Original Research

Trust Me Not: How Ostracism and Job Tension Drive Employees to Hide What They Know

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Abstract

Objective: This study aims to investigate the indirect relationship between interpersonal distrust and knowledge hiding behaviors through two mediating mechanisms, namely workplace ostracism and job tension. By combining social identity, social exchange, and conservation of resources theory, this study addresses the debate on how interpersonal relationships influence defensive knowledge behaviors in high-pressure organizational settings.

Design/Methods/Approach: Data were collected through an online survey from 302 employees working in the FMCG manufacturing sector in Indonesia between January and April 2025. The study employed structural equation modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) and Importance–Performance Matrix Analysis (IPMA) to test the hypothesized relationships.

Findings: The findings reveal that interpersonal distrust significantly predicts workplace ostracism, which in turn leads to increased job tension. Both workplace ostracism and job tension mediate the effects of distrust on three dimensions of knowledge hiding: playing dumb, evasive hiding, and rationalized hiding. IPMA further highlights workplace ostracism as a critical target for managerial intervention.

Originality/Value: This study contributes to the literature by uncovering the psychological and relational pathways through which interpersonal distrust translates into knowledge hiding. It emphasizes the importance of fostering trust and inclusion in the workplace.

Practical/Policy implication: IPMA results indicate that workplace ostracism has high importance but relatively low performance in influencing knowledge hiding, suggesting it should be prioritized in managerial interventions. Organizations should build trust-based cultures and reduce exclusionary behaviors to promote knowledge sharing.

Keywords: Knowledge hiding, Workplace ostracism, Job tension, Interpersonal distrust

JEL Classification: M54, M59

1. Introduction

In knowledge-intensive workplaces, knowledge sharing plays a critical role in driving innovation, enhancing team effectiveness, and sustaining organizational competitiveness (Connelly et al., 2019; Connelly et al., 2012). However, a growing body of research has drawn attention to the emergence of knowledge hiding, defined as the deliberate concealment of requested information by employees. This behavior can significantly hinder collaboration, disrupt team cohesion, and undermine organizational dynamics (Xing & Li, 2022). Scholars have identified various antecedents of knowledge hiding, including interpersonal distrust, workplace competition, and psychological pressure (Khan et al., 2022). Han et al. (2021) asserted that despite organizational efforts to promote open communication and collaboration, psychosocial barriers persist, leading individuals to withhold information even in highly interdependent environments. As a result, a deeper investigation of the underlying mechanisms that contribute to knowledge hiding is both relevant and necessary.

One of the most prominent factors contributing to knowledge hiding is interpersonal distrust, which refers to an individual's skepticism regarding a colleague's honesty, reliability, or good intentions (Al-Dhuhouri & Mohd Shamsudin, 2023; Sulistiawan et al., 2022). Individuals who distrust their coworkers are more likely to protect themselves by withholding valuable knowledge. However, prior studies have yielded inconsistent findings. While some scholars suggest that interpersonal distrust directly promotes knowledge hiding (Connelly et al., 2019), others argue that organizational factors, such as ethical leadership and shared norms, can buffer the negative effects of distrust (Al-Dhuhouri et al., 2024). These contradictions in the literature reveal an urgent need to explore how interpersonal distrust translates into knowledge-hiding behavior through indirect mechanisms shaped by the social and psychological dynamics of the workplace.

To explain the complexity of these relationships, this study integrates three complementary theoretical frameworks, namely Social Identity Theory (SIT), Social Exchange Theory (SET), and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory. Social Identity Theory posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into groups based on shared values (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Liu et al. (2021) emphasized that when employees experience distrust from their colleagues, they may withdraw from group interaction and become socially excluded, leading to workplace ostracism. From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory, workplace ostracism disrupts expectations of reciprocity and mutual respect, resulting in psychological contract violations (Zhao et al., 2016). This disruption motivates employees to reduce their contributions, including by engaging in knowledge hiding behaviors such as playing dumb, evasive hiding, and rationalized hiding. Lastly, Conservation of Resources Theory highlights the psychological strain caused by ostracism, which depletes emotional and social resources and triggers job tension (Hobfoll, 2001; Soliman et al., 2023). In response, employees may protect their remaining resources by avoiding social interaction and concealing knowledge. These theoretical perspectives collectively explain the sequential process by which interpersonal distrust leads to ostracism, which increases job tension and, ultimately, drives knowledge hiding.

Although previous studies have examined the link between workplace ostracism and knowledge hiding, several gaps remain. Riaz et al. (2019) emphasized the mediating role of job tension between ostracism and knowledge hiding, but their study did not address the antecedents of ostracism. On the other hand, Al-Dhuhouri et al. (2024) focused on the relationship between interpersonal distrust and ostracism yet explored its consequences primarily in terms of employee silence rather than knowledge hiding. Moreover, their study only considered ethical leadership as a moderator and did not investigate job tension as a mediating mechanism. These limitations indicate that prior research has not yet provided a comprehensive understanding of how interpersonal distrust ultimately leads to knowledge hiding through both social and psychological pathways. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to these dynamics in high-pressure environments where cognitive demands and performance expectations are high, such as the manufacturing sector.

Furthermore, limited attention has been given to these dynamics in high-pressure environments where cognitive demands and performance expectations are high, such as the manufacturing sector. There is a clear need for more specific research on knowledge hiding within the FMCG sector. Existing studies primarily focus on general management and supply chain contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how interpersonal dynamics influence knowledge behaviors in operationally intense, team-based settings (Butt et al., 2020; Issac et al., 2021). Direct studies on knowledge hiding in the FMCG industry suggest that knowledge hiding can have significant negative impacts on collaboration, innovation, and performance (Xia et al., 2022; Xiong et al., 2021). The FMCG sector is characterized by fast-paced operations, intense competition, and high interdependence across functions, making it particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of knowledge withholding (Chatterjee et al., 2021). Addressing these issues through targeted managerial practices and fostering a culture of trust and openness is essential to mitigate these risks and enhance organizational effectiveness. Therefore, the FMCG manufacturing sector provides a compelling and underexplored context to investigate the psychological and relational mechanisms that influence knowledge hiding.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions: Does interpersonal distrust lead to workplace ostracism? How does workplace ostracism affect job tension and different forms of knowledge hiding? Do workplace ostracism and job tension sequentially mediate the relationship between interpersonal distrust and knowledge hiding?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes in several ways. First, it expands the literature on knowledge hiding by introducing a dual-mediator model that incorporates both workplace ostracism and job tension. Second, it offers a theoretical integration of SIT, SET, and COR to provide a multi-layered explanation of employee behavior in distrustful environments. Third, the study offers practical implications for organizations, particularly in high-pressure manufacturing settings, by identifying social and psychological risk factors that may undermine knowledge sharing. These insights can inform interventions aimed at fostering a culture of trust, inclusion, and collaboration. In addition, this study incorporates Importance–Performance Matrix Analysis (IPMA) to enhance its practical relevance. IPMA identifies which psychological constructs, such as workplace ostracism and job tension, should be prioritized by managers based on their relative importance and current performance in reducing knowledge hiding. This additional analysis supports evidence-based decision-making for organizational development and culture-building efforts.

The structure of this paper is as follows. The next section presents a review of the literature related to interpersonal distrust, workplace ostracism, job tension, and knowledge hiding, followed by the theoretical framework and hypotheses development. The methodology section describes the research design, sampling strategy, and measurement instruments. Next, the empirical results from the data analysis are presented and discussed. The paper concludes with practical recommendations, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development
2.1 Knowledge Hiding

Knowledge hiding refers to the intentional attempt by an individual to withhold or conceal knowledge that has been explicitly requested by another person. Unlike a mere absence of knowledge sharing, knowledge hiding is characterized by a deliberate act of non-disclosure, even when the individual has access to the requested information (Connelly et al., 2019; Connelly et al., 2012; He et al., 2021). For instance, a colleague may ask for a report, and the person in possession of the report may respond that the information is confidential and therefore cannot be shared. In this example, knowledge is intentionally withheld, without any explicit deception. Another form of knowledge hiding occurs when partial information is given, but not the complete content that is requested. These behaviors underline the distinct nature of knowledge hiding, which involves a conscious decision to obstruct the transfer of knowledge, often motivated by self-interest, mistrust, or protective concerns.

Connelly et al. (2012) conceptualized knowledge hiding as a multidimensional construct consisting of three distinct behavioral strategies, namely playing dumb, evasive hiding, and rationalized hiding. These forms represent different ways in which employees might engage in knowledge concealment, and all three are adopted in this study due to their relevance in various interpersonal and organizational contexts. Playing dumb is a behavior in which the knowledge hider pretends not to understand the request or claims not to possess the knowledge in question (Anand et al., 2020; Venz & Nesher Shoshan, 2021). This form of hiding is rooted in deception and a lack of intention to assist, often motivated by concerns over losing personal advantage or status (Kilduff et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2022). Evasive hiding, in contrast, involves giving misleading or partial responses that avoid directly addressing the knowledge request (Hernaus et al., 2018). While not overtly dishonest, this strategy allows individuals to appear cooperative without providing the requested knowledge. This behavior may stem from a desire to avoid conflict, pressure, or interpersonal discomfort. Lastly, rationalized hiding occurs when the individual justifies the withholding of information by citing legitimate or socially acceptable reasons (Zhao et al., 2016). For instance, the knowledge hider may explain that the information is confidential, not theirs to share, or governed by organizational restrictions. This strategy is often used by individuals with high levels of self-monitoring, who are more comfortable with direct but polite communication (Connelly & Zweig, 2012). In some cases, rationalized hiding may also be rooted in ethical considerations, such as respecting company policy or protecting sensitive data (Zhao et al., 2023). Taken together, these three dimensions of knowledge hiding, playing dumb, evasive hiding, and rationalized hiding, capture the nuanced and strategic ways in which individuals may choose to withhold information. Understanding these distinct behaviors is essential to identifying their antecedents and consequences in organizational settings, particularly in environments where trust, collaboration, and knowledge flow are vital for performance and innovation.

The literature review represents the theoretical core of an article. The Literature Review aims to identify and address any gaps in the research. To achieve this, it is important to present ideas in a clear, concise, and well-developed manner. The literature review serves as the foundation for the research question, including the hypotheses that will be tested to achieve the research objective. It is recommended to use current and credible sources from reputable international journals.

2.2 Hypothesis Development
2.2.1 Interpersonal distrust and workplace ostracism

SIT provides a foundational lens through which the link between interpersonal distrust and workplace ostracism can be understood. This theory posits that employees derive a sense of identity from their membership in social groups, and their behaviors are influenced by how they perceive their alignment with those groups. In the workplace, trust plays

a central role in establishing and maintaining group cohesion. When employees experience interpersonal distrust, they are less likely to identify with their team or coworkers and may begin to perceive themselves as outsiders (Verkuyten et al., 2019). This self-categorization as an out-group member can lead to social withdrawal and reinforce the perception of exclusion or ostracism within the work environment (Al-Dhuhouri & Mohd Shamsudin, 2023)

From a psychological perspective, employees who distrust others tend to adopt protective behaviors to minimize perceived risks, such as withholding information, maintaining emotional distance, and reducing openness in communication (Kadam & Kareem Abdul, 2024). These behaviors may be interpreted by colleagues as signs of disengagement or lack of cooperation, which in turn can lead to social distancing by others. As distrust permeates workplace relationships, employees are more likely to avoid interaction with colleagues they perceive as untrustworthy, thereby weakening team collaboration and increasing the likelihood of social exclusion (Hu et al., 2023). Research shows that employees who exhibit distrust toward their peers are more frequently marginalized or excluded in group settings, leading to workplace ostracism (Al-Dhuhouri et al., 2024).

The experience of being ostracized can result in significant emotional and cognitive consequences for employees, including diminished self-worth, loss of control, and feelings of invisibility (Reece et al., 2021). When distrust undermines mutual affiliation and social integration, the social fabric of the team is disrupted, and exclusionary behaviors become more common. In this context, interpersonal distrust functions not only as a relational barrier but also as a catalyst for ostracism within the workplace. Al-Dhuhouri and Mohd Shamsudin (2023) further confirm that interpersonal distrust significantly predicts workplace ostracism, emphasizing the social consequences of distrust in organizational settings. Thus,

H1: Interpersonal distrust has a positive effect on workplace ostracism

2.2.2 Workplace ostracism and job tension

COR theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how social exclusion in the workplace can generate psychological strain (Hobfoll, 2001). This theory posits that employees are motivated to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources such as energy, social support, time, and self-esteem. When these resources are threatened or lost, employees are more likely to experience stress and emotional exhaustion. In this context, workplace ostracism, defined as being ignored, excluded, or rejected by coworkers, is considered a serious threat to psychological and social resources, particularly the sense of belonging and interpersonal support that are essential for coping with work demands.

Being excluded by colleagues deprives employees of informal support networks that typically provide reassurance, guidance, and emotional reinforcement (Duffy et al., 2006; Mattar et al., 2022). This loss of social connectedness can result in increased psychological tension and a reduced ability to manage workplace pressures. Job tension refers to feelings of stress, anxiety, or mental strain caused by work-related stressors such as high workloads, poor relationships with coworkers, and unclear job expectations (Riaz et al., 2019). When employees are ostracized, they are more likely to feel isolated and undervalued, which can lead to higher levels of emotional discomfort and job-related stress.

Workplace ostracism can also lead to the perception that important resources such as social trust and workplace stability are no longer accessible. The resulting psychological toll often manifests in reduced motivation and impaired problem-solving ability. Employees who feel excluded may begin to disengage from their roles and struggle to meet performance expectations. Riaz et al. (2019) highlighted that employees who report higher levels of workplace ostracism also tend to experience increased job tension, suggesting a direct positive relationship between the two variables. Thus,

H2: Workplace ostracism has a positive effect on job tension.

2.2.3 Workplace ostracism and knowledge hiding

COR emphasizes that individuals are motivated to protect, accumulate, and conserve resources they perceive as valuable, including psychological and social assets such as emotional well-being, peer support, and workplace inclusion (Hobfoll, 2001). When employees experience ostracism, they may feel rejected, invisible, or devalued, triggering a defensive response aimed at conserving their remaining psychological resources (Riaz et al., 2019). Furthermore, Takhsha et al. (2020) argued that such experiences can lead to emotional pain that is comparable to physical discomfort, often resulting in reduced motivation, feelings of helplessness, and increased stress. In response to the threat of resource loss, employees who feel excluded may withdraw socially and avoid engaging in behaviors that require emotional investment or interpersonal vulnerability. One form of such withdrawal is knowledge hiding, which involves the intentional concealment of information that has been requested by others (Connelly & Zweig, 2012). COR mechanism emphasized that when employees perceive that their social and emotional resources are at risk, they may opt to protect themselves rather than take further interpersonal risks by sharing knowledge. This avoidance may take different forms, including playing dumb, evasive hiding, and rationalized hiding.

The first form, playing dumb, occurs when employees pretend not to understand or possess the requested information, despite actually having it (Anand et al., 2022). This behavior serves as a protective strategy to avoid further

social engagement or potential exploitation. Connelly and Zweig (2012) found that employees who experience workplace ostracism are more likely to engage in playing dumb because they feel psychologically threatened and choose to disengage rather than contribute. Therefore,

H3a: Workplace ostracism has a positive effect on playing dumb.

The second form of knowledge hiding, evasive hiding, refers to providing partial, misleading, or vague responses to avoid sharing complete information (Connelly et al., 2019; Connelly et al., 2012; Sulistiawan et al., 2022). Employees who feel socially excluded may perceive that their openness is no longer reciprocated or valued. As a result, they may choose to avoid direct confrontation by offering incomplete or ambiguous answers. Research by Connelly and Zweig (2015) suggests that evasive hiding can be more damaging to workplace relationships than other forms of knowledge hiding because it creates a false sense of cooperation while undermining trust. Thus,

H3b: Workplace ostracism has a positive effect on evasive hiding.

The third form, rationalized hiding, occurs when employees justify their refusal to share knowledge by offering seemingly valid reasons, such as confidentiality, lack of authority, or blaming external constraints (Chatterjee et al., 2021). Rather than confronting the exclusion directly, employees may adopt a strategy of justification to maintain professionalism while still avoiding information sharing. This behavior reflects a desire to distance oneself from social risk without engaging in overt conflict. Connelly and Zweig (2012) observed that rationalized hiding often follows episodes of ostracism, as employees attempt to balance social disengagement with preserving their reputation. Based on this reasoning, the third hypothesis is proposed:

H3c: Workplace ostracism has a positive effect on rationalized hiding.

Interpersonal distrust refers to an employee's belief that others may act with harmful intent, behave unreliably, or lack concern for their well-being. In organizational contexts, this distrust weakens the foundation of collaborative relationships and disrupts mutual identification within workgroups (Hu et al., 2023; Kadam & Kareem Abdul, 2024). Based on SIT, when employees perceive a lack of trust from or toward others, they tend to psychologically distance themselves from the group. This sense of exclusion can reduce their affiliation with the organization and lead to behavioral withdrawal. Over time, this process often manifests in the form of workplace ostracism, where employees feel ignored, excluded, or pushed to the periphery of social interaction (Al-Dhuhouri & Mohd Shamsudin, 2023). When employees are perceived as uncooperative or untrustworthy, they may be marginalized from key group activities or social exchanges. This exclusion can trigger a range of psychological reactions, including emotional fatigue, stress, and reduced willingness to engage with others. In response to such social threats, employees may protect themselves by disengaging from collaborative behaviors, particularly in areas involving knowledge exchange. One common outcome is knowledge hiding, a strategic behavior used to withhold information that has been explicitly requested (Connelly & Zweig, 2012).

2.2.4 The mediating effects of workplace ostracism

According to COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001), individuals are motivated to protect and conserve valuable resources, including emotional energy, social relationships, and professional reputation. When interpersonal distrust emerges, employees perceive a potential threat to these resources. As a coping strategy, they may experience or engage in workplace ostracism, either by excluding others or by being excluded, to shield themselves from further resource depletion. Ostracism, however, also creates emotional strain, leading employees to adopt defensive knowledge-hiding behaviors to preserve their remaining cognitive and psychological resources.

One specific form of knowledge hiding is playing dumb, which involves pretending not to understand or possess the requested knowledge. Under conditions of interpersonal distrust, employees interpret ostracism as a social signal that their position or sense of belonging is threatened. To conserve emotional resources and avoid further conflict, they may disengage from knowledge exchange and choose to play dumb. Prior research supports this mechanism by showing that workplace ostracism mediates the link between distrust and playing dumb (Al-Dhuhouri & Mohd Shamsudin, 2023). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4a: Workplace ostracism mediates the relationship between interpersonal distrust and playing dumb.

Similarly, evasive hiding occurs when employees provide partial, vague, or misleading responses to avoid fully sharing information. COR theory suggests that when distrust escalates into ostracism, employees perceive heightened social and psychological threats, which drains their emotional resources. In response, evasive hiding becomes a resource-preserving strategy, allowing employees to avoid direct confrontation while maintaining minimal social engagement (Al-Dhuhouri & Mohd Shamsudin, 2023). Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4b: Workplace ostracism mediates the relationship between interpersonal distrust and evasive hiding.

Rationalized hiding involves justifying the refusal to share information by offering seemingly valid reasons such as lack of authority, confidentiality, or organizational rules (Zhao et al., 2016). In some cases, employees may also shift responsibility to others or claim that they are not allowed to disclose the information. From the COR perspective, this behavior reflects an adaptive attempt to conserve emotional stability and control over knowledge boundaries when inclusion is already compromised. Prior evidence supports this pathway, indicating that workplace ostracism significantly

mediates the relationship between distrust and rationalized hiding. As supported by findings from Al-Dhuhouri and Mohd Shamsudin (2023), workplace ostracism significantly mediates the relationship between interpersonal distrust and rationalized hiding. Therefore, the final hypothesis is proposed:

H4c: Workplace ostracism mediates the relationship between interpersonal distrust and rationalized hiding.

2.2.4 The mediating effects of job tension

COR theory posits that employees strive to preserve and protect valuable resources such as emotional energy, social support, and self-worth (Hobfoll, 2001). When these resources are threatened, individuals experience stress and engage in behaviors aimed at minimizing further loss. Workplace ostracism, which involves being excluded or ignored by colleagues, represents a significant threat to social and emotional resources. Such exclusion may include being left out of social gatherings, disregarded in meetings, or consistently overlooked in daily interactions (Shafique et al., 2020). These experiences trigger emotional distress and psychological discomfort that can manifest as job tension (Riaz et al., 2019). Within the framework of COR theory, ostracized employees may experience heightened job tension as a direct consequence of losing access to social affirmation and peer support. In response to this psychological strain, employees are more likely to disengage and preserve their remaining cognitive and emotional resources through defensive behaviors such as knowledge hiding (Bhatti et al., 2022). Employees who experience job tension may choose to avoid additional cognitive or emotional investment by withdrawing from information-sharing processes. Playing dumb serves as a low-effort strategy to shield oneself from further stress and social exposure. Research by Riaz et al. (2019) supports this mechanism by showing that job tension significantly mediates the relationship between workplace ostracism and playing dumb. Based on this rationale, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5a: Job tension mediates the relationship between workplace ostracism and playing dumb.

A second behavioral response is evasive hiding, in which employees provide misleading or vague answers and delay the delivery of requested information without any real intention to follow through (Connelly & Zweig, 2012). Within the framework of COR theory, employees subjected to ostracism experience emotional exhaustion and increased job tension due to the loss of social support and affirmation. In the context of heightened job tension caused by social exclusion, employees may feel emotionally exhausted and may attempt to limit further interaction with those they perceive as sources of stress. Evasive hiding allows them to maintain surface-level engagement without genuine cooperation. When ostracism leads to emotional strain, evasive tactics become a preferred method to manage interactions without incurring additional psychological costs. Riaz et al. (2019) found that job tension plays a mediating role in this relationship. Therefore,

H5b: Job tension mediates the relationship between workplace ostracism and evasive hiding.

The third form of knowledge hiding is rationalized hiding, which occurs when employees justify their decision to withhold knowledge by offering reasons such as lack of authority, confidentiality concerns, or deflection of responsibility (Zhao et al., 2016). From a COR perspective, ostracism drains emotional resources and generates job tension, which increases employees' desire to avoid further interpersonal strain. Evasive hiding allows employees to appear cooperative while conserving psychological energy by withholding complete information. Instead of confronting the social pressure directly, employees manage their stress by postponing or deflecting knowledge-sharing responsibilities. Consequently, job tension explains why workplace ostracism often leads employees to adopt evasive hiding strategies. Riaz et al. (2019) suggest that job tension resulting from ostracism can contribute to such behaviors. Thus,

H5c: Job tension mediates the relationship between workplace ostracism and rationalized hiding.

3. Method

3.1 Sample and data collection procedure

This study targeted employees in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector in Indonesia. The FMCG industry was selected due to its dynamic and high-pressure work environment, where intense competition, strict deadlines, and interdependent team tasks are common (Chatterjee et al., 2021). These characteristics make it a relevant context for examining psychological and interpersonal dynamics such as interpersonal distrust, workplace ostracism, job tension, and knowledge hiding. Employees in this sector are frequently required to collaborate across functions under performance-driven conditions, which may intensify the likelihood of social exclusion and protective behaviors such as knowledge withholding.

Data were collected using an online survey administered between January and April 2025. This method enabled efficient access to respondents across multiple companies while maintaining cost-effectiveness and reach. A total of 302 valid responses were obtained. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before respondents began the questionnaire. To ensure ethical research conduct, the survey was fully anonymous, and no personally identifiable information was recorded. This anonymity was especially important given the sensitive nature of constructs such as distrust and knowledge hiding (Jelinek & Ahearne, 2006, 2010). In addition to protecting participant privacy, anonymity served as a strategy to reduce potential social desirability bias, which is a common concern in self-reported

survey research. Participants were explicitly informed that their responses would remain confidential and used solely for academic purposes. This approach aligns with ethical standards and supports the reliability of the data collected.

The demographic profile of the respondents is as follows. In terms of gender, 56.95% of participants were female and 43.05% were male. The majority of respondents were in the younger age brackets, with 26.16% under 25 years old, 30.79% aged 25 to 30, and 19.21% aged 31 to 35. The remaining respondents were distributed across the 36 to 40 age group (8.61%), 41 to 45 (8.61%), and over 45 years old (6.62%). Regarding tenure, 19.21% had worked for less than one year, 28.81% for one to two years, 30.13% for three to five years, and 21.85% had more than five years of work experience. These figures suggest a sample that is relatively young and early-to-mid career, which is consistent with the typical workforce composition in Indonesia's FMCG sector.

3.2 Measures

All measurement scales in this study were adapted from previously validated instruments to ensure theoretical consistency and content validity. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Interpersonal distrust was measured using six items from Lewicka and Zakrzewska-Bielawska (2022), which capture employees' perceptions of suspicion, emotional distance, and lack of confidence toward coworkers. Workplace ostracism was assessed with seven items adapted from Peng and Zeng (2017), reflecting employees' experiences of being ignored or excluded in the workplace. Job tension was measured using seven items from Doğru (2021), that evaluate employees' psychological strain and stress resulting from job demands and workplace pressures.

Knowledge hiding was conceptualized as a multidimensional construct and measured using 12 items from Connelly and Zweig (2012), consisting of three distinct dimensions: playing dumb, evasive hiding, and rationalized hiding. Playing dumb refers to employees pretending not to know requested information, while evasive hiding involves providing vague, misleading, or delayed responses. Rationalized hiding captures situations in which employees justify withholding knowledge by offering seemingly legitimate reasons, such as confidentiality or lack of authority.

To ensure linguistic equivalence and clarity, all items were translated and back-translated. The complete list of measurement items is presented in Appendix 1.

3.2 Control Variables

Several demographic variables were included as control factors, namely age, gender, tenure, education level, job position, and division/department, to ensure the robustness of the findings (Yao et al., 2020). The results show that age was negatively related to job tension ($\beta = -0.241$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that younger employees experience higher stress levels. Tenure had a positive effect on job tension ($\beta = 0.201$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that employees with longer service face increased demands and responsibilities. Education level was also positively associated with job tension ($\beta = 0.115$, $p < 0.05$), implying that higher educational attainment may lead to greater expectations and workload pressures.

Regarding knowledge hiding, job position was negatively related to evasive hiding ($\beta = -0.169$, $p = 0.085$) and rationalized hiding ($\beta = -0.270$, $p < 0.05$), meaning employees in higher roles are less likely to engage in these behaviors. Division or department affiliation significantly influenced job tension ($\beta = -0.037$, $p = 0.065$), playing dumb ($\beta = -0.043$, $p < 0.05$), and rationalized hiding ($\beta = 0.044$, $p = 0.062$), indicating that organizational context shapes employees' stress levels and knowledge-sharing patterns. Gender, however, showed no significant effects across all outcome variables, supporting the view that knowledge hiding is more strongly driven by psychological and relational factors rather than demographic differences.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Reliability and validity testing

Given the cross-sectional nature of this study and the use of self-reported, single-source data, steps were taken to mitigate potential common method bias. To statistically assess the presence of common method variance this study employed Harman's single-factor test (Harman, 1976; Lim, 2024). The results indicated that no single factor accounted for the majority of the variance, as the first factor explained only 44% of the total variance, which is less than 50%. This suggests that the data is free from common method bias.

To assess the quality of the measurement model, this study examined three key aspects: convergent validity, discriminant validity, and construct reliability. All evaluations followed established guidelines as recommended by Hair et al. (2016). Convergent validity was assessed through outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). According to Hair et al. (2017), indicators with outer loadings greater than 0.50 are considered acceptable, while those below 0.40 should be removed. As shown in Table 1, all items in the model displayed outer loadings above 0.50, suggesting satisfactory item reliability. Furthermore, the AVE values for all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of

0.50, indicating that each construct captured more than half of the variance of its indicators. These results confirm that the measurement model has adequate convergent validity.

Table 1. Outer loadings and AVE

Variable	Items	Outer Loadings	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Interpersonal Distrust	X1.1	0.935	0.694	0.929	0.907
	X1.2	0.944			
	X1.3	0.918			
	X1.4	0.937			
	X1.5	0.612			
	X1.6	0.552			
Workplace Ostracism	Z1.1	0.854	0.818	0.969	0.963
	Z1.2	0.925			
	Z1.3	0.890			
	Z1.4	0.927			
	Z1.5	0.907			
	Z1.6	0.932			
	Z1.7	0.892			
Job Tension	Z2.1	0.837	0.719	0.947	0.934
	Z2.2	0.889			
	Z2.3	0.909			
	Z2.4	0.770			
	Z2.5	0.891			
	Z2.6	0.832			
	Z2.7	0.799			
Playing Dumb	Y1.1	0.886	0.847	0.957	0.939
	Y1.2	0.945			
	Y1.3	0.921			
	Y1.4	0.928			
Evasive Hiding	Y2.1	0.935	0.888	0.969	0.958
	Y2.2	0.954			
	Y2.3	0.953			
	Y2.4	0.927			
Rationalized Hiding	Y3.1	0.904	0.764	0.928	0.897
	Y3.2	0.908			
	Y3.3	0.830			
	Y3.4	0.851			

Discriminant validity was evaluated using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). As shown in Table 2, the square root of each construct's AVE (diagonal values) was greater than the correlations between that construct and all other constructs, satisfying the Fornell–Larcker criterion. This indicates that each construct is distinct and shares more variance with its own indicators than with other constructs in the model. To further confirm discriminant validity, HTMT values were examined. HTMT values below the threshold of 0.90 suggest adequate discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2016); Henseler et al. (2015). As shown in Table 3, all HTMT values between construct pairs were below 0.90, providing additional support for the discriminant validity of the measurement model.

Table 2. Fornell-larcker criterion

Variable	EH	ID	JT	PD	RH	WO
Evasive Hiding	0.942					
Interpersonal Distrust	0.562	0.833				
Job Tension	0.622	0.552	0.848			
Playing Dumb	0.834	0.623	0.694	0.920		
Rationalized Hiding	0.815	0.548	0.647	0.820	0.874	
Workplace Ostracism	0.716	0.771	0.688	0.786	0.673	0.904

*Notes: EH: Evasive Hiding; ID: Interpersonal Distrust, JT: Job Tension; RH: Rationalized hiding; WO: Workplace Ostracism. The diagonal values are the square roots of AVE

Table 3. Heterotrait-monotrait

Variable	EH	ID	JT	PD	RH	WO
Evasive Hiding						
Interpersonal Distrust	0.557					
Job Tension	0.653	0.537				
Playing Dumb	0.879	0.618	0.739			
Rationalized Hiding	0.879	0.560	0.702	0.890		
Workplace Ostracism	0.746	0.787	0.722	0.826	0.718	

*Notes: EH: Evasive Hiding; ID: Interpersonal Distrust, JT: Job Tension; RH: Rationalized hiding; WO: Workplace Ostracism.

Construct reliability was assessed using both composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha. As shown in Table 1, all constructs demonstrated composite reliability values above the minimum threshold of 0.60, ranging from 0.928 to 0.969. Cronbach's alpha values also exceeded 0.60 for all constructs, ranging from 0.897 to 0.963. These results indicate that the measurement scales are internally consistent and reliable.

Taken together, the results of the convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability assessments confirm that the measurement model in this study is statistically sound and suitable for structural model analysis.

4.2. Hypothesis testing

Before testing the proposed hypotheses, a collinearity assessment was performed to ensure that predictor constructs did not exhibit multicollinearity. The results of the variance inflation factor (VIF) analysis indicate that all VIF values were below the threshold of 3.3, suggesting that collinearity was not a concern in this model. Specifically, the VIF values ranged from 1.000 to 1.901, with all paths meeting the acceptable criteria (Hair et al., 2017). The explanatory power of the model was assessed using the R-square (R^2) values for each endogenous construct. The R^2 values demonstrate moderate to substantial explanatory power: workplace ostracism ($R^2 = 0.594$), job tension ($R^2 = 0.474$), playing dumb ($R^2 = 0.662$), evasive hiding ($R^2 = 0.545$), and rationalized hiding ($R^2 = 0.517$). These findings indicate that the model accounts for a meaningful portion of the variance in each dependent variable. To further evaluate the contribution of exogenous variables, f-square (f^2) values were calculated to assess effect sizes. According to Cohen's guidelines, values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 represent small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively. The path from interpersonal distrust to workplace ostracism showed a large effect ($f^2 = 1.463$). Workplace ostracism also exerted large effects on job tension ($f^2 = 0.901$) and playing dumb ($f^2 = 0.534$), while its effects on evasive hiding ($f^2 = 0.346$) and rationalized hiding ($f^2 = 0.205$) were moderate.

Hypothesis testing was conducted using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples. Table 5 summarizes the direct effects of the proposed paths. All hypothesized relationships were found to be statistically significant ($p < 0.10$), with t-statistics exceeding the critical threshold of 1.28 for a one-tailed test. The results of our hypothesis testing are also exhibited in figure 1.

Table 5. Hypothesis testing results

Path	β	t-value	p-value	Conclusion
Direct effect				
Interpersonal Distrust → Workplace Ostracism	0.771	26.602	0.000	Supported
Workplace Ostracism → Job Tension	0.688	23.230	0.000	Supported
Workplace Ostracism → Playing Dumb	0.586	9.540	0.000	Supported
Workplace Ostracism → Evasive Hiding	0.547	8.358	0.000	Supported
Workplace Ostracism → Rationalized Hiding	0.434	7.246	0.000	Supported

Path	β	t-value	p-value	Conclusion
Indirect effect				
ID → WO → Playing Dumb	0.451	8.669	0.000	Supported
ID → WO → Evasive Hiding	0.422	7.722	0.000	Supported
ID → WO → Rationalized Hiding	0.334	6.670	0.000	Supported
WO → JT → Playing Dumb	0.200	4.813	0.000	Supported
WO → JT → Evasive Hiding	0.169	3.951	0.000	Supported
WO → JT → Rationalized Hiding	0.240	5.684	0.000	Supported

*Notes: EH: Evasive Hiding; ID: Interpersonal Distrust, JT: Job Tension; RH: Rationalized Hiding; WO: Workplace Ostracism.
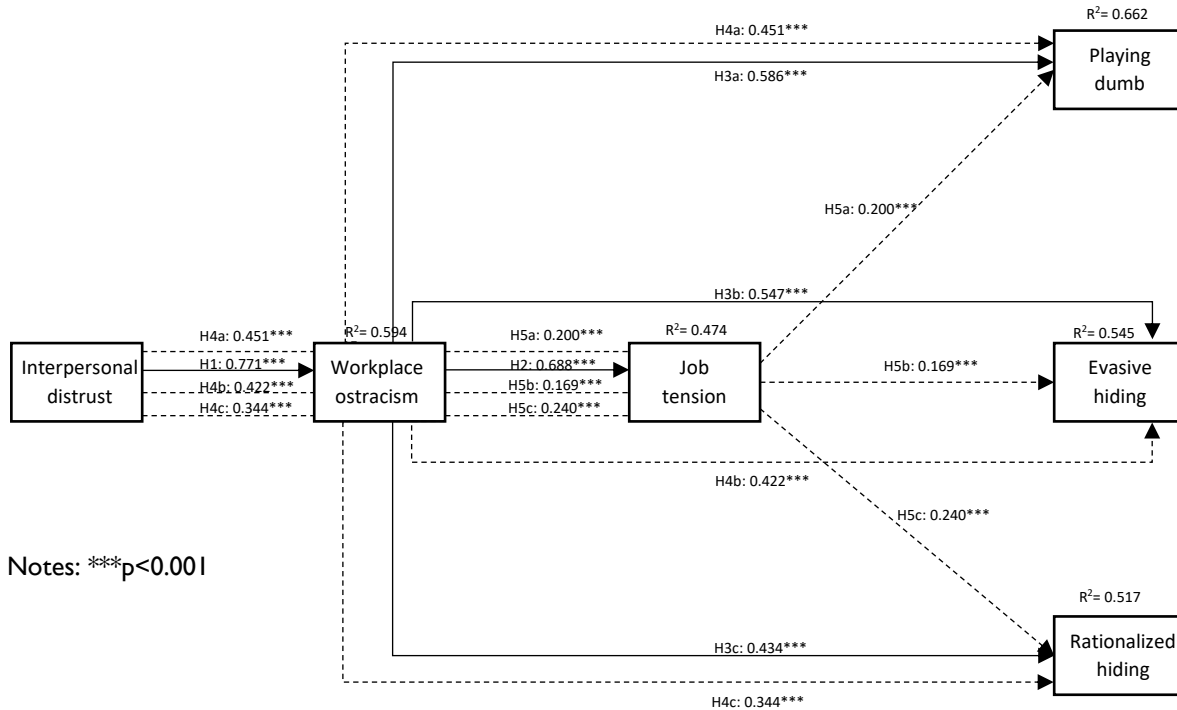
Figure 1. Framework

These results provide strong empirical support for Hypotheses H1 through H3c. Workplace ostracism significantly mediates the impact of interpersonal distrust on knowledge hiding behaviors and job strain, highlighting its central role in the model.

To further test the mediating mechanisms proposed in Hypotheses H4a through H5c, indirect effects were evaluated. As shown in Table 5, all indirect paths were statistically significant, with p-values below 0.10 and t-statistics exceeding 1.28. Overall, these findings confirm the dual mediating roles of workplace ostracism and job tension. Interpersonal distrust indirectly influences knowledge hiding through increased ostracism, while ostracism itself exacerbates job tension, which in turn encourages employees to engage in knowledge hiding behaviors. These mechanisms underscore the complexity of interpersonal dynamics and psychological strain in fostering counterproductive knowledge behaviors.

To complement the core findings, we conducted an Importance–Performance Matrix Analysis (IPMA) using the three dimensions of knowledge hiding as the target outcomes. For illustration, Figure 2 displays the IPMA results for playing dumb as the dependent variable. The IPMA assesses both the importance (total effect) and the performance (average latent variable score) of key predictors, workplace ostracism (WO), interpersonal distrust (IDT), and job tension (JT). As shown in Figure 2A, workplace ostracism demonstrates the highest importance in predicting playing dumb while its performance remains moderate, making it a key target for managerial intervention. Interpersonal distrust also contributes meaningfully and exhibits a comparable performance level, suggesting it is also worthy of attention. In contrast, job tension, while showing relatively higher performance, contributes less to the variance in playing dumb, indicating it may be a less urgent area for action.
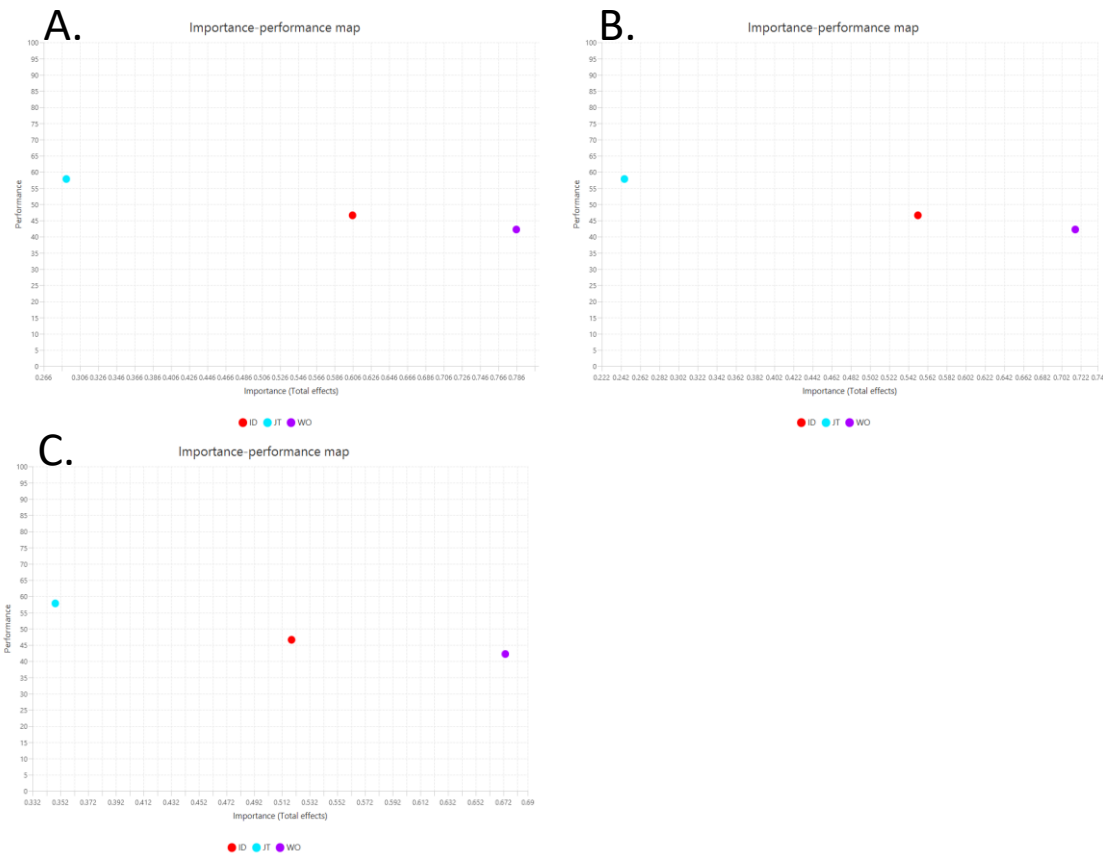
Figure 2. Importance-Performance Matrix Analysis. (A: IPMA for playing dumb B: IPMA for evasive hiding; C: IPMA for rationalized hiding

A similar pattern emerged in the IPMA for evasive hiding (B). Workplace ostracism again demonstrated the highest importance but only moderate performance, reinforcing its position as the primary leverage point for reducing evasive hiding behaviors. Interpersonal distrust, while relevant, ranked lower in importance, and job tension had minimal influence despite relatively high performance. These results confirm that efforts to reduce evasive hiding should focus on fostering social inclusion and reducing experiences of ostracism within teams. For the outcome rationalized hiding (C), workplace ostracism again emerged as the most influential factor, while its performance remained moderate. This confirms the need for organizations to prioritize interventions that minimize ostracism to prevent employees from using rationalized justifications to withhold knowledge. Interpersonal distrust holds moderate influence, whereas job tension shows low importance despite high performance. These findings underscore that efforts to reduce rationalized hiding should primarily target the social exclusion climate, rather than focusing solely on individual stress levels. This additional analysis offers practical value by identifying which constructs should be prioritized to reduce knowledge hiding behaviors. In this case, improving workplace inclusion and strengthening interpersonal trust should be central to intervention strategies, especially in high-collaboration environments such as FMCG manufacturing.

4.3. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that interpersonal distrust has a significant positive effect on workplace ostracism. When trust among employees deteriorates, the likelihood of social exclusion increases. This finding is consistent with Social Identity Theory, which posits that individuals derive a sense of identity and belonging from their membership in social groups. A breakdown in trust can disrupt this sense of group affiliation, causing employees to feel like outsiders. This perception fosters emotional distancing, reduced social interactions, and ultimately leads to ostracism. Interpersonal distrust therefore plays a pivotal role in eroding workplace relationships. The findings support previous study which emphasizes how distrust can fragment social cohesion and weaken collaborative dynamics (Karim et al., 2021). For organizations aiming to foster inclusive and cohesive work environments, especially in interdependent settings such as FMCG manufacturing, strengthening interpersonal trust should be a strategic priority to mitigate the risk of exclusionary behaviors.

In line with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, the findings also show that workplace ostracism significantly increases job tension. When employees are socially excluded, they lose access to emotional support,

affirmation, and practical assistance, which are vital psychological resources. The loss or threat to these resources creates psychological strain and requires additional emotional effort to cope, thus heightening job-related stress. This study expands prior work by highlighting job tension as a critical psychological consequence of ostracism, a gap that had not been fully addressed in earlier studies (Al-Dhuhouri & Mohd Shamsudin, 2023; Dubey et al., 2024). The findings also align with Riaz et al. (2019), who noted that exclusion diminishes confidence and weakens interpersonal networks. These insights underscore the importance of social inclusion as a protective factor against psychological strain in demanding organizational environments.

Moreover, this study reveals that workplace ostracism significantly contributes to all three dimensions of knowledge hiding: playing dumb, evasive hiding, and rationalized hiding. This result amplifies previous studies that employees who feel excluded often disengage from interpersonal exchanges, including knowledge sharing (Anand et al., 2020; Chatterjee et al., 2021). Playing dumb involves pretending not to know information to avoid further exposure to uncomfortable social interactions. Evasive hiding is a subtler form of withdrawal, where individuals delay or deflect requests without direct refusal. Rationalized hiding involves citing formal reasons, such as confidentiality or lack of authority, to justify withholding information. In high-pressure and interdependent work settings such as FMCG manufacturing, these behaviors may function as coping mechanisms. However, they can also disrupt collaboration, reduce transparency, and impair team effectiveness. This study extends prior work by illustrating the specific behavioral responses to ostracism that had not been deeply explored in earlier research.

The study further demonstrates that workplace ostracism mediates the relationship between interpersonal distrust and knowledge hiding. The result of this study confirm prior studies that when employees feel distrusted, they are more likely to perceive social exclusion (Al-Dhuhouri & Mohd Shamsudin, 2023). This exclusion erodes their sense of belonging and psychological safety, prompting them to protect themselves through defensive knowledge behaviors (Zhao et al., 2016). Playing dumb becomes a conscious attempt to avoid social risk. Evasive hiding allows individuals to maintain the appearance of cooperation while minimizing engagement. Rationalized hiding enables them to refuse sharing without explicit conflict by appealing to organizational norms. Theoretical integration of SIT and COR Theory offers a compelling explanation that distrust weakens group affiliation, leading to ostracism, while ostracism depletes psychological resources, driving employees to disengage. This mediating pathway is particularly significant in the FMCG industry, where rapid coordination and seamless information exchange are critical. The findings underscore how trust breakdowns can trigger exclusion and, in turn, produce knowledge withholding that hinders organizational functioning.

Finally, this study identifies job tension as a psychological mechanism linking workplace ostracism to knowledge hiding. Employees who face ostracism often experience elevated stress, which influences their decision to withhold information. Playing dumb, evasive hiding, and rationalized hiding are all forms of defensive behavior aimed at conserving depleted psychological resources. Rather than engaging in open knowledge exchange, employees attempt to preserve emotional stability and avoid additional social strain. This aligns with previous studies which suggest that individuals facing threats to their emotional and social resources will adopt protective strategies (Riaz et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2016). In fast-paced environments like FMCG manufacturing, where collaboration is essential, even subtle acts of knowledge hiding can disrupt workflows and reduce team efficiency. The findings position job tension as more than just a symptom of workplace stress. It is a core mechanism through which exclusion manifests in behavior, reinforcing the need for organizations to address both social dynamics and psychological well-being in order to foster open knowledge sharing.

5. Conclusion
5.1 Theoretical implications

This study was driven by the growing interest in understanding the antecedents and psychological mechanisms underlying knowledge hiding behavior in the workplace. A central debate in the literature concerns how interpersonal distrust contributes to various forms of knowledge hiding, and whether this relationship is direct or mediated by psychological and relational mechanisms. To address this, the study examined the mediating roles of workplace ostracism and job tension in linking interpersonal distrust with three dimensions of knowledge hiding: playing dumb, evasive hiding, and rationalized hiding. The findings demonstrate that both workplace ostracism and job tension significantly mediate these relationships, highlighting their critical roles in translating interpersonal distrust into defensive behaviors that hinder knowledge sharing.

Theoretically, this study advances existing literature by integrating Social Identity Theory and the Conservation of Resources theory to explain how trust breakdown and social exclusion shape employees' psychological states and knowledge-related decisions. It fills gaps left by prior research that overlooked the psychological burden resulting from workplace ostracism and how it translates into different hiding strategies. Managerially, the findings underscore the importance of fostering inclusive workplace environments and strengthening interpersonal trust to prevent knowledge hiding. The additional Importance–Performance Matrix Analysis (IPMA) offers actionable insight by identifying workplace ostracism as the most influential yet under-addressed factor, suggesting it should be a top priority in organizational development initiatives.

5.2 Practical implications

This study provides several practical implications for managers, particularly in dynamic and knowledge-driven sectors such as the FMCG manufacturing industry. Drawing from the Importance–Performance Matrix Analysis (IPMA), we identify specific areas where managerial interventions can be prioritized to effectively reduce knowledge hiding behaviors.

The analysis indicates that workplace ostracism is the most influential factor across all three knowledge hiding dimensions: playing dumb, evasive hiding, and rationalized hiding. Despite its high importance, the performance level of workplace ostracism remains low, suggesting that organizations may be overlooking this issue. Therefore, efforts should focus on reducing feelings of exclusion among employees. This can be achieved through inclusive leadership practices, regular peer engagement programs, and team-based collaboration initiatives that foster a sense of belonging. For instance, organizations should address this by fostering inclusion through inclusive leadership training where managers actively involve all employees in decision-making, peer engagement programs such as cross-departmental projects, and team-based collaboration initiatives that promote shared responsibility. Additionally, implementing anonymous feedback channels can help detect early signs of exclusion and enable timely interventions.

Interpersonal distrust also plays a significant role, although to a lesser extent than workplace ostracism. It holds a moderate position in both importance and performance across the outcomes. This suggests that organizations need to continue building and reinforcing trust within teams. Encouraging transparency, psychological safety, and consistent feedback mechanisms can help reduce suspicion and improve relational dynamics in the workplace (Tan et al., 2022). Leaders should create psychological safety by encouraging employees to voice concerns without fear of retaliation, for example, through anonymous suggestion channels or open Q&A forums. Additionally, regular one-on-one feedback sessions between supervisors and team members can help clarify misunderstandings early, reduce suspicion, and strengthen trust within teams.

In contrast, job tension shows high performance but relatively lower importance in comparison to the other variables. Although not the most critical driver of knowledge hiding, the elevated performance score indicates that employees are already under considerable stress. Addressing job tension through supportive measures such as workload redistribution, mental health support, and flexible scheduling can help prevent stress from escalating into knowledge withholding behaviors. For instance, introducing flexible work arrangements, like allowing remote work options or adjusting deadlines during peak demand, can help employees manage pressure more effectively and reduce the likelihood that stress will escalate into knowledge-hiding behaviors.

Taken together, the IPMA results suggest a practical roadmap for organizations. The primary focus should be on minimizing social exclusion and rebuilding trust among employees. While stress reduction remains important, addressing the relational and psychological underpinnings of knowledge hiding is essential for creating a collaborative and transparent work environment. These efforts are especially critical in the FMCG manufacturing context, where efficiency, coordination, and information sharing directly impact organizational performance.

5.3 Future research agenda

Despite these contributions, this study is not without limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts the ability to infer causality between the examined variables. Future studies may employ longitudinal or experimental designs to explore the temporal dynamics of trust, ostracism, and knowledge hiding. Additionally, the sample was limited to employees in the FMCG manufacturing sector in Indonesia, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other industries or cultural settings. Further research could examine whether similar mechanisms operate in more collectivist or individualist cultures, or across different sectors with varying levels of interdependence and pressure. Finally, future investigations may explore other potential mediators or moderators, such as team climate, leadership style, or individual personality traits, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of knowledge hiding behavior.

Author Contribution
Author 1: writing original draft, data collection and formal analysis
Author 2: conceptualization, review, supervision, validation and visualization.
Author 3: supervision and review

Financial Disclosure

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Appendix 1

Variable	Items
Interpersonal Distrust	a. The employee is closed off in their thinking. b. The employee doubts their trust in coworkers. c. The employee has difficulty communicating with other coworkers. d. The employee keeps a distance from other coworkers. e. The employee finds it hard to express emotions to others. f. The employee feels the need to keep distance from others (feels uncomfortable when someone tries to get too close).
Workplace Ostracism	a. The employee is ignored at work. b. When the employee enters a room, other coworkers leave the room. c. Other coworkers do not respond when the employee greets them at work. d. At work, other coworkers avoid the employee. e. Conversations with the employee are ended by other coworkers at work. f. The employee is rejected when trying to talk with other coworkers at work. g. The employee is treated as if they are invisible at work.
Job Tension	a. The job tends to directly affect the employee's health. b. The employee works under a lot of pressure. c. The employee feels anxious or nervous because of their job. d. The employee might feel better if they had a different job. e. The employee has a job that keeps them awake at night. f. The employee feels nervous before attending department meetings g. The employee often brings work home because they cannot stop thinking about it, even while doing other things.
Playing Dumb	a. The employee pretends not to know the information requested by others or coworkers. b. The employee says they don't know how to help, even though they actually do. c. The employee pretends not to understand what others or coworkers are talking about. d. The employee says they don't know about the topic being discussed.
Rationalized Hiding	a. The employee wants to explain to the requester but feels they should not do so. b. The employee explains that the information is confidential and only for those involved in the project. c. The employee says that their supervisor does not allow them to share the information. d. The employee says that they will not answer the question.
Evasive Hiding	a. The employee expresses willingness to help but does not truly intend to help. b. The employee expresses willingness to help but gives information that is not what the requester needs. c. The employee says they will help later but tries to avoid giving help. d. The employee gives information that is unrelated to what the requester wants.