

RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Knowledge Hiding by Salespeople in a B2C Context

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Received: 28 May 2025 | **Revised:** 6 May 2026 | **Accepted:** 14 May 2026

Keywords: business-to-consumer | knowledge hiding | salesperson

ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore the possible reasons why salespeople hide knowledge from customers in a business-to-consumer context (B2C). Based on the existing literature on knowledge hiding at the individual, organizational, and sales levels, an exploratory methodology with a qualitative approach was adopted. Interviews were conducted with 16 customers and 24 salespeople from different sectors. Based on the content analysis, a theoretical model was developed consisting of three categories that together explain the reasons for knowledge hiding by salespeople. Individual factors indicate that salespeople show intentional behavior, on a personal level, to hide knowledge requested by customers. At the organizational level, culture, leadership, and organizational climate can lead to knowledge hiding. Finally, in relational terms, knowledge hiding can occur in the interaction between salespeople and customers, a phenomenon that has not yet been identified in literature. The results provide input for improving sales practices and strategies, as well as enhancing value propositions for customers. Understanding the reasons behind knowledge hiding can contribute to better management and training of sales staff.

1 | Introduction

The sharing of knowledge between the seller and the buyer is important in sales, as it contributes to the success of the sale and the co-creation of value (Butt et al. 2021; Xia et al. 2025). For this reason, an investment is made in learning, collaboration, and communication for salespeople, who are the link between customers and the organization, and are responsible for obtaining, managing, and disseminating the company's strategic knowledge (Anaza and Nowlin 2017; Xia et al. 2025). For knowledge sharing to contribute effectively to the value co-creation, there must be a relationship of exchange between the seller and the customer, in which interactions are guided by expectations of reciprocity, trust, and mutual benefits (Blau 1964; Connelly et al. 2012; Wen and Ma 2021; Butt et al. 2021; Zhang et al. 2025). Thus, from the perspective of Social Exchange Theory (Blau 1964), social relationships are understood as dynamic exchange processes, in which individuals continuously evaluate the costs, risks, and returns associated with interactions (Madison et al. 2025; Zhang et al. 2025).

However, knowledge hiding can occur in business relationships (Chaker et al. 2021) when an individual intentionally withholds or hides knowledge requested by another person (Connelly et al. 2012; Connelly et al. 2019; Connelly and Zweig 2015; Ismail and Jasim 2025). This interferes with trust and interpersonal bonds between salesperson and customer, thus compromising the sale (Chaker et al. 2021). In this logic, the interaction between seller and customer can be understood as a specific form of social exchange, in which knowledge takes on the role of a relational and strategic resource, used to reduce uncertainty, support decision-making, and enable the proposition and value co-creation (Anaza and Nowlin 2017; Butt et al. 2021; Xia et al. 2025). When this exchange is weakened by knowledge hiding, the salesperson's ability to generate value for the customer tends to be reduced, reinforcing the negative effects of knowledge hiding in commercial relations (Connelly et al. 2012; Connelly and Zweig 2015; Wen and Ma 2021; Butt et al. 2021).

Salespeople are key to proposing value and understanding customers' needs, which improves the knowledge base related to the

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product or service and provides a unique market offer tailored to the needs of each buyer (Holmes et al. 2023; Ramos et al. 2023). In practice, the salesperson must identify and communicate value propositions related to the investment and return desired by the customer (Keränen et al. 2020; Bischoff et al. 2023). In this context, the salesperson's knowledge is relevant to proposing value to the customer, and hiding this knowledge can compromise this value proposition. Therefore, it is important to examine the reasons that might lead a salesperson to hide knowledge from the customer.

Despite the organization's efforts to manage knowledge, many employees prefer to keep knowledge to themselves. Because the company does not own the intellectual property of employees (El-Kassar et al. 2022; Santos et al. 2025), hiding knowledge can limit the organization's strategies for providing value to customers. More specifically, the salesperson must provide valid information or have the motivation to protect customers' interests (Alam et al. 2021). Salespeople can identify how to offer value to customers. They act as knowledge brokers and promote value based on innovation (Ramos et al. 2023). Based on the principles of Social Exchange Theory (Cook et al. 2013), this study therefore sought to answer the following research question: what might lead a seller to hide knowledge from a customer in a *business-to-consumer* (B2C) context? Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine the possible reasons that lead a seller to hide knowledge from a customer specifically in the B2C context.

As a theoretical justification for this research, this research broadens the discussion on knowledge hiding (Connelly et al. 2012) and focuses on the B2C relationship. In addition, it seeks initial evidence that knowledge hiding may occur in the relationship between the seller and the end consumer, contributing to a gap in the literature that has yet to be fully explored (Connelly and Zweig 2015; Gagné et al. 2019; Hernaus et al. 2019; Malik et al. 2019; Peng et al. 2019; Wen and Ma 2021; Zhu et al. 2019; Ismail and Jasim 2025). In addition, the study aims to deepen our understanding of the possible reasons that lead salespeople to hide knowledge from customers (Anaza and Nowlin 2017; Butt et al. 2021; Chaker et al. 2021).

Most surveys on knowledge hiding have taken place outside the domain of sales (Connelly et al. 2012; Connelly and Zweig 2015; Gagné et al. 2019; Malik et al. 2019; Peng et al. 2019; Wen and Ma 2021; Zhu et al. 2019; Ismail and Jasim 2025). Those studies related to sales (Anaza and Nowlin 2017; Butt 2019; Butt et al. 2021; Chaker et al. 2021) have examined the antecedents and consequences of knowledge hiding in the business-to-business (B2B) relationship. This research innovates by extending the study to the B2C relationship and seeking to identify why salespeople hide knowledge from the end customer, which is a novelty in the literature. Such research is particularly relevant, given that, in the B2C context, the information asymmetry between seller and consumer tends to be more pronounced (Homburg and Tischer 2023), increasing the customer's vulnerability to hiding practices. Furthermore, unlike the B2B environment—which is characterized by longer-lasting relationships and buyers with greater expertise—end consumers often have less technical knowledge and less bargaining power, which may exacerbate the negative effects of hiding knowledge on

trust, satisfaction, and repurchase intention (Ramos et al. 2023). Thus, this research extends the study of knowledge hiding to the business-to-consumer (B2C) relationship, seeking to examine the reasons that lead sellers to hide knowledge from end customers; this represents a novel contribution to the literature and broadens its theoretical understanding.

Studies on knowledge hiding have made progress in clarifying such behavior between team members or between employees (Ismail and Jasim 2025; Butt et al. 2021; Chaker et al. 2021; Connelly et al. 2012; Connelly et al. 2019; Connelly and Zweig 2015). For example, Chaker et al. (2021) point out that, among salespeople, knowledge hiding compromises the organization's results, but in the relationship between the salesperson and the customer, no research on this subject has been identified. By understanding the customer's needs, the salesperson provides information about the features and benefits of the products; the customers' perception of value includes interaction with the salesperson (Ramos et al. 2023). Thus, we aim to help bridge the gap regarding the reasons why salespeople hide knowledge from customers, because the literature has only dealt with reasons for doing so among team members (Anaza and Nowlin 2017; Chaker et al. 2021; Gagné et al. 2019; Jafari-Sadeghi et al. 2022; Moh'd et al. 2021).

From a practical perspective, this research is justified in the need of B2C organizations to understand how knowledge hiding acts during sales so they can work with their staff on the problems of this behavior. Companies can also design the sales function as a means of proposing value to the customer. This study therefore supports companies and sales managers in their efforts to increase customer value and thus strengthen their competitive positions.

2 | Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the Social Exchange Theory proposed by Blau (1964), which conceives social relations as dynamic processes of exchange based on expectations of reciprocity, trust, and mutual benefits. Therefore, B2C sales are an eminently relational context, in which, by its nature, uses personal communication to inform buyers about products or services. It requires efficient communication to offer value to the consumer (Homburg and Tischer 2023). Salespeople are intermediaries in the flow of information. They increase the buyer's knowledge with readily available data about the product, thus helping to co-create value with customers (Itani et al. 2022). When applying this theoretical lens to the context of sales, especially in the business-to-consumer relationship (B2C), this study broadens the scope of Social Exchange Theory by demonstrating that knowledge acts as a strategic relational resource in the interaction between salesperson and customer (Blau 1964; Anaza and Nowlin 2017; Butt et al. 2021; Itani et al. 2022; Homburg and Tischer 2023; Madison et al. 2025; Zhang et al. 2025). Thus, knowledge hiding can be understood as a mechanism for regulating social exchange, adopted when the seller perceives relational imbalances, risks, or a lack of reciprocity, with direct impacts on value proposition and co-creation with the customer (Blau 1964; Connelly et al. 2012; Connelly and Zweig 2015; Wen and Ma 2021; Butt et al. 2021;

Gligor and Maloni 2022; Ismail and Jasim 2025). In this context, knowledge hiding by the seller can compromise the transaction, ultimately reducing the value offered to the customer (Gligor and Maloni 2022).

Therefore, it is important to understand the reasons that may lead salespeople to engage in knowledge hiding in the B2C sales context. It can be damaging both individually and collectively (Connelly and Zweig 2015; Peng et al. 2019; Ali et al. 2026), and it can also affect organizational results (Siachou et al. 2021). In the sales context, this occurs when salespeople decide to hide information, reducing the value offered to the customer (Anaza and Nowlin 2017; Butt 2019; Butt et al. 2021; Chaker et al. 2021; Debenedetti et al. 2024; Gligor and Maloni 2022).

2.1 | Knowledge Hiding

According to the literature, knowledge hiding is understood to be the intentional attempt to withhold or hide knowledge requested by another person (Connelly et al. 2012; Ismail and Jasim 2025), where knowledge corresponds to all the information and ideas relevant to the execution of tasks performed by the members of an organization or interaction (Siachou et al. 2021). Knowledge hiding is multidimensional and consists of three facets: rationalized hiding, evasive hiding, and playing dumb. The first occurs when the person justifies or blames someone else for not sharing the requested knowledge. Evasive hiding consists of providing incorrect or partial information, as well as misleadingly promising a future answer. Finally, playing dumb occurs when the employee pretends not to have the requested knowledge (Connelly et al. 2012; Connelly et al. 2019; Connelly and Zweig 2015).

Knowledge hiding does not include cases where employees fail to share knowledge through ignorance or unintentional error (Moh'd et al. 2021). A low degree of sharing can result from the absence of knowledge, while hiding implies the possession of knowledge and the deliberate decision not to share it (Anaza and Nowlin 2017). Knowledge hiding is therefore an intentional act that is characterized by the purposeful refusal to provide information, either by feigning ignorance or by offering justifications for not sharing useful information (Moh'd et al. 2021).

According to Peng (2013), approximately 50% of employees show an intention to hide knowledge when asked for information by someone else. This behavior affects collaborative integration, increases distrust, and reduces joint team productivity (Connelly and Zweig 2015). It also hampers the generation of ideas and the innovation process (Peng et al. 2019; Ali et al. 2026). It can increase organizational costs related to training, process maintenance, and staff turnover (Siachou et al. 2021). It is therefore important to understand the reasons for this behavior.

2.2 | Reasons for Knowledge Hiding

The reasons for knowledge hiding may explain why companies fail to implement knowledge-sharing strategies (Siachou et al. 2021; Ismail and Jasim 2025). Jafari-Sadeghi et al. (2022) highlighted 51 reasons that increase the occurrence of

knowledge hiding, such as ostracism at work, job insecurity, abusive supervision, perceived time pressure, distrust, competitive environment, lack of reciprocity, and personality traits. Butt (2019) identified four main reasons why managers of sales and supply companies hide knowledge from each other: lack of personal relationships, fear of evaluation, restrictions from top management, and expectation of results.

Other reasons that increase knowledge hiding include environments with high levels of distrust and competitiveness (Hernaus et al. 2019), goal orientation (Zhu et al. 2019), an organizational policy that allows political behavior and maneuvering in the workplace (Ismail and Jasim 2025; Arain et al. 2020; Malik et al. 2019), unethical leadership or abusive supervision (Ahmed and Makhbul 2024; Arain et al. 2020; Peng et al. 2019), interdependence between tasks (Ismail and Jasim 2025; Gagné et al. 2019), lack of dignity and respect for others (Lanke 2018), lack of rewards for sharing knowledge, and the feeling of ownership and possession of knowledge (Ismail and Jasim 2025; Alnaimi and Rjoub 2021; Wen and Ma 2021). Among salespeople, knowledge hiding occurs for three reasons: internal competition between salespeople, rewards for individual efforts, and pressure to produce short-term results (Chaker et al. 2021). Knowledge hiding thus represents a form of protection for the seller, who is seeking to turn knowledge into an advantage.

2.3 | Knowledge Hiding in the Sales Field

Salespeople act strategically as mediators between buyers and organizations by promoting interaction and relationships between them (Chaker et al. 2021). They facilitate the co-creation of value through their competencies and capabilities to generate a proactive, customer-oriented sales approach (Alnakhli et al. 2021). For salespeople, knowledge represents up to 50% of their historical sales performance, which makes it a competitive advantage. Maintaining or improving this performance depends on access to the shared knowledge of colleagues and vice versa (Chaker et al. 2021). By hiding knowledge, salespeople hope to improve their performance in front of others and be promoted by the company while providing very little knowledge to other people. However, throughout the sales process, salespeople do not have relationships solely with colleagues: They also have a network of relationships that includes customers (Delpechitre et al. 2020).

A salesperson's success is associated, among other factors, with their competence, skill, content knowledge, and personal experience (Delpechitre et al. 2020). In relation to knowledge, the literature has focused on salespeople as disseminators of knowledge while ignoring their intentional knowledge-hiding behaviors (Anaza and Nowlin 2017), which can reduce the value offered to the customer (Xia et al. 2025). The perception of value for the customer consists of the benefits of the purchase compared to the price (Carvalho and Alves 2023). Companies have realized that, in addition to selling, it is important to satisfy customers' individual needs by continuously co-creating value (Alnakhli et al. 2021; Sohn et al. 2024). Terho et al. (2012) identified three dimensions for building a value-based sale: understanding the customer's business model, designing the value proposition, and communicating relevant information to

generate value. Value-centered selling thus focuses on the proactivity of the salesperson in creating innovative value propositions that provide economic and use value for the customer (Keränen et al. 2020; Bischoff et al. 2023).

Knowledge hiding can compromise the value to be co-created between sellers and buyers. Although there is a vast literature on knowledge hiding (Anaza and Nowlin 2017; Arain et al. 2020; Butt 2019; Butt et al. 2020; Butt et al. 2021; Chaker et al. 2021; Connelly et al. 2012; Connelly et al. 2019; Connelly and Zweig 2015; Gagné et al. 2019; Hernaus et al. 2019; Jafari-Sadeghi et al. 2022; Lanke 2018; Malik et al. 2019; Moh'd et al. 2021; Peng 2013; Peng et al. 2019; Sheidaee et al. 2022; Siachou et al. 2021; Wen and Ma 2021; Zhu et al. 2019; Ismail and Jasim 2025), studies examining the reasons for hiding in sales have tended to focus on team members or B2B sales (Anaza and Nowlin 2017; Butt 2019; Butt et al. 2021; Chaker et al. 2021). There is thus a research gap on the reasons why sellers may hide the knowledge from customers in the B2C context.

In this context, the Expectation Disconfirmation Theory (Oliver 1977) offers a complementary perspective for understanding how knowledge hiding affects customers' perception of value. According to this theory, satisfaction results from comparing the expectations formed before the interaction with the perceived performance during and after it (Kaski et al. 2017; Chen et al. 2022). When a customer expects to receive information from the seller and that knowledge is hidden, this can lead to unmet expectations, undermining the perception of value. Thus, the theory allows us to understand knowledge hiding not only from the seller's perspective but also from the customer's subjective experience.

3 | Methods

Considering the objective of this study, an exploratory methodology was adopted with a qualitative approach. Knowledge hiding is a topic that has room for in-depth investigation (Connelly et al. 2019), and the chosen methodology could help to understand the phenomenon, while making it possible to discover new connections, explain meanings, construct the phenomenon, and understand its dimensions (Makri and Neely 2021). This study considers the commercial sector of B2C retail companies, which is where the customer–seller relationship takes place and, consequently, where the knowledge hiding by the seller can occur. The objective of a company in the B2C market is to sell its products and/or services to end consumers (Homburg and Tischer 2023). The entire sales process is important to provoke the decision to buy and to develop a value proposition generated by the relationship between the salesperson and customer (Holmes et al. 2023; Homburg and Tischer 2023).

We collected data through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured script. We organized the script with a sequence of 20 subjects taken from the literature on the reasons that lead individuals to hide knowledge (being ignored, job insecurity, abusive supervision, perception of time, distrust, competitive environment, reciprocity, interpersonal relationships, personality, managerial evaluation, organizational policy, expectation of

results, goal orientation, maneuvering, autonomy, dignity and respect, organizational reward, feeling of ownership, security of one's own knowledge, and incivility). These encompassed individual aspects related to knowledge and the feeling of psychological ownership over specific information (Chaker et al. 2021; Connelly et al. 2012; Jafari-Sadeghi et al. 2022), as well as interpersonal aspects such as mistrust and knowledge characteristics such as complexity and relationship to the task (Butt 2019; Butt et al. 2020; Butt et al. 2021; Jafari-Sadeghi et al. 2022; Wen and Ma 2021). Organizational elements that inhibit knowledge sharing were also included (Arain et al. 2020; Butt et al. 2020; Malik et al. 2019; Peng et al. 2019).

This study included salespeople who work for B2C companies and customers who showed an intention to make purchases at the store. The inclusion of customers as respondents is justified in light of the Expectation Disconfirmation Theory (Oliver 1977), since it is the customer who forms expectations about the salesperson's informational behavior and perceives, during the interaction, when knowledge is hidden, resulting in a disconfirmation of expectations that affects the perception of value (Kaski et al. 2017; Chen et al. 2022). Listening to customers thus made it possible to expand on the reasons given by salespeople for their own behavior in hiding knowledge, thereby adding greater depth to the study's findings. To reach the salespeople, it was necessary to apply snowball sampling with company owners or managers who authorized the participation of a salesperson from their sales team in the survey and suggested other owners or managers, who in turn facilitated the interview with their salespeople. As a result, we obtained a heterogeneous sample of salespeople from different commercial sectors. Customers were identified in the sales area of the companies visited and were invited to participate in the survey.

We determined the sample size for this study by theoretical sampling. The choice of participants did not seek numerical significance or population representativeness, but rather the individuals most capable of providing relevant information about the phenomenon. The process was conducted interactively, accompanying the data analysis, which was pursued until theoretical saturation was identified (Hennink and Kaiser 2022).

We contacted the participating salespeople during their working hours. Eighteen interviews took place face-to-face at the companies, in reserved rooms or spacious, quiet environments that offered the conditions for the interviews, which were audio-recorded (we used two lapel microphones and a voice recorder) after the participants had agreed to it. Six interviews had to be scheduled with the salespeople to give them more time to take part in the research. The WhatsApp video call feature was used for interviews between the researcher and the salesperson, and we recorded the audio after the participants had agreed. A total of 32 salespeople were invited to take part, 8 of whom refused to do so for various reasons, thus yielding a total of 24 interviewees.

We approached a total of 26 customers to take part, 8 of whom said they did not have time to participate, so we ultimately had 16 participating customers. The interviews took place in the same place which the companies had made available to the salespeople and were audio-recorded with the customers' consent. Our

TABLE 1 | Characteristics of salespeople.

| Code | Gender | Education | Professional activity |
|------|--------|----------------------|--|
| EV01 | M | High school | Gardening |
| EV02 | M | High school | Mattress |
| EV03 | M | High school | Clothing and accessories |
| EV04 | M | Higher education | Utensils, machinery, and equipment for bars and kitchens |
| EV05 | F | High school | Jewelry and semi-jewelry |
| EV06 | F | High school | Computing |
| EV07 | F | Postgraduate studies | Clothing |
| EV08 | M | Higher education | Clothing and accessories |
| EV09 | M | High school | Footwear |
| EV10 | F | Technical course | Opticians |
| EV11 | F | Higher education | Mobile |
| EV12 | F | Higher education | Health insurance |
| EV13 | M | High school | Sports equipment |
| EV14 | M | High school | Aquarium |
| EV15 | M | Higher education | Articles for the home, decoration, appliances, and electronics |
| EV16 | F | High school | Agricultural, gardening, pet, aquarium |
| EV17 | M | High school | Agricultural, gardening, pet, aquarium |
| EV18 | F | High school | Jewelry |
| EV19 | F | Postgraduate studies | Medicine advisor |
| EV20 | M | High school | Agricultural, gardening, pet, aquarium |
| EV21 | M | Technical course | Cars |
| EV22 | M | Higher education | Solar energy |
| EV23 | M | Higher education | Tourism packages |
| EV24 | F | High school | Internet packages |

Abbreviations: EV: Sales interviewee; F: Female; M: Male.

Source: Research data.

final sample contained 40 participants, and theoretical saturation was achieved.

Data collection took place between October 2022 and January 2023. The first interview was a pre-test to check for any adjustments to the script for the semi-structured guide, which was not necessary. At the start of the interview, we asked for information about the participant's profile and then the topics in the script. Each interview lasted an average of 50 min. We transcribed the entire audio of the interviews, thus starting the pre-analysis process.

We analyzed the data collected using the inductive approach for content analysis (De Sordi 2024), with the transcripts being broken down into three categories (organizational, individual, and relational reasons), which were analyzed using NVivo software as a tool to separate, organize, categorize, and code the excerpts from the interviews with both salespeople and customers. Coding was done by launching analytical categories and subcategories anchored in the literature on knowledge hiding. This coding process involved fragmenting the interviews by selecting excerpts. After this process, the results were extracted from the NVivo software to support the analysis and discussion of the data.

3.1 | Characterization of the Salespeople

A sample of 24 salespeople was interviewed for this study. Their characteristics are described in Table 1.

The salespeople who took part in this survey were mostly men. Most had completed high school, two had a technical degree, seven had a college degree, and only three had a postgraduate degree. As far as professional activity is concerned, we obtained professionals from a wide range of commercial sectors, including tourism companies, opticians, pharmacies, and diverse types of stores, with main products including mattresses, clothing, cell phones, aquariums and pet supplies, electronics, jewelry, gardening, sporting goods, shoes, cars, kitchen equipment, solar energy, and internet packages. In general, the group was made up of men with low levels of education working in the commercial sectors of various retail companies.

3.2 | Characterization of the Customers

The customer sample consisted of 16 interviewees. Their characteristics are described in Table 2.

Most of the customers interviewed were women, who were, in general, more educated than the salespeople interviewed; only three customers had a high school education, three had received higher education, and the rest had postgraduate degrees. A heterogeneous sample was obtained in terms of professional activities, with the participation of administrators, teachers, information technology analysts, students, entrepreneurs, accountants, civil servants, and doctors.

TABLE 2 | Customer characteristics.

| Code | Gender | Education | Professional activity |
|------|--------|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| EC01 | F | Postgraduate studies | Administrator |
| EC02 | F | Postgraduate studies | Teacher |
| EC03 | F | Postgraduate studies | Information technology analyst |
| EC04 | F | High School | Student |
| EC05 | M | High School | Student |
| EC06 | M | Higher Education | Student |
| EC07 | F | Postgraduate studies | Teacher |
| EC08 | F | Higher Education | Administrator |
| EC09 | F | High School | Student |
| EC10 | F | Postgraduate studies | Teacher |
| EC11 | F | Higher Education | Entrepreneur |
| EC12 | F | Postgraduate studies | Accountant |
| EC13 | M | Postgraduate studies | Public servants |
| EC14 | F | Postgraduate studies | Teacher |
| EC15 | F | Postgraduate studies | Public servants |
| EC16 | M | Postgraduate studies | Doctor |

Abbreviations: EV: Sales interviewee; F: Female; M: Male.

Source: Research data.

3.3 | Comparative Analysis of Respondent Profiles

The profile of the respondents reveals differences between salespeople and customers, particularly in terms of gender and educational attainment. While the sample of salespeople consisted mainly of men with a high school diploma, the sample of customers was predominantly female and had a higher level of education, with a significant number of participants holding college or graduate degrees. These differences suggest the existence of an asymmetry in the participants' profiles, which could influence the dynamics of interaction in the B2C context.

In terms of education, salespeople tend to have a lower level of education than customers. This situation can lead to insecurity, discomfort, or a sense of threat among more knowledgeable consumers, encouraging them to hold back, oversimplify their answers, or hide their knowledge, since customers' technical and

informational knowledge may lead them to ask more detailed questions, challenge sales pitches, and identify inconsistencies in the information they receive (Kumar Jha and Varkkey 2018; Wen and Ma 2021; Alnaimi and Rjoub 2021).

In terms of gender, there was a predominance of men among the salespeople and of women among the customers. Although this study does not aim to investigate gender-related behavioral differences, this pattern may reflect characteristics of the retail sector under analysis and the occupational composition of the participants. The literature indicates that the occupational structure of the retail sector tends to be characterized by gender divisions, in which women typically hold positions associated with social and relational roles, while men are more frequently found in roles perceived as more technical and operational (Feng and Xiang 2023; Dzogbenuku et al. 2024), which may influence the distribution of salespeople observed in the sample. In addition, women tend to play a central role in purchasing decisions and retail consumption, especially in contexts related to household and family consumption (Dzogbenuku et al. 2024).

4 | Results

The results of this research were obtained from the transcription and analysis of the interviews processed in the NVivo software by coding and categorizing the data. We examined interviews with 24 salespeople and 16 customers. Content analysis made it possible to identify and classify the data into theoretical categories and subcategories based on the literature. This approach broadened the depth of the analysis and highlighted the complexity and nuances of our understanding of the topic. The categories and subcategories provided analytical tools that revealed the various factors and dynamics in the interaction between salespeople and customers, as well as highlighting how knowledge hiding manifests in this context.

In light of Social Exchange Theory, the results indicate that knowledge hiding may occur as a relational response by salespeople to conditions perceived in their interaction with customers (Blau 1964; Connelly et al. 2012; Connelly and Zweig 2015; Wen and Ma 2021; Butt et al. 2021; Zhang et al. 2025). The analysis of the interviews revealed three main categories of reasons for knowledge hiding by salespeople: individual, organizational, and relational. Individual reasons are personal traits and individual differences that influence this behavior. Organizational reasons are factors such as the culture and organizational climate, which can affect the dynamics of knowledge sharing. Relational reasons correspond to the interaction between salesperson and customer during the sales process.

Given the importance of distinguishing between the sellers' perspective and that perceived by customers, we analyzed the statements made by sellers (EV) and customers (EC) and presented them separately. This strategy allowed for a more in-depth interpretation of the results, highlighting similarities and differences between the behavior reported by salespeople and customers' perceptions regarding the knowledge hiding. To supplement this analysis, (In Appendix Table A1) compiles the main statements from the two groups, organized by category and subcategory.

TABLE 3 | Category: Individual reasons why a salesperson hides knowledge from customers.

| Category | Subcategories | No. of associated interviews | No. of coded passages |
|--------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Individual reasons | Competitiveness | 35 | 56 |
| | Knowledge | 40 | 169 |
| | Expectation of results | 26 | 50 |
| | Multitasking | 17 | 29 |
| | Perception of time | 36 | 85 |
| | Personality | 38 | 91 |
| | TOTAL | | 480 |

Source: Research data.

4.1 | Individual Reasons

In the analysis of the interviews, we observed statements that referred to the individual reasons of the salesperson for hiding knowledge from the customer. This category of statements was subdivided into six subcategories: competitiveness, knowledge, expectation of results, multitasking, perception of time, and personality. Table 3 indicates the category and subcategories on knowledge hiding in the B2C context, as derived from existing theory (Alnaimi and Rjoub 2021; Anaza and Nowlin 2017; Butt 2019; Butt et al. 2020; Butt et al. 2023; Chaker et al. 2021; Connelly and Zweig 2015; Irum et al. 2020; Jafari-Sadeghi et al. 2022; Kumar Jha and Varkkey 2018; Moh'd et al. 2021; Wen and Ma 2021).

With regard to the competitiveness subcategory, salespeople noted that competition among them leads to the knowledge hiding from customers. Respondents noted, “so it happens a lot, sometimes, that there’s this internal competition between them and they want to speed up the process and fail to pass on some information” (EV21) This behavior is corroborated by customers’ perceptions, who also recognize this pattern in their interactions: “...because you feel like you’re in a situation of dispute... And he just answered me in a way that I didn’t want... too objective” (EC12). These comments show that competitiveness can lead to a tendency for salespeople to hide knowledge from customers. According to Wen and Ma (2021), personal competitiveness or a competitive personality causes internal conflicts around goals and objectives, which can trigger behavior that leads to knowledge hiding. This study also identified that competition between sellers affects customers looking for information to make a purchase.

As for the knowledge subcategory, salespeople report that the uncertainty caused by customers’ questions leads them to knowledge hiding. EV18 explained that if the customer asks too many questions, it creates insecurity: “... sometimes we even know, but they are so incisive ... so even if I’m sure of what I have learned, what I know, I will back off.” The

salesperson’s possession of this information was also noted as a factor leading to the knowledge hiding, as stated by EV15: “... because that was what sold best, so I didn’t share all the information... but I knew he would come back.” This is in line with the study by (Kumar Jha and Varkkey 2018), who suggest that insecurity is an obstacle to knowledge sharing, as the individual seeking knowledge may use this information in a confrontational way, leading the source of that knowledge to feel threatened and insecure, which can result in knowledge hiding. Furthermore, Wen and Ma (2021) and Alnaimi and Rjoub (2021) report that knowledge hiding due to its possession occurs because of the overvaluation of information or fear of losing control of the situation.

This perception is corroborated by customers, who can identify when the salesperson does not convey confidence in their product knowledge and fails to provide information. For example, EC10 commented that “customers actually stop buying because they feel insecure about the salesperson’s knowledge of the products” and added that “there are salespeople who think that by doing this, by holding on to information, the person will be dependent on them.” According to Chaker et al. (2021), knowledge hiding by salespeople involves the practice of appearing collaborative in sharing information, while deliberately not providing concrete or useful data. This is an intentional effort to retain relevant information and may lead to the provision of incorrect answers or empty promises of future explanations (Connelly and Zweig 2015; Chaker et al. 2021; Ali et al. 2026).

Furthermore, when analyzing the interviews, the knowledge subcategory yielded the highest number of coded excerpts (169), indicating that knowledge is viewed as a strategic and valuable resource in the context of sales. Reports suggest that a salesperson’s knowledge, technical expertise, and confidence in responding to customer questions can be viewed as forms of personal capital, that provide a competitive advantage and, for that reason, are not always freely shared (Alnaimi and Rjoub 2021; Chaker et al. 2021). In this regard, some salespeople tend to hide knowledge as a way to maintain control over the interaction, reduce their vulnerability, or preserve their standing with the customer (Connelly et al. 2012; Wen and Ma 2021; Alnaimi and Rjoub 2021; Chaker et al. 2021).

Turning to the subcategory of outcome expectations, knowledge hiding occurs when the individual believes that sharing knowledge will result in something negative for them (Butt 2019; Butt et al. 2020; Ismail and Jasim 2025). Salespeople report that the fear of losing the sale leads them to hide knowledge: “... the sale is already concluded, let’s say, practically done, and a question arises from the customer and sometimes he believes he can omit it, for fear of losing the sale...” (EV13). This perception is also observed by customers when the salesperson does not pass on knowledge so as not to lose the sale, as illustrated by EC5: “... sometimes the salesperson knows that the delivery takes time, that deadlines are not respected and so on, but he will not say that, right?”. Some customers also believe that the consequences of sharing knowledge may generate negative outcomes for the salesperson themselves: “... a salesperson was reluctant to give me the information for fear that this information could even impact his dismissal.” (EC1).

TABLE 4 | Category: organizational reasons why the salesperson hides knowledge from customers.

| Category | Subcategories | No. of associated interviews | No. of coded passages |
|------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Organizational reasons | Management assessment | 30 | 48 |
| | Interdependence of tasks | 35 | 81 |
| | Abusive leadership | 26 | 40 |
| | Goal orientation | 36 | 68 |
| | Perception of the work environment | 31 | 46 |
| | Organizational policy | 36 | 141 |
| | Organizational rewards | 33 | 76 |
| | TOTAL | | 500 |

Source: Research data.

With regard to the multitasking subcategory, salespeople report that performing tasks beyond selling compromises the information they pass on to customers: "... there was a lot of accumulated stress, a lot to do inside and outside of work, so I just didn't want to talk to the customer..." (EV14). When an employee is interrupted in the middle of a task to respond to a request for information, this can be perceived as an obstacle to their objectives, generating anxiety and potentially resulting in knowledge hiding (Serenko and Bontis 2016).

Customers perceive that stores have few salespeople and that these individuals take on roles beyond selling. As a result, they fail to pass on information so that they can cope with all the demands placed on them: "... the salesperson is the one who arranges the merchandise, the one who takes the order, the one who receives the payment, and there is already a customer waiting to be served; my friend, there is no salesperson who can handle it..." (EC6). Therefore, multitasking was identified as an individual-level factor that leads the knowledge provider to hide knowledge.

The multitasking subcategory had the fewest coded excerpts (29), suggesting that, although work overload is seen as a factor influencing knowledge hiding, it is less prominent than the other individual reasons identified. Nevertheless, reports indicate that the accumulation of responsibilities, operational pressure, and the need to simultaneously address different demands can limit the salesperson's time and willingness to explain products and services in detail. In such situations, communication tends to become more objective, superficial, or controlled, leading to the omission of information deemed secondary (Connelly et al. 2012; Serenko and Bontis 2016; Jafari-Sadeghi et al. 2022).

For the subcategory perception of time, most salespeople point out that knowledge hiding can occur due to a lack of time, both on their part and on the part of customers, as evidenced in EV14's statement: "... there's a bit of a rush, both on the part of the salesperson and the customer..." (EV14). According to customers, salespeople tend to engage in knowledge hiding, especially during lunchtime or at the end of the working day. This can be observed in EC1's comment: "I've seen it in two moments, when it's the salesperson's lunchtime, and when he is about to

leave." Customers also perceive that, due to time constraints, salespeople want to close the sale quickly and end up hiding information: "I think the time factor is certainly a limiter of information." (EC16). Therefore, as identified by Chaker et al. (2021), time pressure proved to be an important element of knowledge hiding.

The personality subcategory is recognized by the salespeople themselves as a key factor in hiding knowledge, as EV02 notes: "... I believe it really comes down to each person's personality." Customers also agree, as seen in EC02's comment: "is very much linked to the personality of the person." This is also corroborated by the salespeople, as EV02 says: "I think it really depends on each person's personality." Such statements echo the findings in the literature that an individual's personality is related to knowledge hiding (Irum et al. 2020; Jafari-Sadeghi et al. 2022).

4.2 | Organizational Reasons

The evaluation of the interviews also highlighted organizational reasons that result in knowledge hiding on the part of salespeople. This category was subdivided into seven distinct subcategories: management assessment, task interdependence, leadership, goal orientation, perception of the work environment, organizational policy, and organizational reward (Table 4). This is in line with prior studies on knowledge hiding in organizations (Anaza and Nowlin 2017; Arain et al. 2020; Butt 2019; Butt et al. 2020; Gagné et al. 2019; Jafari-Sadeghi et al. 2022; Serenko and Bontis 2016; Sheidaee et al. 2022; Wen and Ma 2021; Zhu et al. 2019; Ismail and Jasim 2025).

The subcategory management assessment indicates how superiors can influence information-sharing behavior (Butt 2019; Ismail and Jasim 2025). Salespeople confirmed that the presence of a supervisor affects the transfer of information: "It happens, it does happen... you end up omitting information..." (EV13), and some reported that, because they had been reprimanded, they do not pass on certain information: "I've been reprimanded for this several times" (EV15). From the customers' perspective, the presence of management also influences the salesperson to hide information, as illustrated by EC13: "... the salesperson may be afraid to provide information...". In this sense, fear of

managerial evaluation leads to knowledge hiding behavior between the salesperson and the customer.

For the subcategory on the interdependence in tasks, salespeople explained that they did not have the autonomy to give discounts or change prices: “We’re salespeople, we can’t change that, right?” (EV11). But they also explained that the customer often wants to speak directly to the manager, so they leave it up to the supervisor to pass on information: “Sometimes the customer doesn’t care about the salesperson... they care about what the manager says” (EV10). Customers, in turn, corroborated that salespeople lacked autonomy to provide information, especially about discounts and the technical details of the product; they were thus dependent on the manager’s approval or confirmation. This can be seen in the statements by EC11 and EC13: “then she went to talk to the manager, so that the manager could see what discount she could give me” (EC11) and “it doesn’t seem to have detailed information about a product, because he needs someone else who has more knowledge to tell him what that product is for” (EC13). The need for workers to collaborate with each other can also affect the quantity and quality of information shared (Gagné et al. 2019; Moh’d et al. 2021; Ismail and Jasim 2025). The interdependence of tasks thus does appear to have an effect on hiding knowledge from customers.

In the subcategory of abusive leadership, salespeople reported that this type of leadership leads them to engage in knowledge hiding with customers. EV05 pointed out that: “...it is the mirror of the salesperson... the salesperson is going to serve the customer anyway...”. EV07 added: “...there are salespeople who, when they have an abusive manager and the manager is not in the store, provide the best service. But when the manager is there, because they have been mistreated, then they are already afraid to serve...”. The leader must encourage knowledge sharing and avoid hiding it (Butt 2019). Customers also agreed, according to EC02: “yes, because the leader ends up being the mirror...”. Unethical and abusive leadership impacts workers’ attitudes, leading to knowledge hiding behavior (Arain et al. 2020; Ahmed and Makhbul 2024; Ismail and Jasim 2025).

When analyzing the subcategories, abusive leadership had the fewest coded excerpts (40), suggesting that, although this factor is present, participants perceived it as less significant compared to the other organizational reasons. Nevertheless, reports indicate that abusive behavior on the part of management—such as excessive pressure, constant reprimands, hostile treatment, or a lack of support—can negatively affect the way salespeople interact with customers (Arain et al. 2020; Ahmed and Makhbul 2024; Ismail and Jasim 2025). This finding is consistent with the literature, which shows that abusive leadership encourages knowledge hiding by undermining employees’ trust, motivation, and well-being (Peng et al. 2019; Arain et al. 2020; Ahmed and Makhbul 2024; Ismail and Jasim 2025).

Regarding the subcategory of goal orientation, salespeople recognize that having to meet targets prevents them from explaining too much to a single customer, as evidenced in EV17 statement: “the goal is a factor that affects a lot.... I’m going to have to be more objective, tell what really matters...”. Customers

also consider that salespeople engage in knowledge hiding, as observed in EC15 interview “...well, since he has to meet his target and knows that the product is not selling, they will hide information...”. Zhu et al. (2019) have shown that individuals who have individual goals have a greater tendency to hide information in order to demonstrate greater performance in relation to other people.

The next subcategory, perception of the work environment, refers to the salesperson’s feeling of insecurity at work. Salespeople recognize that an insecure environment leads to knowledge hiding, as evidenced in EV20’s statement: “I think it’s the worst phase there is [...] he asks for information and omits it.” Customers also notice the omission of information by salespeople in this situation. EC16 comments: “They are short of information, and shortage is omission.” Corroborating this finding, Jafari-Sadeghi et al. (2022), Serenko and Bontis (2016), and Sheidaee et al. (2022) observed that job insecurity can motivate knowledge hiding.

The subcategory of organizational policy was related to companies that have policies that do not authorize salespeople to pass on knowledge to customers. Sales assistant EV02 commented that “big companies do this... that batch has a problem... but the store already knows about it, so you hide it.” Customers also agreed, as EC07 mentioned: “sometimes I think they even give credit for this, how can I put it, this deviation, right?” According to Butt (2019) and Butt et al. (2020), managers deliberately hide knowledge because they lack permission to share it. Here, it turns out that the company can prevent salespeople from sharing information with customers.

When analyzing the subcategories, organizational policy had the highest number of coded excerpts (141), indicating that the standards, practices, and guidelines established by companies have a strong influence on salespeople’s tendency to hide knowledge. Reports suggest that organizations may explicitly restrict the sharing of certain information, whether due to management directives or internal policies regarding prices, discounts, defects, deadlines, or product features (Butt 2019; Butt et al. 2020). This finding shows that knowledge hiding does not depend solely on individual characteristics, but can also be encouraged or legitimized by the organization itself, especially in contexts marked by political practices, formal restrictions on information sharing, and organizational cultures that encourage knowledge hiding (Malik et al. 2019; Arain et al. 2020; Butt et al. 2021; Ismail and Jasim 2025).

The last subcategory, organizational reward, refers to the lack of rewards for the salesperson if they share knowledge with the customer (Anaza and Nowlin 2017; Butt et al. 2020; Wen and Ma 2021; Ismail and Jasim 2025). The salesperson EV19 explained: “it happens a lot. Sometimes you don’t explain a product very much because it’s not paying you very much.” The customer also perceives this, according to EC03: “the commission has a great influence.” Knowledge hiding occurs when there are no rewards for sharing information. Without incentives, as this study confirms, salespeople tend to hide knowledge from customers in order to sell something that will bring them greater rewards (Butt et al. 2020; Wen and Ma 2021).

TABLE 5 | Category: Relational reasons that lead salespeople to hide knowledge from customers.

| Category | Subcategories | No. of associated interviews | No. of coded passages |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Relational reasons | Sales approach | 35 | 50 |
| | Inadequate interaction | 40 | 245 |
| | Interpersonal relationships | 36 | 66 |
| | TOTAL | | 361 |

Source: Research data.

4.3 | Relational Reasons

Analysis of the 40 interviews with salespeople and customers revealed relational reasons for salespeople to hide knowledge. This category was subdivided into three subcategories: sales approach, inadequate interaction, and interpersonal relationships. In line with studies on knowledge hiding in organizations (Butt 2019; Butt et al. 2020; Butt et al. 2021; Connelly et al. 2012; Irum et al. 2020; Jafari-Sadeghi et al. 2022; Lanke 2018; Wen and Ma 2021; Zhao et al. 2019), Table 5 shows the relational reasons category and its subcategories, thus detailing the motivations that lead salespeople to hide knowledge in the B2C context.

The subcategory sales approach refers to cases where the salesperson and the customer ignore each other. Several experiences were shared about this. EV01 mentioned: “the person has already offered help, but for some reason, the customer doesn’t want help... then when they do need help, this help often isn’t offered.” EC02 commented: “for example, if you’re just having a look and they approach you, we generally don’t like it. And usually, when you go help them out again, then I think there’s a certain resistance.” Being ignored at work damages relations between colleagues, and those who experience it tend to hide knowledge when asked to do so (Zhao et al. 2019), which was also observed in this study regarding the interaction between salesperson and customer during sales approaches.

Although this subcategory, sales approach, obtained the lowest number of coded excerpts (50), the reports indicate that the way the first contact between salesperson and customer occurs can influence knowledge hiding during the sale. This result suggests that the initial approach functions as a relational element capable of influencing the level of openness, trust, and reciprocity between the parties, favoring or limiting knowledge hiding. The literature shows that being ignored, rejected, or excluded in interpersonal interactions tends to generate defensive behaviors and a greater propensity for knowledge hiding (Zhao et al. 2019; Connelly et al. 2019; Butt 2019; Butt et al. 2020).

In the second subcategory, inadequate interaction, the interviewees mentioned distrust, lack of dignity and respect, incivility, and lack of reciprocity as inappropriate behaviors that can lead salespeople to engage in knowledge hiding when interacting with customers. On the subject of distrust, EV04 reported on the distrust of the salesperson for the customer who knows too much: “when the customer asks a lot of questions and technical questions... you start to think about things, you start to become more thoughtful.” EC06 commented: “perhaps the person’s attire or appearance can end up influencing them,” and EC08

said, “when the customer... just looks and looks... that customer usually doesn’t want the salesman, and I don’t think the salesman gives them all the information.” Thus, the more distrustful employees are of the person with whom they are interacting, the more likely they are to plan to hide knowledge from that person when required to do so (Connelly et al. 2012; Hernaus et al. 2019; Butt et al. 2021).

Regarding the lack of dignity and respect, EV05 commented: “there are customers who arrive like this, approaching, touching, grabbing your hair, and I already shrink back... and it does happen that we pass on information, but in a limited way.” EC01 said, “she may not raise her voice to the customer... but she tends to do so because of the limitation of information.” These reports are in line with Lanke (2018), who identified that a lack of dignity and respect in interpersonal interactions can lead people to engage in knowledge hiding. In the case reports of incivility, EV08 reported: “it’s because you don’t even have the energy to try and talk, because the guy is so aggressive,” and EC05 commented: “I think he’s going to do everything there, just to end that service, just for the customer to leave right away...?” According to Irum et al. (2020), after an act of incivility, employees often hide knowledge as a form of retaliation.

A lack of reciprocity can be observed in the remarks of EV13, who commented: “...that customer’s behavior has already rubbed off on the salesperson...and he’ll shut down in the same way, hiding knowledge...”. EC09 says: “...some people are clueless; they’re just rude...”. In this context, Butt et al. (2020), Butt et al. (2021), and Wen and Ma (2021) confirm that when social exchange between individuals is not reciprocal, it creates an environment conducive to knowledge hiding.

In analyzing the coded excerpts, we observed that the subcategory inadequate interaction had the highest number of codes (245), indicating that the nature of the relationship between salesperson and customer has a strong influence on knowledge hiding. In such situations, the salesperson may be less willing to share information and may withhold certain details as a form of self-protection, retaliation, or to bring the interaction to a quicker close. This finding underscores that knowledge hiding is also strongly influenced by the relational dynamics established during the sale, especially when the interaction is marked by tension, discomfort, or mistrust (Connelly et al. 2019; Lanke 2018; Irum et al. 2020; Butt 2019; Butt et al. 2020).

In the interpersonal relationship subcategory, salespeople recognize that closeness with the customer influences the amount of information passed on. EV17 commented: “In my opinion, it’s

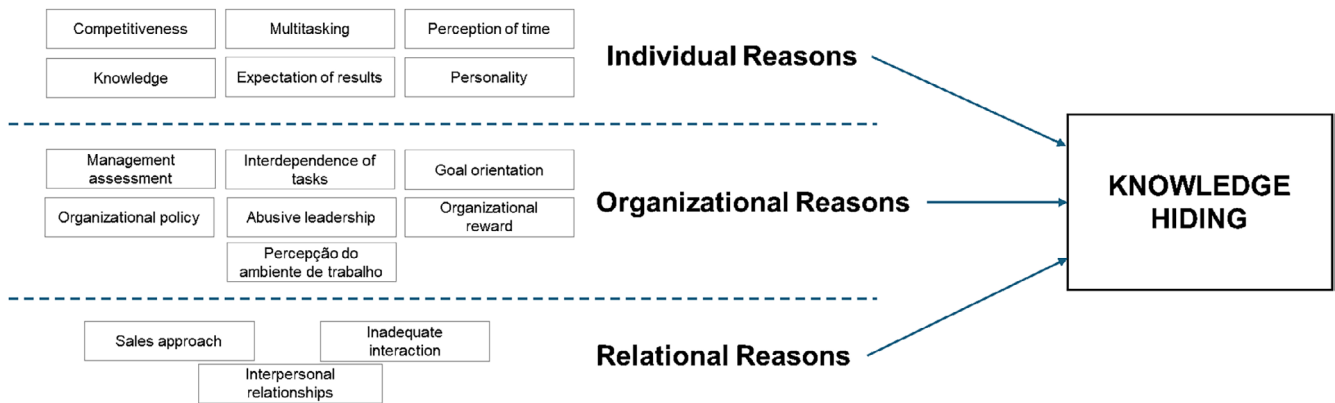


FIGURE 1 | Model of the reasons why salespeople hide knowledge from customers. *Source:* Research data. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

that customer who isn't, isn't a well-known customer—he deserves more attention.” Most customers considered that having an interpersonal relationship with the salesperson made the sale easier. Thus, it led to less effort on the part of the salesperson to pass on more information, as can be seen in the interview with EC13: “he ends up selling the customer anything easily, because the customer trusts him and there's the other side of him trying to build loyalty with the next customer.” This contrasts with the literature, which suggests that the development of interpersonal relationships increases mutual trust, thus reducing knowledge hiding (Butt 2019; Butt et al. 2020; Roy and Islam 2025).

5 | Discussion

This study sought to identify the reasons why salespeople hide knowledge from customers in a B2C context through semi-structured interviews with customers and salespeople. The results allowed us to propose a model (Figure 1), which presents three categories that explain the reasons why salespeople hide knowledge, motivated by individual, organizational, and relational factors. These categories provide initial insights into how this phenomenon may manifest itself in the relationship between seller and customer in the B2C sector.

In light of Social Exchange Theory, the findings of this study indicate that knowledge hiding can be interpreted as a relational response by salespeople to conditions perceived in their interaction with customers (Blau 1964; Connelly et al. 2012; Connelly and Zweig 2015; Wen and Ma 2021; Butt et al. 2021; Ismail and Jasim 2025; Zhang et al. 2025). We note that the reasons for hiding knowledge reported by the participants manifest themselves at different levels, corroborating the findings of Connelly et al. (2012), Wen and Ma (2021), and Jafari-Sadeghi et al. (2022) that knowledge hiding is a phenomenon present at different levels in organizations (individual, organizational and interpersonal). In this sense, the findings suggest that knowledge hiding can be interpreted in light of Social Exchange Theory, through which the seller hides knowledge for individual, organizational, or relational reasons. However, by adopting this behavior, the ability to sustain the proposition and co-create value with the customer is compromised, highlighting that knowledge hiding acts as a critical link between the conditions that shape the exchange relationship and the results generated in the context of

B2C sales (Connelly et al. 2012; Connelly and Zweig 2015; Wen and Ma 2021; Butt et al. 2021; Anaza and Nowlin 2017; Gligor and Maloni 2022).

The first category concerns individual reasons and suggests that salespeople exhibit intentional behavior, on a personal level, to hide knowledge requested by customers. This finding supports previous studies that indicate personal motivations as a reason for hiding knowledge in various organizational environments, with employees admitting to engaging in this behavior (Moh'd et al. 2021; Peng 2013; Ismail and Jasim 2025). This category reinforces the notion that reasons relating to competitiveness, possession of knowledge, multitasking, expectation of results, perception of time, and personality tend to lead salespeople to hide knowledge from customers (B2C). In line with other studies, the motivations behind knowledge hiding include self-interest, competition, knowledge ownership, time, and psychological factors, among other factors. This can damage workplace relationships, reduce creativity, and affect organizational performance levels (Butt et al. 2023; Hernaus et al. 2019; Jafari-Sadeghi et al. 2022; Moh'd et al. 2021; Ali et al. 2026). This study also found that knowledge hiding can have an impact on sales.

The second category, organizational reasons, indicates how culture, leadership, and the organizational climate influence salespeople's attitudes. These factors shape employee behavior, including a propensity to hide knowledge. This category echoes the discussion in the literature about the influence of organizational aspects on knowledge hiding by employees (Arshad and Ismail 2018; Butt 2019; Butt et al. 2020; Butt et al. 2021; Connelly et al. 2012; Hernaus et al. 2019; Irum et al. 2020; Jafari-Sadeghi et al. 2022; Lanke 2018; Wen and Ma 2021; Zhao et al. 2019; Ismail and Jasim 2025) and demonstrates that salespeople are motivated to hide knowledge from customers due to management assessment, organizational policy, interdependence between tasks, abusive leadership, perception of the work environment, goal orientation, and organizational reward.

A permissive environment or one characterized by distrust, abusive leadership, dissatisfaction, and perceived injustice encourages knowledge-hiding behaviors (Butt et al. 2020; Butt et al. 2023; Hernaus et al. 2019; Irum et al. 2020; Jafari-Sadeghi et al. 2022; Wen and Ma 2021; Zhao et al. 2019; Ahmed and Makhbul 2024; Ismail and Jasim 2025). Such environments

also lead to decreasing collaboration and creativity, increasing turnover, and the undermining of organizational effectiveness due to knowledge gaps that prevent projects from being completed (Butt et al. 2023; Hernaus et al. 2019; Lanke 2018; Wen and Ma 2021; Zhao et al. 2019; Ali et al. 2026). This research expands the understanding of how organizational reasons affect the behavior of B2C salespeople and cause them to hide knowledge requested by customers, which can limit the organization's strategies for providing value to the customer.

As for the third category, relational reasons, it relates most closely to the literature, where knowledge hiding is mostly identified among team members or employees, as a result of inadequate interaction between individuals. This behavior is thus considered an interpersonal phenomenon (Anaza and Nowlin 2017; Butt et al. 2021; Chaker et al. 2021; Connelly et al. 2012; Connelly et al. 2019; Connelly and Zweig 2015; Jafari-Sadeghi et al. 2022; Lanke 2018). In addition to this point, however, the present study revealed that knowledge hiding can occur in the interaction between sellers and customers in a B2C context. The salesperson may fail to provide information about the features and benefits of the products, thus influencing the customers' perception of value when buying a product, due to the relationship generated at the time of the sale. The findings in the relational reasons category thus indicated that the salesperson tends to hide knowledge from the customer for reasons related to the sales approach, inadequate interactions, and interpersonal relationships.

In light of the above, the results suggest that B2C sellers may hide knowledge requested by consumers and that this behavior appears to be associated with individual, organizational, and relational factors. The B2C market has a sales focus on individual consumers, which emphasizes emotional appeal and quick transactions. The customer's interaction with the seller thus requires a connection facilitating the collaborative development of solutions, which is a key step in offering value to the consumer (Homburg and Tischer 2023; Itani et al. 2022). The salesperson is important in shaping the customer's experiences, and value-based selling emphasizes the importance of effective communication. Hiding knowledge can compromise the success of the sale, thus reducing the value offered to the customer (Butt et al. 2021; Gligor and Maloni 2022; Terho et al. 2012; Xia et al. 2025). This is problematic, as this value is important for increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty, ultimately boosting the company's performance (Ramos et al. 2023).

In short, for B2C retail companies, the findings offer useful insights for reflecting on how communication, supervision, and customer interaction practices can influence knowledge hiding by salespeople. This way, they can better understand their salespeople's behavior, developing new sales strategies to enhance the value proposition for customers, enabling better decisions regarding sales force activities that cannot be overlooked. This can help them in developing new sales strategies for the customer value proposition by providing better decisions for sales force activities that cannot be neglected. Companies that understand and implement value co-creation strategies must recognize the salesperson as a strategic component to increase loyalty, emotional engagement, and sustainable customer relationships,

which are essential to better meet customer needs and differentiate the company from its competitors.

6 | Conclusions

This study sought to examine the possible reasons that lead salespeople to hide knowledge from customers in B2C. Based on the interviewees' accounts, the results offer initial evidence that this knowledge hiding behavior also seems to occur in the relationship between salesperson and consumer and that it can be perceived by customers during the sales interaction. Thus, in an exploratory way, this study proposed a model with three main categories and their subcategories of knowledge hiding. The model suggests that individual, organizational, and relational reasons shape the motives for the salesperson to hide knowledge from the customer, acting as analytical tools to uncover the nature of the hiding, offering insights for improving sales practices and strategies, and advancing the value proposition to customers.

Considering Social Exchange Theory (Blau 1964), the findings suggest that knowledge hiding can be interpreted as a relational response by salespeople to the conditions they perceive during interactions with customers (Blau 1964; Connelly et al. 2012; Connelly and Zweig 2015; Zhang et al. 2025). By integrating this theoretical lens into the proposed model, the study suggests that individual, organizational, and relational reasons influence how salespeople hide knowledge in B2C relationships, corroborating evidence that knowledge hiding acts as a mechanism for regulating social exchange (Wen and Ma 2021; Jafari-Sadeghi et al. 2022; Ismail and Jasim 2025). These dimensions should be understood as a preliminary analytical model, useful for guiding our understanding of the phenomenon and supporting future research.

In terms of its theoretical contributions, in comparing the results of this study with other research (e.g., Anaza and Nowlin 2017; Butt et al. 2023; Chaker et al. 2021; Connelly et al. 2012; Connelly et al. 2019; Connelly and Zweig 2015; Jafari-Sadeghi et al. 2022; Kumar Jha and Varkkey 2018; Ismail and Jasim 2025), the findings provide initial evidence that knowledge hiding may also occur in B2C relationships. This approach helps broaden the discussion on knowledge hiding within companies.

Building on existing knowledge, the findings of this study suggest that knowledge hiding may occur in the relationship between the seller and the end consumer, and not only among teams or employees, as identified in the literature (e.g., Butt et al. 2023; Chaker et al. 2021; Connelly et al. 2019; Connelly and Zweig 2015; Wen and Ma 2021). This approach is important because knowledge hiding, in addition to affecting internal organizational issues, can have an impact on the relationship between the salesperson and the customer, which ultimately reverberates through sales operations and the value proposition to the customer.

Another contribution of this study is that it helps address the gap in our understanding of the reasons why salespeople may hide knowledge from customers. We found that individual, organizational, and relational reasons (a new category) may motivate

salespeople to intentionally hide knowledge from customers, thus reinforcing that this phenomenon is associated with different reasons (Connelly et al. 2012; Jafari-Sadeghi et al. 2022; Wen and Ma 2021). This finding is relevant because salespeople are the link between the company and customers and are therefore responsible for proposing and co-creating value with them.

In practice, the results indicate that B2C organizations can take steps to mitigate knowledge hiding. Leaders can recruit salespeople with collaborative rather than competitive characteristics, in line with the company's value proposition strategies (Arshad and Ismail 2018). Fostering an environment that satisfies salespeople's needs for competence, autonomy, and relationships can also motivate knowledge sharing with customers. This can be achieved through motivating work design, leadership, incentive systems, and the development of knowledge-sharing norms (Gagné et al. 2019). Organizations can recruit an adequate number of salespeople to manage fluctuations in workload, thus reducing time pressure and the impacts associated with knowledge hiding (Chaker et al. 2021). By understanding the individual-level factors, organizations can create a collaborative environment between the salesperson and the customer. Such an environment would promote the free exchange of information, thus increasing the value proposition and its co-creation with the customer.

In the organizational context, hiding knowledge is not always negative and can protect individual or organizational interests. However, to mitigate its occurrence, it is essential to work on trust between salespeople and managers, while emphasizing identity and reliability (Connelly et al. 2012; Connelly et al. 2019; Connelly and Zweig 2015; Ahmed and Makhbul 2024; Roy and Islam 2025). In sales contexts, leaders should encourage the proactive value proposition of salespeople by building long-term relationships with customers, which can increase loyalty to gain competitive advantage (Arshad and Ismail 2018). To achieve this, leaders can promote environments of trust, collaboration, and civility, thus ensuring that organizational structures and processes favor knowledge sharing and encourage the proposition and co-creation of value with the customer.

Understanding that hiding knowledge interferes with the relationship between salesperson and customer helps managers understand the behavior of their teams and the problems caused by it. It also makes it possible to review sales strategies focused on the value proposition and guide decisions on sales force activities. The results of this study can help companies to intensify their efforts to increase the value they offer customers and strengthen their competitiveness in the market.

Naturally, this study has limitations, which afford suggestions for future research. We believe that there may be additional variables that have not been indicated, so we suggest further research should be carried out to help map out new relevant variables. We also note that the sample composition showed marked differences in gender and educational attainment between salespeople and customers, which may have influenced how participants perceived and reported the knowledge hiding; thus, future research can examine in greater depth the role of gender and educational attainment in knowledge hiding in the relationship between salespeople and customers. As this study

was conducted in the context of Brazilian B2C companies, the findings may not be generalizable to other countries; other reasons for knowledge hiding may be present in different countries, although these reasons were not mentioned in the interviews. We therefore recommend that future studies explore other geographical contexts, including developed countries. Another suggestion would be to carry out comparative qualitative research to analyze the reasons for hiding between experienced and less experienced salespeople to understand possible differences associated with the degree of experience, as this issue was not addressed in the present study. It is also possible to quantitatively investigate differences across retail segments, examine the role of gender, education level, and customer experience, and assess the effects of knowledge hiding on trust, satisfaction, repurchase intention, and perceived value. Finally, we suggest carrying out a quantitative and confirmatory study to test the proposed model (Figure 1) directly with salespeople.

Acknowledgments

The Article Processing Charge for the publication of this research was funded by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) (ROR identifier: 00x0ma614).

Funding

This research was supported by the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq/Brazil), project 304951/2024-2, by the Vice-Rectorate for Research and Innovation (PRPI)/USP in the Program to Support New Faculty Members—project 22.1.09345.01.2, and by NECE; this work is supported by FCT—Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P. by project reference UIDB/04630/2025 and DOI: 10.54499/UIDP/04630/2025.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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TABLE A1 | Statements from salespeople and customers by category and subcategory.

| Category | Subcategory | Salespeople's statements | Customers' statements |
|------------------------|------------------------|--|---|
| Individual reasons | Competitiveness | “so it happens a lot, sometimes, that there's this internal competition between them and they want to speed up the process and fail to pass on some information” (EV21). | “...because you feel like you're in a situation of dispute... And he just answered me in a way that I didn't want... too objective” (EC12). |
| Individual reasons | Knowledge | “... sometimes we even know, but they are so incisive ... so even if I'm sure of what I have learned, what I know, I will back off.” (EV18). “... because that was what sold best, so I didn't share all the information... but I knew he would come back.” (EV15). | “customers actually stop buying because they feel insecure about the salesperson's knowledge of the products” (EC10). “there are salespeople who think that by doing this, by holding on to information, the person will be dependent on them.” (EC10). |
| Individual reasons | Expectation of results | “... the sale is already concluded, let's say, practically done, and a question arises from the customer and sometimes he believes he can omit it, for fear of losing the sale...” (EV13). | “... sometimes the salesperson knows that the delivery takes time, that deadlines are not respected and so on, but he will not say that, right?” (EC05). “... a salesperson was reluctant to give me the information for fear that this information could even impact his dismissal.” (EC01). |
| Individual reasons | Multitasking | “... there was a lot of accumulated stress, a lot to do inside and outside of work, so I just didn't want to talk to the customer...” (EV14). | “... the salesperson is the one who arranges the merchandise, the one who takes the order, the one who receives the payment, and there is already a customer waiting to be served; my friend, there is no salesperson who can handle it...” (EC06). |
| Individual reasons | Perception of time | “... there's a bit of a rush, both on the part of the salesperson and the customer...” (EV14). | “I've seen it in two moments, when it's the salesperson's lunchtime, and when he is about to leave.” (EC01), “I think the time factor is certainly a limiter of information.” (EC16). |
| Individual reasons | Personality | “... I believe it really comes down to each person's personality.” (EV02). | “is very much linked to the personality of the person.” (EC02). |
| Organizational reasons | Management assessment | “It happens, it does happen... you end up omitting information...” (EV13). “I've been reprimanded for this several times” (EV15). | “... the salesperson may be afraid to provide information...” (EC13). |
| Organizational reasons | Task interdependence | “We're salespeople, we can't change that, right?” (EV11). “Sometimes the customer doesn't care about the salesperson... they care about what the manager says” (EV10). | “then she went to talk to the manager, so that the manager could see what discount she could give me” (EC11). “it doesn't seem to have detailed information about a product, because he needs someone else who has more knowledge to tell him what that product is for” (EC13). |
| Organizational reasons | Abusive leadership | “...it is the mirror of the salesperson... the salesperson is going to serve the customer anyway...” (EV05). “...there are salespeople who, when they have an abusive manager and the manager is not in the store, provide the best service. But when the manager is there, because they have been mistreated, then they are already afraid to serve...” (EV07). | “yes, because the leader ends up being the mirror...” (EC02). |

(Continues)

TABLE A1 | (Continued)

| Category | Subcategory | Salespeople's statements | Customers' statements |
|------------------------|------------------------------------|--|--|
| Organizational reasons | Goal orientation | "the goal is a factor that affects a lot... I'm going to have to be more objective, tell what really matters..." (EV17). | "...well, since he has to meet his target and knows that the product is not selling, they will hide information..." (EC15). |
| Organizational reasons | Perception of the work environment | "I think it's the worst phase there is [...] he asks for information and omits it." (EV20). | "They are short of information, and shortage is omission." (EC16). |
| Organizational reasons | Organizational policy | "big companies do this... that batch has a problem... but the store already knows about it, so you hide it." (EV02). | "sometimes I think they even give credit for this, how can I put it, this deviation, right?" (EC07). |
| Organizational reasons | Organizational reward | "it happens a lot. Sometimes you don't explain a product very much because it's not paying you very much." (EV19). | "the commission has a great influence." (EC03). |
| Relational reasons | Sales approach | "the person has already offered help, but for some reason, the customer doesn't want help... then when they do need help, this help often isn't offered." (EV01). | "for example, if you're just having a look and they approach you, we generally don't like it. And usually, when you go help them out again, then I think there's a certain resistance." (EC02). |
| Relational reasons | Inadequate interaction | "when the customer asks a lot of questions and technical questions... you start to think about things, you start to become more thoughtful." (EV04). "there are customers who arrive like this, approaching, touching, grabbing your hair, and I already shrink back... and it does happen that we pass on information, but in a limited way." (EV05). "it's because you don't even have the energy to try and talk, because the guy is so aggressive." (EV08). "...that customer's behavior has already rubbed off on the salesperson...and he'll shut down in the same way, hiding knowledge..." (EV13). | "perhaps the person's attire or appearance can end up influencing them" (EC06). "when the customer... just looks and looks... that customer usually doesn't want the salesman and I don't think the salesman gives them all the information." (EC08). "she may not raise her voice to the customer... but she tends to do so because of the limitation of information." (EC01). "I think he's going to do everything there, just to end that service, just for the customer to leave right away...?" (EC05). "...some people are clueless; they're just rude..." (EC09). |
| Relational reasons | Interpersonal relationship | "In my opinion, it's that customer who isn't, isn't a well-known customer—he deserves more attention." (EV17). | "he ends up selling the customer anything easily, because the customer trusts him and there's the other side of him trying to build loyalty with the next customer." (EC13). |