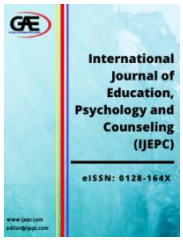
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PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING BEHAVIOUR IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

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Abstract:

The shift to digital and hybrid work has fundamentally changed how employees communicate and share knowledge. Virtual teams bring clear advantages of flexibility and efficiency, but heavy dependence on digital platforms often diminishes face-to-face interaction and poses communication challenges. This makes workers often reluctant to share their expertise, opinions or insights. That's why psychological safety is so important in remote environments as employees need to believe they can ask questions, express their concerns, or share new ideas without being subject to harsh criticism or judgement. Although research on psychological safety and knowledge sharing has increased, the precise relationship between the two in virtual settings remains underexplored. This conceptual paper draws on Social Exchange Theory to examine the proposed relationship between psychological safety and knowledge-sharing behaviour in virtual teams, with psychological safety as the independent variable and knowledge sharing as the dependent variable. The framework proposed based on a narrative review suggests that employees, when they perceive safety and support, view this positive environment as a social resource and respond by proactively sharing their expertise. Ultimately, this paper provides greater theoretical insight into virtual team dynamics as well as practical strategies for managing remote staff collaboration.

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Introduction and Background

Digital technology has changed organisational practices across many industries (Contreras et al., 2020; Ford et al., 2021). Many organisations now use hybrid work, virtual collaboration platforms, and online communication tools. These arrangements can make work more flexible and efficient. Virtual teams have also become more common as remote work continues to grow (Ford et al., 2021). Instead of meeting face to face, employees often work and exchange information through digital platforms.

Virtual teamwork offers many benefits, but it also creates communication challenges. Employees may have fewer social interactions and may find it harder to build relationships online (Contreras et al., 2020). Misunderstandings can also happen because digital communication provides fewer emotional and non-verbal cues. These difficulties may make employees more careful about sharing their ideas, opinions, and expertise.

Organizational knowledge only becomes valuable when employees actively share it. Through knowledge exchange, team members learn from each other, resolve workplace challenges, and drive innovation (Nguyen et al., 2022; Wang & Noe, 2010). Possessing expertise, however, does not automatically translate into sharing it. Many employees hold back out of fear of criticism or rejection—a hesitancy that intensifies in virtual environments where the lack of physical cues often leads to misconstrued messages.

This is where the concept of psychological safety is so important. Edmondson (1999) defined psychological safety as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking. It enables team members to ask basic questions, express their disagreements, or admit their mistakes without fear of humiliation or retaliation. This kind of safety net creates the confidence to communicate in spite of distance in remote arrangements where communication is entirely screen mediated (Newman et al., 2017).

Psychological safety and knowledge sharing have been widely studied, but their intersection in virtual teams needs further investigation. What remains insufficiently explained is the social process through which employees respond to a psychologically safe virtual environment by sharing their expertise. This paper fills this gap by applying Social Exchange Theory; using trust and reciprocity to explain why workers who feel interpersonally secure respond by proactively sharing their knowledge.

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Literature Review

Psychological Safety

The act of requesting input from team members does not imply that they will respond with their opinions. The decision to address a mistake, question a decision, or seek explanation is predominantly contingent upon the perceived repercussions. This hinges on what Edmondson (1999) describes as psychological safety—the communal understanding that interpersonal risk-taking will not provoke consequences or degradation. In nurturing atmospheres, constructive teamwork necessitates questioning and accepting accountability for missteps. This process amplifies team participation, inventive problem-solving, and general collaboration (Carmeli et al., 2009; Newman et al., 2017). Conditions are more complex in remote scenarios, where non-verbal indicators are missing and written content may be readily misread. Ultimately, a wholesome and affirming environment can diminish these virtual confusions, fostering a sense of ease for individuals to contribute online (O'Donovan et al., 2020).

Knowledge Sharing Behaviour

Knowledge-sharing behaviour refers to an employee's aim to disseminate information, experiences, practical expertise, and specialised abilities to others inside the firm (Wang & Noe, 2010). This interaction enables companies to acquire knowledge from prior experiences, address issues more efficiently, and generate innovative concepts or resolutions (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Motivating employees to disseminate their knowledge can also improve the organization's performance and maintain its competitiveness in a dynamic business landscape (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Formal and informal exchanges can serve as platforms for the dissemination of knowledge. Formal dissemination may occur in meetings, training sessions, or presentations, but informal dissemination generally transpires during everyday dialogues and cooperative endeavours. In virtual teams, there are diminished chances for employees to engage in unplanned in-person interactions. Consequently, they increasingly depend on video conferencing, instant messaging, and collaborative digital platforms to exchange information and professional experiences (Ford et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, in spite of these communication avenues, employees may remain reluctant to disclose their information. They may hesitate if they are uncertain about their peers' responses, fear adverse consequences, or lack confidence in their teammates. An adverse communication environment may inhibit collaboration and lead employees to withhold valuable knowledge (Macpherson et al., 2022). Consequently, companies must guarantee that their virtual communication environments are inclusive, respectful, and inviting, enabling all team members to feel empowered to contribute.

Psychological Safety and Knowledge Sharing Behaviour

Evidence from previous studies suggests that employees communicate more openly when they perceive their work environment as psychologically safe (Rajhi & Aljuhmani, 2026). They are more likely to provide feedback, express different opinions, and introduce new ideas during team discussions. By contrast, employees may hesitate to contribute when they expect an

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unfavourable response or believe that others will judge their input negatively (Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara et al., 2026).

Psychological safety may be especially relevant in virtual teams. Online working arrangements can create emotional distance between team members and reduce the social support normally developed through face-to-face interaction (Yang & Wang, 2026). Employees who feel safe within their virtual team may be less concerned about expressing themselves through online communication channels. As a result, they may participate more openly and become more willing to share their knowledge. Psychological safety is therefore proposed to have a positive relationship with knowledge-sharing behaviour in virtual teams.

Underpinning Theory

The paper will use Social Exchange Theory (SET) to explain the proposed association between psychological safety and knowledge-sharing behaviour. SET posits that workplace relationships are developed through ongoing exchanges of support, respect, and other valued resources between people (Blau, 1964). When employees are treated fairly and supported, they may feel a reciprocal obligation to respond in kind and contribute to the group. This exchange process may be more difficult to develop in virtual teams as members have fewer opportunities to observe social and non-verbal cues. Without these cues, employees may be unclear about how their questions, opinions or mistakes will be received. Psychological safety can help mitigate that uncertainty by creating an environment where team members feel comfortable to speak up without fear of embarrassment or punishment. Over time, repeated positive interactions can then reinforce trust within the team.

Another axiom of SET that explains the proposed relationship is reciprocity. When employees feel supported and treated with respect, they can share useful information, past experiences, and new ideas with their coworkers. From this perspective, psychological safety creates a work environment that enables the building of trust and perceives knowledge sharing as a normal aspect of teamwork, thus promoting knowledge sharing.

In this conceptual paper, trust and reciprocity are used only to explain the theoretical reasoning that links psychological safety with knowledge sharing behaviour. They are not included as mediating variables in the proposed model nor empirically tested.

Research Methodology

Remote and hybrid work arrangements have certainly accelerated the digital transformation at work and changed the way we interact. But there are trade-offs with the digital shift. Virtual teams do become flexible, but the loss of face-to-face contact often causes miscommunication and employees withholding valuable expertise. And that's why psychological safety is so crucial in digital spaces. People need to be explicitly reassured that asking questions or expressing dissent won't result in a negative reaction. Although there has been increasing research on the dynamics of virtual work, the underlying mechanism between psychological safety and knowledge-sharing behaviour in remote teams is still unclear.

This conceptual study uses a narrative review rather than new field data to link psychological safety, knowledge sharing and remote team dynamics in the organisational behaviour and knowledge management literature. Here, the Social Exchange Theory is the main anchor:

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employees feel safe and respected, they view the supportive environment as a positive social resource, and they reciprocate by proactively sharing their expertise. This paper treats psychological safety as the independent variable and knowledge sharing as the dependent variable, thus providing a theoretical basis that is ready for future empirical testing and practical takeaways for virtual team managers.

Framework Development

The proposed framework incorporates prior research on psychological safety, knowledge sharing behaviour and virtual teams from the perspective of Social Exchange Theory. In this case, psychological safety is the independent variable and knowledge sharing behaviour is the dependent variable. The heart of the framework states that virtual team members are far more likely to offer ideas, knowledge and past experience once they feel comfortable offering their opinion.

Social Exchange Theory explains how this connection works. Psychologically safe climates foster communication confidence across different remote configurations by reducing the interpersonal risks of speaking up. Workers who feel truly supported and respected by their peers will naturally reciprocate by engaging in group tasks and sharing their institutional knowledge. So, it is expected that a higher level of psychological safety will be directly associated with a higher level of knowledge sharing.

Guided by this theoretical logic, the paper presents the following proposition:

P1: *Psychological safety is positively related to knowledge-sharing behaviour within virtual teams.*

Conceptual Framework

Proposed Conceptual Framework:



Discussion

Virtual teams have transformed the way employees communicate and do their work. Compared to their colleagues who work in the same physical space, virtual team members have fewer chances to observe facial expressions, body language, and other social cues. Most of their interactions are through digital communication, which also minimises informal conversations. Messages without sufficient context may be misunderstood in meaning or tone (Ford et al.,

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2021). Supportive working relationships are therefore important, especially when employees are asked to share their knowledge via online platforms.

The proposed framework identifies psychological safety as an important condition for knowledge sharing in this context. Psychologically safe employees are more likely to ask questions, give feedback, admit mistakes, and share different opinions without fear of an unfair response. This feeling of safety could decrease the anxiety associated with knowledge contribution and enable employees to participate in virtual discussions with more confidence.
This reaction can be explained by Social Exchange Theory. Respect, support, and fair treatment from managers and team members can motivate employees to contribute positively to their team. A contribution can be in the form of sharing useful information, experience and ideas with other members. Trust and reciprocity therefore provide a theoretical explanation for understanding why psychological safety may be positively associated with knowledge-sharing behaviour in virtual teams.

However, the proposed relation in this framework has not been empirically tested. Future research should examine the proposition in different organisations and types of virtual teamwork to see whether the relationship holds in different contexts. Further research could also examine factors that enhance or diminish the relationship between psychological safety and knowledge-sharing behaviour.

Implications of the Proposed Model

The proposed framework, theoretically, contributes to the body of knowledge by employing Social Exchange Theory to elucidate the relationship between psychological safety and knowledge sharing in virtual settings. Psychological safety is, in fact, the mitigation of personal risks of speaking up, asking for help, or admitting error. In a positive environment, team members start to trust each other and share their knowledge in return. Hence, trust and reciprocity are the theoretical pillars underlying the proposed link.

A key strength of the framework is that it integrates psychological safety and knowledge-sharing behaviour in a single comprehensive model. The framework views psychological safety not as a 'nice to have' culture element but as a direct antecedent of knowledge exchange. Such logic aligns with prior findings that supportive organisational conditions directly foster collaborative habits among workers (Obeng et al., 2026). Thus, this model can be a basis for future research on virtual team behaviour in other industries. Practically speaking, these insights provide remote team managers with clear direction.

Leaders must intentionally make spaces for communication where workers can feel secure sharing thoughts, ask questions, and offer feedback without fear of harsh judgement. This means validating a spectrum of opinions and creating a level playing field for participation. Because supportive digital environments are strongly related to collaborative and innovative outcomes (Nilawati et al., 2026), organisations should regularly examine their digital interaction habits to eliminate factors that cause employees to remain silent.

Managerial Implications and Recommendations

Leaders establish the psychological security for remote teams. Through attentive listening, respectful responses, and viewing errors as chances for growth instead of failures, managers

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foster a feeling of safety. This compassion is essential in distant work, since brief text communications can be readily misinterpreted or appear severe.

Transparent communication protocols alleviate digital apprehension to an even greater extent. Leaders have the ability to establish practical team norms around preferred communication methods, anticipated response times, and forms for feedback. When discussions become intricate or intense, transitioning from text to video calls facilitates comprehension of goals and the evaluation of diverse perspectives. There exists a designated area for team members to communicate advancements and share concepts during routine check-ins.

Acknowledgement holds similar significance. When workers recognise the significance of their opinions, they express themselves. Regardless of whether an idea is implemented, the endeavour is acknowledged and no individual feels overlooked. In addition to leadership conduct, organisations must provide intuitive collaborative tools, technical assistance, and specialised management training in inclusive digital leadership. Given that these suggestions stem from a theoretical framework, subsequent empirical investigations are required to evaluate their efficacy across diverse distant work environments.

Conclusion

Virtual teams enable businesses to operate across several locations and to adapt more readily to evolving work requirements. However, the absence of physical proximity and the limited social signals can render online interactions less intimate. Workers can contemplate how their input will be perceived by others or apprehend that their viewpoints could face criticism. In these situations, there can be an increased perception of interpersonal risk associated with knowledge dissemination.

This paper proposes that psychological safety can reduce this risk and encourage knowledge-sharing behaviour among virtual team members. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory, it explains that employees who feel safe, respected, and supported may be more willing to contribute their knowledge to the team. Trust and reciprocity provide the theoretical reasoning for this response, as supportive treatment may encourage employees to participate more openly and assist others through the exchange of information and experience.

Overall, the paper establishes a conceptual relationship between psychological safety and knowledge-sharing behaviour in virtual teams. It also suggests that managers can support this relationship by encouraging open communication, respectful interaction, and constructive feedback. Nevertheless, the proposed framework has not been empirically tested. Future studies should examine the relationship in different organisational settings and identify other conditions that may strengthen or weaken it.

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