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Understanding Knowledge Sabotage Among IT Employees in Pakistan

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Abstract

Nowadays, organizations face the challenge of employees engaging in knowledge sabotage. Therefore, this study is an effort to understand what motivates these individuals to engage in knowledge sabotage (KS). In this regard, this study sheds light on dispositional greed (DG) as the main driver of KS to affect the emotional consequence, shame (SH). The data for this quantitative research was collected from 486 workers of the IT sector of Pakistan through a questionnaire-based survey. All the constructs were measured using validated measurement scales. Hypotheses were tested using linear and hierarchical regression. The results confirmed that DG influences KS through SH. The findings also provide insightful information for professionals who are striving to discourage KS at work.

Keywords: Knowledge sabotage, dispositional greed, shame, IT sector

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Introduction

Knowledge sharing is essential for organizations to achieve successful outcomes (Zhang et al., 2025). Sharing of knowledge makes it easier for employees to work together and create new knowledge, which improves problem-solving and decision-making skills (Binsaeed et al., 2023). However, ineffective knowledge sharing results in unfavorable outcomes, which include a higher likelihood of failure of a new product, less productivity, and delays in completing projects in the IT sector (Bello et al., 2023). The most extreme form of such ineffective knowledge behavior is knowledge sabotage (KS), which is a behavior in which individuals deliberately perform malicious knowledge activities to harm others for their self-interest (Perotti et al., 2023). Although knowledge hoarding and hiding have been extensively researched, KS is still understudied (Thomas, 2025). Thus, it would be a great failure not to look into this phenomenon of KS, considering its reoccurrence in organizations and its detrimental effects on organizations and individuals (Perotti et al., 2022). Hence, the main purpose of this study is to throw light on this most devastating facet of knowledge sharing by revealing its personal-level predictor and outcome.

One of the most relevant but less explored predictors of KS is dispositional greed (DG), which is an unquenchable thirst for more (Wang & Xie, 2023). DG involves a propensity to deceive and manipulate people for one's own benefit (Zeelenberg et al., 2024). Following the principles of conservation of resources theory (COR) of Hobfoll et al. (2018), people having a higher level of DG put their own interests first and accumulate resources even when they are not scarce (De Clercq, 2024). They may indulge in ways that harm others, such as propagating misinformation or sabotaging work (Burhan et al., 2025). These individuals also engage in KS to hoard their resources. However, there is a dearth of literature to understand the influence of such personal characteristics on KS. Moreover, there is also a significant gap in the literature on the emotional consequences of KS. The study identifies shame (SH) as the emotional outcome of KS. SH is more focused on the individual, which means that when someone acts unethically, they undermine their own value (Zou et al., 2025). Negative self-reflections of self-image and action lead to SH (Xu et al., 2024). People feel SH when they take part in unethical actions (Chen & Zhang, 2024), such as KS. They feel a threat to their self-image and social identity, as they have committed ethical and moral transgressions of their professional norms by engaging in KS. Thus, they become ashamed of their behavior. In this way, people who adopt KS to hoard their resources eventually lose more psychological resources. With this backdrop, this study also proposes KS as a behavioral mechanism that translates personal characteristics into emotional consequences.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

The literature review and hypotheses development are discussed in this section.

Dispositional Greed, Knowledge Sabotage and Shame

Dispositional greed (DG) explains "the tendency to always want more and never to be satisfied with what one currently has" (Seuntjens et al., 2015, p. 917). It is an insatiable desire for more, which includes more money, power, influence, benefits, and belongings; in other words, the desire for more of everything valuable (Zeelenberg & Breugelmans, 2022). Enough is never enough for greedy people because they are never content and always want more (Enwereuzor, 2024). Therefore, it usually has detrimental effects on other people because taking more often means that others will receive less (Zeelenberg et al., 2024). Prior research demonstrates that greedy individuals are consumed by self-interest, jealousy, impulsivity, and materialism (Seuntjens et al., 2015). Therefore, it is noted that DG enables the carrying out of various immoral actions (Li et al., 2021), such as knowledge sabotage (KS).

KS is "an incident when an employee (i.e., the saboteur) provides incorrect (i.e., wrong) knowledge to another employee (the target) or conceals knowledge from another employee under the following conditions: 1) the saboteur acts intentionally (intention); 2) the saboteur is fully aware of the target's need for knowledge (need awareness); 3) the saboteur possesses the required knowledge (knowledge possession); 4) the required knowledge is extremely important to the target (knowledge importance); 5) the saboteur is aware of knowledge's importance to the target (knowledge importance awareness); 6) The saboteur is aware that the target would be able to productively apply the required knowledge to work-related tasks (knowledge application)" (Serenko, 2019, p. 1264). Researchers found that individuals having dark traits (like DG) engage in KS (Serenko & Choo, 2020); they have an overwhelming urge to get more at any cost (Sekhar et al., 2020). COR theory suggests they do so because they are afraid of running out of resources. So, they engage in KS to protect their resources. This makes our first hypothesis, i.e., ***H_1: DG affects KS***

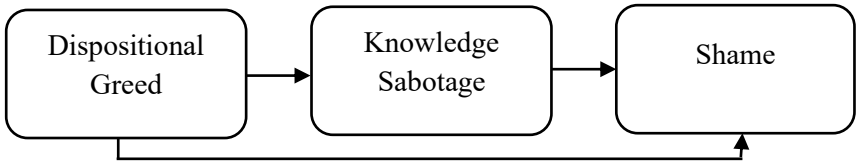
But this KS significantly makes people feel the self-conscious emotion of shame that can impact their actions. Shame (SH) is "one's thinking of being fundamentally bad" (Islam et al., 2022, p. 231). This emotion arises from introspective processes in which people evaluate themselves in the light of socially set norms (Tangney & Tracy, 2012). The more one hides (or sabotages) things, the more they experience stress and negative self-conscious emotions like guilt and SH (Davis, 2024). Modern businesses encourage their staff to exchange knowledge with their coworkers because it gives them a competitive edge. However, when workers provide sabotaged knowledge, they probably believe that their

acts are against the company's policy. Such transgressions of social norms lead to high self-conscious emotions of shame (Islam et al., 2022). Thus, this study also follows the grounds of COR theory that workers experience shame when they feel a threat to their important resources of self-image and professional reputation as they went against the corporate standards of knowledge sharing and indulged in moral and ethical transgression. This makes our second hypothesis, i.e., ***H_2: KS affects SH***

In addition, the mediation of knowledge sabotage in this study is investigated. It is observed that people who have certain traits like DG believe that their valuable resources (e.g., knowledge, status, power) are in danger when shared with others. They want to acquire more or protect the existing resources. This incites them to use knowledge sabotage as a strategy to manage their resources. But this act of knowledge sabotage, while fulfilling a resource-protective purpose, can also result in perceived transgression of social or moral standards, eliciting negative moral emotions like guilt and SH. This makes our third hypothesis, i.e., ***H_3: KS mediates the link between DG and SH.***

Figure 1

Conceptual framework



Research Methodology

Data were collected from knowledge workers in the IT sector of Pakistan. This sector has grown rapidly and dispersed geographically throughout the major cities of the country. Pakistan's IT sector is highly knowledge-intensive and dependent on accurate and timely information flows for project delivery and performance. In this regard, a multi-stage sampling method is used. In the first stage, cities with a significant number of IT companies were chosen using purposive sampling to get adequate representation from major IT hubs of Pakistan, i.e., Lahore, Karachi, Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, Peshawar, and Islamabad. In the second stage, stratified sampling is used to create strata of the list of companies of the Pakistan Software Export Board. This list is comprised of registered companies in only those cities that were selected in the previous stage. In the third stage, proportional allocation is adopted to ensure all regional strata are fairly represented in the sample. In the last stage, convenience sampling is used to collect data from employees because access to employees is restricted in IT firms.

Participants of the study

The sample size of this study was calculated using the item-to-response ratio with criteria of 1:30. So, the sample size was 600 employees. To avoid social desirability bias, workers' anonymity was ensured, which dramatically decreases it (Serenko & Choo, 2020). Respondents were also informed that there is no right or wrong answer and that their responses would be kept confidential.

Instrumentation

Data were collected through a questionnaire-based survey in two intervals with a gap of one month to decrease common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Participants were requested to record their responses on demographics and DG at the first interval. Data on KS and SH were collected at the second interval.

A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure each construct, where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree, except for shame, where 1=never and 5=consistently. Moreover, all the item scales adopted in this study were previously validated by the established studies.

Dispositional Greed: A 7-item scale of Seuntjen et al. (2015) was adopted, which includes "Actually, I'm kind of greedy" (α=0.72). Knowledge Sabotage: A 4-item scale of Serenko (2019) and Serenko and Choo (2020) was adapted, which has items like "In my current workplace, I deliberately provide incorrect information to sabotage a peer's professional success" (α = 0.93). Shame: A 5-item scale of Harder and Lewis (1987) was used, such as "I experience self-consciousness" (α=0.62).

Data Collection

There were 537 valid responses in the first interval and 486 in the second interval, resulting in a final response rate of 81.0%. The demographics of the sample depict that 67.3% of the participants were male, 43.8% were in the 25-34-year age range, 53.9% had a bachelor's degree, 31.3% were working in a middle-level job, and 42.4% had worked for the company for less than two years.

Results

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The tests for missing values, outliers, normality, and collinearity were applied in order to make sure the accuracy of the data for testing the hypothesis; otherwise, they can create problems in the results (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). The data is only useful if it has less than 5% of missing values for a single measure of a variable (Ahmed et al., 2020). In this regard, no missing values were found in the data of this research. Moreover, a total of four cases of

outliers were found using stem and leaf display (Alam et al., 2016). The skewness (±1) and kurtosis (±3) were measured to examine the data normality, and the data were found to be normal (Byrne, 2010). Furthermore, Harman's single-factor method was employed to observe common method variance (CMV). The single factor was observed to have 26.39% variance, which is less than the standard criterion of 50% (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Therefore, the data did not contain any CMV. Bivariate correlations were used to measure the collinearity; the values were less than 0.85; thus, the data were acceptable for further evaluations (Islam et al., 2022). In order to check the consistency of measures, the reliability test was performed. The Cronbach's alpha value of each construct was higher than 0.60 (see Table 1), which shows the acceptable reliability of the scales (Kholed et al., 2021). After the application of these tests, 482 responses were accepted for further analysis.

The mean of all variables varies from 1.88 to 2.86, and the standard deviation varies from 0.71 to 1.05 (see Table 1). The values of Table 1 also show that DG is positively correlated with KS ($r = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$) and SH ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$). KS is positively correlated with SH ($r = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Correlation Analysis, Cronbach's alpha values

Variables	1	2	3	Mean	S.D.	Cronbach's alpha
1- DG	1			2.86	0.76	0.72
2- KS	0.39**	1		1.88	1.05	0.93
3- SH	0.28**	0.24**	1	2.60	0.71	0.62

Note. DG=Dispositional greed, KS=Knowledge sabotage, SH=Shame.

Table 2

Analysis of Direct Hypothesis

Hypothesis	β	R^2	p	Result
DG→KS	0.56	0.16	0.00	Accepted
KS→SH	0.17	0.06	0.00	Accepted

The regression analyses were employed to test the research hypotheses. The linear regression was undertaken to observe the direct relation between DG and KS. It is noted that DG has a positive influence on KS ($\beta = 0.56$, $p < 0.01$). Moreover, KS also has a positive effect on SH ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$). So, H1 and H2 are accepted (see Table 2). In addition, R^2 values represented that DG explained 16% of the variance in KS, while KS led to 6% variance in SH.

Table 3
Mediation Analysis

Variables	M1(β)	M2(β)	M3(β)
Control Variables			
Gender	-0.15*	-0.08	-0.09
Age	-0.04	-0.04	-0.02
Qualification	-0.05	-0.05	-0.05
Job Level	-0.06	-0.04	-0.03
Experience	0.00	0.02	0.02
R^2	0.03		
Independent Variable			
DG		0.25**	0.20**
R^2		0.10	
ΔR^2		0.07	
Mediating Variable			
KS			0.10**
R^2			0.12
ΔR^2			0.02

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Hierarchical regression is commonly used to test the mediation (Chaudhary, 2021). This research also employed a 3-step hierarchical regression method to examine the underlying mechanism of KS in relation to DG and SH. Firstly, all demographic characteristics were included to control for the effect. All the demographic variables explained the variance (R^2) of 3% in SH. Secondly, the predictor DG ($\beta = 0.25$, $p = 0.00$) was incorporated. The R^2 value represented that a 10% variance occurred in SH, and ΔR^2 explained that out of this 10% variance, 7% variance was due to DG. Thirdly, mediator KS ($\beta = 0.10$, $p = 0.00$) was added, and this increased total 12% variance in SH, of which 2% variance (ΔR^2) occurred due to KS. It was observed that DG ($\beta = 0.20$, $p = 0.00$) turns out to be significant due to the addition of mediator KS. Hence, KS provides a partial mediation in the association between DG and SH. Therefore, H3 is supported by the findings of Table 3.

Discussion and Implications

The main objective of this study is to advance the understanding of knowledge sabotage (KS) by investigating personality-based predictors and emotional outcomes using conservation of resources (COR) theory. The results offer consistent support for all proposed hypotheses. First, the positive association between dispositional greed (DG) and

KS indicates that self-focused characteristics of an individual are important in understanding extremely adverse knowledge behaviors. From the lens of COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), people with higher DG constantly strive to gain and secure resources. As a result, they are more likely to perceive competitive workplaces as a threat to their own resources, which makes them use KS as a defensive strategy. This finding advances the previous research that focuses on exploring factors that influence KS (e.g., Perotti et al., 2022).

The results show that there is a positive relation between KS and shame (SH), which reveals how costly it is emotionally to engage in deleterious knowledge behaviors. Although KS can be employed as a resource protection tool, COR theory indicates that KS triggers the loops of resource loss by impacting social relations, professional reputation, and self-image. This argument is justified by the findings of this research. These results fill a huge gap in the literature to provide evidence that KS not merely affects firms and peers but also the emotional well-being of the offender. Previous literature has not investigated this emotional outcome of KS. The results also support the mediation of KS in the relation between DG and SH. The results are in line with COR theory, which postulates that individuals having DG commit KS in an effort to get more. They hoard their resources at the expense of others. However, it is a short-term strategy to protect resources, which ends up bringing more resource loss. This study facilitates a more process-oriented conceptualization of the relationship between individual characteristics and emotional consequences by scientifically proving that KS is a behavioral channel between DG and SH. Overall, the findings present KS not only as an organizational issue but also as a psychologically harmful action that eventually jeopardizes the exact resources people try to preserve.

Practical implications

The current research has major implications for managers, scholars, and organizations to break the cycle of knowledge sabotage (KS) in the IT sector of Pakistan. They need to recognize the individuals having a higher degree of dispositional greed (DG) because these individuals are more likely to commit KS. In this regard, personality tests can be used in recruitment and selection to identify those who want to hoard or sabotage knowledge by assessing the ethical orientation of the employees. Early detection helps managers to develop interventions to alleviate the possible factors before they exacerbate KS.

It is desirable to develop a culture that not only rewards the sharing of knowledge but also discourages sabotage. Companies can create an open knowledge-sharing environment by developing knowledge management systems that facilitate documentation and repositories to ensure the free flow of knowledge. In this way, the less control

employees have over important knowledge, the less likely KS is to occur. Moreover, they can even reprimand the offenders of KS. The introduction of team-based rewards would help to inhibit the greediness of the employees who tend to hoard resources. In this way, organizations can reduce the effects of dispositional greed by reinforcing a culture of collective gains, hence balancing employee behavior with organizational goals. Regular ethics and knowledge-sharing training can also be used to enhance the understanding of not only the organizational and interpersonal but also the detrimental psychological effects of knowledge sabotage, like shame (SH). As KS leads to SH, firms must provide emotional support systems. They can offer counseling and mentoring to overcome the adverse psychological effects. Managers may reframe knowledge sharing as a resource gain instead of a threat. They can use awareness programs to reduce the likelihood of sabotage.

Conclusion

This research unveils how personality traits like dispositional greed (DG), behavioral mechanisms such as knowledge sabotage (KS), and emotional outcomes like shame (SH) are linked in the IT sector of Pakistan. It integrated the perspective of conservation of resources theory to examine how fear of resource loss makes greedy IT workers commit KS that further costs them their emotional resources in the form of shame. By investigating this mechanism, it revealed the direct as well as indirect associations between DG, KS, and SH.

Recommendations

This study has made many contributions. However, it also has some limitations that need to be addressed by future researchers. First, the empirical evidence was limited to the IT industry of Pakistan. Thus, providing stronger contextual specificity. But possibly limiting the external validity of results to different industries or national settings having different institutional frameworks and market dynamics. Therefore, future research needs to replicate this research model in different contexts. Moreover, the current research focuses on dispositional greed as a factor that influences knowledge sabotage (KS) and shame as an emotional consequence. But there can be other factors and behavioral consequences of KS that need further investigation. Moreover, future research may add personal, relational, and organizational level factors to offer multi-level insights into KS.

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