

Mechanisms of the Influence of Job Stress Perception on Knowledge Hiding Behavior - A Study Based on Chinese Cultural Perspectives

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Abstract. With the advancement of science and technology and the evolution of society, employee stress has increasingly become a critical issue in the workplace. Drawing on the cognitive appraisal theory of stress and the conservation of resources theory, this study employs the SOR analytical framework to construct a relational model among job stress perception, uncertainty perception, and knowledge hiding. Data were collected through a questionnaire survey of 388 employees. Furthermore, digital transformation clarity and superior-subordinate guanxi were introduced as moderating variables to explore the mechanisms and boundary conditions underlying employees' knowledge hiding behaviors. The results indicate that: (1) Employees' uncertainty perception is positively influenced by job stress perception and, in turn, positively predicts knowledge hiding; (2) Job stress perception significantly and positively affects knowledge hiding, with uncertainty perception playing a significant mediating role in this relationship; (3) Both digital transformation clarity and superior-subordinate guanxi significantly and negatively moderate the direct effect of job stress perception on knowledge hiding, as well as the mediating effect of uncertainty perception. This study enriches the understanding of the antecedents and boundary conditions of knowledge hiding behaviors and offers practical implications for enhancing knowledge management practices, particularly within Chinese cultural contexts.

Keywords: Job stress perception, Knowledge hiding, Uncertainty perception, Digital transformation clarity; Superior-subordinate guanxi.

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of digital technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data, organizations are facing increasingly intense external competition, complex environments, and heightened uncertainty. According to the knowledge-based view, individual knowledge is a core productive factor in the knowledge economy era and plays a vital role in helping organizations gain sustainable competitive advantages in the market [1, 2]. Managers aim to enhance the efficient flow of information within organizations and fully leverage the economic value of knowledge resources by encouraging employees to actively share knowledge. However, knowledge is inherently differentiated and exclusive [3]. For knowledge holders, the sharing process incurs time costs and risks of knowledge depreciation [4], and coupled with fierce internal competition and job stress, employees who guided by the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory often become reluctant to convert their personal knowledge into organizational assets, leading to knowledge hiding behaviors. Such behaviors not only hinder knowledge flow but also provoke negative emotions (e.g., frustration, dissatisfaction, anger) among knowledge seekers [5]. This will undoubtedly strengthen the knowledge flow barriers, form a systematic impact on the enterprise knowledge management system, inhibit the creative thinking and innovative activities of employees, and then weaken the ability to transform the value of knowledge, resulting in a decline in organizational performance and bringing about the consequences of serious economic losses [6-8]. In this context, in-depth investigation of the antecedents of employees' knowledge hiding behavior has the important theoretical significance of improving the sharing of organizational resources and realizing the long-term synergistic development of employees and organizations.

Knowledge hiding as a counterproductive behavior [5], was introduced into the field of organizational behavior and anthropology in the 1960s [9]. In 2012, Connelly et al. defined its manifestation as the choice of an organizational member to conceal and retain knowledge for certain purposes in the face of a co-worker's request for help regarding knowledge. It contains three categories: evasive hiding, playing dumb and rationalized hiding. According to previous studies, the antecedents of knowledge hiding mainly focus on individual characteristics, knowledge attributes, interpersonal relationships, and external environment [1, 10, 11]. Among them, Venz et al. confirmed that the source of stress is one of the antecedents of knowledge hiding behavior, and at the same time, knowledge hiding can also reverse employee stress relief [12]; Zhu Yao et al. argued that employees facing obstructive time pressure tend to avoid loss and depletion of resources through knowledge hiding [13]. Research shows that the degree of employees' perception of self and work is an important factor in determining the transformation of talent capital in enterprises. Employees with skills and knowledge form cognitive evaluations of organizational identity and satisfaction by perceiving conditions such as job fit, job security, reward and punishment mechanisms, promotion space, and probability of organizational sustainability, and accordingly choose whether to exert self-efficacy in the team to improve organizational performance [14, 15]. However, the role of pressure in inducing knowledge-hiding behaviors and the internal and external regulatory mechanisms of the organization have been neglected in previous studies. In addition, compared with Western culture, Chinese culture has stronger values of collectivism and pragmatic rationality [16], and "family culture", as the core of traditional Chinese culture, runs through organizational management and cultural construction, highlighting "modesty and harmony", "unity and love", "harmony" and other important qualities [17], and studies have shown that these factors significantly affect knowledge sharing behavior [18]. Since the knowledge management of organizations in the Chinese cultural context is more informal and personal, the replication of knowledge hiding antecedents research findings from Western countries in the Chinese real-world environment has limitations [19], therefore, it is necessary to revisit and further develop empirical analysis based on the Chinese cultural context to provide substantive suggestions for domestic organizations to enhance the value of knowledge use. In this paper, we will explore the important influence of employees' job stress perception on knowledge hiding from the perspective of resource preservation theory, analyze the mediating role of uncertainty perception on the formation of knowledge hiding from the stress cognitive appraisal theory, and summarize the moderating roles of the factors of superior-subordinate guanxi (micro variable) and digital transformation clarity (macro variable) in the organizational context in the Chinese cultural context. We aim to enrich the research on knowledge hiding, provide suggestions and countermeasures for management practices, and improve the knowledge management capability of organizations and promote their long-term development.

2. Theoretical basis and research hypotheses

2.1. SOR theoretical framework

The SOR theoretical framework, originally proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), has been widely adopted in studies of behavioral science and environmental psychology to explore how external stimuli influence individual behavior through internal psychological mechanisms [20, 21]. The model comprises three components: Stimulus, referring to external environmental inputs; Organism, representing the individual's internal cognitive and emotional states; and Response, denoting the resulting behavioral outcomes. According to this framework, an external stimulus does not directly lead to a behavioral response. Instead, the stimulus first affects the individual's internal state (organism), which in turn determines the behavioral response. This mediating mechanism has been validated in numerous empirical studies. For example, Dongyang Wang et al. applied the SOR framework and found that colleagues' knowledge hiding behaviors exert bidirectional effects on employees' innovation awareness and behavior, demonstrating the model's explanatory power in

organizational settings [22]. Building on this theoretical foundation, the present study adopts the SOR framework to construct a mediated structural equation model, in which job stress perception serves as the stimulus, uncertainty perception as the organism, and knowledge hiding as the behavioral response. This approach enables a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying knowledge hiding in organizational contexts.

2.2. Job stress perception and knowledge hiding

Job stress is defined as the outcome of a dynamic interaction between the work environment and employees' personal characteristics [23, 24]. According to the cognitive appraisal theory of stress, individuals assess whether their personal resources match the demands of their job, and this cognitive evaluation activates emotional and behavioral mechanisms that influence subsequent coping strategies [25]. In specific workplace scenarios, when employees perceive that the knowledge, skills, or emotional requirements of a task significantly exceed their available resources, they may conclude that they are incapable of adequately performing the task. This mismatch leads to physiological, psychological, and behavioral adaptations, ultimately resulting in job stress [26, 27]. Importantly, this perceived imbalance triggers an internal appraisal of one's own stress-coping capacity [28]. Because perceptions of stress are inherently subjective, different individuals may evaluate the same stressor in diverse ways depending on the intensity and interpretation of their experience [29]. Consequently, job stress perception is not determined solely by objective job demands, but by how individuals interpret and internalize these demands.

Knowledge hiding is an independent and emerging concept in the field of management, referring to employees' deliberate and strategic decision to withhold or conceal knowledge during interpersonal interactions [30]. Such behaviors are often motivated by a desire to retain full control over valuable resources and to maintain the scarcity of idiosyncratic knowledge. Recent research has shown that job stress, as an emotional and cognitive state, can increase the likelihood of knowledge hiding in organizational settings. Drawing upon social exchange theory, Jin Yang argues that employees experiencing high-intensity job pressure are forced to expend considerable time and energy to manage negative emotions. This, in turn, reduces their trust in the organization and increases the occurrence of counterproductive behaviors, including knowledge hiding [31]. Similarly, Rongcheng Liang found that employees exposed to high levels of hindrance stressors are more prone to engage in knowledge hiding behaviors [32]. Stressors such as heavy workloads, time pressure, interpersonal conflict, and resource scarcity often lead to job stress perception. According to the Conservation of Resources theory, when employees perceive a mismatch between demands and available resources, they are likely to engage in protective behaviors to conserve their core resources. Knowledge, as a critical energy-based resource, plays a vital role in obtaining material, social, and psychological benefits [33]. Under such conditions, employees may respond to knowledge requests from colleagues by hiding knowledge as a compensatory strategy to offset the resource loss caused by job stress. Based on the SOR framework, this study conceptualizes job stress perception as the external stimulus and knowledge hiding as the response. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁: Job stress perception has a significant positive effect on knowledge hiding .

2.3. Mediating role of uncertainty perception

Within the SOR framework, the organism functions as both a consequence of the stimulus and a precursor to the response. It also serves a crucial mediating role, transmitting the effects of external stimuli to observable behavioral outcomes. In this study, we conceptualize uncertainty perception as the organismic component, which links job stress perception to knowledge hiding. Drawing on Colquitt et al. [34], uncertainty perception is defined as a negative psychological state in which employees feel unable to predict future developments due to a lack of necessary information or clarity

in their environment. When individuals are situated in volatile or ambiguous work settings, the inability to obtain reliable cues about their situation induces emotional discomfort and insecurity.

According to the cognitive appraisal theory of stress, uncertainty functions as a psychosocial stressor that threatens an employee's sense of control and well-being. This perception of threat prompts individuals to adopt defensive behaviors such as resource hiding, self-withdrawal, and reduced knowledge sharing [35]. Empirical evidence supports this process. Huanwei Wu et al. found that employees exposed to turbulent environments exhibit heightened uncertainty perception and are more likely to engage in resource-avoidant coping strategies [36]. Peng Wang et al. argued that when individuals expected to provide knowledge face high levels of environmental uncertainty, they compensate by intensifying information acquisition efforts. This process increases their psychological ownership and territoriality regarding knowledge, which ultimately fosters knowledge hiding behaviors [37]. Furthermore, cultural factors also influence how uncertainty is processed. In societies characterized by high uncertainty avoidance, such as China, traditional proverbs like learning from the cart ahead and steady and cautious progress reflect a collective preference for predictability, stability, and risk aversion [38, 39]. Individuals in such cultural settings are more likely to perceive uncertainty as threatening and react conservatively, which amplifies the likelihood of knowledge withholding. Based on the above theoretical and empirical rationale, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H₂: Job stress perception has a significant positive effect on uncertainty perception.

H₃: Uncertainty perception has a significant positive effect on knowledge hiding.

2.4. The moderating role of digital transformation clarity

Digital transformation refers to the process through which organizations systematically restructure their business models and cultivate adaptive organizational cultures by integrating technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and automation. This transformation aims to enhance operational efficiency, competitive advantage, and overall organizational effectiveness [40]. Digital transformation clarity (DTC) captures the extent to which employees have a clear and accurate understanding of the content, strategy, and objectives of digital transformation initiatives, as well as their own roles and responsibilities within these changes [41]. According to social cognitive theory, individual cognition is shaped by contextual factors and in turn influences attitudes and behavior [42]. Digital transformation clarity can therefore be seen as a contextual cognitive factor that moderates the relationship between stress and cognitive responses. As such, it plays a pivotal role in shaping behavioral outcomes such as knowledge hiding [43]. In the workplace, employees with high levels of digital transformation clarity are more likely to recognize the value and rationale of digital initiatives. They tend to perceive digital transformation as a means to optimize workflows, enhance performance, and improve organizational outcomes. Consequently, their perception of job-related stress is likely to be reduced, which in turn lowers the likelihood of engaging in knowledge hiding behavior. Conversely, employees with low digital transformation clarity may experience greater ambiguity and anxiety about the risks and challenges associated with digital initiatives. This cognitive ambiguity can amplify their stress perception and increase the likelihood of withholding knowledge in response to uncertainty. Based on the above reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₄: Digital transformation clarity negatively moderates the relationship between job stress perception and knowledge hiding.

2.5. The moderating role of superior-subordinate guanxi

Superior-subordinate guanxi (SSG), rooted in Confucian relational culture, refers to the informal and personal relationships that extend beyond formal job duties, often involving reciprocity, trust, and emotional exchange between supervisors and subordinates [44]. Unlike transactional workplace interactions, superior-subordinate guanxi emphasizes goal alignment and mutual benefit, emerging from non-work activities and social interactions [45]. It is reflected in personal favors, social visits,

emotional intimacy, and implicit understanding of hierarchical roles and responsibilities [46]. According to leader–member exchange (LMX) theory, due to resource limitations, leaders develop differentiated relationships with subordinates, creating “in-group” and “out-group” dynamics. These variations lead to differing levels of psychological and cognitive resources among employees, which in turn influence knowledge-sharing or knowledge-hiding behaviors [47]. Empirical studies have supported these mechanisms. Li Zhao et al. found that strong superior-subordinate guanxi can reduce employees’ job stress perception, ease internal competition, and promote emotional trust and knowledge sharing within teams [48]. Yongda Yu et al. found that when leaders favor certain subordinates through differential leadership, it creates a perception of biased resource allocation. This may prompt employees to reject peers’ knowledge requests and engage in knowledge hiding to maintain a sense of control and fairness [49]. In the Chinese cultural context, superior-subordinate guanxi incorporates both economic exchanges and emotional bonding, embodying traditional values such as loyalty, reciprocity, and hierarchical harmony. Cultural idioms like “a drop of kindness should be repaid with a spring of gratitude” emphasize relational ethics, which may influence knowledge-sharing intentions [50]. Based on the above theoretical and empirical findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: High-quality superior-subordinate guanxi negatively moderates the relationship between job stress perception and knowledge hiding.

2.6. Moderated mediation effects

Building on the SOR framework and the Conservation of Resources theory, this study further proposes that the moderating variables—digital transformation clarity and superior-subordinate guanxi — may also influence the indirect effect of job stress perception on knowledge hiding through uncertainty perception. When employees possess high levels of digital transformation clarity, their cognitive understanding of organizational changes may buffer the stress-inducing effects of uncertainty, thereby weakening the mediating pathway. Similarly, strong relational support through superior-subordinate guanxi may help mitigate emotional strain and reduce the likelihood that uncertainty will translate into defensive behaviors such as knowledge hiding. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H6: Digital transformation clarity negatively moderates the mediating effect of uncertainty perception on the relationship between job stress perception and knowledge hiding.

H7: Superior-subordinate guanxi negatively moderates the mediating effect of uncertainty perception on the relationship between job stress perception and knowledge hiding.

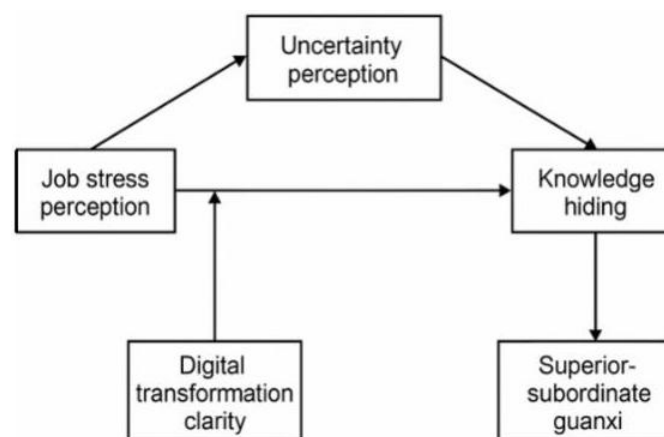


Figure 1. Theoretical model

3. Research design

3.1. Questionnaire design

Table 1. Results of validation factor analysis

Latent variable	Title number	Subject	Standardized factor loadings	P-value	Mean variance extracted values	Combinatorial reliability
Job stress perception	JSP1	My job is very stressful.	0.805	-	0.562	0.792
	JSP2	There are few things at work that are not stressful	0.654	0.000		
	JSP3	I feel a lot of pressure about my career.	0.781	0.000		
Uncertainty perception	UP1	In the turbulent and volatile workplace, there is a lot of instability in my job	0.749	-	0.682	0.866
	UP2	A lot of things seem to be unresolved at work at the moment	0.703	0.000		
	UP3	When thinking about work, I feel uncertain	0.772	0.000		
	UP4	I can't predict how things will turn out at work.	0.668	0.000		
Knowledge hiding	KH1	I don't want to translate individual knowledge and experience into collective knowledge	0.868	-	0.525	0.815
	KH2	I don't want to share the innovation	0.800	0.000		
	KH3	I don't want to share useful information with others	0.809	0.000		

Digital transformation clarity	DTC1	I am well aware of the overall strategy as well as the vision of the unit to carry out digital transformation	0.849	-	0.766	0.907
	DTC2	I have a clear understanding of the practical effects of carrying out digital transformation in my organization	0.922	0.000		
	DTC3	During digital transformation process, I am aware of the new requirements of the organization for my original job responsibilities	0.853	0.000		
Superior subordinate guanxi	SSG1	I care about and know my supervisor's family, work, etc.	0.838	-	0.676	0.913
	SSG2	I will take the initiative to talk to my supervisors and tell them my thoughts, problems, needs and feelings	0.798	0.000		
	SSG3	After work or on vacation, I would call my supervisors to exchange pleasantries or visit them at home.	0.860	0.000		
	SSG4	I will give gifts or visit in person on birthdays or special holidays.	0.827	0.000		
	SSG5	The higher-ups will invite me to dinner.	0.788	0.000		

This study employed quantitative analysis to collect a large amount of empirical data through a structured questionnaire. All measurement scales for the key constructs were adapted from well-established instruments published in leading academic journals both domestically and internationally, and have been previously validated within Chinese organizational contexts. To ensure semantic consistency and contextual relevance, all English items were subjected to the standard translation and back-translation procedure. The items were then revised according to the actual working conditions of employees to enhance the accuracy and applicability of the questionnaire. The questionnaire utilized a five-point Likert scale to measure respondents' agreement with each statement, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and the specific items used are detailed in Table 1.

Job stress perception was measured using a three-item scale developed by Motowidlo et al. and subsequently validated by Hongli Wang et al., with a representative item being "My job is very stressful" [51]. Uncertainty perception was assessed using a four-item scale developed by Colquitt et al. [34]. Knowledge hiding was measured using a three-item scale developed by Peng et al., which demonstrated strong internal consistency in prior studies (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$), and achieved a composite reliability of 0.815 in the current study [52]. digital transformation clarity was measured using the organizational change clarity scale developed by Fugate and Soenen [41], which was adapted following the methodology of Yuntao Dong by replacing the term organizational change with digital transformation of the unit to enhance comprehension among respondents [53]. The superior-subordinate guanxi scale was based on the six-item instrument developed by Law et al. [54], and was refined to five items after data analysis due to the removal of one item with a low factor loading.

3.2. Data collection

The questionnaire of this study consists of two parts: variable measurement and demographic information. The first part is a scale of five core concepts: job stress perception, knowledge hiding, uncertainty perception, digital transformation clarity, and superior-subordinate guanxi, with a total of 18 items; the second part includes seven items: gender, age, education, years of working experience in this organization, monthly income, job title, and type of occupation. The pre-survey was conducted from November 4 to November 16, 2024, during which the online questionnaire was distributed with the help of WeChat, Rednote, Weibo and other platforms, and 68 valid data from working employees were collected by snowball sampling method, and the reliability of the questionnaire was analyzed using SPSS26.0 software. The results showed that the reliability of the other four scales except for the superior-subordinate guanxi was good, and there was no need to delete the question items, and the scale of the superior-subordinate guanxi could be used for formal research by deleting one question item.

The formal research was conducted from November 20, 2024 to December 18, 2024, and the respondents involved in personnel administration, manufacturing, technology research and development, marketing and sales and other occupational types, a total of 464 questionnaires were collected at this stage, and after excluding the invalid questionnaires, there were 388 valid questionnaires, with an effective recovery rate of 83.6%. Men accounted for 51.8% and women accounted for 48.2% of the valid samples; in terms of age distribution, middle-aged people aged 41-50 years old accounted for the largest proportion of 31.7%, while young people aged 21-30 years old accounted for a smaller proportion of 14.2%; the overall educational level of the respondents was high, with 54.9% of the group with a bachelor's degree, 54.9% of the group with a Master's degree and above group accounted for 27.3%; employees in the unit generally longer working years, more than 10 years of the group accounted for 61.3%, 2-9 years of the group accounted for 33.8%; from the level of monthly income, the salary of 3,000-6,000 yuan of the group accounted for 30.7%, 6001-9,000 yuan accounted for 29.6% of the group, more than 9,000 yuan accounted for 35.1% of the group; respondents' positions, the largest proportion of ordinary employees, 58%, grassroots managers accounted for 14.2%, middle managers accounted for 24.55%, the smallest proportion of senior managers, accounting for 3.4%.

4. Results and analysis

4.1. Normality test and common method bias test

Maximum likelihood estimation was used to analyze the data. The samples were tested for normality through SPSS 26.0 software before analysis. The results showed that the absolute values of skewness coefficients of all observed variables were between 0.016-0.580, which met the criteria of less than 3; the absolute values of kurtosis coefficients were between 0.417-1.307, which met the criteria of less than 10, and the data passed the normality test. The Harman one-way test was used to determine whether the sample data had the problem of common bias, and factor analysis was performed on all the question items, using principal component analysis to extract the common factors and without rotation. The results showed that the first factor explained 30.885% of the variance, which did not exceed 40%, and was able to show that the effect of common method bias was not significant [55].

4.2. Reliability test

The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The alpha values for all latent variables exceeded 0.75, indicating satisfactory internal consistency and adequate reliability for empirical research. Based on the guidelines proposed by Kline et al. [56], a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to test the measurement model. The fit indices demonstrated a good model fit: $\chi^2=217.297$, $df=125$, $\chi^2/df=1.738$, $CFI=0.976$, $TLI=0.971$, $GFI=0.942$, $RMSEA=0.044$. All standardized factor loadings were greater than 0.60 (Table 1) and statistically significant at the 0.001 level, suggesting strong item-level reliability. The validity of the constructs was further examined through convergent and discriminant validity tests. The composite reliability (CR) values for the five latent constructs ranged from 0.792 to 0.913, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. The average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.525 to 0.766, surpassing the critical value of 0.50 [57], thus confirming good convergent validity. To assess discriminant validity, the square roots of the AVE values for each construct were compared to the inter-construct correlation coefficients. In all cases, the square root of the AVE for each construct exceeded the corresponding inter-construct correlations (Table 2), thereby providing evidence for adequate discriminant validity [58].

Table 2. Discriminant validity test

	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
Job stress perception	0.562	0.750				
Knowledge hiding	0.525	0.377	0.826			
Uncertainty perception	0.682	0.580	0.382	0.724		
Digital transformation clarity	0.766	0.073	-0.362	-0.014	0.875	
Superior subordinate guanxi	0.676	-0.120	-0.440	-0.116	0.224	0.822

Note: The diagonal is the arithmetic square root of the mean variance extracted.

4.3. Structural equation modeling analysis

The constructed structural equation models were tested for fitness using Amos 26.0 software. The data showed that $\chi^2=81.622$, $df=32$, $\chi^2/df=2.551$, $CFI=0.971$, $TLI=0.959$, $GFI=0.961$, $RMSEA=0.063$, and the actual values of all fit indices were within the recommended range with good fit.

Direct effect test: the maximum likelihood method was used to test the hypotheses of the model, and the results of the direct effect test are shown in Table 3. In the context of daily work, employees' job stress perception significantly and positively affects knowledge hiding ($\beta=0.234$, $p=0.000$) and uncertainty perception ($\beta=0.580$, $p=0.000$), and hypotheses H₁ and H₂ are valid; employees' uncertainty perception significantly and positively affects knowledge hiding ($\beta=0.247$, $p=0.000$), and hypotheses H₃ are valid.

Table 3. Direct effects test

Hypothesis	Path	Std. estimate	Std. dev	T- value	P- value	Conclusion
H ₁	Job stress perception → Knowledge hiding	0.265	0.064	4.133	0.000	Supported
H ₂	Job stress perception → Uncertainty perception	0.552	0.039	13.980	0.000	Supported
H ₃	Uncertainty perception → Knowledge hiding	0.293	0.067	4.363	0.000	Supported

Mediation effect test: Bootstrap method is used to test whether there is a mediation effect of uncertainty perception in the image of job stress perception on knowledge hiding, set up 5000 times of repetitive sampling, using the maximum likelihood estimation method, the mediation effect exists when the confidence interval of the bias correction is 95% and the upper and lower bounds don't include zero. As shown in Table 4, the mediation effect of the path "job stress perception → uncertainty perception → knowledge hiding" is significant ($\beta=0.162$), the confidence interval is (0.072, 0.211), and the mediation effect accounts for 37.965% of the total number of images, therefore, the hypothesis H₄ is established.

Table 4. Mediated effects test

Hypothesis	Path	Std. estimate	Std. dev	Bias-corrected 95% CI		P- value	Percentage of effect (%)	Conclusion
				Lower bound	Upper bound			
-	Direct effect Job stress perception →	0.265	0.064	0.139	0.390	0.000	62.035	-
H ₄	Uncertainty perception → Knowledge hiding	0.162	0.035	0.072	0.211	0.000	37.965	Supported
-	Aggregate effect	0.427	0.053	0.322	0.531	0.000	100	-

Moderating effect test: PROCESS3.3 was used to test the moderating effect of digital transformation clarity and superior-subordinate guanxi on the relationship between job stress perception and knowledge hiding, and the results are shown in Table 5. According to the data, it can be seen that the interaction term of job stress perception with digital transformation clarity is significant ($\beta=-0.148$) on knowledge hiding, with confidence interval (0.361, 0.549), and the Hypothesis H₅ holds; the interaction term of job stress perception with hierarchical relationships has a significant effect on knowledge hiding ($\beta=-0.128$) with a confidence interval of (0.281, 0.470), and hypothesis H₆ holds. In addition, this paper plotted the simple slope effects of digital transformation clarity and superior-subordinate guanxi on the relationship between job stress perception and knowledge hiding, as shown in Figures 2 and 3, the effect of job stress perception on knowledge hiding is weaker in the condition where employees have high digital transformation clarity, and stronger in the condition where employees have low digital transformation clarity; at the same time, the effect of job stress perception on knowledge hiding is stronger in the condition where employees have high-quality supervisor-subordinate guanxi is weaker in the condition where employees have low-quality supervisor-subordinate guanxi, and it is weaker in the condition where employees have low-quality supervisor-subordinate guanxi.

Table 5. The test of moderating effects

Dependent	Variable	Std. estimate	Std. dev	T-value	P-value	R ²	F-value
Knowledge hiding	Constant	-	0.043	56.201	0.000**	0.316	59.143
	Job stress perception	0.402	0.048	9.488	0.000**		
	Digital transformation clarity	-0.379	0.040	-8.928	0.000**		
	Job stress perception × digital transformation clarity	-0.148	0.043	-3.493	0.001**		
Knowledge hiding	Constant	-	0.043	55.387	0.000**	0.311	59.131
	Job stress perception	0.332	0.048	7.807	0.000**		
	Superior subordinate guanxi	-0.388	0.038	-9.076	0.000**		
	Job stress perception × superior subordinate guanxi	-0.128	0.040	-3.009	0.003**		

Table 6. Mediation effects test with moderation

Hypothesis	Path	Moderator	Indirect effect	Std. dev	Bootstrap's 95% CI		Conclusion
					Lower bound	Upper bound	
H ₇	Job stress perception →	High definition	0.134	0.075	-0.013	0.282	Supported
	Uncertainty perception →	Low definition	0.481	0.072	0.077	0.215	
	Knowledge hiding	Moderated mediation effects	0.146	0.035	0.339	0.622	

Table 7. Mediation effects test with moderation

Hypothesis	Path	Moderator	Indirect effect	Std. dev	Bootstrap's 95% CI		Conclusion
					Lower bound	Upper bound	
H ₈	Job stress perception →	High relation	0.132	0.070	-0.004	0.269	Supported
	Uncertainty perception →	Low relation	0.356	0.077	0.205	0.508	
	Knowledge hiding	Moderated mediation effects	0.132	0.037	0.061	0.206	

Test of mediating effects with moderation: This paper further tested the mediating moderating effects of digital transformation clarity and superior-subordinate guanxi (Tables 6 and 7), and the results showed that digital transformation clarity had a significant moderating effect ($\beta=0.146$) in the path of “job stress perception → uncertainty perception → knowledge hiding”, and the confidence interval (0.339, 0.622) hypothesis H₇ holds; superior-subordinate guanxi has a significant moderating effect in the path of “job stress perception → uncertainty perception → knowledge hiding”. The results show that the moderating effect of digital transformation clarity is significant in the path of “job stress perception → uncertainty perception → knowledge hiding” ($\beta=0.146$), with a confidence

interval of (0.339, 0.622) and the hypothesis of H₇ is established; and the moderating effect of superior-subordinate guanxi in the path of “job stress perception → uncertainty perception → knowledge hiding” is significant ($\beta=0.132$), with a confidence interval of (0.061, 0.206), and the hypothesis of H₈ is established.



Figure 2. Modulation effect (digital transformation clarity)

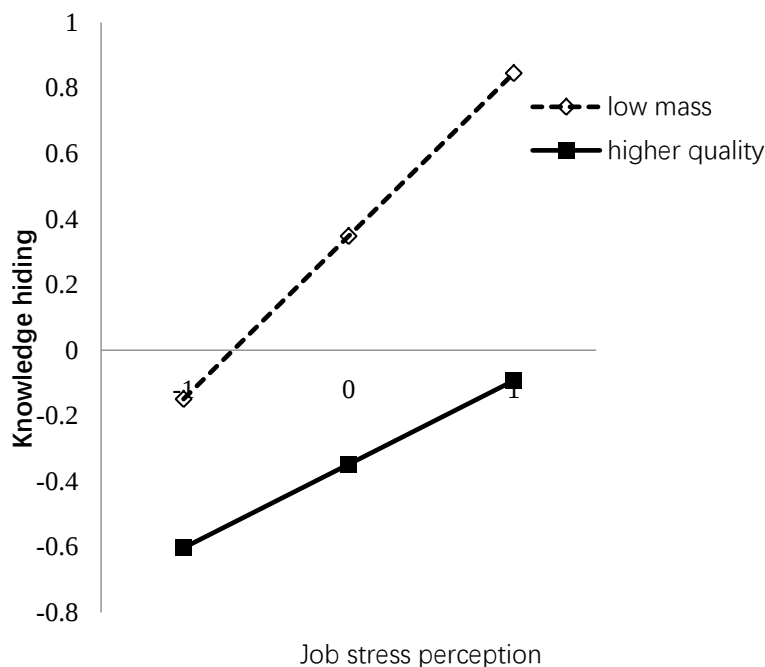


Figure 3. Moderating effects (supervisor-subordinate guanxi)

5. Conclusions and discussion of the study

5.1. Conclusions of the study

Grounded in the cognitive appraisal theory of stress, Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, this study constructed a moderated mediation model using the SOR analytical framework. The study explored the mechanisms through which job stress perception affects knowledge hiding within the Chinese cultural context, while localizing the mediating and moderating pathways. The main conclusions are as follows:

Firstly, job stress perception has a significant positive effect on knowledge hiding. When employees perceive high levels of stress at work, they are more likely to engage in knowledge-hiding behavior. Job stress, as a negative psychological experience, emerges from the misalignment between individual capabilities and environmental demands [59]. As perceived stress intensifies, employees experience faster depletion of psychological and personal resources. On one hand, the loss of autonomy leads to emotional fatigue, prompting employees to avoid sharing knowledge and instead preserve their intellectual assets as a psychological coping mechanism. On the other hand, in a competitive organizational environment, employees may adopt defensive postures toward discretionary behaviors, such as knowledge sharing, in order to reduce exposure to potential risks, thus increasing the likelihood of knowledge hiding.

Secondly, uncertainty perception mediates the relationship between job stress perception and knowledge hiding. The data confirm that higher levels of job stress increase uncertainty perception, which in turn promotes knowledge hiding. In Chinese culture, the tradition of “listening to one’s words and observing one’s actions” reflects a strong sensitivity to uncertain or ambiguous social cues [60]. Stress intensifies employees’ need to predict outcomes, and heightened uncertainty often leads to lower organizational trust. This fosters resource-withholding behavior aimed at reducing exposure to unpredictable risks. These findings align with Carver and Scheier’s work on self-regulatory behavior, which posits that individuals modulate the use of their competencies and cognitive resources to regulate responses to situational stimuli [61]. When the emotional burden of stress outweighs the perceived value of collegial contribution, employees are more likely to withhold knowledge resources.

Finally, digital transformation clarity serves as a negative moderator in both the direct and indirect pathways linking job stress perception to knowledge hiding. Employees with higher clarity regarding the direction and rationale of digital transformation are less likely to perceive stress as threatening, and less likely to experience uncertainty that leads to knowledge hiding. In contrast, when the purpose of digital transformation is unclear, employees may feel threatened by technological replacement or lack of control, leading to self-protective behaviors. In Chinese cultural settings, the prevalent mindset of preparing for a rainy day reflects a deep-rooted cognitive tendency to build psychological safeguards. As a result, employees with high cognitive vigilance may strategically accumulate and conceal knowledge to cope with potential future disruptions, thereby mitigating perceived stress through knowledge stockpiling.

Meanwhile, superior-subordinate guanxi plays a negative moderating role in the relationship between job stress perception and knowledge hiding. Specifically, when the quality of superior-subordinate guanxi is low, employees are more likely to interpret stress as threatening, thereby increasing the frequency of knowledge-hiding behaviors. Previous research has predominantly examined leadership styles—such as emotional, servant, exploitative, inclusive, and ethical leadership—as antecedents or moderators within workplace dynamics [48, 62–65]. However, many of these studies have overlooked the role of traditional interpersonal relationships rooted in Chinese cultural norms [66]. In Chinese society, the principle of casting a peach and returning a plum reflects a deep-rooted norm of reciprocity, in which social favor becomes a symbolic currency for the exchange and retention of valuable resources [67]. Under this system of affective obligation, relationship quality often determines whether employees engage in mutual knowledge sharing or

selective knowledge withholding. High-quality superior-subordinate guanxi can alleviate perceived workplace stress and mitigate the negative emotional consequences of adverse work experiences. This finding is consistent with that of Zongbo Li et al., who argue that superior-subordinate guanxi not only buffers the emotional exhaustion caused by hindrance-related stressors [68], but also weakens the negative effects of insecurity on employees' organizational citizenship behaviors [69]. In this sense, superior-subordinate guanxi operates as an informal emotional resource that enhances employees' perceived organizational support and fosters prosocial knowledge behaviors under stress.

5.2. Theoretical contributions

Grounded in the Chinese organizational context, this study constructs a conditional process model centered on uncertainty perception, drawing on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) analytical framework. Within this framework, job stress perception serves as the antecedent stimulus (“S”), uncertainty perception as the internal cognitive-emotional state (“O”), and knowledge hiding as the behavioral response (“R”). By incorporating cultural concepts such as collectivist harmony and uncertainty avoidance through stability, the study responds to calls for a deeper integration of traditional Chinese cultural values and context-specific management theory into the analysis of workplace behavior.

Firstly, this study identifies job stress perception as a key internal organizational factor influencing knowledge-hiding behavior. Drawing on stress appraisal theory and Conservation of Resources theory, it uncovers the underlying mechanisms through which perceived stress contributes to knowledge hiding, thereby enriching the literature on antecedents of knowledge-hiding behavior. In doing so, the study confirms Lingfeng Yi finding that job stress exerts a direct positive influence on knowledge hiding [5]. Although prior studies have explored antecedents from leadership, relational, or knowledge-based perspectives [70, 71], few have investigated employees' psychological perceptions. This study fills that gap by offering a resource-centric explanation: when individuals experience emotional depletion due to workplace stress, they tend to adopt resource-conserving behaviors, such as knowledge hiding, to prevent further cognitive or emotional exhaustion. This aligns with and extends the findings of Zhao. [72], offering a novel perspective on how individual-level cognitive strain contributes to organizational knowledge inefficiency.

Secondly, this study applies the SOR framework innovatively to the domain of knowledge management research, specifically in modeling employees' knowledge-hiding behaviors. The proposed model “organizational stimulus–cognitive organism–behavioral response” demonstrates the explanatory power of the SOR approach in dynamic organizational settings. The incorporation of uncertainty perception as a mediating mechanism reflects the nuanced socio-cultural context of Chinese organizations, where employees typically avoid risk, adhere to established procedures, and place strong reliance on formal documentation [73]. Uncertainty perception, as conceptualized here, captures the transitional mental state employees experience in response to environmental volatility and provides a culturally embedded lens through which their behavioral choices can be understood. This framework provides theoretical leverage by connecting macro-level organizational changes to micro-level cognitive and behavioral responses. It also equips scholars with a viable analytical tool to explore non-Western management phenomena and encourages further investigation into the cognitive pathways underlying counterproductive knowledge behaviors. Practically, the findings offer culturally informed insights for managers seeking to mitigate knowledge-hiding tendencies by improving clarity of transform communication and fostering relational trust within hierarchical structures.

Thirdly, in order to analyze how macro- and micro-level contextual factors shape the relationship between job stress perception and knowledge hiding, this study integrates two boundary conditions “digital transformation clarity and superior-subordinate guanxi” into a unified analytical framework. This dual-level approach extends the theoretical understanding of knowledge management systems by capturing both structural and relational contingencies that influence employee behavior. Specifically, digital transformation clarity represents a macro-level contextual variable,

reflecting the extent to which individuals comprehend the rationale, goals, and trajectory of organizational digital transformation. It plays a pivotal role in guiding employee adaptation and shaping behavioral responses to change [53]. In contrast, superior-subordinate guanxi is a relational construct embedded in Chinese organizational culture which captures micro-level interpersonal dynamics, emphasizing the role of differential, non-institutionalized exchanges in shaping individual responses to organizational stressors. The study finds that employees with low digital transformation clarity and low quality superior subordinate guanxi are more likely to exhibit heightened sensitivity to negative workplace stimuli and emotions. Under such conditions, the perceived risk of resource loss increases sharply, particularly when individuals feel that their status, control, or knowledge advantage is under threat. Driven by self-protective motives, these employees tend to adopt self-interest-oriented behavioral strategies in knowledge management. Specifically, they engage in knowledge-hiding behaviors as a means to restrict the flow and accessibility of critical knowledge resources, thereby reinforcing personal control and safeguarding perceived competitive advantage [74]. This behavioral pattern reflects and extends Feng Shi et al.'s findings regarding the moderating role of power distance in LMX contradiction and job insecurity, which collectively increase the propensity for knowledge hiding in hierarchically stratified organizations [75]. Accordingly, the moderated chain mediation model developed in this study provides empirical support for how event-context interactions influence individual resource evaluation and conservation strategies, thereby enriching the outcome system of Conservation of Resources theory.

5.3. Practical implications

Organizations should attach importance to the negative impacts of job stress perception and build a scientific stress management and psychological support system to improve the workplace environment. Through technical means such as digital questionnaires and biofeedback devices, regularly monitor employees' stress levels, focus on key positions and high-risk groups, and establish a normalized stress evaluation mechanism. Encourage supervisors to conduct regular dialogues with subordinates, establish colleague support groups, cultivate a team culture of mutual help, and create a supportive organizational atmosphere.

Organizational managers should adopt a two-pronged approach of institutional guarantee and cultural cultivation to create a healthy knowledge ecosystem for employees, encourage self-resolution or assistance in regulating negative emotions, and enhance employees' identification and sense of belonging to the organization. It is recommended to develop a "knowledge contribution points system" within the organization, quantify knowledge sharing behaviors, and link them with substantive rewards such as promotions and bonuses. At the same time, improve the knowledge management system, set up convenient document sharing platforms and expert yellow pages to reduce the cost of knowledge transfer. To eliminate employees' concerns about bearing the cost of sharing, define a safe range for failure and allow trial and error in the process of knowledge sharing.

Organizational members should fully communicate and coordinate cooperation, clarify development cognition in the context of digital transformation, and improve the collective core competitiveness. Senior managers are responsible for ensuring that strategic intentions, values, and overall plans can be accurately communicated; middle managers need to decompose strategies into department-level implementation paths and clarify key tasks at each stage; grass-roots supervisors focus on job impacts, adopt "one-to-one" communication methods to help employees understand the impact of digitization on their specific work and the direction of required skill improvement. Through layered and progressive change communication, reduce employees' stress and uncertainty perception, and enhance change recognition and psychological security.

5.4. Research shortcomings and future prospects

This study has certain limitations: In terms of data collection, data was obtained through questionnaires. When studying negative variables such as knowledge hiding, this method may lead

to employees providing information that deviates from actual behaviors or hides true thoughts in order to shape their subjective self-image. Therefore, future research is necessary to adopt multiple tools and methods for accurate comprehensive measurement of variables, and use other means for synchronous assistance. At the same time, this study analyzes cross-sectional data, lacking consideration of time span, and cannot derive the dynamic impact of variables such as job stress perception and uncertainty perception on knowledge hiding behavior. In the future, it can focus on a long-term perspective and explore the rigorous causal relationship between variables through longitudinal tracking methods. In terms of research content, the perception of job stress and knowledge hiding in this paper only stay at the individual perception level, but they are actually also at the organizational climate level. Future research can improve the model to explore the cross-level impact of knowledge hiding among teams. In addition, on the basis of this paper, the types of independent and dependent variables can be subdivided, the differentiated effects can be distinguished, the boundary scope and conditions can be defined, and the possible positive impacts can be considered, so that employees' knowledge can truly become a "booster" to promote the long-term progress and development of the organization.

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