

Feeling invisible at work: the mediating role of social disconnectedness in the relationship between workplace ostracism and work stress

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Abstract

Purpose – In recent years, workplace ostracism has attracted considerable interest in the field of organizational behavior, resulting in detrimental effects for both employees and organizations. While numerous studies have examined the relationship between workplace ostracism and stress, no empirical study has investigated the mediating role of social disconnectedness in this relationship. This study examines the relationship between workplace ostracism and work stress and the role of social disconnectedness as a mediator in this relationship.

Theoretical framework – This study evaluates the relationships between workplace ostracism, social disconnectedness, and work stress within the context of conservation of resources theory.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were voluntarily provided by 451 employees working in the Marmara region of Türkiye. The data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) implemented in Smart-PLS 4.

Findings – The findings revealed that workplace ostracism was positively related to social disconnectedness and work stress. Social disconnectedness was also positively related to work stress and mediated the relationship between workplace ostracism and work stress.

Practical & social implications of research – Based on the study's findings, recommendations were made for managers and future researchers.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the literature by examining the mediating role of social disconnectedness in the relationship between workplace ostracism and work stress. This is a mechanism that has not been previously investigated. Additionally, the study extends the application of conservation of resources theory by providing a theoretical framework that explains the underlying mechanism linking workplace ostracism to work stress. These contributions offer new theoretical insights into the literature on workplace ostracism.

Keywords: Workplace ostracism, social disconnectedness, work stress, conservation of resources theory.

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I Introduction

In today's work environment, ostracism is a disturbing phenomenon frequently observed in organizations (Hsieh & Karatepe, 2019; Wang et al., 2023). It is a type of behavior with negative implications for both organizations and employees (Liu & Xia, 2016). It is defined as "the extent to which an individual perceives that he or she is ignored or excluded by others at work" (Ferris et al., 2008, p. 1348). Many people experience ostracism in the workplace (Harvey et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2024). A study found that 66% of employees experience the "silent treatment" (Harvey et al., 2019). Although ostracism is a widespread occurrence in organizations, it is a relatively new topic in the literature and can be a difficult problem for organizations to solve (Wang et al., 2023). Workplace ostracism is considered a form of "social death" and a painful situation for individuals. It has received increasing attention in the field of organizational behavior, especially in the last 20 years (Harvey et al., 2019; Li et al., 2021; Sharma & Dhar, 2024). Due to the social nature of people and their need for acceptance, ostracism can be a painful situation in workplaces where interaction with others is necessary (Wu et al., 2011). It is one of the mightiest instruments of social influence (Williams, 2002). Since ostracism can occur in any workplace, further research is needed to examine how managers can prevent it (Chung, 2018).

Workplace ostracism is also expected to increase work-related stress. Empirical studies have also consistently demonstrated that ostracism in the workplace contributes to elevated stress levels among employee (Kim & Jang, 2023; Manninen et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023). According to Glazer and Liu (2017) work stress refers to the process of job stressors, or stimuli in the workplace, leading to strains, or negative responses or reactions. Work stress significantly affects employees today. The stress experienced by employees leads to numerous problems related to both their psychological well-being and work life. These include sleep disturbances, negative emotions, decreased job performance, and reduced motivation (Palmer et al., 2004). A recent study by Omotosho et al. (2025) found that 53.6% of employees reported experiencing workplace stress. In contrast, a study by Habtu et al. (2024) reported this figure as 68%. Additionally, a recent study in Türkiye reported that behaviors such as workplace bullying, personal disrespect, and poor relationships with colleagues contribute to work-related stress (Selcuk & Gundes, 2025).

Social disconnectedness, on the other hand, is defined as a state of social detachment arising from a lack of meaningful relationships (Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Smith et al., 2023) and is an emotionally distressing experience (Quiñones et al., 2025). Perceived social disconnection may be associated with elevated levels of stress (Lee et al., 2002). Previous studies have also shown that social disconnectedness leads to higher stress levels (Christiansen et al., 2024; Poole et al., 2023). Moreover, ostracism leads to stress by depleting a person's resources (Sharma et al., 2024). Ostracism may deprive individuals of reliable interpersonal resources. In such a work environment, individuals may become more cautious about maintaining relationships with others, which can lead to social disconnectedness. This, in turn, may further deplete their resources and contribute to increased stress levels (Wang et al., 2023). Although several studies have examined these relationships, no research has investigated the mediating role of social disconnection in the relationship between workplace ostracism and work stress. Additionally, Liu and Xia (2016) suggested that future research should examine the internal mechanisms of the relationships between workplace ostracism and employee outcomes. Therefore, the present study aims to address this gap in literature.

From another perspective, the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory states that individuals strive to protect and develop their resources. These resources are crucial for understanding the stress individuals experience. This is because people experience stress when they lose or are threatened with the loss of these resources. Furthermore, ostracism in the workplace causes stress by threatening the loss of resources. Individuals experiencing ostracism tend to emotionally disconnect in order to protect their remaining resources, which further exacerbates their stress (Hobfoll, 1989; Leung et al., 2011; Sharma et al., 2024). In short, COR theory argues that employees' exposure to ostracism increases work stress. Prolonged exposure to ostracism may lead employees to become more socially disconnected in an attempt to preserve their existing resources. This, in turn, may further increase work stress. In light of these considerations, the research question of the present study is formulated as follows:

Does social disconnectedness play a mediating role in the relationship between workplace ostracism and work stress?

This study is the first to examine the mediating role of social disconnectedness in the relationship between workplace ostracism and work stress. Furthermore, analyzing this relationship through the lens of COR theory provides valuable theoretical contributions to the literature.

The study begins with a literature review of the relevant variables, followed by hypothesis development. Then, analyses are conducted on the collected data, and the analysis section is written. Finally, the conclusions and recommendations section is presented based on the results obtained from the study.

2 Literature review

2.1 Workplace ostracism

Ostracism is most simply defined as the act of excluding or neglecting someone (Leung et al., 2011). The term originates from the Ancient Greek word “*ostrakismos*.” In ancient Greece, if someone insulted you, you could write their name on a piece of clay and display it in a public area. The community would then ignore that person for ten years if their name appeared 6,000 times (Harvey et al., 2019).

Workplace ostracism is a unique form of rudeness and abuse. It is a behavior that excludes or ignores others from social interactions. It happens when an individual is intentionally shunned from a social relationship. Although ostracism in organizations is essentially defined as the exclusion of individuals by others, it is also a “cold violence” that deserves attention. It is not a one-time occurrence, such as being denied a meeting or an invitation to lunch. Initially, individuals may perceive the first incident as unintentional. However, as such behaviors are repeated, individuals begin to recognize that they are being ostracized and experience negative group pressure (Harvey et al., 2019; Howard et al., 2020; Liu & Xia, 2016).

Ostracism in the workplace can manifest in a variety of ways (Sharma et al., 2024). Examples include not being invited to meetings, always sitting alone in the lunchroom, greetings going unreciprocated, being excluded from decisions you should be involved in, and having your suggestions rejected without consideration in meetings (Harvey et al., 2019). Thus, ostracism encompasses many issues, ranging from being left alone at lunch to being ignored at business meetings.

2.2 Social disconnectedness

Social connectedness is a person's enduring affinity to the social world (Lee et al., 2001). Conversely, social disconnectedness is a condition in which a person is unable to communicate with others (Catacutan et al., 2022). In other words, social disconnectedness is a state of social detachment, characterized by few social relationships and disinterest in social activities (Cornwell & Waite, 2009).

It is a distressing emotional experience caused by a lack of desired social connections (Quíñones et al., 2025). It is a complex condition affecting individuals of all ages. It is characterized by social isolation and loneliness resulting from limited contact with others or a lack of meaningful relationships (Smith et al., 2023). It is a condition that disrupts mental health (Catacutan et al., 2022).

Social disconnectedness has two sub-dimensions: “objective isolation” and “subjective isolation.” Objective isolation refers to the absence of a social network, while subjective isolation refers to dissatisfaction with one's social network. Subjective isolation is a type of perceived loneliness, also called emotional isolation (Butt et al., 2025; Officer et al., 2022).

2.3 Work stress

Stress is a useful concept for understanding many important phenomena in human adaptation (Lazarus, 1966). Stress involves different stimuli, stressors, and responses for different people (Dohrenwend et al., 1971). According to Selye (1973, p. 692), one of the pioneers of the concept of stress, “stress is the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it.” Work stress refers to stressors in the work environment that cause tension or negative reactions (Glazer & Liu, 2017). Broadly speaking, work stress relates to how organizational and work situations affect employees' health and well-being (Jex & Yankelevich, 2008).

According to the job stress model developed by Palmer et al. (2004), stress experienced in organizations has many consequences. While it can lead to individual consequences such as increased blood flow, sleep problems, increased irritability, negative emotions, and increased pain, stress can also lead to organizational consequences such as increased sick leave, increased turnover, decreased job performance, and decreased employee morale and commitment.

2.4 Conservation of resources theory

Hobfoll (1989) developed the “Conservation of Resources” (COR) theory, which is based on the idea that individuals try to retain, protect, and develop their resources, and that they are threatened by the potential or actual loss of these resources. Environmental conditions can threaten or cause the loss of these resources. These resources are necessary to understand stress. Resources are objects, characteristics, or conditions that are valued by or useful to an individual in achieving personal goals. When these resources are lost or perceived as lost, individuals experience stress.

This theory proposes that individuals value various resources, from tangible objects to personal abilities, as vital for managing stress. When these resources are threatened, an individual's stress increases (Sharma et al., 2024). Ostracism is a stressor that negatively affects employees' behavior by depleting their emotional resources (Wang et al., 2023). Workplace ostracism causes individuals to lose resources, leading them to disengage from the organization. Employees aim to preserve their remaining resources and thus tend to emotionally detach in order to avoid excessive resource consumption (Sharma et al., 2024). Employees experience negative consequences when they are unable to cope with ostracism because it depletes their resources at work (Hsieh & Karatepe, 2019). Individuals strive to conserve their resources in order to cope with threatening situations (Leung et al., 2011).

COR theory offers a useful perspective on the potential consequences of ostracism in the workplace. According to COR theory, individuals exposed to ostracism attempt to cope with its consequences to conserve their resources (Sharma & Dhar, 2024). When individuals are exposed to ostracism, their defense mechanisms are activated. These mechanisms, which are activated to prevent further loss of resources, can cause individuals to experience increased stress (Zhu et al., 2017). Ostracism is a stressful experience resulting from resource loss and threat that causes those who experience it to suffer increased psychological and physiological stress. This, in turn, affects positive experiences in the workplace (Wang et al., 2023).

3 Hypotheses development

3.1 Workplace ostracism and social disconnectedness

Employees who are ostracized are socially ignored. Their need for connection and sense of belonging is threatened, and they may feel "ghosted." People try to meet these needs, but if they remain unmet long term, they may eventually feel alienated, helpless, and depressed (Harvey et al., 2019). A recent study in Türkiye found that workplace ostracism increases depressive mood and loneliness among employees (Çağatay, 2026). Employees exposed to ostracism experience a sense of not belonging, making it more difficult to maintain relationships with coworkers (Wang et al., 2023). Moreover, ostracism may lead to increased withdrawal behaviors among affected employees (Harvey et al., 2019). Ostracism has also been associated with lower self-esteem and a reduced sense

of belonging (Ferris et al., 2008). Those experiencing ostracism are often excluded from conversations and social activities (Leung et al., 2011). Thus, as individuals experience ostracism, their sense of belonging decreases, which may lead to increased social disconnection.

Workplace ostracism is a concept associated with negative emotions in organizations. Those who experience ostracism may experience negative emotional effects, feel worse about themselves, and distance themselves from their organizations (Howard et al., 2020). Employees exposed to ostracism are likely to exhibit emotional detachment and withdrawal to conserve resources. By distancing themselves from the organization, individuals reduce their dependence and experience less resource loss (Zheng et al., 2016).

According to COR theory, people are inclined to acquire, preserve, and develop the resources necessary for survival. These resources, such as energy, social support, and job-related resources, are vital for coping with stressful events (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Ostracism constitutes a workplace experience involving both resource loss and the threat of resource depletion. Exposure to ostracism induces tension and anxiety, contributes to emotional exhaustion, and undermines positive workplace experiences (Wang et al., 2023). Individuals exposed to ostracism develop various coping strategies. However, within the COR theory paradigm, when these coping attempts prove unsuccessful, individuals may ultimately engage in withdrawal behaviors to alleviate their distress (Sharma & Dhar, 2024). Social disconnectedness is a pattern of behavior characterized by social withdrawal (Cornwell & Waite, 2009). Based on this information and within the COR theory paradigm, workplace ostracism is expected to increase social disconnectedness. Thus, the first hypothesis of this study is as follows:

H₁: Workplace ostracism is positively related to social disconnectedness.

3.2 Workplace ostracism and work stress

Ostracism threatens individuals' basic needs. Workplace ostracism negatively affects individuals' mental and physical health (Harvey et al., 2019) and functions as a stressor that depletes their personal resources at work (Chung, 2018; Zheng et al., 2016). Ostracism has also been found to negatively impact self-esteem and increase stress levels (Sarwar et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023). In other words, when individuals experience ostracism in the workplace, they may perceive it as a loss of resources, which increases their stress levels (Sharma et al., 2024).

In one respect, ostracism is perceived as a “threat of resource loss” because it creates stress in employees. This perception intensifies stress responses, leading to tension, anxiety, and negative workplace experiences (Wang et al., 2023). Moreover, a recent study in Türkiye found that workplace ostracism increases work stress (Özişli, 2026).

Ostracism depletes the vital resources that support employees at work. In such situations, employees’ defensive mechanisms may activate, causing them to try to protect their remaining resources and experience increased stress. Since belonging and support from colleagues or managers are important workplace resources, employees experiencing ostracism commonly feel stressed about losing these valuable resources (Sarwar et al., 2019). Based on COR theory, as a person is exposed to ostracism at work, it is forecasted that they will experience increased stress, along with a higher risk of depleting their resources. Thus, the second hypothesis of the study is as follows:

H₂: Workplace ostracism is positively related to work stress.

3.3 Social disconnectedness and work stress

Social disconnectedness is characterized by limited contact with others, a perceived lack of meaningful relationships, social isolation, and loneliness. This condition impairs the mental health of individuals (Smith et al., 2023; Catacutan et al., 2022). It is also an emotional experience that causes distress (Quiñones et al., 2025). Social disconnectedness increases perceived isolation (Nisar et al., 2021). An individual experiencing these emotions and conditions at work is likely to experience job stress. One study in Türkiye (Çiçek & Yıldırım, 2025) found that social connectedness is negatively related to depression and anxiety. However, another study by Oral and Günlü (2022) revealed that social distancing increases stress. Lee et al. (2002) found that when individuals feel socially disconnected from others, it can increase their stress levels. Similarly, Poole et al. (2023) stated that university students who experience social disconnectedness report higher stress levels. According to COR theory, stress occurs when individuals experience the actual loss of valued resources or perceive a threat to their continued availability. Additionally, individuals must establish and maintain social bonds (Hobfoll et al., 2018). However, social disconnectedness weakens individuals’ social relationships and communication with others (Catacutan et al., 2022).

This condition can be conceptualized as a form of resource loss within the COR framework and is therefore expected to increase stress. Considering this information, it can be concluded that social disconnectedness probably increases work stress in organizations. Thus, the third hypothesis of the study is as follows:

H₃: Social disconnectedness is positively related to work stress.

3.4 Mediator effect

COR theory states that when individuals experience a loss of resources, they develop various strategies to protect those resources. For example, they might ignore a colleague’s request for assistance in order to conserve their resources (Manninen et al., 2024). Workplace ostracism causes stress by depleting a person’s resources (Sharma et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023). Beyond this direct effect, it is proposed that individuals experiencing social disconnectedness may experience higher levels of stress because they are depleting their personal resources while coping with ostracism. Furthermore, employees must interact with their colleagues while performing daily tasks. However, those experiencing ostracism may be unable to replenish their resources through social relationships, accelerating resource loss. Ostracism also implies a lack of reliable interpersonal resources. In such an environment, they may become more cautious about maintaining relationships with others, which further depletes their resources. Consequently, their own resources are significantly diminished, leading to increased stress (Wang et al., 2023). Therefore, the final hypothesis of the study is as follows:

H₄: Social disconnectedness mediates the relationship between workplace ostracism and work stress.

Figure 1 shows the research model according to the above hypotheses.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research context

The participants in this study are employees based in the Marmara region of Türkiye. This region was chosen because it is widely recognized as the most developed in terms of industrial production, urbanization, and economic activity. According to a 2022 report by the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye, the Marmara region accounted for approximately 61% of Türkiye’s total exports in 2019, highlighting its dominant role in the country’s foreign trade and economic structure (Grand National Assembly of Türkiye, 2022).

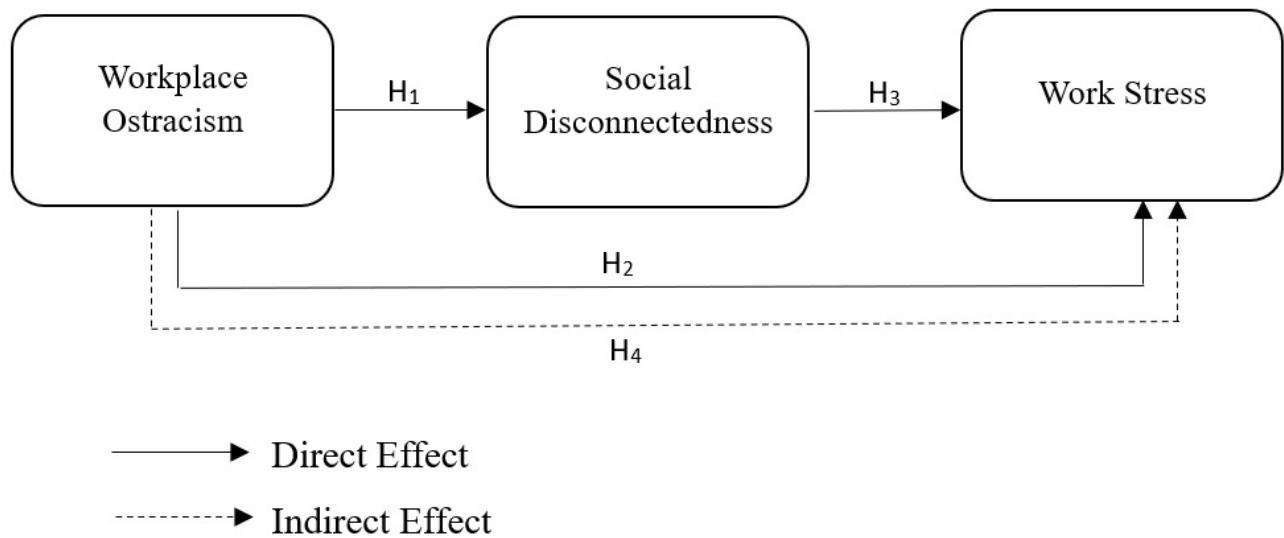


Figure 1. Research model

The research was conducted in the provinces of Istanbul and Kocaeli because they have the highest population densities in Türkiye (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2023).

Furthermore, Istanbul and Kocaeli rank first and second, respectively, in terms of per capita gross domestic product (GDP) among Turkish provinces (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2024). Additionally, according to the provincial-level Human Development Index, these two provinces had the highest levels of human development in the Marmara region from 2018 to 2022 (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2022).

4.2 Sample and data

This study employed a cross-sectional approach. Such studies offer advantages in terms of time efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and practical feasibility, allowing data to be collected and analyzed within a relatively short period (Figueiredo et al., 2025; Wang & Cheng, 2020). Data were gathered at one specific time point through a structured survey. A convenience sampling strategy was employed to select participants from a pool of readily accessible employees. Although convenience sampling can limit generalizability due to unequal participation probabilities among the target population, it offers practical advantages by enabling researchers to recruit participants based on accessibility, geographical proximity, and temporal availability. Due to its feasibility and efficiency, convenience sampling is widely adopted in business research (Etikan et al., 2016; Onofrei et al., 2022).

The study population consists of individuals working in Istanbul and Kocaeli, two cities in the Marmara region of Türkiye. As previously mentioned, ostracism should not be viewed as a one-time event, such as being overlooked for a meeting or excluded from a lunch invitation. While individuals may initially assume the first occurrence is unintentional, repeated behaviors over time enable them to perceive marginalization, leading to social exclusion and adverse group-related pressure (Harvey et al., 2019; Howard et al., 2020; Liu & Xia, 2016). Therefore, to distinguish ostracism from behaviors that may occur as isolated incidents, a minimum one-year tenure in the same organization was set as a participant selection criterion.

The required sample size was evaluated prior to the data collection phase. One frequently used guideline for determining the minimum sample size in PLS-SEM is the “10-times rule” approach (Hair et al., 2011). Since this study has 26 items, a minimum of 260 participants is required. Second, Soper’s (2017) sample size calculator determined that the minimum sample size required to detect the effect is 119. Third, a post hoc power analysis was conducted using SmartPLS to determine whether the sample size was sufficient to detect the hypothesized relationships in the structural model. This analysis used the observed path coefficients, a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, and a statistical power of 0.80. The results showed that the minimum required sample sizes for the structural paths ranged from 24 to 339 observations. The relationship with the smallest path coefficient (OST $\rightarrow$ WSS, $\beta = 0.135$) required the largest sample size ($n = 339$).

Therefore, the adequacy of the sample size was evaluated based on this most demanding relationship in the model.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Gebze Technical University (approval no. E.219613). Strict ethical guidelines were followed, as demonstrated by Sinha et al. (2026). Participation was voluntary, and the participants were informed about the use of the data. To reduce common method variance (CMV), respondents were assured that their responses would remain completely anonymous, in line with the recommendations of Podsakoff et al. (2003). In line with data confidentiality principles, participants were informed in advance that no personal details, such as names or organizations, would be collected. Additionally, it was clearly stated that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions.

Data collection was conducted between August and October 2025. The questionnaires were administered both face-to-face in workplace settings and online through professional networks and email invitations. A total of 650 questionnaires were distributed. However, as no responses were received from 199 individuals, the final sample consisted of 451 participants (Supplementary Data 1 – Dataset and Codebook). Forty-nine percent of the participants were female, and 51% were male. In other words, the number of male and female participants was almost equal. Of the participants, 54.12% were between 25 and 35 years old, 35.41% were between 18 and 25 years old, and 10.91% were between 35 and 45 years old. Thus, the majority of participants were young people. In terms of education level, 59.2% of participants had a bachelor's degree, 14.6% had a high school degree, and 13.7% had a postgraduate degree. Thus, it can be said that the majority of participants had a high level of education. The distribution of participants by position is as follows: 66% worked as personnel, 23% worked as lower-level managers, 6% worked as middle-level managers, and 5% worked as senior managers.

4.3 Measures

Multi-item scales from previous studies were used to test the hypotheses. The scales used were a 5-point Likert system ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” One scale, created by Ferris et al. (2008), measured workplace ostracism and contained 10 items. An 8-item scale developed by Lee and Robbins (1995) was used to measure social disconnectedness. Finally, Sosik and Godshalk's (2000) 8-question scale was used to measure work stress (Supplementary Material 2).

Items were initially translated into Turkish by an expert and then back-translated into English by a different expert using a parallel translation procedure. Then, a draft version of the questionnaire was prepared and evaluated by two academicians with subject-matter expertise to ensure face validity. After confirming the appropriateness of the Turkish version, a pilot study was conducted with 15 participants, followed by a pretest. Since the participants reported no difficulty understanding the items, the questionnaire proceeded to the full implementation stage.

Previous research indicates that women are more likely to experience higher levels of work stress (Götz et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2009). Additionally, there is evidence of an association between age and stress levels, suggesting that perceived stress may vary across different age groups (Götz et al., 2018). Hsu (2019) also found that younger employees tend to experience higher levels of work-related stress. Moreover, an inverse relationship has been reported between educational level and work stress. This indicates that individuals with lower levels of education are more likely to experience higher levels of work stress (Lunau et al., 2015). Additionally, Paat et al. (2025) found that men experience less social disconnectedness than women. Similarly, Ang (2016) reported that social connectedness varies according to age and gender. Furthermore, Read et al. (2024) discovered that social connectedness varies by gender and school level. Barrenetxea et al. (2022) found that social disconnectedness differs by gender and educational level. Based on these findings, gender, age, and educational level were included as control variables because these factors may influence work-related stress and social disconnectedness. When measuring the control variables, gender was coded as 1 for women and 2 for men. Age was collected as an open-ended measure, with participants reporting their age in completed years. Education level was coded as follows: 1 = primary education, 2 = high school, 3 = associate degree, 4 = bachelor's degree, and 5 = postgraduate education.

4.4 Data analysis strategy

The measurement and structural models were assessed using the partial least squares (PLS) method in SmartPLS 4 software. The analysis followed a rigorous, two-stage procedure. First, the measurement model was evaluated to determine construct reliability and validity. Second, the structural model was evaluated to test the proposed research hypotheses. SmartPLS 4 software was chosen due to its user-friendly interface and the minimal technical expertise required to implement the method (Hair et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the PLS-SEM approach is well-suited for evaluating complex models that incorporate both direct and indirect relationships (Henseler et al., 2015). The main rationale for using PLS-SEM was that one of the study variables violated the normality assumption. While the skewness and kurtosis values for social disconnectedness and work stress were within the acceptable range of ± 2 , the values for ostracism exceeded ± 2 . This indicates that the ostracism construct did not meet the normality assumption. Compared with alternative structural equation modeling techniques, PLS-SEM offers greater flexibility in terms of data requirements. Consequently, it is considered an appropriate analytical approach when data exhibit distributional problems, such as non-normality (Hair et al., 2019; Ringle et al., 2020).

CMV poses a potential risk to this research because all the variables were taken from the same source (Podsakoff et al., 2012). To assess this risk, the Harman one-factor test was used (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). According to the results, the first factor accounts for 36.21% of the total variance. Since this rate is below 50%, and there is more than one factor with an eigenvalue above 1, it can be concluded that the study is not problematic in terms of CMV. Additionally, variance inflation factor (VIF) values were evaluated to assess multicollinearity. According to Hair et al. (2010), VIF values above 5 indicate potential multicollinearity problems among the predictor constructs. Since the highest VIF value obtained was 4.274, multicollinearity is not a problem.

5 Findings

5.1 Measurement model assessment

The measurement model was evaluated using SmartPLS 4 and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The reliability of the measurement scales and their convergent and discriminant validity were assessed. First, indicator reliability was examined. According to Hair et al. (2010), factor loadings should exceed a threshold value of 0.70. Thus, two items with factor loadings below this threshold (OS-3 and SD-8) were removed from the analysis. In the final measurement model assessment, all indicator loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70. Next, composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha values were assessed to evaluate internal consistency reliability. The recommended threshold value for both CR (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and Cronbach's alpha (Nunnally, 1978)

is 0.70. All values exceeded the recommended threshold, confirming the internal consistency reliability of the construct measures. Convergent validity was assessed using the average variance extracted (AVE). All AVE values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.50, as suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Table 1 presents the results of the measurement model assessment, including indicator loadings, internal consistency reliability, and convergent validity of the constructs.

Next, the means and standard deviations of the study variables were calculated and a Pearson correlation matrix was generated. As shown in Table 2, workplace ostracism was positively and significantly correlated with social disconnectedness ($r = .338, p < .01$) and work stress ($r = .305, p < .01$). Additionally, social disconnectedness was positively and significantly correlated with work stress ($r = .543, p < .01$).

Discriminant validity was subsequently evaluated using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. The corresponding results are presented in Tables 3 and 4. Discriminant validity was established because the square root of the AVE for each construct exceeded its correlations with the other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and all HTMT values were below the recommended threshold of 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2015). These findings indicate that the measurement model is reliable and valid.

5.2 Structural model assessment

The structural model was evaluated using the bootstrapping procedure in SmartPLS with 5,000 subsamples (Chin, 2010). The results of the hypothesis testing are presented in Table 5. The results revealed that workplace ostracism has a positive and significant effect on social disconnectedness ($\beta = .343; p < 0.01$) and work stress ($\beta = .139; p < 0.01$). Based on these results, H_1 and H_2 were supported. Additionally, social disconnectedness was found to have a positive and significant effect on work stress ($\beta = .518; p < 0.01$), thus supporting H_3 . Finally, social disconnectedness was found to mediate the relationship between workplace ostracism and work stress ($\beta = .178, p < 0.01$). Therefore, H_4 was supported. Additionally, the total effect of workplace ostracism on work stress was positive and significant, as shown in Table 6 ($\beta = .317; p < .01$). The control variables (gender, education, and age) did not show statistically significant effects on social disconnectedness or work stress since their p-values exceeded the 0.01 significance level.

Table 1

Measurement model assessment: indicator loadings, reliability, and convergent validity

Constructs & Items	FL	t-value	VIF	α	CR	AVE
OS				.935	.945	.658
OS-1	.831	18.449***	2.740			
OS-2	.782	8.562***	2.629			
OS-4	.730	9.374***	1.923			
OS-5	.864	18.259***	3.466			
OS-6	.798	12.939***	2.469			
OS-7	.834	31.078***	3.074			
OS-8	.820	12.889***	3.212			
OS-9	.860	22.793***	3.390			
OS-10	.770	18.906***	2.120			
SD				.921	.936	.678
SD-1	.809	32.439***	2.395			
SD-2	.882	57.768***	3.547			
SD-3	.848	35.035***	2.957			
SD-4	.821	44.637***	2.264			
SD-5	.815	32.227***	2.665			
SD-6	.770	25.732***	2.534			
SD-7	.816	32.108***	2.570			
WS				.931	.943	.674
WS-1	.832	44.844***	3.320			
WS-2	.806	35.762***	3.154			
WS-3	.814	38.785***	2.461			
WS-4	.864	59.276***	3.481			
WS-5	.713	23.602***	1.849			
WS-6	.847	46.974***	4.274			
WS-7	.820	36.438***	3.664			
WS-8	.859	51.005***	3.827			

Note. ***p < 0.001; OS: Workplace Ostracism; WS: Work Stress; SD: Social Disconnectedness; FL: Factor Loading; α : Cronbach's Alpha; CR: Composite Reliability; AVE: Average Variance Extracted.

Table 2

Pearson correlation coefficients, means, and standard deviations

	Mean	Std. Dev.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1- OS	1.1567	.4102	1					
2- SD	1.7963	.8506	.338**	1				
3- WS	2.2489	.9749	.305**	.543**	1			
4- Gender	1.510	.5005	.061	.048	-.018	1		
5- Education	3.769	2.169	.025	.034	-.004	.002	1	
6- Age	28.61	14.32	.011	-.015	-.063	-.036	-.016	1

Note. **p<0.01; OS: Workplace Ostracism; SD: Social Disconnectedness; WS: Work Stress.

Table 3

Discriminant validity of the constructs – Fornell–Larcker criterion

	OS	SD	WS
OS	.811		
SD	.345	.823	
WS	.313	.563	.821

OS: Workplace Ostracism; SD: Social Disconnectedness; WS: Work Stress.

Table 4

Discriminant validity of the constructs – Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	OS	SD	WS
OS			
SD	.357		
WS	.326	.588	

OS: Workplace Ostracism; SD: Social Disconnectedness; WS: Work Stress.

Table 5

Structural model assessment

Hypotheses	Relationships	β	SD	t-Value	Results
H ₁	OS → SD	.343**	.049	7.018	Supported
H ₂	OS → WS	.139**	.038	3.624	Supported
H ₃	SD → WS	.518**	.042	12.274	Supported
H ₄	OS → SD → WS	.178**	.028	6.284	Supported
Gender	Gender → SD	.059	.089	.663	Not Supported
Gender	Gender → WS	-.121	.077	1.560	Not Supported
Education	Education → SD	.021	.043	.498	Not Supported
Education	Education → WS	-.017	.031	.546	Not Supported
Age	Age → SD	-.016	.040	.415	Not Supported
Age	Age → WS	-.065	.028	2.327	Not Supported

Note. ** $p < 0.01$; OS: Workplace Ostracism; SD: Social Disconnectedness; WS: Work Stress.

Table 6

Total effect of workplace ostracism on work stress

Relationship	β	SD	t-Value
OS → WS	.317	.049	6.430

Note. OS: Workplace Ostracism; WS: Work Stress.

The next step was to evaluate the structural model's explanatory power for the endogenous constructs. The coefficient of determination (R^2) indicates the amount of variance in the endogenous constructs that is explained by their predictor variables. According to the guideline, R^2 values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 represent substantial, moderate, and weak explanatory power, respectively (Hair et al., 2019). The results showed that workplace ostracism explained 12.1% of the variance in social disconnectedness ($R^2 = 0.121$). Workplace ostracism and social disconnectedness together, however, explained 34.2% of the variance in work stress ($R^2 = 0.342$).

The predictive relevance of the structural model was assessed using the Stone–Geisser criterion (Q^2_{predict}) and effect size (f^2) values. In PLS-SEM, Q^2_{predict} values greater than zero indicate that the model is predictive of the endogenous constructs (Chin, 2010; Hair et al., 2019). The results showed

that the Q^2_{predict} values were 0.079 for social disconnectedness and 0.051 for work stress, indicating that the model demonstrates predictive relevance for both endogenous constructs. Furthermore, the effect size (f^2) values were examined to determine each exogenous construct's contribution to the endogenous constructs. The obtained f^2 values were 0.133 for the effect of workplace ostracism on social disconnectedness, 0.026 for the effect of workplace ostracism on work stress, and 0.359 for the effect of social disconnectedness on work stress. According to the suggested thresholds, f^2 values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 represent small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively (Cohen, 1988; Hair et al., 2019). Thus, workplace ostracism had a small effect on social disconnectedness and work stress, while social disconnectedness had a large effect on work stress.

The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) was examined as an indicator of the model's overall fit.

The obtained SRMR value was 0.056, which is below the recommended cutoff value of 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). This suggests that the model demonstrates a satisfactory level of fit.

6 Discussion and implications

6.1 Theoretical implications

This study uses COR theory to clarify the relationships among workplace ostracism, social disconnectedness, and work stress. The first hypothesis, that “workplace ostracism is positively related to social disconnectedness,” is supported. To the best of current knowledge, this relationship has not been empirically tested before. However, the results of a study conducted by Liu et al. (2025) on 723 college students showed that ostracism is positively related to connectedness. Thus, the results of this study are consistent with those of Liu et al. (2025). Additionally, the research conducted by Paşamehmetoğlu et al. (2022) on 180 employees in Türkiye found that workplace ostracism negatively affects the social capital bonds established with coworkers. This finding is consistent with the conclusion that ostracism reduces social disconnectedness. The finding that workplace ostracism is positively related to social disconnectedness suggests that employees who experience exclusion and being ignored in the workplace are more likely to distance themselves from their coworkers, resulting in a diminished sense of unity and belonging.

From the perspective of COR theory, workplace ostracism represents a threat to valued interpersonal resources. To cope with threatening situations, individuals endeavor to conserve their resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Leung et al., 2011). As individuals attempt to prevent further loss of resources, they may reduce their social engagement with coworkers, which can manifest as greater social disconnectedness.

The second hypothesis of the study, that “workplace ostracism is positively related to work stress,” is supported. This finding is consistent with a study conducted by Sarwar et al. (2019) in Pakistan that found that ostracism affects job stress. Moreover, from a cultural perspective, as both Türkiye and Pakistan have collectivist cultures, the study’s results can be evaluated within the cultural context. The results of this study are also consistent with those of a study conducted in Finland by Manninen et al. (2024), which found that workplace ostracism affects stress.

The finding that workplace ostracism is positively related to job stress suggests that employees who experience ostracism, such as being ignored, excluded from meetings, not receiving greetings, or having their attempts at conversation rejected, are more likely to experience higher levels of job stress. This finding is consistent with COR theory, which suggests that perceived or actual resource loss gives rise to stress responses (Hobfoll, 1989). Since workplace ostracism threatens employees’ emotional and interpersonal resources, the observed increase in job stress may be explained by their efforts to cope with the depletion of these valuable resources (Wang et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2024).

The third hypothesis of the study, that “social disconnectedness is positively related to work stress,” is supported. To the best of current knowledge, this relationship has been tested empirically for the first time. According to the findings of Poole et al. (2023), individuals who experienced social disconnectedness reported higher levels of stress in a study conducted with 710 university students. These results are consistent with those of the present study, which demonstrate that social disconnectedness increases work-related stress. Therefore, when a person does not feel like they belong to a group at work and feels disconnected from their environment, their job stress increases. From a COR perspective, social relationships are valuable resources that help individuals cope with workplace demands (Hobfoll, 1989). When employees experience social disconnectedness, these resources become limited, reducing their capacity to cope effectively and consequently increasing work stress.

Finally, the last hypothesis of the study, that “social disconnectedness mediates the relationship between workplace ostracism and work stress,” is supported. Thus, when employees are excluded from activities such as meetings and lunches, they will likely distance themselves from the group and feel disconnected from their surroundings. The cumulative impact of these experiences will likely manifest as increased frustration, irritation, and job stress. This mediating mechanism is also compatible with COR theory. Workplace ostracism initially threatens employees’ interpersonal resources, leading them to withdraw from social interactions to preserve their remaining resources. However, this increased social disconnectedness further reduces access to valuable social resources, thereby contributing to higher levels of work stress (Hobfoll, 1989; Sharma et al., 2024).

The findings of this study extend the application of COR theory by demonstrating the sequential resource loss process underlying the relationship between workplace ostracism and work stress. Specifically, the results suggest that ostracism directly threatens employees' resources and may initiate a process in which reduced social connections contribute to further resource depletion and stress. Thus, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how interpersonal resource threats in the workplace lead to negative outcomes from employees from a resource conservation perspective (Hobfoll, 1989; Sharma et al., 2024).

6.2 Managerial implications

Workplace ostracism can have devastating consequences for the workplace and create negative outcomes such as social disconnectedness and work stress. Therefore, managers should pay attention to this issue. In order to prevent ostracism, it is important to understand the factors that cause it. It would also be beneficial for organizations to evaluate whether their corporate culture triggers these behaviors.

Creating inclusive conditions for employees and combating ostracism are essential for organizational health (Sharma et al., 2024). Managers must create a culture that discourages ostracism behaviors within their organizations (Wu et al., 2011), and they should develop strategies to reduce ostracism. In this context, managers can organize interactive events to encourage employee interaction (Xu et al., 2020). To reduce ostracism, managers should embrace open communication and mediate conflicts. Addressing organizational issues that may contribute to exclusion is also important for preventing ostracism (Sharma et al., 2024).

This research found that social disconnectedness, in addition to workplace ostracism, leads to work stress. Therefore, it is important for organizations and managers to understand the concept of social disconnectedness alongside the phenomenon of ostracism. Fostering a psychologically safe work environment and promoting intentional social interactions, such as team-building activities or buddy systems, may reduce employees' sense of social disconnectedness. However, this issue may be particularly critical for employees whose social disconnectedness stems from ostracism in the workplace. When managers encounter this situation, they should address it with due seriousness instead of ignoring it.

It is important to recognize employees experiencing disconnectedness and deliberately include them in work processes. For instance, managers can give the floor to employees who are overlooked in meetings or whose opinions are not solicited. They can also create non-judgmental spaces for listening.

Apart from this, the stress experienced by employees because of ostracism, and its effects on both the individual and the organization, will also lead to negative consequences. All employees can experience stress, regardless of age, status, gender, etc. Therefore, it is important for managers to understand workplace stress prevention and management (Palmer et al., 2004). To cope with work-related stress, managers must evaluate environmental factors that could cause stress and take measures to reduce it (Glazer & Liu, 2017).

6.3 Limitations and future recommendations

As with all academic research, this study has limitations. It is hoped that these limitations will be useful for future research. First, the study was conducted in the Marmara region of Türkiye. Therefore, conducting studies in different geographical regions and countries may increase the generalizability of these findings. Such research may also reveal potential cultural differences. Second, most of the participants in the sample were young. Future research could explore this topic by focusing on employees from different generations. This could reveal differences in perspectives on ostracism across generations and increase the generalizability of the study. Third, this study relied on a survey as its primary data collection method. Using different data collection methods in future research could be beneficial. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, could provide a more in-depth understanding of these concepts. Fourth, this study focused on negative outcomes of workplace ostracism. Additionally, future research could contribute to the literature by examining the antecedents of workplace ostracism and the factors that prompt employees to engage in such behavior. This research investigates the relationship between workplace ostracism, social disconnectedness, and work stress. Future studies may investigate the other mediator variables in this relationship, such as employee resilience. Employees with high resilience can better cope with phenomena such as ostracism. Additionally, optimism and self-efficacy can be examined as moderators in the relationship between ostracism and stress in the workplace.

Lastly, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships and capture temporal changes over time. Therefore, future longitudinal studies are necessary to validate and expand upon the present findings.

7 Conclusion

Workplace ostracism is a prevalent phenomenon in organizations associated with numerous negative outcomes. Although many studies have examined workplace ostracism, none have investigated the mediating role of social disconnectedness in the relationship between workplace ostracism and work stress. Thus, this study aims to investigate this relationship. The results indicate that workplace ostracism and social disconnectedness both increase work stress. Moreover, social disconnectedness was found to have a mediating effect on this relationship.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary material accompanies this paper.

Supplementary Data 1 – Dataset and Codebook

Supplementary Data 2 – Appendix A_Scales.docx

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