

Knowledge Hiding in Toxic Environments: The Interplay of Emotional Exhaustion and Fear of Negative Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

The current investigation attempts to explore the ramifications of Exploitative Leadership (EL) on knowledge-hiding behaviour (KHB) of the employees working in the Establishment Division, Cabinet Secretariat, Islamabad, by employing the Cognitive Theory of Stress, Appraisal, and Coping. The hypothesis conjectured that employees' emotional exhaustion (EEE) plays a mediating role in the relationship between EL and KHB. This study also attempted to expound the impending role of the moderating variable, fear of negative evaluation (FNE), between EL and KHB. The research was carried out in a non-contrived environment, and data were collected through the survey method by utilizing self-administered questionnaires at three different time intervals, i.e., (time-T1), (time-T2), and (time-T3). The responses of 313 were received from the respondents on a five-point Likert scale. The research adopted a time-lag design, a deductive approach, and a convenience data-collection sampling technique. AMOS and SPSS software were applied for the data analysis to thoroughly examine the link among the variables. The study's findings revealed that employees exhibit a high propensity for KHB when working under the supervision of EL. Employees experience an extreme sense of being overwhelmed, which often leads to emotional exhaustion, and consistent exhaustion magnifies the behaviour of knowledge hiding as a coping strategy. Furthermore, the hypothesis posited that the moderating variable i.e., fear of negative evaluation, mitigates the magnitude and frequency of KHB of the employees.

Keywords: Knowledge Hiding Behaviour; Exploitative Leadership; Emotional Exhaustion.

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary organizations, knowledge is widely acknowledged as a critical strategic asset for fostering efficiency, innovation, and competitive advantage. While the significance of sharing knowledge is widely endorsed, an increasing number of studies have pointed out the widespread problem of knowledge hiding, that deliberately not sharing information even when it is specifically requested, as a major barrier to organizational success (Hardi et al., 2024; Akbar, 2023). This phenomenon often emerges within toxic workplace cultures, particularly under dysfunctional leadership regimes. Dark-side leadership has been identified as particularly detrimental, characterized by self-serving behaviours, manipulation, and the cultivation of fear and hyper-competition among subordinates (Podile et al., 2024). Such environments deplete employees' psychological resources, often resulting

in emotional exhaustion that undermines their willingness to engage in socially liked attitudes and behaviours, including knowledge sharing (Sabrina, Sulasmri, & Akrim, 2022). Moreover, the fear of negative evaluation creates anxiety stemming from potential judgment by others can exacerbate the effects of exploitative supervision, encouraging employees to keep information to themselves as a means of psychological self-defense.

Leadership is instrumental in directing employee actions and enhancing organizational outcomes (Wiguna, Murwaningsari, and Sudibyo, 2023). While much of the existing literature has focused on the detrimental effects of leadership in private sector organizations, this study aims to expand the scope by investigating the broader consequences of destructive leadership styles within Pakistan's federal government organizations. In particular, the Establishment Division (ED), responsible for diverse and dynamic functions such as policy formulation, recruitment, employee retention, training and development, and performance evaluation, demands stable and competent leadership (Amin and Ali, 2022). However, this division faces a multitude of systemic challenges, including resource constraints, bureaucratic inefficiencies, behavioural impediments, and increasing performance pressures fueled by globalization and digital transformation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). These conditions are further aggravated by chronic human resource issues, such as skill shortages, limited training opportunities, demotivation, and low employee morale. The study of Amin and Ali (2022) argues that despotic leadership within such settings can severely hinder employee performance and diminish job engagement. As a result, the "dark side" of leadership emerges as a substantial hindrance to the progress and effectiveness of federal government organizations (FGOs) in Pakistan.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Exploitative Leadership (EL)

In recent decades, EL has appeared as a significant style of the dark side of leadership, capturing the interest of researchers in organizational behaviour (Guo, Luo & Cheng, 2024). This type of leadership is comparatively novel and requires further exploration to address areas that have not yet been studied. It is often used interchangeably with several other emerging concepts, such as abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), destructive leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013), petty tyranny (Ashforth, 1994), and despotic leadership (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). This study focuses on exploitative leadership (EL), which has features of destructive leadership. The rationale behind opting for EL among other leadership styles is the characteristics encompassed by the sample. EL is "*leadership with the primary intention to further the leader's self-interest by exploiting others, reflected in five dimensions: genuine egoistic behaviours, taking credit, exerting pressure, undermining development, and manipulating*" (Schmid et al., 2019b). Thoroughgood, Tate, Sawyer, and Jacobs (2012) argue that EL is a negative behavioural approach toward subordinates, and due to idiosyncratic characteristics, it is pretty unlike other forms of the dark side of leadership. EL gives priority to personal gains over organizational goals and behaves selfishly in the organization. EL works for self-interest and takes credit for the work performed by the subordinates (Krasikova, Green & LeBreton, 2013). Secondly, EL demeans subordinates in front of others and pressures them through manipulating behaviour and aggression. It often creates conflicts among peers to make them offended and take his benefits. Thirdly, EL makes

frank and friendly relationships with subordinates, recognizes their weak points, and entrusts extra assignments to overburden them (Amin, Khan, and Ali, 2024). Fourthly, EL creates a stressful environment by delegating mind-numbing work to restrict their career advancement (Schmid et al., 2019b).

A plethora of research has observed the EL's effects on a wide range of negative outcomes in the workplace. Previous studies explored the mediation frameworks to elaborate on the links between EL and outcome variables. Tepper et al., (2017) claimed that a few investigations have determined a direct mechanism that how EL affects work-deviant behaviour, commitment, burnout, and job satisfaction. The workplace stressors (ELs) diminish the performance of employees and their creativity. Previous research categorically examined the positive and negative effects of EL and how exploitative behaviour manipulates and translates into employee outcomes (Zhao, Bao, Jolly, 2024; Guo, Luo, & Cheng, 2023; Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005; Bedi, Alpaslan, & Green, 2016; Schmid et al., 2018; Thoroughgood et al., 2012). Schmid et al., (2018) explored the integral role of EL on the emotional reaction of employees and determined how it leads to turnover intention. According to Pircher, Belschak, and Bobbio (2024), EL may increase the stress levels of their subordinates and cause them to experience negative emotions, and they also suggest that further research is needed to better understand this mechanism and explore potential avenues for mitigating its effects.

2.2 Knowledge Hiding Behaviour (KHB)

Recent scholarly inquiries have explored the phenomenon of knowledge hiding among subordinates, focusing on the situational and personality factors that influence their intentions to withhold information. Unfair policies of the organization and reward systems, ostracism, time-bound assignments, and an unfavourable culture of knowledge-sharing provide opportunities for employees' knowledge-hiding behaviour at the workplace (Zhu, Xu, & Zhang, 2024; Lee, Lee, & Kim, 2023). Therefore, prior research has emphasized the need for further scholarly attention toward understanding knowledge-hiding behaviour and its underlying antecedents at the micro level (Peng et al., 2018; Felin et al., 2015; Xiao & Cooke, 2019; Felin et al., 2015; Peng et al., 2018).

Lunden et al., (2017) emphasized the perilous impact of leadership on the psychological and mental well-being of subordinates, particularly focusing on the often-overlooked impacts of dark-side leadership. In this context, research by Jahanzeb et al., (2019) and Ghani et al., (2020) have examined how abusive supervision can positively affect subordinates' tendencies to hide knowledge. Among various dark leadership styles, EL is a critical, emerging, and largely unexplored area, especially concerning KHB in the workplace. The current investigation attempts to address the unexplored and nuanced relationship between EL and KHB and to determine the genuine role of EL as an imperative antecedent. Hence, to uncover the interplay, a critical analysis is crucial to apprehend the phenomenon of KHB as "*it is a deliberate effort of employees to suppress or hide the essential information from the colleagues* (Perotti, Belas, Jabeen & Bresciani, 2023). Bowen (1982) claims that KHB works as a chronic disease and parasite that eats the very marrow of the organization. In the presence of EL, employees get stressed and attempt to hide the available information from their colleagues. Eissa et al., (2017) contended that EL does not directly affect employees' outcomes but flows through a systematic mechanism of mediation.

2.3 Employees' Emotional Exhaustion (EEE)

Maslach and Jackson (1981) explain employees' emotional exhaustion (EEE) as the insights or the intuition in which the emotional resources of an individual are consistently dwindled. Due to the consistent demand and chronic stress, employees' sense of being emotionally expended and considered EL as a source of threat or loss to the available resources. EL intentionally exerts pressure, undermining others for the sake of self-interest, taking credit for the subordinates' work, and remaining manipulative. Such a leader is egoistic and always intimidating others to put pressure and expand fear, which compels subordinates to adopt KHB. For this reason, according to the Stress Appraisal and Coping theory, at the initial stage, employees try to comply with the temperament of EL and willingly or unwillingly adhere to avoid any sort of misunderstanding or conflict (Amin and Khan, 2025). But due to the consistent manipulative and aggressive behaviour of EL, subordinates get emotionally drained and exhausted. Hence, Bashir, Fanchen, and Bari (2024) conclude that the magnitude and intensity of knowledge-hiding behaviour vary across individuals, largely influenced by the dispositional traits of subordinates.

2.4 Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE)

One of the dispositional traits is Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE). FNE is the *“apprehension about others’ evaluations, distress over their negative evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectations that others would evaluate oneself negatively”* (Watson & Friend, 1969).

Studies in this domain recommend that employees' threats to resources and the fear of negative evaluation vary and respond to a stressful environment differently (Kim, Lee, & Park, 2022; Garcia, Levinson, & Rodebaugh, 2023). Employees' varying degrees of FNE affect different levels of KHB within the organizational setting. This research made candid efforts to address the gap between EL and KHB in exploring the FNE (dispositional variable) as a moderator and EEE as a mediator to further explain the intricate relationship.

The current investigation offers numerous potential contributions to the growing body of research on KHB within the evolving domain of organizational behaviour. By addressing the detrimental impact of EL, it enriches both the knowledge management literature and the scholarship on the dark side of leadership. First, this research provides a timely and contextually relevant contribution by identifying KHB as a novel and critical outcome within public sector organizations, a setting often overlooked in existing literature. Second, it advances theoretical understanding by examining the interplay between EL and KHB, intervened by EEE, thereby offering empirical insights into the psychological mechanisms through which destructive leadership influences knowledge-related behaviours. Third, the study responds to recent scholarly calls to investigate the nuanced interplay between supervisory behaviour and subordinate knowledge dynamics by employing a theoretically grounded framework. Finally, this research critically evaluates the role of FNE, illuminating the conditions under which subordinates are most probably to be involved in KHB when operating under EL. Collectively, these findings deepen our understanding of how negative leadership behaviours undermine organizational knowledge processes

and employee well-being, particularly within high-stakes, resource-constrained public sector environments.

2.5 Theory and Hypotheses Development

The Cognitive theory of Stress, Appraisal, and Coping (SAC), introduced by Lazarus and Folkman in 1984, has been utilized in this study. The SAC theory is crucial for understanding how individuals respond and adapt to their environment to skillfully manage stressful situations (Lazarus, 1991). The SAC theory involves two stages, i.e., the primary appraisal stage and the secondary appraisal stage. During the primary appraisal, when an employee faces a stressful or threatening situation, they attempt to thoroughly evaluate the event as a threat, harm, or challenge. After a conspicuous evaluation of the events as harmful or threatening, the secondary appraisal process gets started, and the individual finds certain coping mechanisms and strategies to deal with the taxing situation. The SAC theory was applied to understand how the behaviour of EL rationally influences the KHB of subordinates at the workplace. The SAC theory further elaborates that human beings' emotional, cognitive, and psychological resources are depleted when faced with stressful situations (EL). This theory endorses and explains the negative illustration of the impact of EL on the work-related stress experienced by subordinates. The persistent stress caused by EL can intensify the emotional and mental strain on subordinates. Thus, the cognitive theory of SAC was utilized to discover how plausible strain and stress arise from the behaviour of EL that may negatively affect the KHB of subordinates working in the organization. The theory further elaborates on how probable psychological and physical resources are expended due to the strain and stress created by the EL and their negative upshots regarding workplace attitudes and behaviour. The SAC theory also argues that coping is a cognitive reaction where subordinates strive to manage stress at both external and internal levels. Moreover, the way individuals assess and cope with stress differs due to their inherent traits and personal characteristics. Therefore, this study, grounded in the SAC theory, aims to investigate the relationship between EL and KHB, with EEE acting as a mediator and FNE serving as a moderator.

2.6 Exploitative Leadership and Knowledge Hiding Behaviour

EL is a leader's style that is genuinely self-centered and concentrates on the quest for personal achievements, gains, and dominance, even at the cost of other individuals' interests (Amin, Khan, and Ali, 2024). KHB is an illegitimate behaviour of an individual when someone requests knowledge sharing; he intentionally attempts to withhold or conceal knowledge (Connelly et al., 2012). It is an extensive phenomenon in the workplace that not only has overwhelming repercussions on subordinates but also on the growth and reputation of the organization, like fading creativity, dying interpersonal relationships, and declining prosperity (Peng, 2013). Thus, numerous studies have devoted attention to further exploring the modus operandi and establishing a formation mechanism to identify interpersonal, dispositional, and situational antecedents (Olafsen, Deci, & Skerlavaj, 2023; Zhang, He, & Huang, 2023).

KHB is an ill-mannered and cautious behaviour of employees where they suppress or hide valuable information required for colleagues or organizations. Three dimensions of KHB have been observed in the previous literature, where each incorporates a unique strategy; playing dumb, evasive hiding, and rationalized hiding (Connelly et al., 2012). Playing dumb refers to a situation where an employee claims

to be oblivious about the information requested. On the other hand, evasive hiding transpires when an individual provides deliberately incorrect or deceitful information or intends to unconsciously respond or make fabricated guarantees for supporting information. Rationalized hiding occurs when an individual confesses that the requested information is rationally confidential or restrained by the supervisor and cannot be shared with anyone without taking prior permission (Men, Fong, Luo, Zhong, & Huo, 2023). Nevertheless, such strategies are being used in the organization to hold or hide information. However, this inquiry strives to analyze past research to reflect on aggregate KHB and investigate the already identified dispositional and situational aspects contributing to KHB. The constructs already undertaken in the past literature include workplace ostracism, psychological ownership, knowledge complexity, interpersonal distrust, time pressure, and knowledge-sharing climate (Peng, 2013; Huo et al., 2016; Zhao et al., 2016; Kerlavaj et al., 2018), which are connected with KHB. While individual and situational factors have been closely linked to KHB, there is a scarcity of literature focusing on how dark-side leadership styles influence KHB.

Keltner et al., (2003) contended that subordinates are prone to maltreatment and appraise punishment from the supervisor (stressor) due to the lacunas of the hierarchy of power between supervisor and subordinates working in the organization. Recent studies have identified EL as a significant interpersonal stressor within organizational settings (Amin, Khan, & Ali, 2024). Schmid et al., (2018) assert that EL is inherently egoistic, as it inappropriately deals with the contributions of subordinates, attributing their efforts to his own without due recognition. Subordinates perceive and evaluate such unethical and unjustifiable behaviour as a significant threat to their well-being, prompting them to engage in KHB as a means of regaining control. Continuous exposure to EL leads subordinates to recognize manipulative actions as a potential source of psychological stress. In response, subordinates adopt evasive knowledge behaviour as a coping mechanism to protect their self-respect and self-esteem. When people sense a threat to their self-esteem, they tend to adopt escape-avoidance tactics to lessen the negative impact of EL (Lazarus, 1991).

Grounded in the principles of the Cognitive Theory of Stress, Appraisal, and Coping (SAC) (Lazarus, 1991), the present study posits that subordinates, when confronted with the insulting, egoistic, and manipulative behaviour of EL, engage in an appraisal process that leads them to perceive such behaviour as credit-seeking and exploitative, prompting avoidance strategies. Leaders exhibiting these traits are often characterized by underperformance, self-serving tendencies, and a lack of innovative ideas or methods aimed at fostering the growth and development of their subordinates. Moreover, EL frequently imposes excessive workloads and assigns tasks with unrealistic deadlines, creating situations that enable them to demean and exert control over subordinates (Sun, Wu, Ye, and Kwan, 2023). Consequently, subordinates perceive such leadership as a significant impediment to human capital development and overall organizational progress, leading them to engage in information withholding as a protective mechanism.

EL prioritizes personal goals over the needs of subordinates and takes credit for their performance, which demotivates subordinates to the point where they put no extra effort to generate value-driven ideas, leading to diminished creativity. Consequently, EL demonstrates reluctance in fostering the cognitive development of subordinates and actively hinders their career progression by delegating trivial

and irrelevant tasks. This suppressive environment negatively impacts subordinates' confidence and competence, ultimately impairing their performance and prompting them to withhold knowledge as a protective measure. Such a leadership approach is not only detrimental to individual growth and professional development but also undermines organizational reputation, competitiveness, innovation, and overall success.

This study explores that EL puts unwarranted pressure on the subordinates and suppresses them by adopting a controlling and dominating behaviour and giving challenging timelines. Subordinates appraise such behaviour of EL as disastrous for their well-being and retreat self-defensive strategy in terms of KHB. The current study further argues that EL spoils the career growth of subordinates by providing trivial assignments to create avenues for restricting their growth, which subordinates consider it as a personal attack and get stirred to adopt KHB as a self-protective mechanism. EL often uses tactics like becoming blatantly friendly or showing sympathy to the subordinates for the purpose of gaining some personal interests. Subordinates take this attitude as self-centered for well-being and prepare a coping strategy to conceal knowledge, which curtails the human and organizational growth at the workplace.

By applying the SAC, the current inquiry explains the phenomenon and advocates EL as a significant interpersonal factor that compels subordinates to hide knowledge at the workplace. It also recommends that KHB is a key for the self-defense approach and protective mechanism to cope with the EL.

Thus, based on SAC theory, the authors conjectured that EL being stressful for employees is appraised as a stressor, individuals assess it as a critical source of KHB. When employees are exploited by their leaders in the form of acting egoistically, overburdening, manipulating, and restricting their growth and development, they are likely to avoid communication with the supervisor. Therefore, EL emerges as a potential cause to subordinate KHB. Based on the above literature, the authors hypothesized:

Hypothesis: 01 EL positively affects KHB.

2.7 Exploitative Leadership and Employees' Emotional Exhaustion

EEE refers to a psychological condition marked by a depletion of emotional energy and a sense of extreme fatigue or burnout. It is an element of burnout, a syndrome that includes emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (a sense of cynicism or disconnection from work or others, and a diminished sense of personal achievement (feeling less effective in one's job). It is often experienced in the context of work-related stress or prolonged periods of high demand and low control (Nakao, 2010). According to Cordes and Dougherty (1993) and Maslach and Jackson (1981), "*emotional exhaustion is the perception that one's emotional resources have been completely expended*". Maslach's Burnout Theory developed a widely recognized model of burnout that includes emotional exhaustion as one of its core components. Maslach clarifies that EEE is the feeling of being emotionally drained and depleted due to chronic stress and excessive demands.

EEE is a state of chronic emotional depletion and fatigue that results from prolonged exposure to high levels of stress, particularly in the workplace. Amin and Khan (2024) document that EL often create an environment of constant stress and fear through their controlling and insulting behaviour. Employees may feel hesitant to express their thoughts, opinions, or concerns for fear of retribution. EL may engage in micromanagement and limit employees' autonomy, leaving them feeling disempowered and stripped

of control over their work. Feeling powerless and emotionally drained can result from a lack of control over one's situation. ELs may exhibit unpredictable and inconsistent behaviour, making it difficult for employees to anticipate their responses or reactions. This uncertainty can create a sense of instability and anxiety. Employees under EL may experience frequent devaluation, criticism, or belittlement. Constant negative feedback and lack of recognition can erode self-esteem. EL may disregard personal boundaries, expecting employees to be constantly available and responsive, even outside of regular working hours. This intrusion into personal time and space can lead to EEE, and leads to the emotional toll of EL can spill over into employees' personal lives, affecting their overall well-being, relationships, and mental health. This can further exacerbate EEE and struggling to cope with the cumulative stress. The demanding and oppressive nature of EL can make it challenging for employees to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Over time, this imbalance can contribute to EEE as they feel overwhelmed by the constant pressure.

Lazarus' SAC theory, employees managed by EL will evaluate the situation as either a threat or a challenge and will attempt to navigate the stressful circumstances. The ongoing stress caused by EL leads employees to struggle with emotional regulation, perceiving EL as a threat due to the exhaustion of their emotional and cognitive resources. Therefore, from the aforementioned discussions, it is proposed that:

H2: Exploitative Leadership positively affects Employees' Emotional Exhaustion.

2.8 Employees' Emotional Exhaustion and Knowledge Hiding Behaviour

Peng (2013) argues that psychologically stressed employees are more prone to knowledge concealment and use it as a safeguard. The stressed employees have already expended their energies to regulate their mental and emotional state. They are unable to transfer information or retrieve and explain it. Such employees are detached from the assigned work and are accompanied by cynicism, and are reluctant to establish an interactive mechanism at the workplace. Serenko and Yoo (2021) claimed that EEE and KHB a psychological phenomenon where employees consider knowledge as a territoriality and psychological ownership and rhetoric 'this is my knowledge'. This frame of mind further leads to cognitive dissonance, weakens social relationship, and hides knowledge. Connelly, Cerne, Dysvik, and Skerlavaj (2019) investigated that EEE is an individual-level antecedent, whereas KHB is not just a strategic action or reaction but a coping mechanism to relieve the stress, emotional draining, and overwhelming situation.

The SAC theory emphasizes the stressed situation and employees' perception to tactfully handle it or take it as a threat. In most cases, employees get exhausted being continuously facing a detrimental situation. Then develop a coping mechanism to allay the painful situation by adopting socially and culturally unacceptable behaviour.

Hypothesis 03: Employees' Emotional Exhaustion positively affects Knowledge Hiding Behaviour

2.9 Mediating Role of Employees' Emotional Exhaustion

Slemp, Zhao, Hou, and Vallerand (2021) argue that supportive leadership helps employees' well-being and performance, and negative leadership goes to the flip side of the coin. Zhang and He (2023) explored that destructive leadership is a potential hindrance stressor that curtails the organization's goal attainment and the personal growth of employees. EEE can also appear due to the excessive job

demand and negative supervision, which ultimately result in employees' negative outcomes. Zhang and Bednall (2024) opined that not only negative leadership causes EEE, but sometimes the drained emotions of employees that trigger the leader and turn double on the tactics of EL and harshly compel them to comply with which makes a re-enforce spiral. Lee, Kim, and Park (2023) found that resilience, optimism, and efficacy serve as a buffer between EL and employee outcomes. It implies that hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and emotionally mature individuals are better equipped to rationalize untoward circumstances without being drained and share meaningful information.

Hypothesis 04: EEE Mediates the Relationship between EL and KHB.

2.10 Fear of Negative Evaluation as a Moderator

FNE refers to an individual's apprehension that his performance report, which is crucial for career advancement and professional development, may be subject to a hostile or overly critical assessment by his supervisor (Thomas & Jones, 2023). This inquiry applies the Cognitive Theory of Stress Appraisal and Coping (Lazarus, 1991) to point out the varying behaviour of individuals concerning FNE in relation to the EL. Individuals with high FNE try to evade unfavourable situations, which helps them to be negatively assessed (Thomas & Jones, 2023). Those who are working under the supervision of EL are probably more prone to strain, stress, and are expected to be negatively evaluated. The past investigations claimed that individuals with high FNE often devotedly outperform even trivial tasks that are assigned, especially when the performance is appreciated by the upper echelon officers (Smith & Johnson, 2024; Williams, Chambliss, & Stein, 2023). Conversely, individuals with low FNE exhibit greater resilience to stress, reduced sensitivity, and a diminished concern for adverse evaluations. Such leaders tend to be demanding and manipulative, leading subordinates to disengage from making a positive impression and instead adopt KHB as a coping mechanism (Shillamkwese, Tarba, & Yao, 2024). EL often hinders the career progression of subordinates by fostering a work environment characterized by self-centered and authoritative behaviour. When subordinates become aware of such an egoistic and offensive leadership approach, they tend to detach emotionally from the assigned tasks. Consequently, they exhibit reluctance to share knowledge with colleagues at any hierarchical level, whether horizontally or vertically, thereby negatively impacting organizational learning and collaboration. In comparison, those who are low in FNE are not interested in creating value or making a positive reputation, or being liked or disliked. They are fearless and plucky to compromise for the sake of favourable reports and conceal sharing knowledge. Thus, this inquiry attempts to explain the moderating role of FNE, which is applied to weaken the interplay between EL and KHB at the workplace. There is a possibility that FNE might conditionally influence the strength of the indirect link between EL and KHB through the mediator EEE. Consequently, a moderated mediation of the research model can be proposed as:

Hypothesis 05 (a): FNE moderate the positive relationship between EL and KHB via EEE such that this relationship is stronger for individuals having low FNE.

Hypothesis (b): FNE moderates the positive relationship between EL and KHB via EEE such that this relationship is weaker for individuals having high FNE.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

The study applied a survey method, a design of time lag, and was conducted in a non-contrived setting, single source (self-reporting) for the collection of data. The surveys were handed out to employees of the Establishment Division, Cabinet Secretariat, who were taken as a sample for the study. The population for this research is the entire Ministries/Divisions of the federal government Secretariat. Appropriate assessment of the participants regarding their immediate supervisors was needed to prudently measure the EL behaviour displayed at the workplace. The variables under study, i.e., EL, FNE, EEE, and KHB, are considered subjective in nature and are measured on opinion, personal assessment, experience, biases, perspectives, feelings, attitudes, and perceptions. Thus, a self-report assessment should look reasonable. The survey was conducted in three phases, each separated by intervals of 6 to 7 weeks, labeled as T1, T2, and T3. During the first phase, T1, data on the independent variable (EL) and the moderating variable (FNE) were collected from participants. In the second phase, T2, information regarding the dependent variable (KHB) was obtained. Finally, in the third phase, T3, data for the mediating variable (EEE) were gathered from the same group of participants.

3.2 Questionnaire Development

At time T1, 480 questionnaires were handed over to participants, and only 423 completed responses were collected, providing details on demographics such as gender, marital status, CNIC, qualifications, and service duration. At time T2, a total number of 423 questionnaires were distributed who had responded of which 369 were returned (marked by name, or ID), working in the Establishment Division, and duly received 369 responses. Likewise, at time T3, a total of 369 questionnaires were distributed to those who had already participated in the T2 session and received 313 filled-in responses. For this research, the participant's net response rate was 65%.

3.3 Variables Measurement

Data was gathered from the participants by utilizing a measurement of five-point Likert scale, i.e., 5 (Strongly Agree), whereas 1 (Strongly Disagree). Appropriate measures were employed to evaluate the constructs utilized in the study. The items within these constructs were slightly adjusted to ensure they were more reflective, meaningful, and aligned with the norms, values, and cultural context of the population being examined.

Exploitative Leadership (EL)

At time T1, a 15-item scale introduced by Schmid et al. (2019a) was applied to assess EL. The scale's items included: *"Takes it for granted that my work can be used for his or her personal benefit"* and *"Puts me under pressure to reach his or her goals."* The value of reliability (internal consistency) of items of the instrument, i.e., Cronbach's Alpha, was observed to be 0.88.

Knowledge Hiding Behaviour (KHB)

At time T2, a 12-item scale created by Connelly et al. (2012) was utilized to measure KHB. One of the items in the construct was: *"I pretended I did not know what he/ she was talking about."* The value of

reliability (internal consistency) of items of the instrument, i.e., Cronbach's Alpha, was observed to be 0.93.

Employees' Emotional Exhaustion (EEE)

At time T3, an 8-item scale formed by Maslach and Jackson (1981) was used to assess EEE. The items of the construct consist of statements like "*I feel emotionally drained from my work,*" among others. The value of reliability (internal consistency) of items of the instrument, i.e., Cronbach's Alpha, was observed to be 0.93.

Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE)

At time T1, an 8-item scale created by Carleton et al. (2007) was used to assess FNE. One of the items in the construct was: "I worry about what people will think of me even when I know it doesn't make any difference." The value of reliability (internal consistency) of items of the instrument, i.e., Cronbach's Alpha, was observed to be 0.79.

4. FINDINGS

The data were analyzed for the current study using SPSS and AMOS v. 24 software. To authenticate the data results, the data normality test, and for the convergent and discriminant validities, the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed. To examine the overall patterns of the study constructs and the interconnections among the variables, structural equation modeling (SEM) was utilized for hypothesis testing in AMOS software. This approach was further validated using the PROCESS technique (Hayes, 2017) in SPSS with bootstrapping.

4.1 Reliability and Validity

The reliability and validity of the construct items were carefully checked. The reliability of the study measurement scales was determined by using the values of Cronbach's alpha (internal consistency), which is greater than 0.70. The composite reliabilities for all items within the construct were determined, ranging from 0.74 to 0.93, which exceeds the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Liu & Wang, 2016). Additionally, the factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE) surpassed the standard values of 0.70 and 0.50, respectively.

Table 1: Analysis of Validity and Reliability of Construct Items

Construct	Items	Item Loading	CR	AVE	Alpha
EL	EL1	0.742***	0.742	0.579	0.88
	EL2	0.763***			
	EL3	0.749***			
	EL4	0.789***			
	EEE1	0.794***			
EEE	EEE2	0.765***	0.825	0.543	0.93
	EEE3	0.781***			
	EEE4	0.793***			
	EEE5	0.772***			

	EEE6	0.798***			
	FNE1	0.701***			
	FNE 2	0.723***			
	FNE 3	0.781***			
FNE	FNE 4	0.744***			
	FNE 5	0.726***	0.896	0.548	0.79
	FNE 6	0.762***			
	FNE 7	0.783***			
	KHB1	0.759***			
KHB	KHB 2	0.783***			
	KHB 3	0.782***	0.932	0.597	0.93
	KHB 4	0.769***			
	KHB 5	0.787***			

4.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

The Pearson correlation analysis was performed to ascertain the correlation coefficient. The findings indicated a significant and positive correlation between EL and employees' outcomes, KHB. Similarly, EEE showed a significant and positive correlation with employees' outcome KHB. In contrast, the correlation between FNE and KHB was significantly negative. The diagonal values represent the square root of AVE values. However, the correlation values among the variables are lower than the diagonal values, the instrument's discriminant validity is confirmed according to Formell & Larker (2014) criteria.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Sr.#	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1	EL	2.942	0.87	(0.785)			
2	EEE	2.597	0.82	0.456**	(0.762)		
3	FNE	2.498	0.75	-0.472**	-0.512**	(0.752)	
4	KHB	2.321	0.69	-0.513**	-0.583**	0.468**	(0.768)

Note **p<0.001(two tailed); SD= standard deviation

4.3 Model Fitness and Hypotheses Testing

AMOS's Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) technique was employed in the study's direct, mediation, moderation, and mediated hypotheses, aiming to enhance comprehension of the primary causal mechanisms being examined. The goodness of fit statistics, as recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999), evaluate how accurately the structural models show the data and the hypothesized relationships among the study variables. As shown in Table 3, the χ^2/DF value is 1.1875, which is below 3. Likewise, the other fit indicators' values, such as RMSEA, CFI, NFI, GFI, and TLI, fall in the acceptable limits. Consequently, the values of results emerged from confirmatory factor analysis for the full measurement model authenticated and validated the empirical model of variables under study which demonstrating strong robustness.

Table 3: Model fit Indices for full Structure Model

Measure	Estimate	Threshold	Interpretation
X ²	2437.653.652	--	--
DF	2099	--	--
X ² /DF	1.1875	Between 1 and 3	Excellent
CFI	0.942	>0.93	Excellent
SRMR	0.047	<0.08	Excellent
RMSEA	0.054	<0.07	Excellent
PClose	0.659	>0.05	Excellent
NFI	0.898	>0.90	Acceptable
TLI	0.986	>0.95	Excellent

4.4 The Direct Effects of EL on Employees' outcome and EEE

The SEM model was employed to examine the direct impact of EL on the outcome variable KHB. As the findings depicted in Table 4, EL significantly and positively affects KHB, with the standardized regression coefficient for KHB being ($\beta = 0.532$, $p < 0.001$). Likewise, H2 suggests a direct effect of EL on EEE. The analysis indicates that EL has a significant and positive influence on EEE, with a coefficient of ($\beta = 0.487$, $p < 0.001$). Consequently, both H1 and H2 are supported.

Table 4: Direct Effects of EL on KHB and EEE

Predictor	Construct	β	S.E.	P-Value	R ²	Hypothesis
EL	KHB	0.562***	0.048	***	0.364	H1 Accepted
EL	EEE	0.487***	0.043	***	0.287	H2 Accepted

4.5 Direct Relationship of EEE with KHB

The relationship between EEE and KHB is postulated by H3 as shown in Table 5. It reflected that EEE has a positive and significant impact on KHB ($\beta = 0.472$, $p < 0.001$). The value of R² = 28% shows the accumulated variation in KHB is caused by EEE. Thus, the data strongly supported Hypothesis 3 of the study.

Table 5: Direct Effects of EEE on KHB

Predictor	Construct	β	S.E.	P-Value	R ²	Hypothesis
EEE	KHB	0.472***	0.034	***	0.283	H3 Accepted

4.6 The Mediation Effects of EEE between EL and KHB

The relationship of mediation between the independent variable EL and the dependent variable KHB through the mediator EEE is postulated as H3. The requisite coding for the conditional indirect effects is made in software, i.e., AMOS, through bootstrapping of 2000 at a 95% confidence interval to test the level of significance. The conditional indirect paths, i.e., (EL → EEE → KHB), are positive and significant ($\beta = 0.137$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, H4 is accepted.

Table 5: Indirect Conditional Effects of Mediation

Parameter	β	Lower	Upper	P	Hypothesis
EL → EEE → KHB	0.137	-0.026	-0.193	0.001	H4 Accepted

4.7 Moderated Mediation Effects

The measure of moderation in terms of interaction (EL x FNE) has a significant negative impact ($\beta = -0.078$, $p < 0.01$) on EEE. This negative effect of the interaction term indicates that when the FNE moderator is at a low level, there is a strong positive correlation between EL and EEE. However, as the FNE moderator increases, the relationship weakens between EL and EEE. The overall model has an R-squared value of 0.58.

Table 6: Moderated Mediation Analysis for FNE and EEE between EL and Employee Outcome

Predictor	Outcome	B	S.E.	P	R-Square
LV_EL	LV_EEE	0.172***	0.026	***	0.58 0.25
LV_FNE	LV_EEE	-0.637***	0.036	***	
EL x FNE	LV_EEE	-0.078***	0.038	0.014	
LV_EEE	LV_KHB	0.536***	0.049	***	

The conditional indirect effects for the moderation mediation analysis are carefully calculated in the second stage. The results are reported in Table 6. The conditional indirect path from interaction term (EL x FNE) through EEE to KHB was negative and significant ($\beta = -0.044$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, the moderation mediation was validated.

Table 7: Conditional Indirect Effects for Moderated Mediation

Parameter	β	Lower	Upper	P	Hypothesis
(ELxFNE)→EEE→KHB	-0.044	-0.07	-0.004	0.025	H5(a) and H(b) Accepted

5. DISCUSSION

The current investigation aimed to explore how EL impacts employees' tendency to KHB. Additionally, the study looked into how EEE mediates this relationship and how FNE moderates it. The statistical analysis showed strong model fit indices and confirmed the reliability and validity of the constructs. Utilizing the Lazarus theory of Stress, Appraisal, and Coping (SAC), the results reflected that employees experiencing EL felt emotionally exhausted, which in turn enhanced KHB. This suggests that when employees fail to timely utilize the cognitive and emotional resources to handle the stress caused by EL, their KHB at work escalates. Furthermore, the study addressed that EEE mediates the connection between EL and KHB. The study findings demonstrated that EL has a positive effect on KHB, which is mediated by EEE. Thus, the results clearly showed that EL amplifies EEE in the employees of the Establishment Division, Cabinet Secretariat, Islamabad. The hypotheses regarding mediation were supported by the results. This research also explored the linkage between EL, EEE, and KHB, considering FNE as a moderating factor. The study findings suggested that when FNE is low, the connection between EL and EEE is strong, leading to high KHB. In contrast, when FNE is high, the link between EL and EEE is weaker, encouraging employees to share knowledge. Thus, study hypotheses concerning moderator FNE were confirmed.

5.2 Theoretical Contribution

The current investigation attributes multi-fold contributions to the emerging field of EL by exploring its new behavioural dimensions through the lens of cognitive theory related to stress, appraisal, and coping. The present study is remarkable as it elucidates various aspects of EL and their hierarchical relationships. It potentially contributes to the literature of leadership in general and to the public sector organizations of Pakistan in particular. The public sector organizations in Pakistan adhere to a bureaucratic leadership style, which often leaves subordinates feeling depressed, miserable, and despondent. The egoistic, credit-taking, arrogant, and domineering nature of EL induces stress and fear among employees within the organizations. This research can assist policymakers in comprehending the truly important role of leaders in the Federal Government Organizations and in developing institutional long-term policies and strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of EL on employees' behaviours. To address the issue of employees concealing knowledge, organizations should implement training and development programs focused on emotional intelligence skills within the domain of leader-subordinate dynamics.

5.3 Managerial Contribution

Employees need to be adept at implementing emotional intelligence strategies to manage stress and conserve their cognitive and emotional resources. Secondly, based on the study's findings, leaders should adopt a positive leadership approach and cultivate a strong leader-member exchange (LMX) to prevent emotional exhaustion among employees, as a robust LMX encourages employees to be authentic and pragmatic. Thirdly, the Training Wing of the Establishment Division should organize training sessions for both leaders and subordinates to improve their management styles, emotion regulation skills, prosocial interactive skills, empathy, and defence mechanisms, enabling subordinates to openly share their ideas and frankly discuss the challenges being faced caused by supervisors without fear of negative evaluation of performance.

5.4 Implications, Limitations and Future Direction

This framework offers a unique lens for examining the intricate relationships among EL, FNE, EEE, and KHB. Research based on this logical model can elucidate the multifarious processes that drive subordinates' reactions to negative leadership behaviours and their impact on knowledge hiding. The insights derived from the present study can help to emphasize servant leadership, authentic leadership, and democratic leadership that encourage participative dialogue, support employee-centric policies, and motivate employees to adopt passion and creativity, even in challenging circumstances. This study has several limitations. First, the problem of Common Method Bias (CMB) may arise due to reliance on self-reported data in the study. The previous research categorically underscores the importance of addressing CMB (Javed et al., 2020; Akhtar et al., 2020a), indicating demand for data collection from other sources, such as supervisors and peers. Second, this examination has employed a time-lagged

research design, which is not fully longitudinal research. Future research should adopt a purely longitudinal approach for a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying phenomenon. Third, this investigation utilizes the theory of stress, appraisal, and coping to explore the role of EL in KHB through EEE and FNE. Employees perceive exploitative leadership as a potential harm, threat, or challenge to their cognitive and emotional resources, rendering it a scarce resource to achieve the demands of the job in the workplace. Resultantly, the employees under EL supervision deplete their cognitive and emotional resources to manage the stressor, which consequently leads to KHB. Therefore, future research should explore alternative theoretical frameworks to understand EL and its outcome. Fourthly, this research was conducted in an underdeveloped country, with data collected from employees of the Establishment Division in Pakistan. According to Hofstede's insights (1983), uncertainty avoidance and high power distance are key cultural aspects of the country. Thus, future studies could be undertaken in different social and cultural backgrounds to reveal the effects of EL. Fifthly, this research was embarked on in a public sector organization; thus, upcoming research could emphasize the joint venture of public sector as well as private sector organizations to completely comprehend the dynamics of EL on KHB.

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