

Leader moral disengagement and follower knowledge hiding. A moderated mediation model of follower Machiavellianism and trust in the leader

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to build a moderated mediation model to investigate the roles that trust in the leader and follower Machiavellianism can play in the relationship between moral disengagement of the leader and hiding of knowledge of the followers.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were gathered from eight universities in Turkey using a set of 72 matched leader (dean)–follower (faculty member) questionnaires. The hypotheses were tested with multiple regression, moderated regression and bootstrapping analyses.

Findings – The findings reveal that leader moral disengagement positively influences follower knowledge hiding, while trust in the leader mediates this influence and follower Machiavellianism not only moderates the relationship between leader moral disengagement and trust in the leader but also reduces the indirect relationship between leader moral disengagement and follower knowledge hiding through trust in the leader.

Research limitations/implications – Even though measurements of research variables were collected from different sources and with time separation, common method bias might have existed. Also, this research is carried out in a single cultural context posing the issue of the generalizability of our findings to other cultural contexts.

Originality/value – The main contribution of this study is to construct and investigate a conceptual model that focuses on the possible effect of moral disengagement of the leader on knowledge hiding by the followers. Also, by supporting the mediating role of trust in the leader, this research reveals that followers of leaders with high moral disengagement are more prone to indulge in the hiding of knowledge. Moreover, the moderating role of follower Machiavellianism, found in this study, provides an additional understanding that followers may vary in the degree to which they are sensitive to the leader's influence.

Keywords Moral disengagement, Knowledge hiding, Follower Machiavellianism, Trust in the leader

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In terms of organizational success and sustainability in higher education, information management is regarded as a vital managerial activity (Annansingh *et al.*, 2018). Research has investigated the factors contributing to positive knowledge behavior, such as knowledge sharing, in recognition of its significance (Connely *et al.*, 2012). Knowledge transfer and its sharing are critically important for increasing academicians' teaching and research efficiency, improving the quality of education and enhancing organizational competitive advantages in higher education (Sadiq and Daud, 2009).

While knowledge transfer within organizations is difficult, there is increasing evidence that employees will be encouraged to share their knowledge with others (e.g. Aram *et al.*, 2020; Husted and Michailova, 2002). To tackle this challenge, scholars have concentrated on issues



that could improve the sharing of knowledge, such as how sharing can strengthen one's prestige and credibility (Wasko and Faraj, 2005), how establishing relational relationships may cause reciprocal behaviors such as knowledge sharing (Ko *et al.*, 2005) and how the attitudes of employees may be influenced by sharing norms (Bock *et al.*, 2005). Other considerations that may promote knowledge sharing contain opportunities (Bartol and Srivastava, 2002), the fulfillment of psychological contracts (Scarborough and Carter, 2000), climate sharing of knowledge (Connelly and Kelloway, 2003) and trust (Jarvenpaa and Majchrzak, 2008).

While considerable research has addressed the factors prominent to knowledge sharing (Wang and Noe, 2010; Connelly *et al.*, 2012), those leading to knowledge hiding are not yet addressed (Connelly *et al.*, 2012; Hernaus *et al.*, 2018). Knowledge hiding refers to a deliberate effort to hide/withhold knowledge sought by others (Connelly *et al.*, 2012). Prior research advocated the consequences of knowledge hiding, such as destruction of creativity (Černe *et al.*, 2014, 2017), impediment to dissemination and development of new ideas (Černe *et al.*, 2014) and increased intention of turnover (Connelly *et al.*, 2012). Nevertheless, studies searching the antecedents of knowledge hiding were fairly minimal compared with research on the adverse effects of knowledge hiding (Connelly *et al.*, 2012; Ko *et al.*, 2005). In limited researches examining the predictors of hiding knowledge, the main variables were interpersonal antecedents (Connelly *et al.*, 2012). Interpersonal knowledge hiding research has concentrated mainly on the nature of the relationship between coworker dyads (e.g. interpersonal distrust and organizational ostracism; Connelly *et al.*, 2012; Zhao *et al.*, 2016; Zhao and Xia, 2019). It is not only significant to comprehend the association between the relationships among coworkers and knowledge hiding but also of great significance to recognize the predictors related to individual differences variables on the supervisor–subordinate relationship (Tepper *et al.*, 2009). As an individual difference variable, moral disengagement, a set of interrelated cognitive mechanisms allowing a leader to perform unethical behaviors without obvious guilt or self-censure, has many undesirable results for organizational members, including lower creativity (Zheng *et al.*, 2019), higher unethical decision making (Detert *et al.*, 2008), cyberbullying (Tang *et al.*, 2018) and workplace deviant behaviors (Zheng *et al.*, 2019). Leaders within organizations have tremendous power to control their followers' views of moral values and corresponding conduct (Ng and Feldman, 2015). In particular, moral disengagement of leaders can play a major role in influencing followers (Bonner *et al.*, 2016). Examining how moral disengagement impacts the hiding of knowledge is, therefore, of considerable importance to study.

The prior theoretical relationships propose that perceptions of trust may function as a conditional mechanism through which leader moral disengagement is related to knowledge hiding. Scholars of positive organizational behavior have embraced the concept of trust in the leader (e.g. Dirks and Ferrin, 2002). Inspired by the Social Cognitive theory, this research proposes that leader moral disengagement will diminish followers' trust in the leader and affect their knowledge hiding.

On top of the above, there remains an interesting question as to whether leader moral disengagement influences followers equally. Leadership is an interactive process dependent on leaders and followers (Wang *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, although we usually suppose morally disengaged leader behaviors negatively influence follower trust in the leader, it should be emphasized that followers may differ in the degree to which they constantly perceive and recognize moral elements in their experiences as well as capture an immanent tendency to perceive issues as moral ones (Wang *et al.*, 2018). Thus, we expect followers, with low Machiavellianism, to respond more negatively to leader moral disengagement involved in a set of behaviors violating moral norms. That is, the relationship between leader moral disengagement and trust in the leader can be moderated by follower Machiavellianism.

The present study intends to contribute to current literature in numerous ways. Firstly, our study aims at filling the knowledge gap between leader moral disengagement and hiding

knowledge. Preceding research has shown that one of the most significant factors in hiding knowledge is unsupportive or poor leadership. This paper is one of the first studies to examine the relationship between leader moral disengagement and knowledge hiding. Secondly, determining how trust in the leader decreases employees' knowledge hiding in the organizational behavior literature has received little empirical attention (Staples and Webster, 2008). The findings could help us understand the processes influencing knowledge hiding in organizational settings. Thirdly, this study contributes to the literature by examining how leader moral disengagement increases the knowledge hiding of followers through trust in the leader, which in turn explains the moderating effect of follower Machiavellianism. Figure 1 provides a summary of the theoretical model for this study.

Theory and hypotheses

Leader moral disengagement and follower knowledge hiding

Knowledge hiding is a significant problem in the social fabric of a workforce resulting in many detrimental effects on the efficiency and performance of employees and organizations (Connelly *et al.*, 2012; Peng, 2013; Connelly and Zweig, 2015; Zhao and Xia, 2019). Hiding knowledge damages the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and endangers the strategies of managers to improve the learning and creativity of employees, as well as inhibits the efforts of managers to help organizations achieve a sustainable competitive advantage (Connelly *et al.*, 2012; Černe *et al.*, 2014).

We suppose that leaders, with high moral disengagement, are likely to engender their followers to hide knowledge from them. According to the theory of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1986), people have a set of moral standards leading to personal distress and/or self-condemnation if broken. Individuals may escape embarrassment and self-condemnation by disassociating themselves from the detrimental consequences of their behavior. The moral theory of disengagement provides a basis for understanding the mechanisms by which individuals can justify their unethical and unjust behaviors safely. People usually refrain from behaving in ways that contradict personal moral values due to pain normally induced by it (Bandura *et al.*, 1996). When the moral values of people are different from those of their behaviors, they experience psychological distress caused by cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

Managers with high moral disengagement are likely to have role modeling cues promoting loose standards and immoral conduct since they do not perceive these behaviors as being especially inappropriate (Bonner *et al.*, 2016; Erkutlu and Chafra, 2019a). So, a morally disengaged manager would be viewed as an unethical leader. Consequently, these managers are likely to consider the immediate advantage of participating in dishonest leadership activities (Treviño and Nelson, 2011).

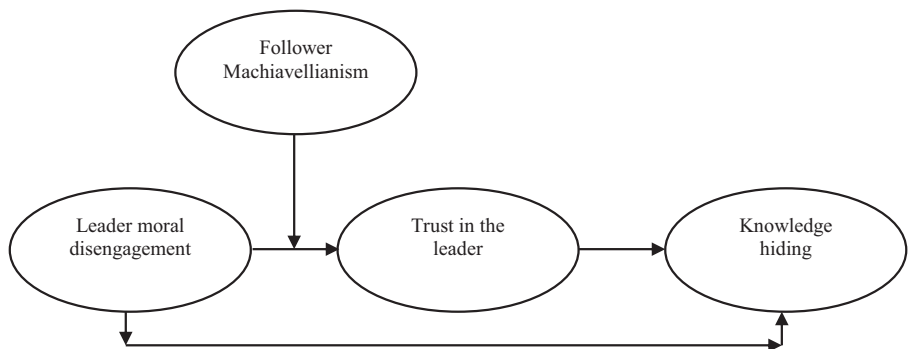


Figure 1.
Proposed moderated
mediation model

In this study, we contend that Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) can help understand the impact of leaders, with high moral disengagement, on knowledge hiding. According to social cognitive theory, individuals receive knowledge about themselves and others from the social environment, develop internal norms of conduct and control their actions in compliance with internal norms (Bandura, 2001). Despite their positions in organizations, leaders with high moral disengagement are often seen as repulsive and manipulative examples of ethical actions. In this respect, these leaders offer valuable cues for employees to participate in dishonest activities, such as hiding knowledge (Brown *et al.*, 2005). Moreover, Men *et al.* (2020) suggest that a leader's relationship with his/her followers by moral displays, open-mindedness, commitment and benevolence allows him/her to share his/her knowledge and to express his/her true self without fear of negative consequences on his/her career, status and self-image. Leaders, with high moral disengagement, do not pay attention to whether their behaviors and decisions are morally appropriate. They can lie without any discomfort, hide and distort the facts, gossip, etc. by engaging in organizational deviant and undesirable behaviors. The motive behind this is that, with the various cognitive justifications, leaders can support their exhibited behaviors. Employees of managers with high moral disengagement feel more distrust since their managers may be engaged in undesirable and unethical behaviors affecting them in the future. This causes employees to hide knowledge because, when employees share knowledge, they think that this knowledge can be used by their managers for their own interests. For instance, managers can present the knowledge as their own and try to get benefit from it. Thus, we expect a positive relationship between leader moral disengagement and followers' knowledge hiding.

H1. Leader moral disengagement is positively related to follower knowledge hiding.

The mediating role of trust in the leader

We propose that leader moral disengagement can encourage withholding knowledge by employees since moral disengagement may decrease employee trust in the leader. Trust was typically described as the psychological state concerned with one's willingness to be vulnerable to actions of another party based on positive expectations of another party's motives and behaviors (Mayer and Gavin, 2005). The key to this conceptualization is the ability of the trustee (the person who trusts) to take risks with the trustor (the person who is trusted), allowing the latter to take control of the matters, relevant to the trustee. The employees' trust in the leader can be, therefore, defined as willingness to accept management vulnerability under risk circumstances (Gao *et al.*, 2011).

Leader moral disengagement discourages employees' trust in the leader because this very disengagement sends an important signal that management is not concerned about employees' well-being while treating employees immorally and unethically (Fehr *et al.*, 2020). In situations of unethical leadership, employees generally adopt negative attitudes and behavior against the leader. Particularly, employees tend to lose trust in their leader and assume that the unethical actions of the leader represent questionable values and beliefs (Ng and Feldman, 2015).

We suggest that trust in the leader is negatively related to hiding knowledge, since, when employees trust their leaders, they are more likely to take risks in expressing suggestions and concerns. This is in alignment with the opinion of Mowbray *et al.* (2015) that developing trust in a leader is an important factor when promoting positive psychological conditions for knowledge sharing. On the other hand, where employees have no trust in the leader, they would be more unwilling to take chances associated with knowledge sharing and, therefore, would withhold knowledge, even if they have organizational problems and concerns. Past studies have proposed that trust is correlated with risk-taking behavior in a relationship (Mayer and Gavin, 2005). Empirically, Gao *et al.* (2011) found that trust in the leader

diminishes knowledge hiding among telecommunications employees. Similarly, [Ng and Feldman \(2015\)](#) stated, in a longitudinal study, that employees engage in more knowledge hiding when they mistrust their organization/management. Considering the above theoretical perspectives and empirical results, we expect that trust in the leader will negatively affect knowledge hiding. Given our proposition about the moral disengagement-trust and trust-knowledge hiding relationships, we further propose that moral disengagement will have an indirect effect on knowledge hiding through its influence on trust. Accordingly, we predict the following:

- H2.* Trust in the leader mediates the relationship between leader moral disengagement and follower knowledge hiding.

The moderating role of follower Machiavellianism

We further propose that follower Machiavellianism would serve as a boundary condition of the relationship between moral disengagement and trust in the leader. Research indicates that taking personal values into account will help us appreciate the relationship between leaders and followers ([Brown et al., 2005](#)). Personality traits, as relatively lasting attributes that form guiding principles for attitudes, behaviors and decisions ([Rokeach, 1968](#)), have significant consequences for the lives of individuals in general. When it comes to leader-follower relationships, as a personality trait, Machiavellianism becomes immediately salient ([Palomäki et al., 2016](#)).

Machiavellianism (Mach) is a personality trait that describes one's tendency to "distrust others, engages in amoral manipulation, seek control over others, and seek status for oneself" ([Dahling et al., 2009](#), p. 219). Machiavellians have an unethical outlook, show a lack of control in interpersonal relationships, consider others as instruments only for achieving their goals and are extremely goal-oriented ([Christie and Geis, 1970](#)). Employees, high in Mach, are more aggressive, competitive, convincing ([Christie and Geis, 1970](#); [Schepers, 2003](#)), have higher internal locus of control ([Gable and Dangelo, 1994](#)) and indulge in more emotional coercion ([Christie and Geis, 1970](#)). Moreover, they display a pessimistic and cynical viewpoint ([Christie and Geis, 1970](#)) affecting their capacity to judge others as worthy of vulnerability or good. This may lead to distrust in others ([Gurtman, 1992](#); [Higgins and King, 1981](#)). [Gurtman \(1992\)](#) found repeatedly that those, high at Mach, had interpersonal issues linked to lack of trust. Likewise, [Dahling et al. \(2009\)](#) state lack of trust as a key feature of Machs. As Machs deliberately manipulate and try to take advantage of others, they assume that others also try to control and exploit them. Therefore, they do not seem to trust others ([Erkutlu and Chafra, 2019b](#)).

Employee trust is closely related to certain attitudes and behaviors of employees at work. For instance, having poor trust in the leader would possibly result in employees displaying less cooperative behavior and feeling greater stress. [Dirks and Ferrin \(2002\)](#) provide a summary and meta-analysis of the relationship between employee trust and occupational outcomes (e.g. job (dis)satisfaction and extra-role work behaviors). It is possible that employees, not trusting their leaders, would feel more anger, negative emotions and confrontation. Also, employees frequently perceive their leader's support and characteristics as representative of the support and characteristics of their organization. Therefore, based on the theory of social exchange (e.g. [Blau, 1964](#)), researchers claim that employees reciprocate their leaders for being trustworthy by displaying constructive job attitudes and pro-organizational behaviors such as organizational citizenship behaviors (e.g. [Yang et al., 2009](#)). Machiavellian employees, who do not trust their leader, are unwilling to participate in constructive behaviors and indulge in dishonest or unethical conduct (e.g. do not work diligently while tasks need to be accomplished, steal work material or conceal their knowledge). We argue that employees, with a high Mach, are more likely to react by

exhibiting more distrust to moral disengagement practices (Shen and Zhu, 2011). Nevertheless, low Mach employees will disregard the extent to which the supervisor is morally disengaged as well as the effect that it has on the immoral actions of the leader. Thus, we would expect less profound consequences of moral disengagement on the trust in the leader. Hence, we propose:

- H3.* Follower Machiavellianism moderates the relationship between leader moral disengagement and follower trust in the leader, such that the relationship is stronger among followers with high rather than low follower Machiavellianism.

The previous arguments state an integrated framework in which trust in the leader mediates the relation between leader moral disengagement and follower knowledge hiding. Furthermore, the effect of leader moral disengagement on trust in the leader depends on follower Machiavellianism. Researches have shown explicitly that behavior to conceal knowledge is caused by a process of distrust initiated by the hider of knowledge (Connely *et al.*, 2012). Černe *et al.* (2014) categorically defined the loop of distrust when considering the impact of knowledge on creativity. The developed trust deficit may lead to further hiding of knowledge due to reciprocity from the opposing party (Staples and Webster, 2008). Therefore, interpersonal trust is considered one of the key factors determining the degree to which knowledge is concealed. On this basis, we further hypothesize that follower Machiavellianism also moderates the intensity of the mediated relationship between leader moral disengagement and follower knowledge hiding through leader trust, that is, a moderated mediating effect.

Therefore, we hypothesize:

- H4.* Follower Machiavellianism moderates the mediating effect of trust in the leader on the relationship between leader moral disengagement and follower knowledge hiding, such that the mediating role of trust in the leader will be stronger for followers with high rather than low follower Machiavellianism (Figure 2).

Method

Sample and procedures

The sample encompassed 812 faculty members and their deans from eight universities randomly chosen from a total of 209 Turkish universities (Turkey Higher Education Council, 2020).

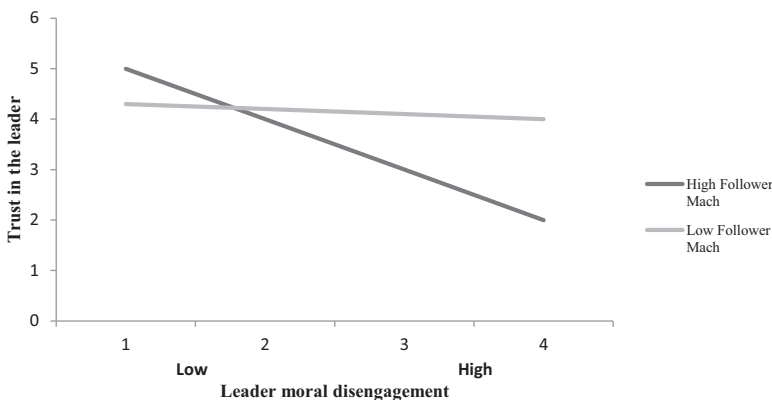


Figure 2. Interaction of leader moral disengagement and follower Machiavellianism on trust in the leader

The purposeful method of sampling was used to choose the sample. It is a non-probability sampling method in which the researcher relies on personal judgment when collecting samples from the population. Second, the sampling approach has stratified all universities in Turkey into seven strata according to their geographical area. Later, universities in each stratum were proportionally chosen; the research sample included faculty members serving at the universities selected. A study team comprising of four doctoral students has visited the universities and obtained permissions for the distribution of questionnaires from deans of finance, managerial, healthcare, science and literature and engineering and education faculties. All participants were told that their contribution was voluntary, that their responses would be used exclusively for our study and will be held strictly confidential. The research study is conducted in three phases. Before being distributed, survey questionnaires were coded to align the faculty members with their deans. Faculty members were asked to report their leader's (dean) moral disengagement and their Machiavellianism in the first stage and their trust in the dean in the second stage. On separate questionnaires, matched deans rated their faculty members' knowledge hiding in the third stage. Since questionnaires were originally written in English, they were translated to Turkish and then translated back into English to maintain a meaning of equivalence (Brislin, 1980). In the first stage, we received 1,098 (out of 1,200) complete questionnaires (91.5% response rate). One month later, since 29 faculty members left the organizations, only 1,069 faculty members participated in the second stage. A total of 812 complete questionnaires were received by 1,069 faculty members (75.9% response rate). The third survey was distributed two months later to 72 deans of the 812 faculty members who completed both the first and the second surveys. Finally, 72 useful paired questionnaires for further analysis were provided, including 72 deans and 812 faculty members, following the dismissal of three incomplete sets of leader and related faculty members' surveys. 54% of the faculty members were female with an average age of 38.16 years whereas 83% of the deans were male with an average age of 50.76 years.

Measures

All focal variables have been scored with the 5-point Likert scale "1 strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree". To determine the reliability and convergent validity of the measurement, Cronbach α , the composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE) have been reported.

Leader moral disengagement

It was measured using Moore *et al.*'s (2012) 8-item moral disengagement scale. The sample item includes "Playing dirty is sometimes necessary to achieve noble ends". The measure had coefficient α 's of 0.88, composite reliability of 0.89 and AVE of 0.59. The results showed adequate reliability and convergent validity of the measurement.

Trust in the leader

It was measured by 10-item trust in the management scale developed by Mayer and Gavin (2005). A sample item included the following: "If my manager asked why a problem happened, I would speak freely even if I were partly to blame". The measure had coefficient α 's of 0.81, the composite reliability was 0.85 and AVE turned out to be 0.60. The results showed that the reliability and convergent validity of the measurement were good.

Follower Machiavellianism

We applied the well-accepted 12-item Dirty Dozen scale to assess follower Machiavellianism (four items for Machiavellianism, Jonason and Webster, 2010). A sample item of

Machiavellianism was “I have used deceit or lie to get my way”. The measure had coefficient α 's of 0.90, composite reliability of 0.91 and AVE of 0.61. The results showed that reliability and convergent validity were adequate for the measurement.

Knowledge hiding

A twelve-item scale instrument developed by Connelly *et al.* (2012) was used to measure knowledge hiding. A sample item is “I offered other members of my team some other information instead of what they wanted.” The measure had coefficient α 's of 0.90, the composite reliability was 0.93 and AVE was 0.65. The results showed that the measurement's reliability and convergent validity were good.

Control variables

In all our analyses, we controlled the follower age, gender and organization tenure, since previous studies have shown that these variables are potentially related to knowledge hiding (e.g. Černe *et al.*, 2017; Zhao and Xia, 2019). Age and organizational tenure have been calculated in years, and gender has been calculated as a dichotomous dummy variable coded as male 0 and female 1. Since gender is in its categorical state, it is appropriate to create a dummy variable for it in the regression.

Results

Test of the measurement model

Before testing the proposed hypotheses, confirmatory factor analyzes were conducted with AMOS to examine the discriminant validity of four latent variables: Leader moral disengagement, trust in the leader, follower Machiavellianism and follower knowledge hiding. The results show that four-factor model ($\chi^2/df = 2.32$, SRMR = 0.04, RMSEA = 0.05, CFI = 0.93) fits the data better than the three-factor model (i.e. combining leader moral disengagement and follower Machiavellianism into one factor, $\chi^2/df = 8.12$, SRMR = 0.09, RMSEA = 0.11, CFI = 0.82), the two-factor model (i.e. combining leader moral disengagement, trust in the leader and follower Machiavellianism into one factor, $\chi^2/df = 11.70$, SRMR = 0.13, RMSEA = 0.16, CFI = 0.73) and the one-factor model ($\chi^2/df = 21.69$, SRMR = 0.17, RMSEA = 0.21, CFI = 0.63), supporting the variables' discriminant validity. Also, the discriminant validity is assessed by comparing each construct's square root of AVE with the correlation between the construct and all other constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Based on Fornell and Larcker (1981), if the correlation between the particular construct and any of the other constructs is lower than the square root of each construct's AVE, then discriminating validity is verified. Hence, we calculated the AVE of each construct further. Results ranged from 0.51 to 0.65. For each construct, the square root of the AVE scores turned out to be greater than the correlations between the constructs, therefore confirming the discriminating validity.

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations and correlations of the variables. All variables are correlated significantly to each other. Leader moral disengagement is negatively correlated with trust in the leader ($r = -0.33$, $p < 0.01$), and positively with follower knowledge hiding ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, trust in the leader is negatively correlated with follower knowledge hiding ($r = -0.39$, $p < 0.01$). From the control variables, only age is positively correlated with knowledge hiding. The higher an employee's age is, the more he/she engages in knowledge hiding. Moreover, the mean values both for the moral disengagement and follower Mach were below mid-point (2.19 and 2.15 respectively).

It suggests that such tendencies and traits are not specifically high among employees. The mean and SD found for moral disengagement in this study are similar to those found by Detert *et al.* (2008).

Main and mediation effects

We conducted multiple regression analyses to analyze the direct and indirect effects (i.e. H1 and H2). As Table 2 reveals, the regression coefficient is significant ($\beta = 0.33, p < 0.01$, Model 5), showing support for H1. Moreover, Model 7 in Table 2 shows the relations of leader moral disengagement and trust in the leader to follower knowledge hiding are significant (leader moral disengagement, $\beta = 0.26, p < 0.05$; trust in the leader, $\beta = -0.31, p < 0.01$). Thus, H2 is supported.

Moderation effects

Hierarchical moderated regression analyses were conducted to test the moderation effects (i.e. H3) using the procedures established by Cohen *et al.* (2003). Control variables were entered in Step 1, moral disengagement and follower Machiavellianism were entered in Step 2 and the interaction between moral disengagement and follower Machiavellianism was entered in Step 3. Moral disengagement and follower Machiavellianism were mean-centered before entering into the equation and calculation of the interaction term. The results of Model 3, in Table 2, revealed that the two-way interaction term (i.e. leader moral disengagement \times follower Machiavellianism) is significant ($\beta = 0.12, p < 0.10$). Also, to facilitate interpretation of the moderation results, we plotted simple slopes for the relationship between leader moral disengagement and trust in the leader at high (mean + SD) and low (mean - SD) level of follower Machiavellianism. Figure 2 displays that leader moral disengagement has a stronger impact on trust in the leader when followers have lower ($\beta = -0.31, t = -3.13, p < 0.01$), as opposed to higher levels of follower Machiavellianism ($\beta = -0.06, t = -0.90$, ns). Thus, H3 was also supported.

Moderated mediation effects

To check the moderated mediation effect (H4), we used the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2013). Based on 5,000 bootstrapped samples, 95% of bias-corrected confidence intervals are determined in our study.

As Table 3 reveals, trust in the leader has a significant mediating effect on the relation of leader moral disengagement to follower knowledge hiding for followers with high follower Machiavellianism ($\beta = -0.06, SE = 0.04, 95\% CI [-0.09, -0.02]$), but not for followers with low

Table 1.
Means, standard deviations and correlations among variables

| Variable | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|------------------------|-------|------|---------|-------|-------|----------|----------|---------|
| 1. Age | 32.16 | 3.12 | | | | | | |
| 2. Gender | 0.68 | 0.32 | -0.06 | | | | | |
| 3. Tenure | 13.12 | 3.19 | 0.61*** | 0.03 | | | | |
| 4. Moral disengagement | 2.19 | 0.96 | 0.09 | 0.05 | 0.07 | | | |
| 5. Trust in the leader | 3.39 | 1.15 | -0.08 | -0.06 | -0.03 | -0.33*** | | |
| 6. Follower mach | 2.15 | 1.30 | 0.09 | 0.06 | 0.08 | 0.58*** | -0.31*** | |
| 7. Knowledge hiding | 3.66 | 1.06 | 0.12* | 0.07 | 0.09 | 0.36*** | -0.39*** | 0.31*** |

Note(s): *** $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed)
* $p < 0.10$ (2-tailed)
 $N = 812$

| Variables | Trust in the leader | | | Knowledge hiding | | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|----------------|-------------|------------------|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | Model 6 | Model 7 |
| Age | -0.07 (-1.63) | -0.06 (-1.42) | -0.06 (-1.51) | 0.09 (2.45) | 0.09 (2.59) | 0.08 (2.29) | 0.06 (1.96) |
| <i>Gender</i> | | | | | | | |
| Male | -0.07 (-1.45) | -0.05 (-1.35) | -0.04 (-1.29) | 0.06 (1.73) | 0.05 (1.55) | 0.04 (1.47) | 0.02 (1.43) |
| Female | -0.03 (-1.25) | -0.02 (-1.21) | -0.02 (-1.19) | 0.04 (1.57) | 0.04 (1.40) | 0.03 (1.35) | 0.01 (1.32) |
| Tenure | -0.02 (-1.09) | -0.02 (-1.13) | -0.01 (-0.89) | 0.08 (2.21) | 0.07 (2.13) | 0.05 (1.83) | 0.03 (1.42) |
| M. disengagement (MD) | | -0.31*** (-6.09) | -0.30*** (-5.13) | | 0.33*** (7.91) | | 0.26** (4.61) |
| Trust in the leader | | | | | | | |
| Follower mach (FM) | | -0.33*** (-7.11) | -0.30*** (-5.12) | | | | -0.37*** (-9.13) |
| MD × FM | | | 0.12* (2.65) | | | | |
| R^2 | 0.01 | 0.17 | 0.25 | 0.02 | 0.18 | 0.19 | 0.21 |
| Adjusted R^2 | 00 | 0.16 | 0.24 | 0.01 | 0.17 | 0.18 | 0.20 |
| ΔR^2 | 0.01 | 0.16 | 0.08 | 0.02 | 0.16 | 0.01 | 0.02 |
| F | 1.18 | 3.12 | 7.82 | 0.78 | 1.46 | 3.19 | 6.36 |

Note(s): *** $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed)

** $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed)

* $p < 0.10$ (2-tailed)

t -values in parenthesis

$N = 812$

Table 2.
Multiple regression
analysis results

follower Machiavellianism ($\beta = -0.00$, SE = 0.03, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.02]). Therefore, H4 was supported.

The results of the hypotheses are summarized in Table 4.

Discussion

This study was designed to determine the relationship between leader moral disengagement and follower knowledge hiding as well as the mediating role of trust in the leader and the moderating role of follower Machiavellianism on that relationship. The results of this study reveal that leader moral disengagement positively influences follower knowledge hiding. This finding broadly supports the work of other studies in this area linking leader moral disengagement with knowledge hiding of followers (Brown *et al.*, 2005; Men *et al.*, 2020). Other important results are that trust in the leader mediates this influence between leader moral disengagement and follower knowledge hiding, and follower Machiavellianism moderates both the direct effects of leader moral disengagement on trust in the leader and the indirect effect of leader moral disengagement on follower knowledge hiding via trust in the leader. These results agree with the findings of other studies, in which leader moral disengagement encourages followers' knowledge hiding by decreasing followers' trust in the leader (Fehr *et al.*, 2020; Ng and Feldman, 2015) and follower Machiavellianism affects the impact of leader moral disengagement and serves as a boundary condition of the relationship between moral disengagement and trust in the leader (Shen and Zhu, 2011). Moreover, the study's control variables, *age*, *gender* and *tenure*, affect knowledge hiding, particularly the age of respondents. The higher the age of the faculty member, the higher his/her knowledge hiding. Following these results, previous studies have demonstrated that demographic variables such as age, gender and organizational tenure are potentially related to knowledge hiding (e.g. Cerne *et al.*, 2017; Zhao and Xia, 2019).

This study contributes to the literature on leadership and knowledge management in three key aspects. First, by empirically investigating the relationship between moral disengagement

Table 3.
Moderated mediation results for knowledge hiding across levels of follower Machiavellianism

| Moderator | Level | Conditional indirect effect | SE | <i>t</i> | Knowledge hiding | | |
|---------------|-------|-----------------------------|------|----------|------------------|-----------|-----------|
| | | | | | <i>p</i> | LL 95% CI | UL 95% CI |
| Follower mach | High | -0.06 | 0.04 | -3.323 | 0.000 | -0.09 | -0.02 |
| | Low | -0.00 | 0.03 | -0.933 | 0.126 | -0.05 | 0.02 |

Note(s): LL = lower limit; CI = confidence interval; UL = upper limit

Table 4.
Summary of the hypotheses tested

| Hypotheses | Result | Explanation |
|--------------|-----------|--|
| Hypothesis 1 | Supported | Leader moral disengagement is positively related to follower knowledge hiding |
| Hypothesis 2 | Supported | Trust in the leader mediates the relationship between leader moral disengagement and follower knowledge hiding |
| Hypothesis 3 | Supported | Follower Machiavellianism moderates the relationship between leader moral disengagement and follower trust in the leader, such that the relationship is stronger among followers with high rather than low follower Machiavellianism |
| Hypothesis 4 | Supported | Follower Machiavellianism moderates the mediating effect of trust in the leader on the relationship between leader moral disengagement and follower knowledge hiding, such that the mediating role of trust in the leader will be stronger for followers with low rather than high follower Machiavellianism |

and knowledge hiding, it supports theoretical claims on the value of moral disengagement within organizational contexts. Second, by identifying the mediating role of trust in the leader, the research adds to our understanding of how leader moral disengagement is associated with follower knowledge hiding. Lastly, by examining the moderating role of follower Machiavellianism, our study offers a more comprehensive view of which personality traits are adequate in explaining knowledge hiding for a leader with moral disengagement.

More specifically, the first contribution is to construct and analyze a conceptual model that reflects on the possible influence of the leader's moral disengagement on the follower's knowledge hiding. As noted earlier, the identification of factors that engender knowledge hiding has become a major research subject in the management field (Zhao *et al.*, 2016). Although leadership has been acknowledged as an important situational factor that may have a major impact on the follower's knowledge hiding/sharing (Xia *et al.*, 2019), research has yet to systematically examine the effect of a leader's moral disengagement on the follower's knowledge hiding.

Second, even though our study indicates that leadership is identified as a particularly important factor stimulating the hiding of knowledge among followers, very few is known about possible mechanisms by which leaders influence the hiding of knowledge among followers (Zhao and Xia, 2019). In this regard, our study provides an important theoretical perspective to understand why followers under leader moral disengagement are more likely to be involved in hiding their knowledge, through examining and confirming trust in the leader as a mediator connecting leader moral disengagement to follower knowledge hiding.

Third, it has long been acknowledged that trust in the leader has a significant effect on positive organizational outcomes (e.g. Erkutlu and Chafra, 2016). However, there is not much research on how the moral and ethical dimensions of leadership impact trust (van den Akker *et al.*, 2009). This study is unique in explaining the connection of leader moral disengagement with trust in the leader. Specifically, as expected, our study shows that leader moral disengagement is negatively related to trust in the leader. We also introduce in this study important boundary conditions: follower Machiavellianism. By showing that leader moral disengagement has a stronger direct effect on trust in the leader for followers with low Machiavellianism, the findings of the study support the notion that followers can vary in their degree of receptivity to leadership effects (Wang *et al.*, 2018).

Implications of the study

As noted earlier, the volatile and uncertain climate has driven contemporary organizations to minimize the strong need for follower knowledge to hide. Therefore, from a practical point of view, our findings are significant as they offer an insight into how and where the moral disengagement of the leader increases the hiddenness of follower knowledge. The moral disengagement of the leader is related to the knowledge hiding of followers in our study. Organizations wishing to reduce the hidden knowledge should either create successful procedures for selecting leaders with strong moral standards or provide leadership training and learning programs.

Our results show that increasing followers' trust in the leader is also a beneficial strategy for preventing knowledge hiding. Leaders may also promote the growth of their sense of trust through their followers' fair treatment and sincerely care for the best interests of their followers. Although trustworthiness seems fairly straightforward, leadership selection should consider the personalities and drives of leadership candidates as certain very capable candidates are unwilling to establish trustworthy leadership relationships for different reasons (e.g. Machiavellian tendencies).

The moderating role of follower Machiavellianism shows that leader moral disengagement is not detrimental for all followers and that followers are not simply

inactive recipients of leader moral disengagement. Results reveal that organizations should help managers better understand why employees with different personalities are likely to hide knowledge while effective recruiting of personnel and allocation of jobs should be planned accordingly. For example, it is worth examining the background of job candidates, in particular the opinions of their former employers and peers on the temperament of the candidates. Although we cannot allow managers to determine the dark personality of candidates (e.g. Machiavellianism or psychopathy) in work interviews due to their hidden disposition and perception control abilities, managers should make good use of probationary employment periods to identify any behavioral or character problems relevant to such dark personalities. Identifying those new employees, who are high on these dark personality characteristics, may have long-lasting benefits for managers (Pan *et al.*, 2018).

Finally, provided that the sample under study consists of faculty members and their deans from Turkish universities, it would be appropriate to have an emphasis on the managerial implications that research findings can have in the university field from a managerial perspective. Higher education administrators, for example, must build an atmosphere that allows academic staff to exchange knowledge. Academic staff is more likely to be encouraged and inspired to disseminate and exchange information in a sharing culture than to keep it secret. As a result, collectively thriving teams will emerge. Higher education organizations should create training programs, particularly for administrators, to help instill moral values and attitudes, as well as trust in the administrator. Similarly, universities should host workshops for administrators and academic staff to address the advantages and disadvantages of knowledge hiding as well as the advantages of knowledge sharing. The collaborative culture of an organization is a significant determinant of knowledge-sharing behaviors among its employees (Witherspoon *et al.*, 2013). To minimize knowledge hiding and cultivate knowledge-sharing attitudes among academic staff, universities must foster a positive knowledge-sharing culture.

Conclusion

This study provides initial evidence that leader moral disengagement is positively related to follower knowledge hiding via trust in the leader in the workplace. Moreover, follower Machiavellianism plays a moderating role, whereby it strengthens the relation that trust in the leader has with knowledge hiding. Taken together, how and when moral disengagement matters most are clarified in our moderated mediation model. Our findings add to the literature on leadership and knowledge management by investigating the relationship between moral disengagement and knowledge hiding in the workplace through previously unexplored mediators and moderators. This study thus gives a springboard for future research to investigate other structures and expose the fundamental processes that prevent the hiding of knowledge.

Limitations

There are some limitations to note in the study which indicate the path for future studies. First, measurements, based on a questionnaire for all variables, can raise questions regarding the common method variance (CMV). As stated by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003), CMV can be reduced by gathering research variables from different sources and with time separation, as is the case in our research design. Harman's single factor test results also indicate that the model fits are poor and unacceptable. Thus, we believe that, even though CMV is present in this study, this is not a serious issue.

Second, our research is limited to cross-sectional design analysis. Even though moral disengagement has been viewed as a complex mechanism by which individuals disassociate themselves over time from their moral values (Bandura *et al.*, 1996), empirical research tends

to neglect the dynamic mechanisms through which employees are morally disengaged over time as a consequence of numerous interpersonal factors at work. In future studies, through a collection of longitudinal data, researchers may attempt to identify the situational factors in the workplace leading individuals to moral disengagement over time.

Third, this research is carried out in a single cultural context. This may open a debate of whether our findings could be generalized in other cultural contexts. The prevailing norms and dimensions of a national culture could influence knowledge hiding. For example, as a cultural dimension, uncertainty avoidance may affect knowledge hiding. In cultures of high uncertainty avoidance, more organizational activity structuring, more formal rules, and less risk-taking by managers and employees would be observed. On the other hand, in low uncertainty avoidance cultures, one would witness less organized activities within organizational settings, less formal rules, as well as more risk-taking by managers and employees. Low uncertainty avoidance organizational cultures are likely to have higher knowledge hiding than that of high uncertainty avoidance organizational cultures (Babič *et al.*, 2018). Researchers are, therefore, suggested to expand this study to other cultural contexts so that our findings can be cross-validated.

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