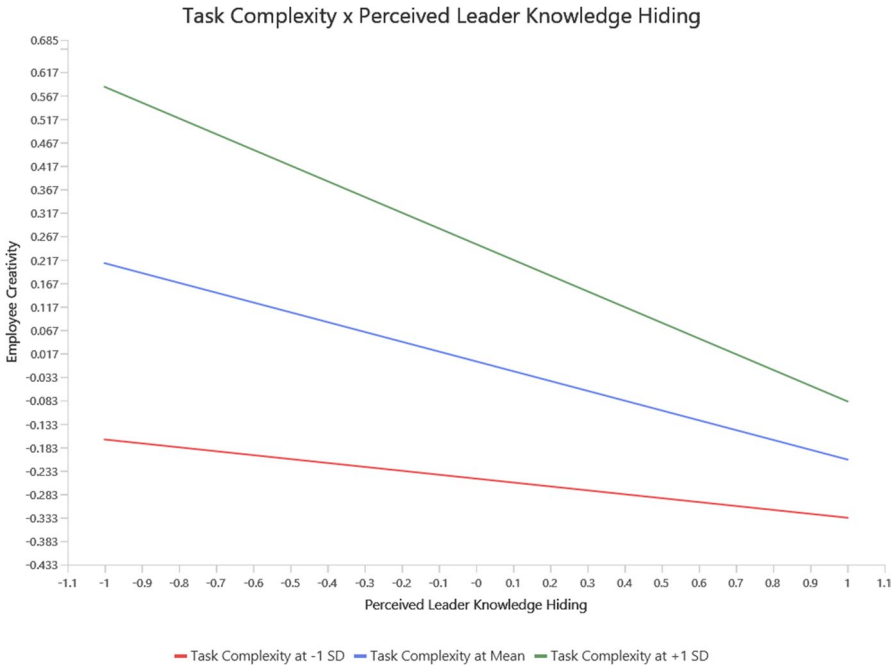

Fig. 3 Interactional effect of task-related complexity and PLKH on employees' creativity

of low-mattering in employees, reducing their creativity. The current study also considers the moderating role of task-related complexity. The study's findings demonstrated that all of the proposed hypotheses are supported. The following sections include a comprehensive discussion of the results derived from this research.

The current study findings authenticate that PLKH decreases employee creativity and mattering. Akhtar et al. (2022) pointed out that leaders deliberately withholding their knowledge is widely recognized as a hindrance in fostering a work environment that encourages creativity and innovation among employees. The perception of leaders engaging in information or expertise withholding damages trust levels inside the organization, impeding open communication of ideas and hindering cooperation (Zhao et al., 2023). Employees may be reluctant to offer their creative thoughts or innovative proposals because their efforts may not be adequately appreciated or appropriately recognized. The act of a leader withholding information impedes the workforce's creative capacity. When workers perceive a lack of transparency from their leaders, it may result in a decreased feeling of importance inside the organization (Soral et al., 2022). The concept of mattering, which refers to the perception of one's significance and worth, is vital in fostering employee motivation, creativity, and work satisfaction.

The perception of low-mattering among employees mediates the negative relationship between PLKH and employee creativity. When workers see that their efforts are not adequately recognized, it may lead to disengagement and demotivation (Bashir et al., 2021). Workers may choose conformity over creativity in this work

setting, fearing their work will not be noticed or valued. On the other hand, in situations where workers see that their ideas have significance and their contributions are esteemed, there is a greater likelihood of them experiencing a sense of empowerment and motivation to produce innovative solutions and make valuable contributions towards the achievement of the organization's objectives (Soral et al., 2022).

The results further showed that task-related complexity moderates the relationships between PLKH and employee creativity. For instance, high task complexity strengthens the negative association between PLKH and employee creativity. Tasks with a high level of complexity often need a high degree of skill and the ability to think creatively. Leaders who conceal information hinder workers' capacity to acquire and develop essential expertise, diminishing their creative-thinking abilities. Moreover, when workers believe that information is being intentionally concealed, it might diminish their motivation and reduce their willingness to exert additional effort to address intricate difficulties with creativity. The moderating effect of task complexity is attributed to heightened difficulty and a compounded impact of limited access to essential resources, magnified cognitive and emotional burden, and decreased intrinsic motivation. The harmful effects of information concealing on creativity increase with job complexity, indicating that leaders have a critical role in supporting or impeding their workers' creative abilities. Establishing and maintaining transparency, confidence, and cooperation culture is critical for businesses hoping to prosper in challenging and competitive environments.

Theoretical Contribution

The current research significantly adds to the body of existing knowledge in many ways. First, the current study's findings further add insight to the existing knowledge base by examining the impact of LKH perception on employees' creativity. Bogilović et al. (2017) noticed that studies on organizational creativity highlight the significance of social interactions among people, particularly the impact of information sharing on fostering individual and team innovation. Moreover, there has been a lack of focus on how employees' involvement in KH practices might harm creativity. Additionally, previous works have looked at various elements that colleagues' KH practices have influenced; however, there is not much research regarding leaders who conceal information from their subordinates (Akhtar et al., 2022; Butt & Ahmad, 2019). The perception among workers that their leaders are deliberately concealing information or expertise contributes to the development of a climate characterized by distrust and discourages open communication. Additionally, it impedes the exchange of information and cooperative problem-solving, which limits an individual's creative thinking capacity (Akhtar et al., 2022).

Second, according to Soral et al. (2022), in the fields of organizational and social psychology, the term mattering is introduced as a positive concept that leads to improved results in employee productivity and satisfaction. Further, they pointed out that a limited amount of research is available on the factors that lead to low levels of mattering in employees. The current study introduces employee low mattering as a retaliation action of PLKH to address the abovementioned gap. Leadership is seen

as participating in information concealing, which may harm employees' morale and feelings of mattering. When workers suspect their superiors are purposefully keeping information or knowledge from them, it may result in employees' distrust and isolation. As a result, workers lose motivation and interest since they do not feel that their opinions and ideas are being taken seriously.

Third, the current study contributes to the body of knowledge management literature by emphasizing employee mattering as an underlying mechanism behind the association between PLKH and employee creativity. By doing this, the present research responded to the recommendations made by Arain et al. (2022) and Hameed et al. (2023), who focused on identifying possible mediators of PLKH and its effects. The research adds to our knowledge of how PLKH first reduces employees' sense of significance, encouraging them to be less creative. The findings offer a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying mechanisms, thereby contributing a new perspective to the empirical literature. The findings suggest that interventions aimed at improving employee mattering could potentially reduce the adverse effects of PLKH.

Fourth, the current study adds insight into the literature on KH by introducing task-related complexity as a moderating variable. In highly complex tasks, where the need for access to relevant information and insights is more pronounced, the detrimental effects of PLKH may be amplified, underscoring the critical role of task characteristics in shaping the consequences of leader behavior on employee outcomes. By recognizing the role of task complexity as a moderator, the current study's findings deepen our understanding of how leader behaviors influence employee creativity in diverse organizational settings, thereby enriching theoretical frameworks such as SET and shedding light on practical implications for leadership and organizational practices.

Finally, the current study serves the literature of SET by providing insight into the phenomenon of PLKH and employee creativity. SET has been greatly broadening in its application, making these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the theory. SET suggests an idea of relationships as a kind of "give and take" that tries to find equilibrium between gains and losses. In this study, PLKH emerges as a perceived breach in the reciprocity norm, where employees feel their leaders withhold valuable knowledge. This breach affects employees' perceptions of being valued within the organization and their creative engagement. Therefore, the research extends SET from traditional economic exchange to sociopsychological dimensions at work. The study findings thus highlight the complex interrelations between leadership behavior, employee well-being, and organizational performance. The research demonstrates the detrimental effects of PLKH on employee mattering and creativity and emphasizes the importance of open leadership communication in fostering a positive work environment. Leaders play a role in shaping organizational climate, and their behaviors can significantly affect staff attitudes and actions. Therefore, organizations should be encouraged to invest in leadership development programs that stress knowledge sharing and comprehensive communication practices.

Managerial Implications

The research results have substantial practical consequences for organizations cultivating a favorable and inventive work atmosphere. Employees regard supervisors as the most critical individuals in the workplace, and their self-esteem is contingent upon their leaders' treatment of them (Arain et al., 2020). The PLKH leads to employees receiving signals that their contributions are not valued by their executives and that they are not essential members. It decreases importance, incentivizing employees to reduce their creative performance (Soral et al., 2022). Consequently, we suggest that organizations establish mechanisms to promote employee creative endeavors in accordance with the results of the current study. In the context of PLKH, organizations should develop awareness programs that motivate leaders to overcome KH behaviors by demonstrating their detrimental effects. Additionally, awareness programs should emphasize the importance of role modeling and leadership motivation for leaders, and they ought to be instructed to establish rigorous accountability standards for their actions and themselves.

Withholding information that subordinates ask for is a workplace deviance that undermines employee morale and hinders their job effectiveness (Akhtar et al., 2022). The current study's findings have shown that workers' perception of LKH conduct negatively impacts their motivation to engage in creative activities. Additionally, the findings indicate that PLKH not only directly hinders workers' creativity but also indirectly affects it via their (low) mattering. Leaders who deliberately withhold knowledge and information from their subordinates can undermine workers' sense of mattering in the company. The findings highlight the importance of effective communication in the context of leadership. The current study's findings recommended that organizations put resources into establishing leadership training projects emphasizing the significance of transparent communication and disseminating information. Businesses seeking innovation and excellence should prioritize work environments with positive cultures that make people feel appreciated. Recognizing employees for their distinctive contributions reminds them that their work matters and is valued. Formal recognition programs that celebrate objectives achieved or informal remarks from peers praising a job well done may contribute to this strengthening of purpose. Moreover, businesses need to provide targeted seminars that address the adverse impact of KH behavior on subordinates' performance results and emphasize the crucial role of knowledge sharing in enhancing organizational performance.

Moreover, the study findings suggest that leaders should adjust their management style according to the complexity of tasks or projects. In highly complex tasks, management should give extra guidance and support to offset the potential adverse impact of PLKH on staff morale and creativity. This process may involve allocating resources, providing training opportunities, or starting a mentoring system to help employees work through difficult tasks. On the other hand, in less complex tasks, management may give staff authority over their work and encourage freedom of expression and independence. Additionally, the results of current work highlight the significance of workers' well-being and satisfaction. Employees' well-being and loyalty might take a hit if they perceive their contributions are undervalued due to

the leader's practice of withholding information. Moreover, creating a culture where the workforce feels appreciated and valued should be a top priority for every organization, which might include chances for skill development and improvement, programs of recognition, and frequent feedback sessions.

In conclusion, the practical implications of the current study's findings are far-reaching. In the present era of the information-based economy, where knowledge transfer is the main driving force, concealing knowledge is a significant obstacle to organizational performance (Soral et al., 2022). Organizations should prioritize open communication, invest in leadership development, tailor leadership approaches to task complexity, and put employees' well-being and job satisfaction as top concerns. By taking these initiatives, organizations can lessen the adverse effects of PLKH, enhance employee mattering and creativity, and ultimately create a more innovative and thriving workplace. Moreover, companies that want to stay successful in today's fast-changing business environment need to understand the importance of these factors.

Future Research Directions and Limitations

Despite the confirmation of the detrimental impact of PLKH on employee mattering and creativity in our research model, some gaps in this work need further investigation. First, the limited sample size of the research makes it difficult for the conclusions to be applied to a larger population. The external validity of the findings would be improved by doing the research with a bigger and more varied sample and by having it replicated in other organizations and countries. Second, this study deals with leader KH as a single variable, although it has three types (rationalized hiding, evasive hiding, and playing dumb) with different levels of deception (Connelly et al., 2019). Future research may consider three types of leader KH to examine employees' perception of each type to more accurately calculate the impact of leader KH behavior on employees' mattering and creativity. Third, although the current study attempts to fill the gap by conducting research on the low mattering of employees as per recommendations of Soral et al. (2022), the current research does not consider mattering with its three types (awareness, importance, reliance). Future studies may serve the literature by considering three types of mattering to deeply understand the impact of leader KH on each type of mattering.

Data Availability The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors without undue reservation.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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Authors and Affiliations

Hafsa Bashir[1] · Shaham Saleem[2]

✉ Hafsa Bashir
hafsa.bashir@bit.edu.cn; hafsabashir78@hotmail.com

✉ Shaham Saleem
shaham_saleem@bit.edu.cn; shaham_saleem@hotmail.com

[1] School of Economics, Beijing Institute of Technology, Beijing 100081, China

[2] School of Management, Beijing Institute of Technology, Beijing 100081, China