

Mediating Effect of Organizational Virtuousness in Relationship between Ethical Leadership and Knowledge Hiding: Evidence from Higher Educational Institutions of Punjab, Pakistan

Muhammad Asadullah

PhD Scholar, Institute of Business Administration, Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, KP, Pakistan asadmpa@gmail.com

Dr. Khalid Rehman (Corresponding Author)

Assistant Professor, Institute of Business Administration, Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, KP, Pakistan khalidrehman@gu.edu.pk

Dr. Nafid Khan

Assistant Professor, Institute of Business Administration, Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, KP, Pakistan nafidkhan39@gmail.com

Dr. Rafiullah

Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, IBA, Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, KP, Pakistan rafiullahirfan.23@gmail.com

Dr. Shumaila Hashim

Associate Professor, Institute of Business Administration, Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, KP, Pakistan. shumailahashim@gu.edu.pk

Sadiq Ullah

PhD Scholar, Institute of Business Administration, Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, KP, Pakistan sadiq.icmap@gmail.com

Abstract

Purpose: This study aimed to examine the impact of ethical leadership on the knowledge-hiding behavior of university faculty members, considering the mediating role of organizational virtuousness.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Respondents for this study were randomly selected from 327 faculty members employed at universities in the Punjab province of Pakistan, established before the year 2015. Using a cross-sectional design, the principal author administered a questionnaire measuring ethical leadership, organizational virtuousness, and knowledge hiding.

Findings: The study revealed that ethical leadership and organizational virtuousness can predict knowledge hiding. Additionally, ethical leadership had a significant indirect effect and an insignificant direct effect on knowledge hiding in the presence of organizational virtuousness, thereby proving full mediation.

Research Limitations/Implications: While the findings are insightful, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations in the study. These limitations can guide future research in this domain, offering avenues for further exploration and refinement.

***Practical Implications:** The study's outcomes have practical implications for organizational leaders, suggesting that fostering ethical leadership and organizational virtuousness can mitigate knowledge-hiding behaviors among faculty members.*

***Originality/Value:** Contrary to common beliefs, this study supports the assumption that the effect of ethical leadership on knowledge hiding is mediated through organizational virtuousness. This novel insight contributes to the existing literature and underscores the importance of ethical leadership and virtuous organizational practices.*

***Key Words:** Ethical Leadership, Organizational Virtuousness, Knowledge Hiding*

I. Introduction

In the last two decades, they have witnessed the collapse of leading energy and information and communication technology corporations such as ENRON, Satyam, and WorldCom because of their executives' commercial crimes and unethical practices. As a result, work ethics and ethical leadership received substantial attention from organizational managers and researchers (Khoreva & Wechtler, 2020; Rokhman, 2010; Neubert, Carlson, Kacmar, Roberts, & Chonko, 2009). In response, organizations devised and implemented ethical guidelines in their HRD programs to cultivate ethical norms among their workforce (Khan, Abbas, Gul, & Raja, 2013) and shaped their positive behaviour (Mehnaz, Asadullah, Hussain, & Rehman, 2020). This endeavor mainly focused on creating leadership characterized by ethical behavior and moral integrity. Ethical leadership is the demonstration of behaviour that aligns with established norms, both in personal acts and interpersonal relationships. It involves the promotion of desirable conduct among followers via effective two-way communication, reinforcement strategies, and decision-making processes (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). Researchers and managers believe ethical leadership may foster trust, fairness, and positive work environments (Den Hartog, 2015; Treviño, Hartman, & Brown, 2000). It may also be instrumental in promoting positive work outcomes and curtailing negative behaviors. Ethical leadership may establish an enabling organizational culture characterized by forgiveness, integrity, trust, and compassion (Abdullah, Dechun, Ali, & Usman, 2019). In other words, it may establish a virtuous organizational

culture that may buffer negative behaviors detrimental to organizational growth and excellence. Studies suggest that leaders' integrity significantly affects the employees' behavior, which in turn helps reduce adverse behaviors such as knowledge hiding (Anwaar & Jingwei, 2022).

Institutes of higher education are grappling with the complex issue of knowledge-hiding behaviour (Ghani, Zhai, Spector, Chen, Lin, & Ding, 2020) (Zutshi et al., 2021; Ghani et al., 2020). Knowledge hiding (KH) refers to the intentional act of withholding and concealing information that is being sought by another individual (Connelly, Zweig, Webster, & Trougakos, 2012). It can harm organizational growth and excellence if employees hide valuable insights or expertise from colleagues, often discouraging them from sharing helpful information or knowledge (Anwaar & Jingwei, 2022). As mentioned earlier, designing strategies to minimize KH inclination remained among the critical challenges in knowledge management (Zutshi, Creed, Bhattacharya, Bavikc, Sohalb, & Bavik, 2021). Ethical leadership in such a situation may prove instrumental in curtailing knowledge hiding among general employees, especially in higher education institutions, as it may curtail counterproductive behaviors (Abdullah, Dechun, Ali, & Usman, 2019).

Despite the increasing volume of scholarly material pertaining to the phenomenon of knowledge-hiding and its relationship with leadership, it remains imperative to comprehensively grasp the impact of ethical leadership on knowledge-hiding behaviour. What are the processes that may be used to explain the direct or indirect impact of ethical leadership on workers' knowledge-hiding behaviour? Does ethical leadership directly translate work outcomes, or does it require any mediating mechanisms to curtail negative work outcomes such as knowledge hiding? (Zutshi, Creed, Bhattacharya, Bavikc, Sohalb, & Bavik, 2021; Abdullah, Dechun, Ali, & Usman, 2019; Babič, Černe, Connelly, Dysvik, & Škerlavaj, 2019; Connelly, Zweig, Webster, & Trougakos, 2012).

Although empirical evidence suggests that ethical leadership is instrumental in curtailing knowledge hiding in organizations, the role of organizational culture in this relationship lacks evidence. Eissa et al. (2017) assert that ethical leadership mediates through a mediator to curtail adverse work outcomes

instead of directly transforming the work outcomes. This research paper seeks to investigate the mediating role of organisational virtuousness in explaining the indirect effect of ethical leadership on knowledge hiding. By addressing the mechanisms that underlie this relationship, we aim to bridge the existing gap in the literature. The virtuous organizational culture may prove a mediator in this regard. Organizational virtuousness, which refers to virtuous values, ethical principles, and a culture of integrity within an organization (Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004), represents a crucial yet underexplored element in understanding the dynamics of ethical leadership and knowledge-hiding behaviors. Utilizing social exchange theory as the foundational framework, this study asserts that ethical leadership, which promotes moral values, ethical decision-making, and fairness, can potentially cultivate a culture of organizational virtuousness. It is postulated that this variable functions as a mediator, facilitating the influence of ethical leadership on the occurrence of knowledge-hiding behaviour among the employee population. In other words, ethical leaders are expected to decrease employees' propensity to be involved in knowledge hiding by promoting a virtuous organizational culture.

This study may contribute to having a broader understanding of the intricate dynamics that govern ethical leadership, organizational virtuousness, and knowledge-hiding behavior within higher educational institutions. This study provides valuable insights for academic scholars and practitioners striving to cultivate ethical leadership and facilitate knowledge sharing in their respective domains by establishing a theoretical foundation that explores the role of organizational virtuousness as a mediator. The ultimate goal is to shed light on how ethical leadership can be harnessed to foster virtuous organizational cultures that, in turn, restrict knowledge hiding and enhance organizational performance and effectiveness. It endeavors to fill a crucial research gap and contribute to contemporary organizations' evolving discourse on leadership and knowledge management.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Ethical Leadership and Knowledge Hiding

Opposite of knowledge sharing, knowledge hiding refers to a negative and immoral behavior involving

the deliberate concealment of knowledge from others (Abdullah, Dechun, Ali, & Usman, 2019; Babič, Černe, Connelly, Dysvik, & Škerlavaj, 2019; Connelly, Zweig, Webster, & Trougakos, 2012). It may consist of three related behaviors: *playing dumb*, where employees tend to show a lack of related information; *evasive hiding*, where employees make false promises of sharing required information; and *rationalized hiding*, where employees logically explain the reasons for not sharing desired information (Connelly, Zweig, Webster, & Trougakos, 2012). Extant literature has investigated unethical and destructive behaviors such as knowledge hiding in organizations (Connelly, Zweig, Webster, & Trougakos, 2012). However, there is still a paucity of research on antecedents and outcomes of employees' knowledge hiding (Connelly, Zweig, Webster, & Trougakos, 2012). One such mechanism that may dampen such negative behavior is ethical or normatively appropriate leadership behavior in the organization. Ethical leaders may display normatively appropriate behavior and inspire their followers through their ethical role. Consequently, followers refrain from involving unethical and destructive behaviors such as hiding knowledge of the organization (Abdullah, Dechun, Ali, & Usman, 2019). Based on the discussion above, it is hypothesized that:

H1: Ethical leadership has a negative effect on knowledge-hiding behavior.

2.2 Ethical Leadership and Organizational Virtuousness

As a result of recent commercial crimes, workplace ethics, and ethical leadership have gained substantial attention. Organizations strive to develop a culture of organizational trust, leaders' integrity, and compassion to promote knowledge sharing (Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011). A large body of literature asserted that ethical principles influence leadership effectiveness through their ethical and inspirational role. Ethical leadership involves promoting and displaying morally appropriate behavior through role modeling and interpersonal communication (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). Brown et al. (2005) asserted that an ethical leader may be defined as someone who has both moral character and managerial skills, who consistently demonstrates and applies ethical behaviours in their actions and decision-making processes. Research indicates that ethical leadership plays a crucial role in cultivating a culture of virtuousness inside an organisation. This culture is characterised by the presence of

organisational trust, leaders' honesty, and compassion, all of which contribute to the promotion of good organisational behaviour (Alia & Sağsan, 2021; Neubert, Carlson, Kacmar, Roberts, & Chonko, 2009) (Roy, Newman, Round, & Bhattacharya, 2023) which in turn may promote positive individual as well as organizational outcomes (Sun & Yoon, 2022; Alia & Sağsan, 2021). The discussion suggests that ethical leadership predicts organizational virtuousness. We hypothesize that;

H3: Ethical leadership positively affects organizational virtuousness.

2.3 Organizational Virtuousness and Knowledge Hiding

Empirical evidence suggests that the relationship between organizational virtuousness and knowledge-hiding behaviour has been a subject of growing interest in organizational behavior (He & Wei, 2022). Organizational virtuousness, which encompasses ethical values, trustworthiness, and a culture of integrity, sets the tone for the ethical climate within an organization (Brown et al., 2005). When an organization actively promotes virtuous values and fosters an ethical culture, employees are more likely to perceive that their actions are subject to scrutiny positively. In such an environment, the inclination to engage in knowledge hiding diminishes (Koon, 2022). Employees tend to feel a stronger sense of responsibility toward the organization and its members, making them less likely to withhold valuable information or expertise (Magnier-Watanabe, Uchida, Orsini, & Benton, 2017). Organizational virtuousness can be a powerful deterrent against knowledge hiding, as it reinforces a sense of moral obligation and shared responsibility for the organization and its members' collective well-being (Shah & Hashmi, 2019). Consequently, a strong organizational commitment to virtuous values influences employees' ethical behavior and reduces their propensity to hide knowledge, ultimately fostering a more transparent and collaborative work environment (Nikandrou & Tsachouridi, 2015). We hypothesize that;

H4: Organizational virtuousness has a negative relationship with knowledge-hiding behavior.

2.4 Mediating Role of Organizational Virtuousness

Extensive literature indicates that ethical leadership can reduce negative work outcomes directly (Zhao & Xia, 2018) or through intermediary pathways (Eissa et al., 2017). Eissa et al. (2017) assert that a mediator is imperative in the relationship between leadership and work outcomes. On the other side, the impact of ethical leadership on detrimental job consequences, such as the concealment of information, is facilitated by an intermediary factor. (Abdullah, Dechun, Ali, & Usman, 2019; Connelly, Zweig, Webster, & Trougakos, 2012). Social exchange theory provides a plausible rationale for this relationship. The subordinates in the organizations reciprocate supervisors' behavior as a transactional process. Employees are positive when managers treat them fairly and harmful when they promote their own interests, such as knowledge hiding (Walumbwa, Hartnell, & Misati, 2017). However, other studies suggest that EL requires mediating mechanisms instead of transforming work outcomes directly (Eissa, Chinchanchokchai, & Wyland, 2017). Hence, employees need organizational support in the form of organizational virtuousness to evade the detrimental effects of knowledge hiding on organizational competitiveness (Shah & Hashmi, 2019).

Research suggests that some positive organizational factors, including organizational virtuousness characterized by ethical values, trustworthiness, and a culture of integrity, set the tone for the ethical climate within an organization and may serve as mediators between leadership behavior and work outcomes such as employees' knowledge hiding (Jahanzeb, Fatima, Bouckennooghe, & Bashir, 2019). Employees extend support when they realize that the leadership has created a climate of virtue in the organization (Walumbwa, Hartnell, & Misati, 2017). On the contrary, Asadullah et al. (2022) asserted that a lack of leaders' behavioral integrity results in employees' inclination to distance themselves from their supervisor and engage in destructive behavior such as knowledge hiding in the workplace (Asadullah et al., 2022).

Hence, we assume that employees tend to engage in transactional practices. They may extend support to the organization when it extends support through fair treatment, forgiveness, and compassion. On the contrary, leaders' dishonesty would cause animosity, and they could participate in dysfunctional and

harmful activities such as knowledge-hiding conduct. Based on these arguments, the hypothesis is formulated:

H6: Organizational virtuousness mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employees' knowledge-hiding behavior.

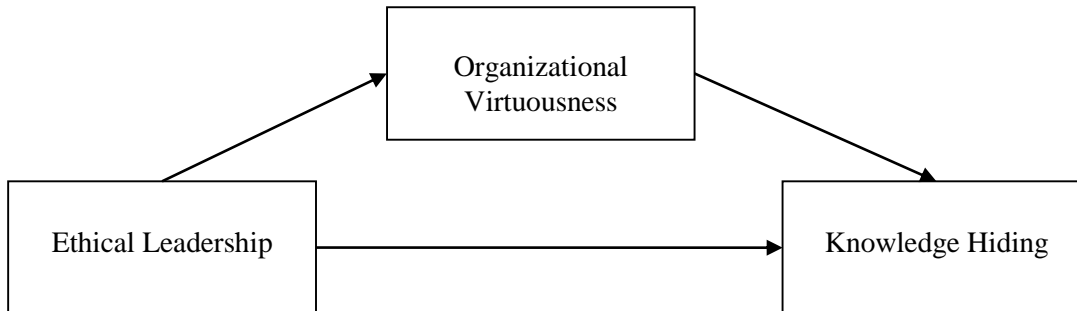


Figure I: Research Model

3. Methods

Respondents: We recruited 350 faculty members from universities established before 2015 in the province of Punjab using a simple random sampling technique.

Instrument: Data were collected from respondents using a consolidated survey questionnaire encompassing ethical leadership (10 items), organizational virtuousness (14 items), and knowledge hiding (12 items). The scales for these constructs were originally developed by Brown et al. (2005), Cameron et al. (2004), and Connelly et al. (2012), respectively. The data analysis was conducted using SPSS Version 27, employing correlation, regression, and mediation techniques.

4. Results

As shown in Table I, we assessed the model in four phases. In the first phase, we observed that all the items' outer loadings surpassed the 0.70 threshold. The second and third phases indicated that the constructs' Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha Reliability exceeded 0.7, indicating high internal consistency. We verified the convergence of the variables by calculating the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) from the item variance (Hair et al., 2016), which exceeded the 0.60 threshold.

Table I: Factor Loadings, Cronbach's Reliability, CR, and AVE

Constructs	Items	Outer	Cronbach's	CR	AVE
		Loadings	Reliability		
Ethical Leadership (10×items)	EL1	0.834	0.98	0.97	0.74
	EL2	0.865			
	EL3	0.904			
	EL4	0.826			
	EL5	0.844			
	EL6	0.882			
	EL7	0.884			
	EL8	0.857			
	EL9	0.907			
	EL10	0.777			
Organizational Virtuousness (10×items)	OVI	0.89	0.98	0.98	0.76
	OV2	0.877			
	OV3	0.928			
	OV4	0.865			
	OV5	0.873			
	OV6	0.88			
	OV7	0.836			
	OV8	0.834			
	OV9	0.855			
	OV10	0.912			
	OV11	0.885			
	OV12	0.835			

	OVI3	0.802			
	OVI4	0.889			
Knowledge Hiding (12×items)	KH1	0.836	0.97	0.98	0.77
	KH2	0.839			
	KH3	0.869			
	KH4	0.879			
	KH5	0.902			
	KH6	0.857			
	KH7	0.884			
	KH8	0.912			
	KH9	0.921			
	KH10	0.855			
	KH11	0.889			
	KH12	0.868			

4.5 Demographics of the Respondents

We administered 350 questionnaires and received 327 fully completed responses, resulting in a satisfactory response rate of 93%. This rate is favorable compared to the 53% response rate reported by Asadullah et al. (2019) in a similar context. Table 2 below presents the details of the respondents' demographics.

Table 2: Demographics

	Description	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	198	61
	Female	129	39
	Total	327	100
Age	20-30	69	21

	31-40	98	30
	41-50	77	24
	Above 50	83	25
	Total	327	100
	Private	124	38
	Public	203	62
University	Total	312	100
	Lecturer	158	48
	Assistant Professor	127	39
	Associate Professor	25	8
	Professor	17	5
Designation	Total	327	100
	1-5 Years	162	50
	6-10 Years	112	34
	11-15 Years	24	7
	16-20 Years	18	6
	More than 20 Years	11	3
Experience	Total	327	100

Correlation Analysis

As indicated in Table 3, we observed a significant positive association between EL and OV ($r=0.548$, $P<0.05$). Interestingly, EL shows a weak positive association with KH ($r=0.201$, $P<0.05$), as well as between KH and OV ($r=0.307$, $P<0.05$).

Table 3: Correlation Analysis

	EL	OV	KH
EL	I		

OV	.548**	I	
KH	0.201	0.307	I

4.6 One Way ANOVA

Table 4: One-Way ANOVA

Variables	KH	
	F-Statistics	P-Value
Gender	2.186	.087
Age	1.654	.156
Designation	.835	.532
Experience	1.605	.232
University	.679	.447

Table 4 shows no significant association between any demographic variable and knowledge hiding (dependent variable). This indicates that there is no necessity to control for any demographic variables during the regression analysis to mitigate their impact on KH.

4.7 Linear Regression Analysis

We analyzed the proposed direct relationships in the current study through linear regression analysis. As there was no significant association between demographic variables and KH, we did not control demographics during regression to neutralize their impact on KH.

Table 5: Linear Regression Analysis

Predictor	Knowledge Hiding			Organizational Virtuousness		
	β	R ²	ΔR^2	B	R ²	ΔR^2
Ethical Leadership	.201	.041	.039	.548**	.199	.197

Organizational	.307	.020	.087
Virtuousness			

** shows P<0.05

Table 5 illustrates a 4.1% variation in KH attributed to ethical leadership. Contrary to common assumptions, our findings indicate that a unit change of 0.201 (P=0.000) in KH is predicted by EL, rejecting the study’s first hypothesis (H1). Additionally, we observed a 19.9% alteration in OV resulting from EL. Our results show that a change of 0.548** (P=0.000) in OV is attributable to a unit of EL, confirming the second hypothesis (H2).

Furthermore, OV predicts a 2.0% change in knowledge hiding, indicating a weak positive relationship. In contrast to common assumptions, our results reveal that a difference of 0.307** (P=0.000) in KH is accounted for by OV, rejecting the third hypothesis (H3).

4.8 OV as Mediator between EL and KH

While investigating the mediating effect of OV in EL and KH relation, a significant indirect (b=0.204, t=1.404) and insignificant direct (0.147, P=0.1614>0.05) impact of EL on KH in the presence of OV showing a full mediation and offered support to H4.

Table 5: Mediation Analysis

Relationship	Total Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval		Conclusion
				Interval		
				LLCI	ULCI	
EL-->OV-->KH	0.2506 (0.0002)	0.1476 (0.4213)	0.204	0.1148	0.2993	Full Mediation

5. Discussion

The present study demonstrates that there exists a significant association between ethical leadership and Knowledge Hiding (KH), with a modest positive effect size of 4.1%. This finding suggests that ethical leadership has a weaker, yet still beneficial, influence on the occurrence of KH. The results of our investigation did not provide evidence in favor of Hypothesis I as posited in the study. However, the findings of our research were consistent with the study of Kalshoven and Boon (2012) as well as Strobel et al. (2010). These studies posit the existence of a transactional relationship between leaders and subordinates. The active promotion and embodiment of behavior that aligns with established norms plays a crucial role in cultivating trust among members of the workforce.

Consequently, employees exhibit constructive behaviors and mitigate negative work outcomes (Koay & Lim, 2022; Anser, Ali, Usman, Rana, & Yousaf, 2021). The assertions made in this study are further corroborated by the underlying principles of Social Exchange Theory (SET). The manifestation of self-serving conduct by supervisors elicits feelings of hostility in subordinates, prompting them to create emotional and psychological distance from their supervisors and engage in the act of hiding knowledge. This study revealed that EL predicts a 19.9% change in OV, confirming the H3 of the study. We found substantial support from the existing research of Roy et al. (2023), Alia & Sağsan (2021), Hannah et al. (2011), and Neubert et al. (2009). Results suggest that moral leadership inspires followers by displaying moral values. Consequently, subordinates start following them, and leadership succeeds in developing a culture of virtuousness.

Furthermore, our investigation revealed that Organizational Virtuousness predicts a 2.0% change in Knowledge Hiding (KH). Contrary to prevalent beliefs, organizational virtuousness demonstrated a weak positive correlation with knowledge hiding, rejecting Hypothesis 4 of the study.

The study's results indicate that there is a significant indirect effect ($b=0.204$, $t=1.404$) and a statistically non-significant direct effect of Ethical Leadership (EL) on Knowledge Hiding (KH) when organizational virtuousness is present (0.147 , $P=0.1614 > 0.05$). These findings support Hypothesis 5, suggesting full mediation. Although our hypothesized mediation is innovative, we have obtained support for these outcomes from similar investigations. Contrary to prevailing beliefs positing a direct relationship between ethical leadership (EL) and negative work outcomes (Nemr & Liu, 2021; Abdullah

et al., 2019; Zhao & Xia, 2018; Coolen, 2012), our study aligns with existing research in asserting that EL operates through mediating mechanisms (Eissa et al., 2017) rather than exerting a direct influence on work outcomes. This study supports the assertion made by Eissa et al. (2017) that ethical leadership is contingent upon transactional mechanisms to provide favorable job results.

6. Conclusion

Our research revealed that ethical leadership protects against negative work outcomes, such as knowledge hiding. We observed that leaders' adherence to normatively appropriate behavior contributes to developing a virtuous organization characterized by moral integrity, organizational trust, forgiveness, and optimism. Consequently, employees within a virtuous organization tend to abstain from engaging in counterproductive work behaviors, including knowledge concealment. However, our study indicated that the influence of ethical leadership on knowledge hiding operates indirectly through the mediating factor of organizational virtuousness rather than exerting a direct impact. Specifically, findings from the higher education sector in Punjab supported our hypothesis that organizational virtuousness acts as a social exchange mechanism between ethical leadership and knowledge hiding.

7. Implications

The study has specific practical implications. The findings of this study suggest that leadership development programs should prioritize ethical leadership. These programs train leaders to demonstrate integrity and transparent communication, leading to reduced knowledge hiding. Promoting virtuous behaviors like kindness and trustworthiness fosters a positive work environment, lowering knowledge hiding. Managerial training must emphasize ethical leadership, nurturing a virtuous organizational culture, and minimizing knowledge hiding. Performance evaluations should include ethical leadership and virtuous contributions to incentivize ethical practices. Gaining insight into the connection between ethical leadership, organizational virtuousness, and employee behavior facilitates conflict resolution and strengthens team cohesion.

On the theoretical frontier, this study advances our comprehension of social exchange theory by highlighting the mediating role played by organizational virtuousness. It expands our understanding of

the influence of ethical leadership by exposing its impact on knowledge-hiding behavior. Additionally, the research contributes to the literature on the interplay between organizational culture and employee behavior by illustrating how organizational virtuousness influences knowledge hiding. This study provides a comprehensive perspective on employee behavior, delivering valuable insights for researchers and practitioners. The effectiveness of ethical leadership in mitigating knowledge hiding is contingent upon cultivating a virtuous organizational culture, underscoring the significance of such a culture within organizations.

8. Limitations and Further Research

Implementing a cross-sectional design may impose constraints on the capacity to establish causal links and represent the progressive dynamics over time. Future researchers may choose to utilize longitudinal methods to investigate the effects of Ethical Leadership (EL) and Knowledge Hiding (KH) on Organizational Virtuousness (OV). Moreover, it is crucial to consider that the exclusive emphasis on individual behaviors inside higher education institutions may limit the applicability of the research findings. This is because organizational results are shaped by multiple levels of analysis, such as departmental, university, and societal contexts. To explore the interactions between the variables of interest across various levels, prospective researchers may consider employing a multilevel approach.

The current study is being carried out within the higher education domain of Punjab, Pakistan. To evaluate the extent to which the findings can be applied to different settings, it is recommended that future scholars reproduce the study in various circumstances, including but not limited to alternative regions or countries. Various cultural, institutional, and contextual factors can influence the relationship between ethical leadership, organizational virtuousness, and work outcomes. Comparative studies within other cultural and organizational contexts can yield a more profound comprehension of these interconnections.

Furthermore, the narrow emphasis on Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) and knowledge concealment as outputs of labor may restrict our understanding of the relationships between the

mechanisms of ethical leadership and organizational virtuousness. Furthermore, our study has examined ethical leadership's direct and indirect impacts on knowledge hiding within higher education, specifically considering the influence of organizational virtuousness. However, organizational virtuousness can convert leadership practices into ethical ones, influencing work outcomes. Additional investigation is necessary to explore the phenomenon of reverse mediation of ethical leadership in the context of the connections between organizational virtuousness and knowledge concealment.

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