

# Negative Workplace Gossip, Self-Esteem, and Knowledge Hiding in Project Management

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**Abstract:** Across industries worldwide, managing intangible human-related risks has become critical for sustaining project governance and production efficiency. This study identifies and empirically tests a critical gap in project and production management literature by linking interpersonal behaviors such as Negative Workplace Gossip (NWG) to Knowledge Hiding (KH) and Organization-Based Self-Esteem (OBSE). NWG is conceptualized as a risk that undermines communication, depletes psychological resources, and disrupts knowledge transfer. A cross-sectional survey of 308 employees was analyzed using SPSS and PROCESS Macro. The results demonstrate that NWG significantly reduces OBSE and increases KH, while OBSE partially mediates this relationship. Collectivism moderates both the direct and indirect effects, weakening the negative influence of NWG on OBSE and its positive effect on KH. These findings fill a contextual gap by extending Conversation of Resource (COR) theory into project-based environments and comparing implications for collectivist cultures such as Saudi Arabia with broader global project management settings. From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that project managers need to address gossip and knowledge hiding as hidden project risks, promote OBSE, and leverage collectivism values. Conflict management training, transparent communication systems, and organizational culture interventions can mitigate gossip-driven risks. As part of Saudi Vision 2030, the research demonstrates how managing interpersonal interactions can foster improved communication and innovation. Although the empirical context is Saudi Arabia, the conceptualization of hidden risks in projects has broader relevance for international project management.

**Keywords:** Negative workplace gossip, knowledge hiding, organization-based self-esteem, collectivism, project governance, project management, human Factors.

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## 1. Introduction

Under Vision 2030, which fosters diversification, infrastructure, large-scale projects, and innovation-led production systems (Al-Ribdi, 2020; Alshammari et al., 2023), Saudi Arabia is undergoing a quick-track change in its industrial and project settings. Achieving Vision 2030 demands not only cutting-edge technology but also efficient project governance, communication, and both operational and psychological team resilience. In a production context, these disruptions can lead to coordination failures, design flaws, rework, or delays, framing NWG not just as a source of psychological distress but

as a direct project risk. One of the most common but often less monitored and intangible risks to performance is negative workplace gossip (NWG).

Gossiping in the workplace about a colleague without their participation, also described as negative workplace gossip (NWG), is detrimental to trustworthiness, collaboration, and information flow (Cheng et al., 2023). In a project context, these disruptions can lead to failure to coordinate with one another, and potential failures in design, rework, or delays, making NWG again less about psychological distress and more of a project risk. One behavioral response to NWG is knowledge hiding (KH), which occurs when employees purposely withhold knowledge, act as if they are ignorant, or provide partial knowledge when asked (Yang and Ribiere, 2020; Yao et al., 2020). In production, KH can stall knowledge transfer between project stages, decrease problem-solving capabilities, and create risks to product quality or safety (Tandelilin et al., 2023).

The COR (Conservation of Resources) theory provides a practical structure for understanding these risks in relation to project management. COR holds that employees intentionally use and conserve personal and organizational resources when faced with stressors (Bass et al., 2023). In project contexts, OBSE (organization-based self-esteem) or the employee's perception of personal value to the project team operates as a psychological resource that behaviorally determines resilience/engagement and level of participation (Ahmed et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). When NWG undermines OBSE, it can lead to employee disengagement from sharing knowledge and developing project innovation, likely jeopardizing project resilience and efficiency. When engineers and project staff have high OBSE, they are more likely to engage in project team coordination and knowledge transfer, thereby supporting project momentum.

The reaction of teams to NWG is also shaped by cultural influences. Relevant in Saudi project settings, which are shaped by Islamic and tribal civilizations, collectivism emphasizes loyalty, group harmony, and shared purpose (Hofstede, 1980; Lacko et al., 2020). In projects like construction, IT, or energy megaprojects, a collectivist approach might boost team unity, lower personnel turnover, and enable knowledge integration. It may also raise conformity-based peer pressure, thereby increasing stress for staff members who feel they are being marginalized (Chen et al., 2024). Understanding the moderating influence of collectivism offers valuable insights for managing human factors in project management.

Though there is expanding literature on workplace gossip and hostile environments in organizational settings (Pertiwi et al., 2024; Zou et al., 2020), little is known about these interactions within project and production management, particularly in non-Western or collectivist cultural contexts. Previous studies in Europe and East Asia have looked at the psychological consequences of gossip, but little is known about its operational effects on information transfer, coordination, and project results in Middle Eastern project-based systems. This study bridges this research gap by empirically investigating how NWG and OBSE interact to influence KH in project-based organizations in Saudi Arabia and comparing the theoretical implications from cross-cultural viewpoints. Thus, it draws on COR theory while also extending its application within project management. To conclude, this study answers three important questions:

1. How does NWG affect knowledge hiding in project and production contexts?
2. Does OBSE mediate the relationship between NWG and KH, shaping team resilience?
3. How does collectivism moderate the impact of NWG on OBSE and KH in project teams?

Framing gossip and knowledge hiding as human element risks influencing project performance indicators like schedule adherence, communication efficiency, and production results helps to advance project management research. By extending COR theory and including cultural dimensions, the study also contributes a cross-contextual understanding pertinent to project-based enterprises in both Saudi Arabia and other global industries.

## **2. Conceptual Background**

### **2.1. Negative Workplace Gossip in Project Settings**

Negative workplace gossip (NWG) refers to the sharing of harmful or negative information about an employee in their absence. (Zou et al., 2020; Cheng et al., 2023). In organizations that are project-based, gossip is not just a minor social problem; it can act as a risk factor that slowly destroys communication, coordination, and trust among project teams. Consequently, the poor communication resulting from gossip leads to design flaws, rework, delays, and safety incidents, which carry significant consequences in engineering and production systems. Consequently, NWG may be regarded as a powerful and hidden disruptor of project governance and performance. Although considerable research has examined the psychological effects of gossip in traditional offices, its operational impacts on project and production management remain sufficiently under-investigated, particularly in cultures where relationships and group harmony in the governance system. The lack of empirical research in this area has created a significant gap that this study seeks to fill.

### **2.2. Knowledge Hiding and Project Performance**

Knowledge hiding (KH) refers to an employee's intentional withholding of requested knowledge. Employees can hide knowledge by pretending not to know something, not responding to the question, or only ever providing incomplete knowledge (Xia et al., 2022). In project settings, KH disrupts direct knowledge transfer between phases and prevents an effective handover from design to planning to implementing teams. This limits the organization's ability to innovate, resolve technical questions and maintain productive momentum (Yang and Ribiere, 2020; Tandelilin et al., 2023). If such behavior continues, KH leads to project overruns, quality issues, and schedule delays, three of the most serious lagging indicators in project and production management. Yao et al. (2020) demonstrated this defensive mechanism by showing how negative workplace gossip directly fosters knowledge hiding through fear and distrust, providing a foundation for the present study. However, most of these studies have been conducted in Chinese or Western organizational contexts; their transferability

to Middle Eastern project environments remains uncertain. The present study therefore extends this line of inquiry by investigating how gossip-induced KH operates in Saudi Arabia's project governance systems, which are characterized by strong collectivist norms and rapid industrial transformation.

### **2.3. Organization-Based Self-Esteem as a Project Resource**

Organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) reflects an employee's sense of self-worth and competence, which increases with recognition within their organization (Ahmed et al., 2023, Zhang et al., 2023). OBSE in the project environment acts as a psychological shield that fosters the team's resilience, participation, and ability to invent new things. High OBSE employees are more likely to present their knowledge and skills, work together with different departments, and help in completing project tasks on time. In contrast, lower OBSE may contribute to disengagement and defensive behaviors (e.g., KH) or lessen problem-solving capacity, all of which may negatively affect project outcomes. While OBSE has been previously examined in leadership and motivation research, its relevance as a psychological "resource" in project-based organizations has not been sufficiently theorized. This study therefore advances OBSE as a core construct linking COR theory to project management performance.

### **2.4. Collectivism and Project Team Cohesion**

Collectivism values allegiance to group identity, collective accountability, and the prioritization of team objectives over individual aspirations (Lacko et al., 2020; Han et al., 2021). In large-scale production initiatives, collectivism serves as a cultural resource for group cohesion and integrates knowledge across diversified functional units. Collectivist values, drawing on cultural and faith traditions, contribute to group harmony and help manage interpersonal disagreements among project teams in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Hofstede, 1980; Al-Ribdi, 2020). Conversely, collectivism could also instill the need for conformity which may heighten stress for employees when dealing with gossip or exclusion (Shaan, 2024). Prior comparative evidence suggests that collectivist norms may moderate gossip's influence differently across contexts, for example, mitigating interpersonal strain in East Asian cultures (Ma et al., 2022) but intensifying conformity pressure in Westernized hybrid teams (Darling and Whitty, 2019). Such cross-cultural differences highlight the importance in how collectivism exercises its moderating power, for example, within project-oriented systems in Saudi Arabia.

## **3. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses**

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory is a very beneficial framework for understanding interactions, including NWG's effects on KH and the influence of OBSE and collectivism on these relationships (Bass et al., 2023; Hobfoll et al., 2018). In project-based organizations, resources exist in both tangible (i.e., budget, equipment, time) and intangible forms (i.e., trust, collaboration, self-esteem). The occurrence of NWG depletes employee's psychological resources, leading to a decline in OBSE and, simultaneously, promoting KH dismissive behavior that negatively impacts project governance and performance.

Drawing on COR theory as a foundation, the present research enriches the context by considering OBSE as a distinct psychological resource in the project that affects coordination, communication, and innovation. Resource loss has been primarily discussed at the individual level in traditional COR applications. However, in project environments, such depletion manifests as disrupted information flows and delayed deliverables. Thus, incorporating COR theory into project and production management provides a linkage between behavioral resource dynamics and measurable organizational outcomes.

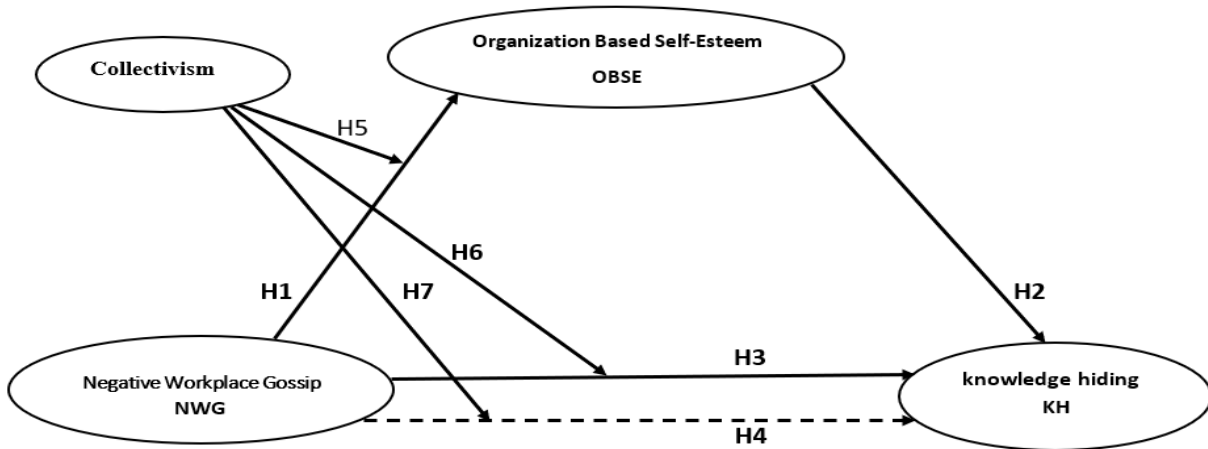
Moreover, by positioning collectivism as a moderating cultural resource, the framework not only fills a theoretical gap in COR-based models but also incorporates cultural buffers that alter stress-response dynamics. This dual-resource model consisting of psychological (OBSE) and cultural (collectivism) resources, extends COR theory to both micro and meso levels of project governance.

- H1: Negative workplace gossip (NWG) positively affects knowledge hiding (KH) in project-based organizations.
- H2: Negative workplace gossip (NWG) negatively affects organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) in project settings.
- H3: Organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) negatively affects knowledge hiding (KH).
- H4: Organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) mediates the relationship between NWG and KH.

Cultural values, particularly collectivism, dictate how employees respond to interpersonal stressors. In collectivist project contexts, strong collective ties and mutual commitment to a project goal will potentially reduce the damaging effects of gossip on self-esteem and discourage knowledge hiding (KH). Conversely, collectivism can exacerbate stress for an individual who fears exclusion. This dual nature makes collectivism a significant moderator in project-based work contexts.

- H5: Collectivism moderates the relationship between NWG and OBSE, such that the negative effect is weaker in highly collectivist project contexts.
- H6: Collectivism moderates the relationship between NWG and KH, such that the positive effect is weaker in highly collectivist project contexts.
- H7: Collectivism moderates the indirect relationship between NWG and KH via OBSE (i.e., moderated mediation).

The proposed relationships are summarized in the research framework (Fig. 1). This framework positions NWG and KH as human-related risks within project and production management and conceptually integrates COR theory with cross-cultural management perspectives. By linking psychological depletion (OBSE loss) and cultural buffering (collectivism), it provides a novel theoretical lens for understanding how interpersonal dynamics translate into project performance outcomes such as cost, schedule, and quality deviations.



**Fig. 1.** Research Framework: Human Factors in Project-Based Organizations

The framework shows the proposed relationships between NWG, OBSE, and KH, and collectivism. NWG is depicted as an invisible project risk factor that diminishes OBSE and encourages KH. Together, NWG and KH. act as barriers to knowledge transfer and coordination, both of which are critical to team functioning in project-based contexts. OBSE is examined as a psychological resource in this relationship, while collectivism is investigated as a cultural moderator of team dynamics and resilience in project environments .

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative cross-sectional method for the analysis of the interaction among negative workplace gossip (NWG), organization-based self-esteem (OBSE), knowledge hiding (KH), and collectivism on project and production outcomes. The use of a quantitative method allows for a broad examination of the purported relationships between human factors intertwined with NWG. This approach helps unravel the complexity of intangible risks, such as gossip, that underlie knowledge transfer failures, coordination breakdowns, and reduced project performance. The data are cross-sectional, muting the interpretation of causality. Although causality cannot be inferred due to the cross-sectional design, common-method bias was mitigated through procedural precautions and statistical measures.

### 4.2. Population and Sampling

The population comprises personnel from the public, health, education, and private sectors of Saudi Arabia. However, despite their differences in function, all these sectors are characterized by a project and knowledge-intensive work approach. Outputs such as infrastructure projects, health initiatives, educational reforms, or industrial services are delivered through these sectors via cross-functional teams. To capture the variation across project environments, a stratified random sample was used to ensure representation from the sectors. Sample size was determined according to Krejcie and Morgan’s (1970) guidelines to ensure that the statistical power for mediation and moderation analysis was adequate.

### 4.3. Data Collection

A bilingual (Arabic and English) survey was used to collect data to ensure clarity for both local and foreign project staff. The tool was first tested with a pilot group before deployment to check for accuracy and contextual relevance. Minor wording adjustments were made to ensure the items were relevant to project-based work environments. In order to reduce the social-desirability bias, the survey ensured anonymity and assured the participants that there were no “right” or “wrong” answers. The participation was optional, and no one in the supervisory position could see the individual answers. Furthermore, the scale items were randomized in order and wording to make it difficult for the respondents to pattern, thereby reducing acquiescence bias. A total of 356 replies were received, out of which 308 were retained after the processing for straight-lining, missing values, and outliers. Demographic information, including gender, age, years of experience, and sectors, is presented in Table 1. Notably, more than 42% of the respondents reported over 15 years of professional experience the sample’s inclusion of highly experienced project practitioners.

### 4.4. Measures

All of the measures were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree) and adapted to the context of the project: Negative Workplace Gossip (NWG) was assessed by a three-item He et al. (2023) scale, adjusted to highlight the risks in project communication. One of the items: “In the last half of a year, damaging information about me has been disseminated by coworkers or managers, and that has affected project collaboration.” ( $\alpha =$

0.892). OBSE was evaluated using a ten-item scale by Kanning and Hill (2012), which captured employee’s perceived worth in project teams. One of the items: “My inputs are vital for the project outcomes to be successful.” ( $\alpha = 0.927$ ). Knowledge Hiding (KH) was assessed with a three-item adaptation from Peng (2013), contextualized for project work. One of the items: “I occasionally do not share project-related information that others could use to finish their tasks.” ( $\alpha = 0.877$ ). Collectivism was measured using Yoo et al.’s (2011) six-item scale, which reflects team-oriented cultural values in project settings. One of the items: “The project’s delivery success of the team is more important than individual recognition.” ( $\alpha = 0.885$ ). To evaluate the possibility of common method variance, Harman’s single-factor test was conducted. The first factor accounted for less than 40 percent of total variance, which suggests that common method bias was not a major concern.

**4.5. Data Analysis**

Data analysis was performed using SPSS statistical software and the PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2013). The following procedure was followed: first, descriptive statistics served to profile respondents and identify project variables. Subsequently, reliability tests (Cronbach’s alpha) were performed to ensure internal consistency, followed by a correlation analysis to investigate the relationships among NWG, OBSE, KH, and collectivism. Ultimately, mediation and moderation models were examined using PROCESS (Models 4 and 8) with 5,000 bootstrap samples in order to determine the direct, indirect, and conditional effects. Although PROCESS is a regression-based approach, the results are interpreted in the context of project governance models and human risk factors, thus connecting employee behaviors to project outcomes such as communication efficiency, task integration, and production performance.

**4.6. Ethical Considerations**

The study followed ethical research practices. Participants provided informed consent, their identities are protected, and they can withdraw at any time. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained before the start of data collection. Ethical safeguards also acted as procedural safeguards against distortion and established participant’s confidence.

The selection of participants portrays a multi-faceted, well-versed labor force of professionals from knowledge-heavy project segments of Saudi Arabia, thus making the outcomes applicable to the governance issues of the public and private sectors alike.

**5. Results**

Data analysis was performed using SPSS with PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2013), applying a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 samples to estimate 95% confidence intervals. The results are reported in three stages: descriptive statistics and correlations, mediation effects, and moderation/conditional process analysis.

**Table 1.** Sample description

Variable	Classification	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	172	55.8
	Female	136	44.2
	Total	308	100.0
Age	Between 20 and 30 years	36	11.7
	Between 30 and 40 years	175	56.8
	Between 40 and 50 years	87	28.2
	Above 50 years	10	3.2
	Total	308	100.0
Years of experience	Less than 5 years	28	9.1
	From 5 to less than 10 years	70	22.7
	From 10 to less than 15 years	78	25.3
	15 years or more	132	42.9
	Total	308	100.0
Sector	government	86	27.9
	education	73	34.7
	healthcare	85	27.6
	private organizations	64	20.8
	Total	308	100.0

**5.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations**

Table 2 shows the average values, standard deviations, reliability coefficients, and inter construct correlations for all constructs. The Cronbach’s alpha values for all the scales were greater than 0.85, indicating that the internal consistency was very high.

Negative workplace gossip showed a significant negative correlation with OBSE and collectivism, but a positive correlation with KH. Collectivism was found to be positively correlated with OBSE and negatively correlated with KH. These results elucidate the underlying reason for the suppression of psychological resources and knowledge-sharing behaviors by gossip and enhancement of cohesion by collectivism. From a project governance viewpoint, these correlations

imply that the diminished OBSE and increased KH are not merely personal matters but also manifest operationally as reduced communication effectiveness and higher coordination risk.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics, alpha, and correlations between constructs (Fornell-Larcker method)

NO.	Construct	Mean	SD	Alpha	1	2	3	4
1	NWG	2.649	1.010	0.892	<i>0.908</i>			
2	OBSE	3.683	0.776	0.927	-0.526**	0.787		
3	KH	2.720	1.056	0.877	0.609**	-0.497**	0.897	
4	Collectivism	3.335	0.852	0.885	-0.426**	0.547**	-0.411**	<i>0.801</i>

Note: Negative Workplace Gossip (NWG), Organization-Based Self-Esteem (OBSE), Knowledge Hiding (KH).

\*\**: P < 001. The square root of AVE is typed in bold italic along the diagonal.*

### 5.2. Direct and Mediating Effects

To test hypotheses H1–H4, PROCESS Model 4 was employed. Results are presented in Table 3. The findings indicate that NWG was a strong positive predictor of KH ( $\beta = 0.608, p < .001$ ), meaning that gossip directly promoted KH secrets in project contexts. Furthermore, NWG was a strong negative predictor of OBSE ( $\beta = -0.373, p < .001$ ), indicating that gossip lowered the employee’s perceived value in the project teams. OBSE was a negative predictor of KH ( $\beta = -0.329, p < .001$ ). This confirms that OBSE played the role of a supporting resource in knowledge transfer. The mediation test showed that OBSE was a partial mediator of the relationship between NWG and KH (indirect effect = 0.123, 95% CI [0.06, 0.21]), meaning that gossip facilitated the increase of knowledge hiding in the project environments both directly and indirectly. In a practical sense, the outcomes of this research suggest that diminishing OBSE would result in project inefficiencies that are highly noticeable, as information transfer between design and execution teams get even slower, work is repeated, and the solving of problems is delayed thereby, considerably increasing the chance of schedule and cost overruns.

**Table 3.** Testing the direct and indirect (mediation) effect of SNWG on EKH

Predictors	Model 1 (KH)		Model 2 (OBSE)		Model 3 (KH)		Model 4 (KH)	
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>CI</i>
Gender	-0.014	-0.145	-0.026	-0.347	-0.022	-0.242		
Age	-0.045	-0.455	0.023	0.300	-0.038	-0.390		
Experience	-0.054	-0.782	0.129*	2.394	-0.115	-0.170		
Sector	0.121*	2.790	0.015	0.448	0.126*	3.001		
NWG	0.608**	12.609	-0.373**	-9.885	0.486**	9.039		
OBSE					-0.329**	-4.620		
Indirect Effect							0.123	[0.06; 0.22]
R <sup>2</sup>	0.392		0.309		0.432		-----	
F	38.935		27.121		38.190		-----	

Note: Negative Workplace Gossip (NWG), Organization-Based Self-Esteem (OBSE), Knowledge Hiding (KH).

\**P < 0.05 and \*\*p < 0.001.*

### 5.3. Moderating Effects of Collectivism

PROCESS Model 8 was used to test hypotheses H5 and H6. Table 4 summarizes the results. Interaction effects were important to both models. The interaction between collectivism and NWG reduced the negative influence of NWG on OBSE and the positive influence of NWG on KH. The simple slope tests indicated that at low collectivism level NWG had a bigger impact on OBSE it was more negative ( $\beta = -0.315, p < .001$ ) and in KH it was more positive ( $\beta = 0.533, p < .001$ ). When collectivism was high, these impacts were smaller (OBSE:  $\beta = -0.130, p < .05$ ; KH:  $\beta = 0.307, p < .001$ ). This implies that team norms of a collectivist nature keep communication flows stable and minimize the loss of productivity due to interpersonal conflicts, which in turn leads to better compliance with project timelines and quality criteria.

### 5.4. Moderated Mediation

The moderated mediation hypothesis (H7) was subjected to a trial by means of testing if collectivism was the factor that determined the indirect effect of NWG on KH through OBSE. The findings are presented in Table 5.

In collectivism’s low ranges, OBSE was found to be a considerable mediator in the relationship between NWG and KH. In collectivism's high ranges, the mediation was not significant, which indicates that the values of collectivism resist the eroding of OBSE thus minimizing the transferring of gossip to knowledge hiding in project teams.

The results indicate that NWG significantly damages interpersonal relationships, primarily by increasing knowledge hiding and suppressing knowledge transfer, through the negative influence on OBSE. A decrease in OBSE results in prolonged decision-making periods, poorer collaborative problem-solving, and reduced innovation capacity. Conversely, a high level of collectivism serves as a protective mechanism, mitigating negative impacts by fostering project unity, removing communication barriers, and ensuring efficiency.

**Table 4.** Testing the moderate effect of collectivism

Predictors	Model 1 (OBSE)		Model 2 (KH)	
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<b>B</b>	<i>t</i>
Gender	0.007	0.109	-0.043	-0.461
Age	0.001	0.010	-0.049	-0.502
Experience	0.077	1.554	0.010	0.154
Sector	0.012	0.392	0.129*	3.101
NWG	-0.222**	-5.427	0.420**	7.325
Collectivism	0.333**	7.348	-0.132*	-1.996
NWG × Collectivism	0.109*	2.667	-0.133*	-2.405
R <sup>2</sup>	0.428		0.449	
F	32.131**		30.534**	

Note: Negative Workplace Gossip (NWG), Organization-Based Self-Esteem (OBSE), Knowledge Hiding (KH).  
\*P < 0.05 and \*\*p < 0.001

**Table 5.** Direct effect of NWG on OBSE and KH when low and high collectivism

Moderator	Model 1 (OBSE)		Model 2 (KH)	
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
Collectivism (Low)	-0.315**	-7.582	0.533**	8.799
Collectivism (High)	-0.130*	-2.038	0.307**	3.590

## 6. Discussion

This study looked at the impact of negative workplace gossip (NWG) on knowledge hiding (KH), the mediating effect of organization-based self-esteem (OBSE), and the moderating influence of collectivism in project-based organizations in Saudi Arabia. The findings, based on the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, identify NWG as an intangible risk factor for projects that deplete psychological resources and hinder knowledge sharing, thus negatively affecting project management and production efficiency.

The study results revealed that NWG had a significant positive effect on KH (H1 supported). This is consistent with earlier findings by Yao et al. (2020), who argued that gossip creates fear and defensive knowledge withholding, and by Pertiwi et al. (2024), who found that negative workplace vibes agitate knowledge hiding. While Yao et al. (2020) studied this phenomenon in general Chinese organizational settings, the present research extended this relationship to project-based environments in Saudi Arabia, where KH directly affects project governance outcomes. However, while earlier studies largely discussed these effects in general organizational settings, the present study extends them to project-oriented environments, where knowledge hiding can have more immediate consequences such as delays, design flaws, and compromised safety standards. This contextual extension not only portrays gossip as a cultural or interpersonal issue but also as a direct operational risk factor in project delivery systems. Accordingly, the first research question was answered in this study by demonstrating that NWG considerably raises KH in project and production contexts, thereby affirming its role as an intangible project risk.

The second research question inquired: Does OBSE mediate the relationship between NWG and KH? The results showed that NWG had a reduced OBSE (H2 supported), and OBSE negatively predicted KH (H3 backed), and OBSE partially mediated the NWG-KH relationship (H4 backed). These findings are in line with Kong (2018) and Song and Guo (2022) who found that NWG not only reduces self-esteem but also indirectly leads to defensive reactions. Likewise, Ahmed et al. (2023) pointed out that OBSE is a factor of discretionary effort, which is in line with the current outcome of high OBSE minimizing knowledge withholding. This research adds a new layer by positioning OBSE, a form of “psychological capital”, as a critical, intangible asset within project governance systems that maintains communication networks and coordination. The weakening of OBSE leads to disintegration of project teams which eventually causes rework, prolonged resolution of issues and poorer quality outcomes. Therefore, the mediating role of OBSE links individual psychology to project performance, extending COR theory from the personal to the project level.

The third research question was: How does collectivism moderate the relationships among NWG, OBSE, and KH? The results indicated that collectivism mitigated the negative impact of NWG on OBSE (H5 supported), weakened the positive effect of NWG on KH (H6 supported) and moderated the indirect NWG–KH relationship via OBSE (H7 supported). These results are generally in line with those of Zhao et al. (2024), who found that collectivism lessens the impact of gossip on prosocial behaviors at work, and Ma et al. (2022), who reported that team collectivism keeps group dynamics intact even when the going gets tough. However, the results also partially contrast with those of Darling and Whitty (2019), who argued that collectivism could facilitate stress via conformance pressures. The present study integrates these viewpoints by illustrating a contingency: while collectivism lessens gossip’s direct effects on knowledge sharing, at extremely high levels, its protective function weakens OBSE’s mediating power, implying diminishing returns.

This research provides a distinctive Middle Eastern perspective, complementing previous studies in East Asian, European, and North American organizations by demonstrating the dual role of collectivism as both a resource and as a

constraint, depending on the intensity and context. It extends the geographic and theoretical boundaries of gossip research by integrating COR theory with cultural contingency models. This cross-cultural insight indicates that while gossip depletes resources universally, recovery mechanisms like group solidarity are culture-specific. All hypotheses (H1-H7) were supported. The present study is in agreement with the previous studies confirming NWG as one of the sources of workplace toxicity (Cheng et al., 2023; Kong, 2018) and KH as a defensive behavior (Zou et al., 2020). On the other hand, it broadens this area of research by casting these interactions in the light of human factor risks in project and production management, where they cause a more or less negative impact on coordination, knowledge integration and, finally, project success.

Theoretically, these findings not just bring about a change to the development of the COR theory but also demonstrate the relevance of OBSE as a resource pertaining to the project and its erosion as a reason for operational inefficiencies. Besides, they broaden the scope of cultural research by showing that collectivism is a moderator of the NWG–OBSE–KH pathway in Saudi Arabia, hence, adding to the global project management literature. The results verify that the combination of cultural and psychological resources is the main factor that influences the manifestation of human-factor risks in projects, thereby providing a more cohesive theoretical model that connects micro-level actions to macro-level performance results.

The practicality and policy implications are extensive. Project managers should classify gossip and KH as operational within risks in management frameworks, rather than treating them solely as HR issues. Effective mitigation would involve: (a) having structured conflict management and mediation systems that deal with interpersonal tensions at an early stage. (b) Provide training on communication protocols that encourage transparency and constructive criticism. (c) Implement organizational culture initiatives such as recognition programs, team briefings, and cross-departmental mentoring that support OBSE and shared accountability. Additionally, training modules that focus on emotional intelligence and ethical communication can assist managers in identifying and neutralizing gossip before it has a chance to interrupt the flow of a project.

Last but not least, these insights, being grounded in the Saudi Vision 2030 context, are still globally applicable. Regardless of the industry, informal communication networks present similar risks to international project teams (construction, IT, or engineering). To facilitate communication across cultures, interchange of ideas, and innovations, OBSE is to be treated as a major resource and collective practices of a healthy nature to be promoted, so that the team would consist of different cultural backgrounds and with good relations among them.

## **7. Conclusion**

This research examined the relationship between negative workplace gossip (NWG), organization-based self-esteem (OBSE), and knowledge hiding (KH) in Saudi Arabia's project-driven industries, and how collectivism influences those relationships. Using the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, this research redefines NWG and KH as intangible but measurable human-related risk factors that affect project governance, knowledge transfer, and production efficiency. The findings offer evidence that NWG negatively affects OBSE, which increases KH, and that collectivism serves as a cultural buffering factor.

The study offers several contributions to theory. It expands the COR theory body by clearly demonstrating that OBSE is a project-relevant psychological resource tied to project outcomes. The potential depletion of OBSE through gossiping directly implies negative employee behavior of KH, which obstructs the crucial knowledge flows necessary for successful project coordination and innovation. The study further includes cultural dimensions and indicates that the collectivistic aspect of a culture acts as a contextual moderator that strengthens team resilience in project settings but, at the same time, also increases conformity pressures. Thus, categorizing NWG and KH as intangible risks expands the conceptualization of project risk management to include human factors alongside conventional technical and financial risks.

The results suggest that the practitioners must consider gossip and KH as operational risks in project governance models. On the one hand, project managers should establish formal communication protocols and conflict management systems to reduce gossip, and CPD programs to promote OBSE and prevent KH. In addition, structured training on conflict resolution, ethical communication, and organizational culture-building should be implemented to strengthen psychological safety and foster trust. Embracing the advantages of collectivist cultural tendencies can advance cohesion and shared accountability in teams, but project managers should also be aware of the negative consequences of overstated conformity. Ultimately, embedding these practices in project governance systems can reinforce knowledge transfer between project phases, reduce the likelihood of schedule and cost overruns, and also lead to innovation. This directly benefitting Saudi Vision 2030 initiatives while offering transferable insights for international project environments.

This research offers significant revelations, but it also has its drawbacks. The use of a cross-sectional design restricts the drawing of causal conclusions, and a longitudinal study could be the best way to monitor the changes in gossip, OBSE, and KH throughout the different stages of the project. The use of self-reported data is susceptible to common method bias. This could be addressed in future research by employing multi-source data collection or observational methods. Also, the cultural setting of the research is confined to Saudi Arabia, which decreases the possibility of applying the findings to other cultures. Further studies comparing these dynamics across collectivistic and individualistic cultures would help determine their prevalence in global project teams.

Future studies could further this exploration by investigating the interactions between human factors like OBSE and collectivism and the project elements such as leadership styles, governance mechanisms, or technological enablers which include knowledge management systems and AI-supported collaboration tools. The integration of psychological, cultural,

and technological dimensions of project governance would be a big step forward in offering a more comprehensive framework for managing human-related risks in production and engineering projects.

The issues discussed are not limited to the Saudi Arabian context. The risks posed by human factors such as gossip and withholding of knowledge easily rise above national boundaries and affect global teams working in the construction, IT, energy, and healthcare sectors. By framing these behaviors as operational risks, this paper provides project managers around the globe with a framework to foster communication, improve knowledge transfer, and build robust teams in an increasingly globalized and complex industrial landscape. but also highlights these areas as critical concerns for project managers worldwide.

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### **Author Contributions**

Shahenda Said Habib contributed to conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data collection, draft preparation, and manuscript editing. Wael Zakaria Elsayy Elshanhaby contributed to conceptualization, theoretical framing, methodology, validation, supervision, and manuscript editing. Osman Elsayy contributed to conceptualization, analysis, interpretation of results, supervision, and manuscript editing. Amr Noureldin contributed to methodology, data collection, analysis, draft preparation, manuscript editing, project administration, and served as the corresponding author. Mohamed Aboueldahab contributed to data analysis, interpretation, visualization, manuscript editing, and validation. Reem Elbolok contributed to investigation, data collection, analysis, and manuscript editing.

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### **Institutional Review Board Statement**

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### **Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools**

The authors confirm that no AI tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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