

# Impact of workplace ostracism on knowledge withholding behavior: Does job contract matter?

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## Abstract

Considering the lack of home ground generated theory and empirical evidence regarding the knowledge-withholding, workplace ostracism, and job contract. The current study was carried out to measure the impact of perceived workplace ostracism on knowledge-withholding behavior and the moderating role of job contracts in the relationship between workplace ostracism and knowledge-withholding behavior. Perceptual and cross-sectional data were collected from the employees working in the Nepalese co-operative industry. Among the surveyed employees, 329 responses were analyzed using SPSS. Positivist research philosophy and deductive reasoning approach were used to reach a conclusion from the quantitative data. This study revealed that workplace ostracism positively affects knowledge-withholding behavior. Job contracts moderated the relationship between workplace ostracism and knowledge-withholding behavior. Permanent employees' knowledge-withholding behavior was positively impacted by workplace ostracism. Temporary employees' knowledge-withholding behavior was not affected due to workplace ostracism. A number of implications and directions for future research are suggested.

**Keywords:** Moderation, Permanent employees, Temporary employees, Workplace ostracism, Knowledge-withholding behavior

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## Introduction

Ostracism in the workplace is a persistent problem, a severe and pervasive concern for today's enterprises (Hsieh & Karatepe, 2019). Workplace ostracism is the degree to which a person feels neglected or excluded at work (Ferris et al., 2008). According to O'Reilly et al. (2015), workplace ostracism is also called peer rejection, social exclusion, social isolation, desertion, and being "out of the loop." Indeed, ostracism has a detrimental impact on an employee's emotions and behavior, leading them to engage in various self-defeating actions (Haldorai et al., 2020). According to research, 66% of workers reported experiencing ostracism at work, while 28.7% said that coworkers purposefully departed the area when they arrived (Parker, 2019). Occupational exclusion significantly impacts targets' psychological, attitudinal, and behavioral consequences due to job stress (Zimmerman et al., 2016). Some examples of such effects include job discontent, decreased organizational engagement, subpar job performance, increased unproductive workplace conduct, and higher turnover intentions (Hsieh & Karatepe, 2019). Despite the topic receiving a lot of research attention recently, academics have paid very little attention to how its effects combine with the employees' characteristics (Liu et al., 2019), and almost no study in the context of Nepal as of this date.

Like how knowledge has evolved into a necessary resource in contemporary society, the rate at which individuals, groups, and organizations create and apply knowledge has steadily accelerated over time (Castells, 2011). Examining the literature reveals a very erratic picture of the causes of knowledge-withholding behavior and the theories that attempt to explain them. There hasn't been a systematic development of causal

justifications for information concealment. In contrast to the vast amount of studies on information sharing and contribution, contemporary research on counterproductive knowledge behaviors (such as knowledge withholding, knowledge hiding, and knowledge hoarding) is still surprisingly limited (Wu, 2020). According to a survey, 76% of workers participate in knowledge-hiding behavior. Instead of just not sharing knowledge, knowledge concealing is bad organizational behavior that entails suppressing it on purpose (Aljawarneh & Atan, 2018). Theoretically, there are differences between sharing and withholding (Kang, 2016). For instance, low levels of sharing may result from ignorance, whereas high levels of withholding demand knowledge. Giving and receiving have benefits and drawbacks (Lin, 2010). The current outbreak of the coronavirus serves as an excellent example of this. The exchange of information amongst medical professionals is helping to find the most efficient solution to the situation.

On the other hand, governments that suppress information may be able to prevent public fear. Even though it is incredibly challenging to motivate and encourage people to share their knowledge, this must be done. Because withholding knowledge could generate significant and expensive difficulties for organizations, academics are growing interested in counterproductive knowledge behavior (Serenko & Bontis, 2016). This is because withholding knowledge has become increasingly common.

Moreover, employees' situation is vital for their working environment. All the employees are not in equal status and condition, and such conditions and quality impact their behavior. One such condition is the nature of their employment contract. Their employment contract can be permanent or temporary, and job security is connected with the job contract. Permanent employees are more secure in their organization, but temporary employees are less certain. Job security determines the employees' behavior, of course, and temporary employees may not exhibit destructive behavior as they fear unemployment, especially in a less developed country. But permanent employees have secured a job and may demonstrate a certain level of dissatisfaction in the form of behavior at the workplace. Because of such behavior, they should not lose their job like temporary employees. Hence, permanent and temporary employees may have different knowledge-withholding behavior due to their workplace ostracism.

To address the issues raised in the previous sections. This study aims to measure the (a) impact of workplace ostracism on knowledge-withholding behavior and (b) the role of employees' nature of job contract (permanent or temporary) in the relationship between workplace ostracism and knowledge-withholding behavior in the context of employees working Nepalese co-operative industry.

## **Literature review**

### ***Knowledge-withholding behaviour***

Knowledge withholding is an umbrella term for several unproductive knowledge activities. Some examples include disengaging from knowledge sharing, knowledge hoarding, knowledge hiding, and incomplete knowledge sharing (Shen et al., 2019). Because of the inherent interconnectedness of knowledge, it is frequently unstated, which makes it challenging to determine whether or not a person is intentionally concealing information (Tsay et al., 2014). In contrast to keeping information to oneself, knowledge sharing may be easily identified and evaluated. Because of this, a significant body of published research has been devoted to elucidating why individuals choose to share their expertise. Knowledge withholding is standard, and its effects on organizational performance cannot be ignored. Although a commitment to promoting knowledge sharing is conducive to improving team creativity and improves organizational performance, knowledge withholding is also a common phenomenon (Peng, 2013). Therefore, despite the large number of studies that have been done on knowledge sharing and contribution, more and more attention has been paid in recent years to knowledge behaviors that are counterproductive. These include knowledge withholding, knowledge hiding, knowledge hoarding, knowledge sharing hostility, knowledge sharing ignorance, partial knowledge sharing, disengagement

from knowledge sharing, counter knowledge sharing, and knowledge sabotage. Knowledge sabotage intentionally prevents others from sharing their knowledge (Wu, 2020). The idea of concealing information came about due to the growing published research. Researchers initially thought of it as a combination of knowledge hiding and knowledge hoarding. Knowledge hiding is defined as the deliberate attempt to withhold or conceal knowledge that others have requested, and knowledge hoarding is described as accumulating knowledge that others do not demand. In the early stages, researchers viewed it as a combination of the two (Connelly et al., 2012). This definition is not simple by any stretch of the imagination because it only makes a statement about the scope of what information can be concealed. Therefore, Lin and Huang (2010) defined knowledge withholding as "the likelihood that individuals contribute less knowledge to others in the organization than they could" from the standpoint of withholding effort for the first time. This definition focuses on how individuals withhold information from one another. To be more specific, the term "knowledge withholding" is described as "an umbrella notion that covers several sorts of detrimental knowledge practices," such as "information hiding," "knowledge hoarding," "partial knowledge sharing," and "disengagement from knowledge sharing" (Shen et al., 2019). The description proposed by Shen et al. (2019) applies not only to many different research settings but also encompasses a vast number of different sorts of unproductive knowledge behaviors.

### ***Workplace ostracism***

Ostracism is a frequent occurrence that people can encounter. Ostracism can take many forms, including exile and banishment, silent treatment, and avoiding eye contact (Ferris et al., 2008). Research has shown that the same brain regions that respond to physical pain also react to social rejection. All four of a person's basic needs—the need for self-worth, belonging, control, and a purpose in life—can be threatened at once by racism (Williams, 2007). First, being excluded hurts one's self-esteem since excluded people often believe they have done something wrong or have undesirable traits. Second, being excluded makes marginalized people feel like they are cut off from the group they want to be a part of, negatively impacting their urge to belong. Finally, because others don't react to their behavior, alienated people feel less in control. Those who are isolated believe they are powerless to stop the isolation and, as a result, feel out of control. Last but not least, being shunned impacts a person's sense of purpose in life because it is a type of "social death" and illustrates what life would be like without them (Sommer et al., 2001).

Ostracism is not necessarily deliberate or intended as punishment. Sometimes people don't pay attention to others because they are too preoccupied with their tasks, leading to an accidental disregard for others and their replies (Williams, 2007). When people are ignorant of the socially exclusionary nature of their actions, racism can also be unintentional (Robinson et al., 2013). People unaware of their inaction may frequently experience this type of exclusion (Sommer et al., 2001). Ostracism can even be confusing because the target of it may or may not be aware that it is happening on purpose (Williams, 2007). Since this ostracism is not always intended to injure, the motive is not a factor in this description (Robinson et al., 2013). Conversely, ostracism is intentional when perpetrators know they are failing to socially engage the target and do so with the desire to harm and exclude them. As a passive-aggressive tactic, the silent treatment can be used to punish, retaliate, or harm the target person and avoid conflict, difficult social situations, or unpleasant feelings (Robinson et al., 2013). Yet, ostracism often has a negative effect even when there is no malice or aim because it might result in unpleasant experiences (Williams, 2007).

### ***Workplace ostracism and knowledge-withholding behavior***

When one actor's achievement of a result negatively impacts the achievement of the other player, this is considered outcome interdependence from the standpoint of social exchange theory. In other words, when circumstances are (seen to be) constructed in a negative interdependent fashion, one person's success is dependent upon the other person's failure. Hence, withholding is likely to be the better option when a

knowledge owner contemplates sharing or keeping their knowledge with someone they believe to be negatively outcome interdependent. This is due to the possibility that the information could serve as a method to success for both actors. Still, it would be illogical to divulge it if doing so would assist the other actor in achieving their objective (Poortvliet & Darnon, 2010). In other words, knowledge-withholding behaviors may be consistently predicted by negative interdependence. Knowledge withholding will reduce when employees (in positively interdependent contexts) have reasonable exchange expectations or relationships, whereas knowledge withholding will increase when they do not. Racism makes people feel less like they belong and identify with their workplace and organization. When people are excluded from the group, they feel like outsiders, making them feel different from their coworkers and threatening their sense of belonging (Williams, 2007). The social identity perspective (Turner et al., 1987) contends that people's perceptions of and identifications with others play a significant role in their attitudes and behaviors. Zhao and Xia (2017) and Zhao et al. (2016) examined the hypothesis that workplace rejection enhances knowledge hoarding and knowledge concealment. The following hypothesis 1 serves as the goal of this study:

Hypothesis 1: workplace ostracism positively impacts knowledge-withholding behavior. It means an increase or decrease in workplace ostracism causes an increase or decrease in knowledge-withholding behavior.

### ***The interactive role of job contract and workplace ostracism on knowledge-withholding behavior***

According to the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), people's key group affiliations give them a sense of value. There are many different groups that individuals may identify with. Examples include their nation, workplace, team, and professional field. People's conviction that their identity and the substance of the social category strongly intersect is the key to identification. Social identification theory was developed, at least in part, to explain why people occasionally act against their best interests when assisting an in-group they strongly identify with (Turner, 1978). According to social identity theory, individuals will work and even make sacrifices to benefit the group they identify with. This implies that people should be less likely to withhold information from others who are a part of the in-group when they identify with their organization, group, work unit, etc. Strongly identifying with their team or organization, employees are less likely to keep information from their coworkers. The later studies also discovered two moderators. To deal with being shunned, excluded people may, in the beginning, ethically distance themselves from their workplace. Second, those who are excluded might hold unfavorable attitudes about reciprocity, which implies they may be unkind to others who are unkind to them. As a result, when more employees are left out, they become more dependent on information as a resource and more secretive about their expertise. Permanent and temporary employees do not share the same level of identification with their team and organization. So, whether an individual has a permanent or temporary job contract affects how likely they are to be isolated at work and exhibit knowledge-withholding behavior. As a result, this research aims to test the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Job contract (i.e., temporary or permanent) moderated the relationship between workplace ostracism and knowledge-withholding behavior. It means the impact of workplace ostracism on knowledge-withholding behavior is not the same for temporary and permanent employees.

### ***Measures***

#### **Job contract**

Employees' job contract was measured as dichotomous variables. Employees were asked to choose their contractual status as either "permanent" (1) or "temporary" (2) to the question, "what is your job contract"? Respondents were asked to choose a permanent or temporary job status as defined by their human resource policy or job contract. If both human resource policy and job contract do not clarify the contract as permanent

or temporary, respondents were requested to choose temporary if they have a contract period of one year or less than this, otherwise permanent. Respondents were asked to select only one option so that all the respondents were divided into two categories.

### **Workplace ostracism**

Workplace ostracism was measured with Ferris et al.'s (2008) ten-item Likert scale. Sample items include: "Others at work treated you as if you weren't there," "Others avoided you at work," and "Others ignored you at work." All the measured items used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5). In this study, internal reliability was measured at .87.

### **Knowledge withholding**

The survey questions for the construct used five-point Likert scales, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Sample items are: "I usually do not share my professional knowledge and experience with my supervisor" and "I usually do not share helpful information with my supervisor." This study measured the internal reliability of the construct .79.

### **Control variables**

Few demographic variables like respondents' gender, age, experience, education, and designation were considered in the study. These variables were measured by creating ordinal numbers for statistical calculation in software. The effects of these demographic variables were controlled while calculating the coefficient of the independent variable and moderating variables to predict dependent variables. These variables were controlled in a regression model to have the actual effect of workplace ostracism and job contract on vertical knowledge-withholding behavior.

### **Respondents and survey strategy**

A set of questionnaires was prepared to comprise Likert-scale statements, a choice question, and demographic information. The survey was carried out among the employees working in Nepalese co-operative limited operated in Kathmandu valley. The list of co-operatives was taken from the co-operative division of Nepal. From the list, 15 co-operatives were selected randomly. Then after, questionnaires were distributed among co-operative staff with the help of a referent person provided by concerned co-operatives. Altogether 450 questionnaires were distributed within the 15 co-operatives, giving one week to fill up and return the questionnaire through an assigned referent person. Of the distributed questionnaire, 351 (78%) questionnaires were returned. Out of returned questionnaires, incomplete and unengaged responses were 22, which were not considered for further analysis. Hence, 329 (73.11%) responses were analyzed to measure the postulated hypothesis.

### **Data analysis**

Firstly, the reliability of the construct was measured to see the internal reliability of the construct. Secondly, the normality of the data was checked and ensured with the help of a Q-Q plot and histogram. Thirdly, the correlation of the study variable was measured to ensure heteroscedasticity. Multiple regression was carried out to measure the direct effect of workplace ostracism on vertical knowledge-withholding behavior after controlling the impact of demographic variables. A hierarchical regression model was used to measure the moderating effect of job contracts in the relationship between workplace ostracism and vertical knowledge-withholding behavior. A graph was used to show the moderating effect precisely and clearly.

### **Results**

As depicted in Table 1, the workplace ostracism of the employees working in the Nepalese co-operative industry was 3.27, with a standard deviation of 1.15. Likewise, knowledge-withholding behavior was 2.61, with a standard

deviation of 1.23. The correlations of the study variables were measured as expected. Especially correlation between knowledge-withholding behavior and workplace ostracism was as hypothesized.

**Table 1**  
**Correlation, mean, and standard deviation of the study variables**

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1) Gender	-	-								
2) Age	-	-	-.08							
3) Experience	-	-	-.10	.71**						
4) Education	-	-	-.06	.28**	.38**					
5) Designation	-	-	.18**	-.51**	-.48**	-.25**				
6) Job contract	-	-	.05	-.06	-.15**	-.15**	.12*			
7) Workplace ostracism	3.27	1.15	-.01	.39**	.32**	.03	-.17**	-.06		
8) Knowledge-withholding	2.61	1.23	.17**	.01	-.06	.03	.07	.17**	.35**	

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As depicted in Table 2, Model 1, gender was statistically significant in predicting knowledge-withholding behavior, and the contribution of the demographic variables in total was 4 percent ( $R^2 = .04$ ,  $F = 2.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Likewise, Table 2, Model 2, depicted that the coefficient of workplace ostracism to predict the knowledge withholding behavior was statistically significant ( $B = .40$ ,  $F = 8.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ) after controlling the effect of demographic variables. This indicated that hypothesis 1 is accepted. This model explained that the 3% ( $\Delta R^2$ ) variation in the model is caused by workplace ostracism.

**Table 2**  
**Regression result testing direct and interactive influence of workplace ostracism and union affiliation to predict knowledge withholding behavior**

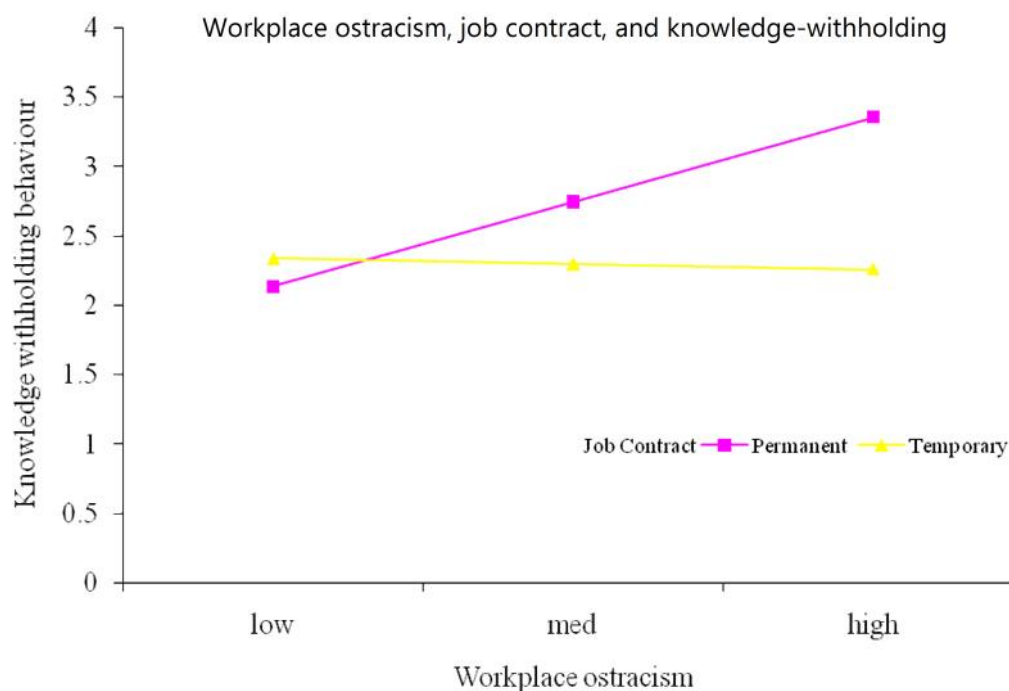
Independent Variables	Dependent variable: Knowledge withholding behavior			
	Model 1 (B)	Model 2 (B)	Model 3 (B)	Model 4 (B)
Step 1: Demographic Control Variables				
Gender	.40**	.39**	.36**	.05
Age	.23	.18	-.12	-.12*
Experience	-.20	-.16	-.25*	.00
Tenure	.20	.25	.40*	.08
Designation	.10	.07	.05	.05
Step 2: Main Effect				
Workplace ostracism		.40**	.45**	-1.38**
Step 3: Main Effect				
Job contract			.47**	-.04
Step 4: Interactive Effect				
Workplace ostracism X job contract				.56**
R	.04**	.03**	.16**	.71**
R <sup>2</sup>	.04**	.07**	.22**	.93**
F	2.79**	8.68**	65.29**	379**

\*\* , \* indicates significance at .01, and .05 levels, respectively

Similarly, as shown in Table 2, Model 3, to predict the knowledge withholding behavior, the coefficient of job contract (permanent or temporary), after controlling the effect of demographic variables and workplace ostracism, was statistically significant ( $B = .47$ ,  $F = 65.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This model indicated that a 16 percent

variation in the model was due to the effect of job contracts. Hence, the precondition of hypothesis 2 was accepted as outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986). Likewise, Table 2, Model 4, was computed to measure the moderating effect of job contracts in the relationship between workplace ostracism and knowledge-withholding behavior respecting the guidelines recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). This model shows that the interactive effect of workplace ostracism and job contract to envisage knowledge-withholding behavior was statistically significant ( $B = .56$ ,  $F = 379$ ,  $p < .001$ ) after controlling the effect of demographic variables, workplace ostracism and job contract. Besides the significant impact of interactive terms, the significance of  $\Delta R^2$  (Baron and Kenny, 1986) indicates the moderating effect of a variable in the relationship between independent and dependent variables. This model showed that the interactive effect of workplace ostracism and job contracts adds 93% ( $\Delta R^2$ ) variation in the model. Hence, hypothesis 2 was accepted.

**Figure 1**  
**Interactive effect of job contract and workplace ostracism on knowledge withholding behavior**



The significance of the change in  $R^2$  was used to measure the moderating effect of job contracts in the direct relationships of workplace ostracism to knowledge-withholding behavior. The statistical significance of the change in  $R^2$  due to the addition of the interaction term is typically used as the criterion to affect the size of the interaction. However, researchers Witt et al. (2000) have argued that the change in  $R^2$  does not adequately reflect the magnitude of the impact of the moderator variable. As noted by Witt et al. (2000), a limitation of using the change in  $R^2$  as the only estimate of the effect size of the interaction is that it provides a conservative estimate, as it reflects the average effect of a moderator across the entire range of values of a predictor. Interaction effects are presented in the graph suggested by Aiken and West (1991) to address this issue.

As depicted in Figure 1, the effect of perceived workplace ostracism on knowledge-withholding behavior was more severe for permanent employees than temporary employees. Temporary employees were almost unaffected by workplace ostracism to exhibit knowledge-withholding behavior. For permanent employees, the effect of workplace ostracism on knowledge-withholding behavior increased as the level of workplace ostracism increased. Moreover, in the case of permanent employees, employees' knowledge-withholding behavior was higher when their workplace ostracism was high and vice versa. But, in the case of temporary employees, the knowledge-withholding behavior was almost the same whether their perceived workplace ostracism was high or low.

## Discussion, conclusion, and implications

This study was carried out to measure the impact of workplace ostracism on knowledge-withholding behavior as well as the role of the job contract (permanent or temporary) in the relationship between workplace ostracism and knowledge-withholding behavior. This study revealed several findings. Firstly, this study showed that workplace ostracism positively affected knowledge-withholding behavior. This indicates that employees exhibit knowledge-withholding behavior if workplace ostracism is perceived. Chawla and Gupta (2019) discovered that organizational commitment, which suggests an emotional connection to the organization, has a negative relationship with knowledge concealment as a predictor of information-withholding behavior.

Similarly, Tsay et al. (2014) discovered that knowledge withholding is adversely correlated with affective attaching to the organization. This empirical evidence suggests that any harmful workplace situation or behavior is positively associated with knowledge-withholding behavior, but constructive conditions or behavior are negatively related to knowledge-withholding behavior. Hence, the organization can minimize workplace ostracism, so employees do not withhold their knowledge.

Secondly, this study revealed that job contract (permanent and temporary) moderates the relationship between workplace ostracism and knowledge-withholding behavior. This means that the relationship between workplace ostracism and knowledge-withholding behavior, and this relationship is not the same for permanent and temporary employees. Lastly, this study revealed that temporary employees' knowledge-withholding behavior does not change due to their perceived workplace ostracism. But permanent employees' knowledge-withholding behavior increased (or decreased) as perceived workplace ostracism increased (or decreased). From this perspective, procedural justice, distributive justice, and interactive justice have all been empirically confirmed to be significantly connected with a person's desire to conceal knowledge, according to Abubakar et al. (2019), Huo et al. (2016), and Pan and Zhang (2018). Also, the interdependence theory and the norm of reciprocity show that others influence a person's behavior. When there is strong interdependence and positive reciprocity between them, knowledge-withholding behavior is less likely to occur (Zhao et al., 2016). This means workplace ostracism does not equally affect all people, and it might differ due to personal situations as well as other justice factors.

Regarding the moderation of job contracts and no effect of workplace ostracism on knowledge-withholding behavior, the possible causes might be job security associated with the temporary job contract. Due to the fear of unemployment due to knowledge-withholding behavior, employees might not engage in counterproductive behavior. It means job security might play a vital role in having no effect of workplace ostracism on knowledge-withholding behavior, as there are chances of being unemployed when someone shows counterproductive behavior. Therefore, further study is necessary for the context of developed countries with low unemployment rates. Likewise, from the findings of this study, an organization can focus on minimizing perceived workplace ostracism to improve knowledge-withholding behavior because permanent employees have a severe effect of workplace ostracism on knowledge-withholding behavior.

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