Understanding how and when workplace ostracism jeopardizes work effort

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Abstract

Purpose – While the performance consequences of workplace ostracism (WO) have been examined in many studies, relatively little is known about WO’s relationship with work effort (WE), which is a vital part of the performance domain. Moreover, the literature is largely silent regarding how WO translates into reduced effort and when such effects are less likely. The purpose of the study is to bridge these gaps. Specifically, the paper examines the relationship between WO and WE, taking into account the mediating role of emotional exhaustion (EE) and the moderating role of work centrality (WC).

Design/methodology/approach – Data for the study came from an online survey of 310 full-time employees of service-sector organizations in Pakistan. The PROCESS macro, a robust computational tool for research models involving both mediating and moderating mechanisms, was used for analysis.

Findings – WO was found to be a risk factor for organizations in that it not only induces/aggravates strain in employees, but also hampers them in expending effort in given roles. Findings further highlight that the negative relationship between WO and WE is mediated by EE and moderated by WC.

Research limitations/implications – Owing to the cross-sectional data and correlational research design, the study has limited power to make causal inferences about the relationships between the constructs (e.g. WO and WE). Further, the study is conducted in a collectivist culture where people are particularly sensitive to WO; it is, therefore, possible that the strength of relationships between the constructs might differ in individualistic cultures.

Practical implications – Apart from informing management practices in relation to minimizing the occurrence of WO, the study also offers valuable insights into how employees can protect themselves from the negative effects of WO.

Originality/value – The study is among the very few empirical works that simultaneously explicate how and when WO jeopardizes employees’ WE.

Keywords Workplace ostracism, Work centrality, Emotional exhaustion, Work effort, Pakistan

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Workplace ostracism (WO), defined as employees’ perceptions regarding the extent to which they suffer from exclusionary behaviors at work (Ferris et al., 2008), has gained a great deal of research attention in the past decade. Research to date has explored myriad consequences of WO (Mao et al., 2018; Sharma and Dhar, 2021), and there is consensus in the literature that such an experience can cause a wide array of negative outcomes, including decreased job
performance and productivity (Anjum and Ming, 2018; Ayub et al., 2021; De Clercq et al., 2019; Jahanzeb et al., 2020); reduced job engagement, felt obligation and organizational identification (Wu et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2020); undermined motivation, commitment and job embeddedness (Lustenberger and Jagacinski, 2010; Lyu and Zhu, 2019); squelched enthusiasm to contribute for the good of the organization (Chung, 2015; Wu et al., 2016); diminished creativity and job satisfaction (Ferris et al., 2008; Kwan et al., 2018); lack of self-control (DeWall et al., 2012); higher levels of stress, burnout, turnover intention, defensive silence, interpersonal conflict and deviance (Ayub et al., 2021; Chung, 2015, 2018; Jahanzeb and Fatima, 2018; Lyu and Zhu, 2019; Wu et al., 2012); increased propensity to display unsafe, dishonest, counterproductive, procrastination, deviant and unethical pro-organizational behaviors (Chen and Li, 2020; He et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2021; Poon et al., 2013; Yang and Treadway, 2018; Zhang et al., 2020) and greater tendency toward hiding knowledge and cyber-loafing (Koay, 2018; Zhao and Xia, 2017).

A review of the extant literature on WO, however, indicates a dearth of research with respect to its relationship with employees’ work effort (WE), defined as “the extent to which one works hard and keeps trying to perform the given or chosen tasks” (De Cooman et al., 2009, p. 267). We know of only two prior studies examining the association between WO and WE (Anjum et al., 2019; Türkmen et al., 2016). Insights into how WO translates into decreased effort are also almost non-existent with the only exception being the study by Anjum et al. (2019). Moreover, the conditions under which WO is more or less likely to affect WE remain largely unknown. The basic purpose of the current study is to fill these gaps in the literature. In particular, this study attempts to investigate how WO undermines effort and when such effects are less likely. The answers to these questions are important both for theory building and management practice. The answer to the first question, for instance, is important for theory building on how WO might obstruct employees’ contributions (i.e. WE), as well as helping practitioners and human resource (HR) managers to develop efficient interventions to minimize the negative effects of WO. Similarly, the answer to the second question can inform theory and management practice regarding the conditions under which WO is less likely to affect employees’ effort. Hence, this paper has important theoretical significance and practical value.

Drawing from the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) and using insights from recent empirical works showing that employees’ exposure to ostracizing behaviors can deplete their emotional resources (Jiang et al., 2021), due to which they contribute less (Mirza et al., 2020), this study assumes that EE, defined as “the feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted of one’s emotional resources” (Maslach, 1993, p. 20), could mediate the relationship between WO and WE. Similarly, in line with the underpinnings of COR theory and the findings that personal resources such as emotional intelligence and self-efficacy can mitigate the negative behavioral outcomes of WO (De Clercq et al., 2019; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), the current study proposes that work centrality (WC), defined as “an attitude that portrays the importance or value of work in one’s life” (Paullay et al., 1994, p. 225), could moderate the association between WO and WE. Another key reason why WC seems likely to moderate the WO–WE relationship is that work-centered individuals are less sensitive to workplace conditions/situations (Bal and Kooij, 2011; Kooij and Zacher, 2016) and tend to have a strong identification with work (Hirschfeld and Field, 2000). It is likely, therefore, that despite being ostracized, they keep working hard and devote energies to given or chosen tasks.

The current study contributes to the extant literature in several ways. First, this study is among the very few empirical works introducing and testing the “conduits” through which WO affects WE. The present study, therefore, not only deepens our understanding of the extent to which ostracism obstructs employees from remaining committed to and putting extra energies into their tasks, but also broadens the scant body of knowledge on the
mechanisms that might underlie the WO–WE relationship (e.g. Anjum et al., 2019). Moreover, the study highlights a potential impediment of WE (i.e. EE). Notably, no prior empirical work, to the best of our knowledge, has either discussed the rationale for the link between EE and WE or has empirically investigated this relationship. Thus, this study is important in that it extends our knowledge of the factors that might hinder WE. Second, this study is the first to introduce WC as a boundary condition of the WO–WE relationship. In doing so, not only does the current study unpack the hitherto unexamined relationship between WC and WE, but it also reveals the conditions under which WO is more or less likely to affect WE, which represents a perspective not examined in past research. Third, this study builds on and lends empirical support to COR theory’s relatively less scrutinized resource caravans’ principle (Hobfoll, 2001), evidence, for which is rarely found in management research (e.g. Ahmed et al., 2021; Anjum et al., 2021). Finally, this study introduces a new invigorating personal resource (WC) to COR theory, thus expanding its resource base.

2. Research framework and hypotheses
COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) provides a relevant theoretical backdrop to the underlying purpose of this study, i.e. to understand how and when WO might affect WE. Therefore, COR theory is used as a theoretical lens in this study. In particular, COR theory’s postulation that stressors can negatively affect individuals’ energy and motivate them to conserve their resources (De Clercq et al., 2019; Hobfoll 1989, 2001) is used to expound WO’s direct and indirect relationships with WE. Further, the resource investment and resource caravans’ principles of COR theory are used to explicate the moderating role of WC and the relationship between WC and WE, respectively. Our choice for using COR theory as an overarching theoretical framework follows many eminent researchers in the field who have also framed their studies using this theory (for a review, see Anjum et al., 2020; Chen and Li, 2020; De Clercq et al., 2019; Koay, 2018).

2.1 The relationship between workplace ostracism (WO) and employees’ work effort (WE)
WO is a psychologically taxing experience (Ferris et al., 2008; Glazer et al., 2021) that may inhibit individuals from expending effort. There are, at least, three reasons why WO seems likely to adversely affect WE. First, ostracism’s potential to negatively affect employees’ motivation and ability to contribute for the organization (Lustenberger and Jagacinski, 2010; O’Reilly and Robinson, 2009; Robinson et al., 2013) suggests a negative relationship between WO and WE. Second, research has demonstrated that employees’ effort is sensitive to their perceptions of the psychological environment, i.e. employees tend to expend more effort when they perceive that their organization is accommodative of their psychological needs (Brown and Leigh, 1996) and vice versa. Being an element of the toxic work environment, not only can WO distort employees’ perceptions of the psychological climate (Anjum and Ming, 2018), but also block their innate needs for belongingness, meaningful existence and self-esteem (Ferris et al., 2008). It is likely, therefore, that employees’ contributions to the organization (i.e. WE) may plummet. Third, COR theory holds that precarious/adverse situations such as ostracism can drain individuals’ emotional and energy resources, demoralize them and diminish their enthusiasm to contribute to the organization (De Clercq et al., 2019; Hobfoll 1989, 2001). Thus, ostracized employees might expend less effort. Although scarce, previous empirical works have demonstrated that ostracism can lead to a decrement in employees’ WE (Anjum et al., 2019; Türkmen et al., 2016). Hence, a negative relationship is predicted between WO and WE:

H1. Employees’ perceptions of WO will be negatively associated with their WE.
2.2 The mediating role of emotional exhaustion (EE) in the relationship between workplace ostracism (WO) and work effort (WE)

We argue that the negative relationship between WO and WE might be mediated by EE. Before explicating the rationale for the mediating role of EE in the WO—WE relationship, it is necessary to understand the relationship dynamics among WO, EE and WE. In this regard, we first delineate the relationship between WO and EE. Given that ostracism is a psychologically devastating phenomenon, it might lead individuals to feel depressed, helpless and emotionally devastated (Williams, 1997). Many empirical works have also shown that ostracism leads to several negative psychological and emotional reactions (e.g., Anjum et al., 2019; Ferris et al., 2008, 2016; Ma et al., 2021). But why does this happen? A potential explanation could be that social exclusion blocks people’s fundamental need for belonging and meaningful existence (Ferris et al., 2008), due to which they might feel emotionally distressed. Similarly, when employees are isolated, ignored or excluded in the workplace, several adverse feelings ensue, such as stress, psychological distress and EE (Anasori et al., 2021; Chen and Li, 2020; Chung, 2018; Jahanzeb and Fatima, 2018; Jiang et al., 2021; Koay, 2018; Wu et al., 2012). Hence, ostracism could be viewed as an emotionally devastating experience for employees. From the perspective of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), WO epitomizes a resource-loss condition (i.e. employees’ social resources are threatened and/or lost when they are ostracized), which can overstretch employees’ emotional resources, thereby inducing/aggravating strain (Jiang et al., 2021). Put simply, the unmet need to share thoughts and emotions due to the loss of emotional and social contacts at work can translate into EE (Anjum et al., 2020; Chen and Li, 2020). Hence, we posit that:

H2. Employees’ perceptions of WO will be positively associated with EE.

An inverse relationship is also anticipated between EE and WE. We assume this based on the findings that EE has negative repercussions for performance and other work-related outcomes (Cropanzano et al., 2003; Tourigny et al., 2013; Wright and Cropanzano, 1998) and the underpinnings of COR theory. From the standpoint of COR theory, EE represents “a state of impoverished resources which does not enable further investment of resources” (Westman et al., 2005, p. 183). In keeping with this argument, we submit that being devoid of emotional resources (i.e. EE) could motivate employees to expend less effort, which may also be viewed as a resource in that it embodies attentional and energy resources [e.g. working hard (intensity) and time spent on given or chosen tasks (persistence); De Cooman et al., 2009; Yeo and Neal, 2004]. There are two potential reasons for why we expect this. First, feelings of being emotionally drained due to one’s work or work environment can make employees extremely selective in deploying their existing resources, i.e. they are less likely to invest their attentional and energy resources (e.g. WE) on the tasks at hand when they feel emotionally exhausted (Tourigny et al., 2013). Second, the depletion of emotional resources could encourage attitudinal and behavioral withdrawal, which may take many forms, including increased turnover intention and reduced job performance (Wright and Cropanzano, 1998). We, therefore, postulate that the depletion of emotional resources might obstruct employees in putting their energies into tasks (i.e. intensity and direction) and remaining focused on them (i.e. persistence). Hence, we hypothesize that:

H3. EE will be negatively associated with WE.

Combining the above arguments, we postulate that EE might serve as a psychological conduit through which WO might translate into reduced effort. COR theory posits that individuals’ behavior is determined by the desire to garner resources. Specifically, when individuals perceive that their resources are threatened and/or lost, they start conserving them to circumvent further loss of their existing resources (Hobfoll, 2001). In other words, the depletion of emotional resources (i.e. EE) caused by precarious situations at work (i.e. WO)
could inhibit individuals in expending their existing resources (i.e. WE). We, therefore, predict that an unremitting exposure to ostracizing behavior at work increases employees’ vulnerability to EE, which, in turn, leads them to expend less effort. Several studies support this postulation. For instance, Mirza et al. (2020) showed that employees perform less well in their jobs if they feel emotionally exhausted due to being ostracized at work. Chen and Li (2020), Koay (2018), Jahanzeb and Fatima (2018), and Jiang et al. (2021) also found WO to be costly for organizations in that it invokes certain negative feelings (e.g. EE) in employees. Further, these studies attested to the mediating role of EE in linking WO to various adverse outcomes, including decreased job performance, increased cyber-loafing and higher propensity to engage in unsafe behaviors and exhibit interpersonal deviance. We, therefore, hypothesize that:

\[ H4. \text{ EE mediates the negative relationship between WO and WE.} \]

2.3 The moderating role of work centrality (WC)

As already described, WC is a work-related attitude that portrays the value or importance of work in one’s life (Paullay et al., 1994); this definition might confuse the readers, as many constructs describing one’s attitude towards work and the job (e.g. job involvement [JI], work engagement and workaholism) already exist in the literature. Therefore, a brief discussion on how WC differs from these constructs is necessary. While JI refers to the extent to which one is engaged in, and cognitively preoccupied with his/her current job, WC captures the importance of work in one’s life. Hence, WC has a broader scope than JI. It is noteworthy that JI comprises two main dimensions: JI-role (the extent to which one is engaged in job-related tasks) and JI-setting (the extent to which one is involved in the settings where one performs one’s job). Individuals might, however, be involved in one aspect but not the other. For example, a surgeon may exhibit high involvement in his/her duties (JI-role, e.g. providing consultations to patients and performing surgeries, etc.), but may not necessarily be involved in other activities that pertain to work settings (JI-setting, e.g. hospital administration) (Paullay et al., 1994). Another point of demarcation between WC and JI is that the latter is more sensitive to work-related experiences. Compared with the relatively stable nature of WC, JI is more vulnerable to workplace conditions. Researchers have noted that work-related factors such as job resources and job demands can impact JI (Bal and Kooij, 2011). WC is also distinct from work engagement and workaholism in that it is a precursor to work engagement and it does not entail negative features and outcomes, as is the case for workaholism (Bal and Kooij, 2011).

Having demarcated WC from related constructs, we now focus on WC’s relationship with WE. WC, being a work-related attitude, could determine how people behave both in the workplace and outside it (Bal and Kooij, 2011). Thus far, WC has been found to be linked to several beneficial outcomes, including higher levels of JI, work engagement, affective organizational commitment, job satisfaction, in-role performance and positive affect, as well as decreased intention to quit (Bal and Kooij, 2011; Hirschfeld and Field, 2000; Hu et al., 2018; Tziner et al., 2014; Ziegler and Schlett, 2016). WC also has implications for employment relationships. For instance, a study conducted in a healthcare organization in the Netherlands revealed interesting patterns of relationships between WC and the two forms of psychological contract (transactional and relational). The study found that WC had a positive association with relational contract and a negative association with transactional contract, suggesting that work-centered individuals are more likely to invest their resources (e.g. energy and time) in tasks, tending to build long-term, open-ended and mutual relationships with their organization (compared to those who attach low value to work and invest no or little resources in building a relationship with their organization) (Bal and Kooij, 2011). WC’s positive correlations with various dimensions of citizenship behaviors
(Diefendorff et al., 2002; Uçanok and Karabati, 2013; Ziegler and Schlett, 2016) also indicate that people who view work as a central part/aspect of their lives may go beyond the formal job description and engage more in extra-role or discretionary behaviors and activities to benefit the organization and its employees. Since work-centered individuals derive pleasure and satisfaction from work, they will likely devote more time and energy to their work, hence expending more effort on given tasks. Therefore, a positive relationship is predicted between WC and WE. This assumption receives theoretical support from the resource caravans’ principle of COR theory, which asserts that resources tend to be linked with other resources; for instance, those with greater self-efficacy are likely to be high in self-esteem and optimism (Hobfoll, 2001). Given that WC is an individual’s attitude that can lead to several desirable outcomes – the defining feature of resources (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) – it may, therefore, be viewed as a personal resource and can be expected to correlate positively with WE, which is also an attentional resource (Yeo and Neal, 2004). Hence, we propose that:

H5. WC will be positively associated with WE.

We assume that WC will positively moderate the negative relationship between WO and WE. One key reason for this is work-centered employees’ decreased vulnerability to workplace conditions/experiences (Bal and Kooij, 2011; Kooij and Zacher, 2016), i.e. employees for whom work is a central part of their lives are not extremely sensitive to workplace experiences (e.g. job demands or stressors). Hirschfeld and Field (2000) also noted that the essence of WC is non-affective. In line with this, we argue that highly work-centered employees will be less affected by WO (a manifestation of job demands/stressors) and thus will not suspend and/or curtail their WE.

Although WC’s moderating role in attenuating the negative behavioral outcomes of workplace stressors or precarious situations at work has not yet been examined, studies exist that show that WC could act as a moderating mechanism. Ziegler and Schlett (2016), for instance, found job satisfaction to be more predictive of the extra-role and in-role behaviors for those endowed with high WC. Kooij and Zacher (2016), meanwhile, demonstrated that WC positively moderates the age-perceived remaining time relationship, such that this relationship is weaker for the individuals high in WC than for those low in WC. Research has also shown that WC moderates the negative relationship between meaningfulness and affective organizational commitment, such that the strength of said relationship is non-significant for those high in WC, implying that work-centered employees, despite their work being meaningless, retain an affective connection with the organization (Tan, 2016). Similarly, Hu et al. (2018) found that the relationship between qualitative job insecurity and subjective well-being is non-significant for those high in WC. Based on these studies and building on the resource investment principle of COR theory, which states that employees’ personal resources (e.g. WC in this study’s case) can offset the detrimental effects of precarious situations/conditions (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), we postulate that:

H6. WC moderates the negative relationship between WO and WE, such that this relationship will be weaker when WC is high.

The interplay of this study’s constructs is demonstrated in Figure 1. Given that WC tends to be less sensitive to workplace conditions and has positive work-related outcomes, it should be more potent in moderating the WO–WE relationship, rather than the WO–EE or EE–WE relationships.

3. Methodology
3.1 Target population and the context
Although WO can occur anywhere (Ferris et al., 2017), participants in this study were recruited from telecom companies, banks and higher education institutions (HEIs) in
Pakistan because these organizations have been shown to have a high incidence of WO (Anjum et al., 2019; Jahanzeb et al., 2018). A plausible reason for this could be heavy workload. It is a common observation that employees in banks, telecom companies and HEIs are expected to perform several tasks within a specific period of time, due to which they may engage less in social interactions in the workplace. Employees in HEIs, for instance, are required to perform several duties/roles (e.g. giving lectures, conducting scientific research, arranging seminars, workshops, and conferences, preparing students for various competitions, overseeing admissions processes and performing other administrative duties [Faisal et al., 2019]). As a result, they are more likely to accidentally overlook their colleagues. Similarly, jobs in banks and telecom companies are highly complex, i.e. employees in these organizations not only have to deal with customers, cater their needs and maintain an accurate record of their transactions in different databases, but also have to handle recurrent software/hardware issues and perform several other tasks. It is likely, therefore, that they may inadvertently fail to engage in social niceties in the workplace (e.g. greeting co-workers in a socially acceptable manner or having conversations with them), resulting in the high incidence of WO.

Apart from the facts noted above, research has also demonstrated that the disruption of interpersonal relationships at work (e.g. ostracism) could have greater impacts on employees from collectivist cultures/societies such as Pakistan (Jahanzeb and Fatima, 2018; Jahanzeb et al., 2018; Jiang et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2020). Thus, the target population for this study and the context are both suitable for examining the outcomes/consequences of WO.

3.2 Sample and procedure
The survey for this study comprised three main sections: a cover letter, questions on demographics and the measurement scales. Because English is the business language in Pakistan and the potential respondents were expected to have at least a bachelor’s degree from public or private universities or colleges in Pakistan where the medium of instruction is English, the survey was administered in English. Fellow researchers and senior professors in organizational behavior, with whom one of the researchers had personal contact, were requested to comment on the overall format, language and other aspects of the survey before its administration. Considering their verbal suggestions (e.g. the correction of some typographic errors in the question statements), an online survey was designed and its web link was sent to the professors and fellow researchers for their final review, after which the survey was administered online. Information and access constraints were the main reasons for choosing an online survey approach. One of the researchers leveraged his official and personal contacts to collect data. The concerned officials in the target/selected organizations were first contacted to seek permission for data collection. After obtaining their informal permission, an e-mail with following information was sent to them for dissemination among their peers and subordinates:

![Figure 1. Research framework](image)
A brief introduction to the objectives/purpose of the research.

Assurances that participation in the study entailed no risks or costs. It was also stated that participation had no negative or positive implications for respondents’ current or future employment and no benefits of any kind (e.g. money or gifts) would be provided.

Assurances on the anonymity and confidentiality of respondents’ opinions and information.

Confirmation that participation in the survey was voluntary and respondents could quit it at any time during its administration. It was also made clear that the withdrawal of responses would not be possible after the completion of survey because no identifying information (e.g. name, phone number, and e-mail address) was sought.

A statement of consent and an unidentifiable survey link followed the aforementioned details. The survey was set to receive only one response from each computer/respondent. The survey remained operational for almost 45 days and recorded 310 useable responses ($n = 310$). Not only does the obtained sample size surpass the threshold of 10 observations per item, it also exceeds the preferred ratio of 20 observations per independent variable (for a discussion, see Hair et al., 2010, 2018). Demographic profile of the sample is provided in Table 1.

### 3.3 Measurement

The measurement scales used were as follows:

#### 3.3.1 Workplace ostracism (WO)

The frequency with which respondents experienced exclusionary behaviors at work was assessed with a ten-item scale, including items such as “How often in the past 30 days have others ignored you at work” (Ferris et al., 2008). Similar to those of Ferris et al. (2008; $\alpha = 0.94$) and Ayb et al. (2021; $\alpha = 0.92$), the reliability coefficient for the WO scale in the present study was found to be 0.938.

<table>
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<th>Variables</th>
<th>Categories and codes</th>
<th>Frequency and percentage</th>
<th>Mode</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female (2)</td>
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<td>41–50 (3)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>≥51 (4)</td>
<td>09 (2.9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qualifications</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Master’s (2)</td>
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<td>Banking (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Telecom (3)</td>
<td>66 (21.3)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents
3.3.2 Emotional exhaustion (EE). Following Cho et al. (2016), six items (e.g. “I feel emotionally drained from my work”) from Maslach and Jackson (1986) were used to measure the extent to which respondents felt emotionally exhausted. The reliability coefficient for this scale was 0.871. Similar results have been reported by Cho et al. (2016; \( \alpha = 0.93 \)).

3.3.3 Work effort (WE). A ten-item scale comprising three dimensions: intensity (four items); direction (three items); and persistence (three items) was used to measure respondents’ WE (De Cooman et al., 2009). Sample items included: “I put a lot of energy into the tasks that I commence” (intensity); “I do my best to do what is expected of me” (direction); and “When I start an assignment I pursue it to the end” (persistence). The reliability coefficient for this scale was 0.931, which is akin to that of De Cooman et al. (2009; \( \alpha = 0.90 \)).

3.3.4 Work centrality (WC). The short version (three items) of the WC scale (Bal and Kooij, 2011) was used to determine the extent to which respondents believed that work was a central part of their lives (sample item: “The most important things that happen to me involve my work”). Similar to that reported by Bal and Kooij (2011; \( \alpha = 0.75 \)), the reliability coefficient for the WC scale was 0.719. Although this value exceeds the threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2010, 2018), it is relatively low. Therefore, a commonly used procedure (“alpha if item deleted”) was performed to determine whether the \( \alpha \) value of this scale can be maximized. However, the procedure did not indicate a significant increase in this value if any item on scale was deleted. For robustness, the composite reliability (CR) score for this scale was also computed, which exceeded 0.70 (see Table 2), indicating a good internal consistency (Hair et al., 2010, 2018).

The response options for the WO scale ranged from “Never” (1) to “Always” (5), while the response options for the EE, WC and WE scales ranged from “Strongly disagree” (1) to “Strongly agree” (5).

3.4 Control variables and analysis strategy
Consistent with the notion that people might expend more effort in early tenure (Lloyd, 2008), as well as findings showing that the employees’ feelings of EE could differ with their gender, age and tenure (Li et al., 2014), the effects of these variables were controlled. Model 5 of the PROCESS macro (the highly robust and easy-to-use computational tool for testing research models involving both mediating and moderating mechanisms (Hayes, 2018)) was used to test the hypotheses.

4. Results
The goodness of fit (GOF) of the measurement model and the construct validity were examined via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). For GOF, we focused on several absolute

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inter-construct correlations</th>
<th>Reliability and validity statistics</th>
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<td>Variables</td>
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<td>1. WO</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. WC</td>
<td>-0.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. EE</td>
<td>0.379**</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. WE</td>
<td>-0.357**</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive statistics</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
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<td>SD</td>
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<td>Variance</td>
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**Note(s):** \( **p < 0.01 \); Sqrt_AVE = square root of AVE
and incremental fit indices, including normed chi-square ($\chi^2$/df), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), incremental fit index (IFI), normed fit index (NFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) and comparative fit index (CFI), as well as the size and significance of the standardized factor loadings ($\lambda$) (Hair et al., 2010; Kline, 2016). The results demonstrated that the hypothesized model (i.e. the four-factor model: WO, WC, EE and WE) had an adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2$/df = 1.527; GFI = 0.889; RMSEA = 0.041; NFI = 0.902; IFI = 0.964; TLI = 0.960; CFI = 0.964). The results obtained from the CFA (i.e. factor correlations and standardized factor loadings) were further used to compute the indicators of discriminant and convergent validity. Specifically, the average/mean variance extracted (AVE) scores for each construct were computed to establish convergent validity, while the AVE scores and their square root values were compared with the corresponding scores of maximum squared variance (MSV) and inter-construct correlations, respectively, to determine the distinctiveness between this study’s constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). As Table 2 shows, all AVE scores were higher than 0.50, providing good evidence for convergent validity (Hair et al., 2010). Further, the MSV scores were less than their corresponding AVE scores, and their square root values were greater than the inter-construct correlations, suggesting that the constructs are distinct from each other (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). There was no evidence of cross-loadings in further support of discriminant validity.

We were aware that the use of self-report measures and the same measurement schedule for the focal constructs could increase the probability of common method bias (CMB). To minimize the likelihood of this bias, the following procedural measures were taken at the survey design and administration stages (Chang et al., 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2003):

1. The anonymity and confidentiality of respondents’ opinions and demographic information was guaranteed to reduce evaluation apprehensions and response editing
2. Different response options (anchors) were used for independent and criterion variables to minimize the method bias, which the commonalities in response options could cause and
3. The items for each construct were grouped in separate sections and arranged so that respondents would not be able to guess the theoretical ordering of constructs and their interrelationships.

Additionally, two diagnostic techniques (single factor test and the common-method factor approach/test via CFA) were run to determine the extent of CMB in the data. The single factor model fitted the data very poorly ($\chi^2$/df = 7.893; GFI = 0.369; RMSEA = 0.149; NFI = 0.481; IFI = 0.515; TLI = 0.475; CFI = 0.513). Moreover, the inclusion of a common-method factor in the hypothesized model did not improve the model fit. The $\Delta$CFI between the common-method factor model and the hypothesized model was 0.01, suggesting that CMB was not a serious concern (Bagozzi and Yi, 1990; Teng et al., 2020). As shown in Table 2, the correlations between focal variables were in the expected direction, indicating small to medium effect sizes (Cohen, 1988) and rendering initial support for the hypothesized relationships.

The hypotheses testing results are summarized in Tables 3 and 4. As shown in Table 3, the direct effect (path $c'$) of WO on WE was significant (coefficient = −0.228, $p < 0.05$), while the total effect (path $c$) was found to be $-0.275$ [i.e. $c = (c') + (ab); c = (-0.228) + (-0.047); c = -0.275$]; hence, $H1$ is supported. Results further revealed that while WO had a positive relationship with EE (coefficient = 0.394, $p < 0.05$), EE had an inverse relationship with WE (coefficient = −0.120, $p < 0.05$), supporting both $H2$ and $H3$. Bootstrapping, which is a robust
method for testing mediation effects (Hayes, 2018), was used to test H4. Specifically, the bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals were constructed for testing the significance of mediation/indirect effect (Lau and Cheung, 2012). Mediation/indirect effect can be said to be significant if the upper and lower limits of the bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals do not include zero (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). As can be seen in Table 3, the 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals for the mediation effect (coefficient 5 0.047, p< 0.05) did not include zero (LB 5 0.102; UB 5 0.006), supporting H4.

As expected, a statistically significant and positive relationship emerged between WC and WE (coefficient 5 0.176, p< 0.05), supporting H5. Evidence for the moderation effect was also found (WO*WC: coefficient 5 0.177, p< 0.05). The variance (ΔR²) accounted for by the interaction term was 0.041 (F = 17.076, p< 0.05). The post-hoc analysis of the moderation effects (Table 4) showed that the WO–WE relationship was more strongly negative when WC was low (coefficient 5 −0.402, p < 0.05) and non-significant when WC was high (coefficient 5 −0.054, p > 0.05), supporting H6. The moderation effects are further elucidated in Figure 2. As the control variables had non-significant relationships with outcome variables, the analysis was conducted without them and similar findings were obtained.

5. Discussion
The current study was set out to answer two main questions: how WO translates into reduced effort and when such effects are less likely. Regarding the first question, it was found that
employees who perceive WO are less willing to expend effort because they feel emotionally exhausted. Specifically, WO was found to be a risk factor for organizations, as it adversely affects effort and induces/aggravates strain in employees. Similarly, EE was found to be detrimental to employees’ WE. The strength of the WO—WE relationship revealed is akin to that found by Türkmen et al. (2016), indicating that the loss of social resources (e.g. interpersonal relationships at work) has serious repercussions for organizations. The negative association between WO and WE attests to the postulation that workplace exclusion can diminish employees’ contribution to the organization (De Clercq et al., 2019; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Hence, it may be argued that being ostracized can undermine employees’ WE. A relatively strong relationship also emerged between WO and EE, which is similar to the findings of Chen and Li (2020), Jahnzeb and Fatima (2018) and Jiang et al. (2021), signifying that employees in collectivist cultures tend to be extremely sensitive to WO. Since collectivist cultures put greater emphasis on inter-connectedness, harmony and conflict avoidance, a direct confrontation with ostracizers in such a setting may be considered rude (Jahanzeb and Fatima, 2018). Thus, employees in collectivist cultures not only experience the pain of ostracism, but also incur an additional cognitive burden via suppressing their feelings. It is likely, therefore, that they might feel overly strained. Moreover, since individuals’ identities in collectivist cultures are tied/link by their membership in various social groups (e.g. family and organizations), members’ exclusionary behaviors in these groups can, therefore, be perceived as “identity threats” by the targets, which can hurt them deeply (Jahanzeb et al., 2018). Actually, ostracism may lead the targets to think that they do not “belong in” the group, which can exacerbate the strain. The positive relationship between WO and EE lends credence to COR theory’s predictions that individuals’ exposure to stressors (e.g. WO) may overstretch their resources, leading them to feel strained (Anjum et al., 2020; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001).

Another novel and valuable finding is the manifestation of EE in reduced effort, which suggests that emotionally exhausted employees are reluctant to expend effort. This not only aligns with findings that EE has deleterious outcomes (Cropanzano et al., 2003; Wright and Cropanzano, 1998), but also lends credence to the assumption that being devoid of emotional resources hampers the further investment of resources (Westman et al., 2005). As the results show, EE did not fully explain the WO—WE relationship (i.e. both the direct and indirect effects were statistically significant and pointed in the same direction), so the mediation effect can be considered partial or complementary (Zhao et al., 2010). The mediation effect of EE on
the WO—WE is in line with past empirical works, which have shown that EE could serve as a psychological conduit through which WO transmits its effects (Chen and Li, 2020; Jahanzeb and Fatima, 2018; Jiang et al., 2021; Koay, 2018; Mirza et al., 2020).

Concerning the second research question, we found that the relationship between WO and WE was less pronounced (i.e. non-significant) when WC was high. Thus, it can be asserted that those endowed with high WC are less likely to curtail or suspend their effort after having been ostracized. Our findings on the moderation effects of WC are consistent with that of De Clercq et al. (2019), who found that personal resources can offset the negative behavioral consequences of WO. Results for the moderation effects also provided some interesting insights. For instance, no relationship was observed between WO and WC, while the latter was found to be positively correlated with WE. These findings are consistent both with theory and past empirical works. For example, whereas the non-significant relationship between WO and WC reinforces the assertion that WC is less sensitive to workplace conditions (Bal and Kooij, 2011; Kooij and Zacher, 2016), a positive correlation between WC and WE supports the postulate that resources tend to be linked with each other (Hobfoll, 2001). Hence, it can be argued that the predictive capabilities of COR theory go beyond the realms of stress and strain, and the theory may potentially be used as a theoretical lens to extrapolate how resources couple or decouple. The moderation effects of WC also align with past research findings on WC’s positive moderating role (Kooij and Zacher, 2016; Ziegler and Schlett, 2016) and COR theory’s postulation that resource-endowed individuals are less affected by adverse conditions (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). In light of this study’s findings, it can thus be concluded that WC is an important personal resource in the workplace.

6. Implications for practice
As this study highlights, WO has serious repercussions for both employees and the organization (e.g. increased EE and reduced WE); due attention should, therefore, be paid to managing it. Although it may not be possible for organizations to reduce the incidence of WO to “zero,” its frequency can, however, be curtailed through different initiatives. It is a common observation that organizational members are incognizant of the “insidious” nature and consequences of WO. Perhaps that is why it has become a widespread phenomenon in workplaces (Ferris et al., 2017). Therefore, organizational members need to be sensitized regarding the perils of WO so that they do not exhibit it intentionally (Anjum et al., 2019; Ferris et al., 2017). Since most organizations do not have effective mechanisms via which WO incidents can be reported, the frequency with which organizational members are ostracized and the “sources” and “causes” of such incidents remain unknown. Therefore, effective and timely interventions cannot be designed. In this nexus, we suggest that organizations should proactively seek information about the presence, causes and sources of WO so that these can be managed/handled effectively (De Clercq et al., 2019). One possible way to collect, store and use such information is to have an effective feedback system, which organizations can easily develop and put in place. Once such a system is developed, employees should be encouraged to use it to report all incidents of mistreatment (e.g. ostracism), as well as other grievances. This would not only help organizations to monitor and keep track of WO, but also take necessary remedial actions.

Organizations could also develop guidelines on how organizational members (i.e. targets and their coworkers and supervisors) should deal with WO (e.g. how targets should seek help upon being ostracized and when their co-workers should intervene). This would limit the translation of ostracism and other bad behaviors into intense outcomes, such as aggression and retaliation (Ferris et al., 2017). Another possible way to prevent and/or minimize WO is to ensure a culture of respectful interactions in workplaces whereby people greet each other
with a smile and show gestures that signal respect (Anjum et al., 2019). Similarly, communal events could also be arranged to minimize the incidence and impacts of WO (Jahanzeb et al., 2020). WO may also be decreased by not allowing potential perpetrators to enter organizations. To this end, careful hiring is necessary, i.e. organizations should contact the previous employer and key individuals (referees) to understand potential candidates’ behaviors (Olson-Buchanan and Boswell, 2009). Organizations must also consider crafting interventions via which the detrimental effects of WO can be minimized. In this regard, mindfulness training would be helpful. Research has shown such training to be beneficial in reducing EE, improving performance (Glomb et al., 2011; Hulsheger et al., 2013) and deterring employees’ inclination to ostracize others (Scott and Duffy, 2015). Moreover, trainings aimed at developing the abilities (e.g. emotional intelligence) that can help employees to curb the negative consequences of WO may also be designed (Ayub et al., 2021).

Since WC was found to be contributive to WE, and also to attenuate the negative effects of WO, there is value in nurturing this resource. Although WC is a relatively stable attitude, it may develop with positive experiences (Paullay et al., 1994). Within organizations, employees’ positive experiences, such as autonomy and responsibility, interesting work and career development events (e.g. promotion), can positively influence WC (Kooij and Zacher, 2016; Sharabi and Harpaz, 2010). Therefore, organizations need to ensure that their employees have appropriate autonomy and responsibility and that the work they perform is also stimulating. Apparently, this seems to be a difficult task; a little overhauling of the job design may be helpful.

Employees also have a role to play in controlling WO and shielding themselves from its negative effects through self-help. Since ostracism cannot be completely avoided in workplaces, employees should take good care of themselves both within and outside organizations. Within the workplace, employees should interact more with cooperative, supportive and congenial colleagues, while they can spend more time with family and friends and thrive outside of work. This would help them replenish their emotional resources and minimize strain (Porath et al., 2015). Employees could also practice mindfulness and meditation to enhance their focus and avoid negative thinking and emotions. Research suggests that practicing mindfulness and meditation helps employees to regulate their emotions and handle stressful situations in an effective way (Porath et al., 2015). These practices may, therefore, be included in one’s daily or weekly schedule. There are many free online resources (e.g. https://www.mindful.org/) that can be consulted regarding learning and practicing mindfulness and meditation techniques. Employees should also learn coping skills (e.g. stress management and/or management of professional demands) and apply these to deal with the demands of their jobs (e.g. ostracism) and associated problems (i.e. EE) (Maslach et al., 2001).

7. Limitations and implications for research
The findings are subject to several limitations, which pave ways for future research. First, although the ordering of this study’s constructs (e.g. WO→EE→WE) is consistent both with the underpinnings of COR theory (i.e. stressors can deplete individuals’ resources, due to which they might contribute less [Hobfoll, 1989, 2001]) and prior empirical research (e.g. Mirza et al., 2020), it is possible that employees expending less effort might be ostracized by other organizational members; researchers are encouraged to examine this perspective. However, it is unlikely that employees expending less effort might feel emotionally exhausted because such feelings are most likely to occur when employees encounter stressors at work (Wright and Cropanzano, 1998); hence, this study’s research model seems more plausible than a model in which EE mediates the relationship between WO and WE. Second, the cross-sectional data and correlational design limit this study’s power to make causal inferences
about the relationship between WO and WE. Therefore, more robust designs that allow drawing inferences (e.g. multi-stage longitudinal studies) are suggested.

Third, the sample studied (i.e. employees from service sector organizations) constraints the generalizability of findings to other sectors (e.g. manufacturing organizations). The replication of this study in other sectors is, therefore, strongly recommended. The fourth limitation pertains to the context of this study, i.e. the study was conducted in collectivist culture where people are particularly sensitive to WO (Jahanzeb and Fatima, 2018; Jahanzeb et al., 2018; Jiang et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2020); it is possible that the strength of relationships between the constructs (e.g. WO and EE) might differ in individualistic cultures. Therefore, to determine whether the observed relationships are cultural artifacts, cross-cultural studies are recommended. Fifth, although our choice for considering EE as a mediator of the WO–WE relationship is consistent both with theory and prior empirical research, the partial or complementary mediation effect indicate the possibility of other mediating mechanisms. Future researchers should, therefore, explore the mechanisms by which WO can affect WE, thus expanding the limited body of knowledge on how WO can translate into diminished WE. Sixth, although our analysis and statistically significant interaction/moderation effects indicated that CMB was not an issue (Siemsen et al., 2010), time-lagged and multi-source data are recommended in future studies. Seventh, only one moderating mechanism was studied in this paper. Certain other factors, such as work engagement (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010) and work-passion (Zigarmi et al., 2009), might also act as moderators of the WO–WE relationship; future research could explore this perspective.

Finally, this study is limited in that it investigated WO's relationship with only one construct in the performance domain, i.e. WE. The scope of this study could be expanded by examining the relationship of WO with various facets of role-based performance (Welbourne et al., 1998). Similarly, the relationship of WO with objective organizational outcomes (e.g. healthcare costs) could also be examined in future studies, as research in this context is extremely scant (Ferris et al., 2017).

8. Conclusion
WO is a pervasive phenomenon (Ferris et al., 2017) that has deleterious consequences for employees and the organization (Sharma and Dhar, 2021). Although research to date has looked into the myriad consequences of WO, this study has examined a hitherto unexplored perspective, i.e. how and when WO jeopardizes WE. In doing so, this study not only develops a clearer understanding of why employees expend less effort, but also provides critical insights into when WO is more or less likely to affect WE. In particular, this study reveals that WO is an emotionally devastating experience for employees that undermines their WE. This study also highlights that the extent to which ostracized employees can withhold effort depends upon their ability to draw from their WC. More specifically, ostracized employees who attach great value or importance to work are less likely to withhold their effort. In addition to enriching the literature, this study is particularly relevant for practitioners and HR managers in that it suggests ways in which the incidence and negative consequences of WO can be minimized. We expect that this study will pave the way for further empirical research on the intervening and moderating mechanisms of the WO–WE relationship.

References


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