

THE HIDDEN FACTORS BEHIND KNOWLEDGE CONCEALMENT: A REVIEW-BASED FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

Organizational knowledge management fosters innovation, decision-making, continuous learning, and competitiveness. This can be readily accomplished in an organization through employee knowledge sharing. Yet, not sharing with others and concealing knowledge among employees in an organization has emerged as a significant impediment in organizations as it could prohibit the organization's ongoing growth and survival. Knowledge concealment is a compelling idea that has clear detrimental repercussions on organizations, as it stifles creativity and obstructs teamwork and collaboration, impacting organizational performance. This paper explores the hidden factors of knowledge concealment: internal competition, lack of rewards in knowledge sharing, psychological entitlement, leadership, and moral disengagement. Comprehensive studies have methodically scrutinized the different factors that lead to knowledge concealment. However, they are insufficient, as many studies have focused on the consequences, resulting in a lack of interest in investigating the factors. This research addresses the gap by examining the numerous factors that influence the existence of knowledge concealment in organizations through the literature review or survey approach. The findings of the literature review or existing research indicate that these factors have consistently demonstrated strong associations with knowledge concealment in previous studies. In addition, this study introduces a fresh conceptual framework that analyzes the hidden factors of knowledge concealment, hence offering opportunities for future research by other academics.

Keywords: *Hidden factors, knowledge concealment (KC), knowledge hiding (KH), knowledge management (KM), knowledge sharing (KS).*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is widely recognized as a vital resource that significantly influences the effectiveness and sustainability of organizations (Cen et al., 2024). As a finite and valuable asset, knowledge offers a strategic advantage that can enhance and sustain an organization's competitive position in the marketplace (Avotra et al., 2021). Numerous studies have emphasized the importance of effectively managing knowledge at the individual and organizational levels to drive organizational performance and success (Al-Hawamdeh, 2022). In today's knowledge-driven economy, organizations heavily invest in knowledge

management (KM) initiatives to collect, evaluate, and disseminate employee knowledge (Ali & Tang, 2022). Knowledge sharing (KS) is a fundamental component of knowledge management (KM), as employee knowledge is considered a valuable and enduring organizational asset (Joo et al., 2024). KS typically occurs through interactions and communication between two or more individuals (Osman et al., 2015). Implementing effective KM strategies, encouraging employee knowledge sharing, has enhanced organizational efficiency and strengthened competitive advantage (Fonseca, 2021). Moreover, KS has been positively associated with improved performance outcomes, cultivating employee creativity, and promoting innovative behaviour in the workplace (Luu, 2021). KS's significant impact on individual and organizational success has drawn increasing scholarly attention (Anand et al., 2021).

Regrettably, not all employees are willing to share their knowledge. The reluctance to share and a tendency to conceal knowledge can lead to wasted financial resources, weakened team collaboration, and disruptions in the overall effectiveness of knowledge management efforts within organizations (Arain et al., 2018). If this scenario occurs, it will impede the employees' capacity to acclimate and accommodate changes in their everyday lives (Osman et al., 2024). Despite top management's policy encouraging knowledge sharing, employees often avoid this behaviour at work (Xiong et al., 2021; Jasimuddin & Saci, 2022). Research indicates that when employees conceal knowledge from their colleagues, it can impede an organization's capacity to manage knowledge efficiently (Zutshi et al., 2021). Therefore, organizational development commonly perceives knowledge concealment as detrimental (Bhatti et al., 2023; Goncalves et al., 2023). Even though organizations often endeavour to cultivate a culture of sharing, numerous employees attempt to conceal their knowledge and experience (Ruparel & Choubisa, 2020). Knowledge concealment (KC), the intentional act of concealing or hiding knowledge from others, has emerged as a critical barrier in organizational settings (Akbarzadeh et al., 2022). Therefore, knowledge concealment poses a significant obstacle for organizations seeking to improve their knowledge management initiatives as it is difficult to identify the presence of information and its mostly unclear implications.

Concealing knowledge in organizations is distinguished as an unethical, harmful, and unproductive activity that impedes employee innovation and impacts organizational accomplishment by several researchers (Hernaus et al., 2019). Consequently, the prevalence of knowledge concealment significantly hinders its efficacy and development, the sharing process in an organization, and the administration of organizational knowledge (Afshar-Jalili, 2021; Siachou et al., 2021) as well as learning and development programs (Anand & Hassan, 2019). It worsens when there is a crisis in the organization that results in a lack of resources and, at the same time, causes staff to conceal knowledge to gain a competitive advantage (Rauf et al., 2024). As a result, the expression of originality, creativity, and collaboration is hindered, affecting the achievement of organizational objectives (Yingfei et al., 2021). Many studies have primarily examined the effects of knowledge concealment, resulting in a notable gap in understanding its underlying factors (Hoseinpour et al., 2022; Yingfei et al., 2021). Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by synthesizing these studies to reveal the hidden factors in knowledge concealment in Malaysia and suggesting a conceptual framework that could be utilized for future empirical.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview of Knowledge Concealment

There has been a notable increase in interest in the exploration of topics associated with knowledge concealment (Koay et al., 2020). Knowledge concealment is very visible as it has been studied in organizational studies, organizational behavior, leadership, and human resource management (Rezwan & Takahashi, 2021). In addition, the study has been

expanded across various disciplines, including information systems, higher education, and psychology (Ghani et al., 2020). Nevertheless, some academics have examined knowledge concealment across various domains, including its effects on individual and organizational performance, such as the quality of an organization's decision-making (Ghasemaghaei et al., 2021) and the implementation of decisions (Li et al., 2020). Likewise, organizations face significant challenges due to this concealment of knowledge and its failure to disclose it to others (Akbarzadeh et al., 2022; Isaac, 2022).

Studies have also shown that concealing knowledge leads to financial losses and worse-than ideal operational performance (Rubbab et al., 2022). This is consistent with the findings of the financial impact of concealing knowledge for the Fortune 500 companies was a substantial \$31.5 billion (Banagou et al., 2021). Knowledge concealment involves taking specific actions that might unexpectedly affect conditions and communication channels. Employees deliberately conceal knowledge for the sake of the organization (Arain et al., 2021). The lack of transparency among employees within diverse organizations can significantly hinder a company's ability to compete and grow, ultimately devastating customer relationships (Avotra et al., 2021). Consequently, it will impede the employees' capacity to acclimate and accommodate changes in their everyday lives (Anand & Hassan, 2019) and the individuals involved may suffer (Jha & Varkkey, 2018). The presence of KC in an organization significantly disrupts knowledge flow, hinders knowledge management efforts, and impairs the organization's overall performance and development (Afshar-Jalili, 2021). Nonetheless, the lack of transparency among employees, especially within diverse and dynamic organizational environments, can significantly impede a company's growth and competitiveness, potentially damaging customer relationships (Avotra et al., 2021).

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a structured literature review approach to systematically review and analyse the factors that may lead to knowledge concealment (KC) and knowledge hiding (KH). This secondary data was collected from credible academic databases such as Scopus, ScienceDirect, Web of Science (WoS), SpringerLink, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar. Both manual and computer searches were also performed using search terms of interest, such as "knowledge concealment" or "knowledge hiding". The inclusion criteria for articles were (i) being peer-reviewed articles, (ii) being published between 2015 and 2025, (iii) in English, and (iv) containing studies that focused on predictors, causes, and antecedents of knowledge concealment or knowledge hiding. Unrelated papers, non-English articles, book chapters and conference abstracts were excluded. Following the study selection process (including deduplication, abstract/title screening, full-text review), 80 suitable articles were included for final analysis.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 Development of the Proposed Model Based on the Previous Study

The concept of knowledge concealment (KC) was initially introduced by pioneering researchers Connelly et al. (2012), and since then, scholarly interest in the topic has grown significantly. Numerous studies have emphasized that employees who conceal knowledge hinder an organization's ability to manage knowledge effectively (Zutshi et al., 2021). Consequently, KC is widely regarded in organizational studies as unethical, detrimental, and counterproductive behaviour that stifles innovation and hampers overall organizational performance (Shah & Hashmi, 2019). The negative impact of KC is particularly exacerbated during organizational crises, where limited resources may drive employees to conceal knowledge in pursuit of personal or departmental advantages (Rauf et al., 2024). This behaviour undermines originality, creativity, and collaboration—factors critical to achieving

organizational objectives (Zhang & Min, 2021). Initially explored within the domains of organizational studies, organizational behaviour, leadership, and human resource management (Rezwan & Takahashi, 2021). This study is a structured review and synthesis of the literature, and only the numbered statements from this study are put forward. No original data were collected, and therefore, findings are based on theoretical knowledge and patterns forming part of earlier empirical and conceptual research.

4.1.1 Internal Competition

Internal competition specifically refers to situations where employees compete against one another for limited organizational resources, such as compensation, recognition, promotions, and status (Anaza & Nowlin, 2017). Often referred to as internal rivalry, internal competition encompasses the competitive dynamics within an organization, where individuals and departments vie for access to markets, technologies, and resources (Kaushal & Nyoni, 2022). This competition can lead to heightened interpersonal conflicts and anxiety among employees, particularly when they perceive that others may devalue or overshadow their knowledge and expertise. As a result, individuals conceal their knowledge and skills to preserve their competitive edge and social standing (Jordan et al., 2017). While internal competition drives employees to compete for rewards, resources, and recognition, it can also serve as a motivator for performance, pushing individuals to contribute to achieving organizational goals. Moreover, the presence of internal competition often leads to the concentration of power within certain individuals, where knowledge becomes a key asset that fuels further competition and accelerates organizational processes (Zhang & Min, 2021).

Prior research has shown that a strong motivating factor can significantly influence an individual's perception of competitiveness in the workplace, with such factors also having the power to alter this perception (Shirahada & Zhang, 2022). In environments where employees are concerned about the negative impact on their power or ability to outperform others, they are more likely to conceal their knowledge and engage in hostile behaviours toward colleagues (Oliveira et al., 2019). These individuals may also deliberately conceal or erase data for personal gain (Perotti et al., 2022), engaging in actions that ultimately harm organizational performance. Competitive individuals often prioritize their benefits and interests over the recognition, prestige, and rewards of others to protect their authority and status against rivals within the company (Hernaus et al., 2019). In professional settings, internal competition manifests when individuals seek to assert their superiority, often to the detriment of teamwork. Additionally, researchers (Anand et al., 2021) found that employees often conceal knowledge from others to protect themselves from potential humiliation and the emotional toll of losing social status.

4.1.2 The Lack of Rewards in Knowledge Sharing

Human beings inherently seek recognition and praise for their efforts in the workplace. Kurniawan and Anindita (2021) found that recognition, as a form of reward, significantly motivates individuals to share their knowledge. Consequently, organizations design extrinsic and intrinsic rewards to encourage employee knowledge-sharing behaviours. When employees are acknowledged for their contributions, it boosts their motivation and drives the organization's overall success. Asaari et al. (2019) revealed that recognition for performance improvement encourages employees to share knowledge, which ultimately enables organizations to deliver exceptional services through financial and non-financial incentives to enhance KS (Alias & Muslim, 2016). Moreover, research has shown that rewards enhance employee performance through financial rewards or other forms of recognition (Ali & Anwar, 2021). However, a lack of knowledge-sharing rewards can significantly hinder knowledge flow within organizations. Employees who perceive the absence of rewards, either through

insufficient public recognition or financial compensation, are less likely to share their knowledge (Anaza & Nowlin, 2017).

Employees not receiving recognition for their efforts are often demotivated to share their knowledge. Rațiu (2021) found that individuals are more inclined to conceal their knowledge without incentives. This behaviour can escalate over time, with employees increasingly concealing knowledge if they do not perceive sufficient benefits from sharing it (Kumar & Varkkey, 2018). Additionally, KS may be hindered by a lack of genuinely significant or pertinent information, especially when employees feel their contributions are undervalued or unacknowledged (Kumar & Varkkey, 2018). The absence of rewards has been consistently associated with KC. Employees may view KS as an additional, unappreciated obligation, especially without recognition or incentives. As a result, this can lead to reduced motivation and diminished willingness to help colleagues, ultimately affecting organizational performance (Kumar & Varkkey, 2018). The lack of rewards can significantly negatively impact employee productivity, as recognition and rewards are crucial in driving performance and organizational success (Masri & Abubakr, 2019). Furthermore, organizations that implement strategies for employee recognition tend to see improved morale and enhanced performance levels (Hee & Rhung, 2019).

4.1.3 Psychological Entitlement

Psychological entitlement has increasingly become a subject of both conceptual and empirical investigation across multiple research domains, including marketing (Kemper et al., 2022), ethics (Chen et al., 2023) and education (Tan, 2016). Psychological entitlement is defined as a stable, pervasive belief that an individual deserves more than others, regardless of their performance or contributions (Stenius et al., 2016). This sense of entitlement is reflected in both desired and actual behaviours and pertains to individuals who consistently believe they deserve exceptional rewards and treatment, irrespective of their inherent qualities or performance levels (Campbell et al., 2004). Individuals with high psychological entitlement believe they deserve preferential treatment or should be regarded as unique in social contexts. They maintain a positive self-image and expect favourable outcomes in significant situations (Farooq & Sultana, 2021).

Psychological entitlement increasingly concerns contemporary businesses and managers (Harvey & Dasborough, 2015). Jordan et al. (2017) found that psychological entitlement, particularly in organizational psychology, is increasingly prevalent among younger individuals. This trend is gaining greater attention from both scholars and organizational managers, as also indicated by Priesemuth & Taylor (2016). This sense of entitlement is commonly linked to several detrimental personality traits, such as greed, aggression, a lack of forgiveness (Campbell et al., 2004), narcissism, and poor self-control (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Employees exhibiting high psychological entitlement may engage in abusive behaviours towards colleagues and are more likely to participate in political behaviours (Eissa & Lester, 2021). Additionally, they often employ effective yet ethically questionable strategies, such as expressing discontent at work, mistreating others, encountering relationship difficulties, and perceiving supervisors as abusers (Harvey & Harris, 2010). Research indicates that individuals with high psychological entitlement are more prone to deviant behaviours, unethical negotiation tactics, and unproductive workplace actions. This includes self-centred sharing of organizational information (Alnaimi & Rjoub, 2021), abusive supervision (Eissa & Lester, 2021), and involvement in corruption (Lin et al., 2023). Despite these tendencies, these employees frequently encounter subpar performance outcomes (Joplin et al., 2021) due to their counterproductive behaviours (Neville & Fisk, 2019).

4.1.4 Leadership

Leadership is crucial in fostering employees' active engagement with the organization (Joo et al., 2024). It has been shown that leadership enhances knowledge management and boosts organizational performance (Gui et al., 2024). Leaders can shape the work environment to encourage collaboration, helping employees achieve organizational goals (Ugwu et al., 2020). González et al. (2019) noted that leadership styles can influence both subordinates and organizational transformation, though their effectiveness may vary depending on how employees respond. Effective leadership, aligned with employees' job priorities and personalities, significantly improves employee performance (Choi et al., 2020). Moreover, a supervisor's leadership style can directly impact employees' willingness to share their knowledge with others (Usman et al., 2024). However, knowledge sharing can sometimes lead to criticism and negative feedback, depending on an employee's confidence level (Runhaar & Sanders, 2016). Therefore, cultivating a clear vision and implementing performance-oriented training and reward systems (Deng et al., 2019) can boost employee confidence and enhance task effectiveness. Leaders who create such environments can promote knowledge sharing and reduce the tendency to conceal knowledge (Scuotto et al., 2017). However, despite these efforts, employees with varying levels of self-efficacy may still intentionally conceal knowledge (Joo et al., 2024). Thus, the impact of leadership style on knowledge sharing can differ significantly across employees (Choi et al., 2020). Leadership can be categorized into two main types: transformational and transactional leadership of which transformational leadership is widely regarded as the cornerstone of effective leadership (Ugwu et al., 2020). Ladan et al. (2017) described transformational leaders embodying respect, integrity, and ethical conduct. These leaders inspire employees by elevating their aspirations for success and personal growth, fulfilling their drive for accomplishment. Masa'deh et al. (2016) further extended this concept, defining transformational leadership to help individuals achieve their goals while enhancing overall organizational performance. In contrast, transactional leadership is based on a reciprocal relationship between leaders and employees, where employees are rewarded for meeting established expectations (Ugwu et al., 2020). This leadership style involves two main components: contingent rewards and management by exception. Transactional leaders closely monitor employee performance and intervene only when mistakes or deviations from set expectations occur (Joo et al., 2024).

4.1.5 Moral disengagement

Moral disengagement is a psychological characteristic that influences how individuals process ethical decisions and engage in unethical behaviour without experiencing distress (Moore et al., 2012). This concept was further developed by Moore et al. (2015), who described it as a process involving the interaction between cognition, organizational cues, and reciprocal causality. Moral disengagement has been associated with unethical behaviour that benefits the organization (Lian et al., 2022), social loafing (Alnuaimi et al., 2010), and workplace harassment (Kowalski et al., 2021). According to Bonner et al. (2016), based on the moral disengagement theory, individuals who violate their ethical standards often experience self-condemnation and discomfort. They alleviate this unease by providing spurious justifications for their unethical conduct (Bandura, 2014). The theory posits that when newcomers endure hazing by more experienced employees, they disconnect from both personal and organizational ethical standards, leading to moral disengagement. Individuals typically refrain from immoral actions due to the guilt and discomfort they generate (Bonner et al., 2016).

Studies have confirmed that employees with high levels of moral disengagement are more likely to set examples promoting lax standards and unethical behaviours, as they do not view such actions as unacceptable (Bonner et al., 2016). For example, moral disengagement has been identified as a cognitive process variable that examines how leader humility

influences subordinates' mental justifications for and/or minimization of deviant behaviours (Valle et al., 2019). Men et al. (2020) proposed that a leader's relationship with followers—marked by moral displays, openness, commitment, and benevolence—can foster an environment where knowledge is shared freely, and employees can express themselves without fear of negative consequences to their career, status, or self-image. However, recent studies by Erkutlu and Chafra (2023) found that leaders with high moral disengagement fail to consider the ethical implications of their actions and judgments. These leaders often engage in behaviour such as deceiving without remorse, concealing and manipulating the truth, gossiping, and participating in organizational deviance and unwanted behaviours.

4.2 UNDERPINNING THEORY: SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

This study used the Social Exchange Theory (SET) as the theoretical foundation to explain knowledge concealment. SET offers a strong theoretical foundation for explaining why, in some contexts, individuals choose to conceal their knowledge when exchanges (whether social or economic) are perceived as imbalanced or without reciprocity. In addition, this theory contributes not only to enhancing the explanation of the influence of each factor, but also to increase the analytic quality of the proposed conceptual framework. Through grounding the claims on a strong theoretical background, this structure receives added academic rigor and is more likely to undergo future empirical testing.

5.0 THE PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In the proposed framework, the author chose to include variables that have the strongest supporting evidence regarding the hidden factors of KC. This framework could serve as a valuable roadmap for future studies exploring these factors, particularly within under-explored sectors in Malaysia, such as the public sector, higher education, and agriculture. These sectors have often been overlooked in KC research, presenting opportunities for deeper investigation.

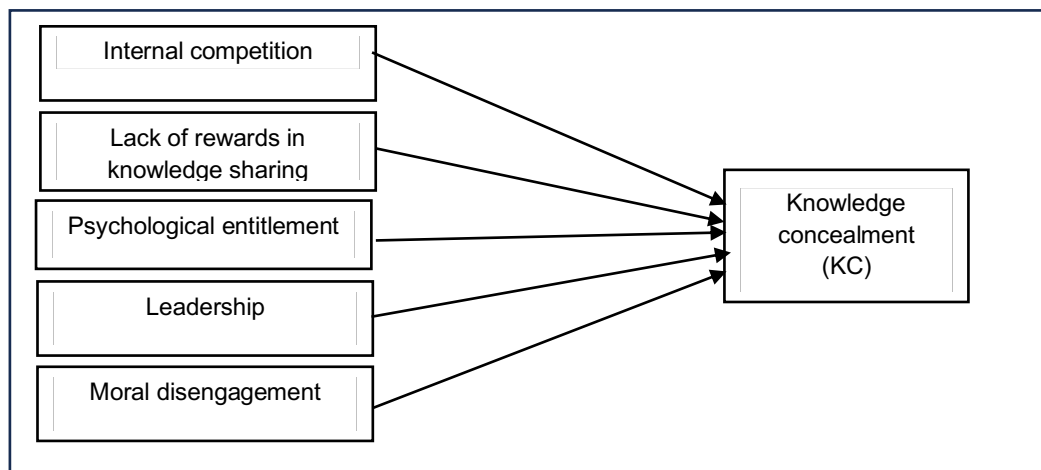


Fig. 1. Proposed Conceptual Framework (constructed by authors)

6.0 DISCUSSION

This article explores the various hidden factors that contribute to KC as identified by several authors. A literature review reveals that these factors have been extensively studied, and robust findings regarding KC have been found. The growing trend of internal competition has significantly contributed to KC, which starkly contrasts with KS. This trend underscores the

increasing importance of effective KM. Employees tend to conceal knowledge when sharing it, which offers no tangible benefits (Pereira & Mohiya, 2021). Research has shown that internal competition has a positive impact on KC in various sectors, including the financial sector (Xiaolong et al., 2021), academics (Hernaus et al., 2019), and the manufacturing and service sectors in Pakistan (Iqbal et al., 2022). In addition, the lack of rewards in knowledge sharing is a frequently tested factors of KC. As organizations encourage employees to share knowledge, rewards are a key motivator in fostering a culture of sharing. It has been demonstrated that rewards help reduce KC, particularly in teams working on new product development (Min & Zhang, 2023).

Furthermore, psychological entitlement has emerged as significant factors in KC. A sense of entitlement and an inability to separate personal interests from organizational objectives can foster corrupt behaviours. Corporations with less competition, larger scales, and early-stage development are likelier to perceive corruption as beneficial (Lin et al., 2023). Ultimately, such behaviours are inefficient and deviant, as employees who perceive themselves as deserving but not adequately compensated are more prone to engaging in unethical actions (Loi et al., 2020). The next factor is leadership in reducing the likelihood of subordinates concealing knowledge (Usman et al., 2024). According to prior research (Scuotto et al., 2017), transactional and transformational leadership influence employee KC. Lastly, moral disengagement is another important driver of KC. Previous research has also established a link between moral disengagement and the tendency to conceal knowledge (Men et al., 2020). Additionally, Khan et al. (2023) confirmed that moral disengagement positively affects KC, arguing that employees who conceal knowledge contribute to the erosion of moral values within organizations. A study conducted in Turkey also supported this, finding that moral disengagement positively influences KC (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2023).

7.0 CONCLUSION

This paper explores five hidden factors of KC that have been extensively researched: internal competition, lack of rewards in knowledge sharing, psychological entitlement, leadership, and moral disengagement. The significance and relevance of these factors are clearly explained, offering valuable insights for future researchers in the domain of KC. While most extensive studies have systematically examined the consequences of KC, they have often overlooked the underlying factors that lead to its occurrence. This gap highlights the pressing need for further research on the factors of KC, as emphasized in previous studies. The significance of these aspects is concisely explained to offer valuable insights and contribute to researchers' knowledge in future studies on KC. Thus, it is evident that there is a tremendous need for research on the determinants of KC based on the suggestion from the previous study.

8.0 SUGGESTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study seeks to establish a robust foundation for future research endeavors, particularly in developing countries such as Malaysia, where KC remains an underexplored and critical issue. By presenting a conceptual framework that outlines key factors influencing KC, this research aims to highlight the unique challenges and opportunities present in these contexts. Future studies can leverage this framework to delve deeper into the nuanced dynamics of KC, enhancing the understanding of how cultural, economic, and institutional factors interact and their implications for innovation and development in Malaysia and similar regions.

CO-AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Suhaila Osman is the principal author of the manuscript. Norhayati Hussin and Mohd Sazili Shahibi contributed by commenting on and reviewing the entire manuscript to ensure its quality. All authors contributed to and approved the final manuscript.

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DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

While preparing this article, the author utilized Quillbot Premium and Grammarly to examine and edit the content and accept full responsibility for the writing and publication.

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