Discussion paper

Workplace ostracism and proactive customer service performance: A conservation of resources perspective

Hong Zhu a, Yijing Lyu b,∗, Xincai Deng c, Yijiao Ye d

a School of Tourism Management, Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou, China
b School of International Business Administration, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, Shanghai, 200433, China
c School of Economics and Management, Guizhou Normal University, Guiyang, China
d School of Management, Xiamen University, Xiamen, China

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A B S T R A C T

This study tests the impact of workplace ostracism on hospitality employees’ proactive customer service performance (PCSP). Drawing upon the conservation of resources theory, we investigate the effects of two sequential mediators (i.e., job tension and customer orientation) and the moderating effect of need for affiliation. Using a time-lagged research design and the data from 16 hotels in China, we find that workplace ostracism positively influences job tension; job tension decreases customer orientation, which in turn undermines employees’ PCSP. Moreover, we find that need for affiliation exacerbates the effect of workplace ostracism on job tension such that the effect is stronger when employees’ need for affiliation is high rather than low. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications subsequently.

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1. Introduction

Workplace ostracism, which refers to the extent to which an individual perceives that he or she is ignored or excluded by others in the workplace (Ferris et al., 2008), is a universal phenomenon. Over 66% employees reported the experience of “the silent treatment” at work in a survey (Fox and Stallworth, 2005), while 650 out of 5000 workers felt that they had been excluded (Hitlan et al., 2006). Given its prevalence, increasing research attention has been devoted to this field, showing that workplace ostracism has a devastating impact on the target employees’ attitudes and behaviors such as emotional exhaustion (Ferris et al., 2008; O’Reilly et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2012; Zhao et al., 2012), reduced satisfaction (Ferris et al., 2008; Liu et al., 2013), withdrawal of prosocial behaviors (Balliet and Ferris, 2013), decreased organizational citizenship behaviors (Ferris et al., 2008), increased deviant behaviors (Zhao et al., 2013), and lowered job performance (Ferris et al., 2015).

Despite abundant research on workplace ostracism in the general management filed, we know little about the impact of workplace ostracism in the hospitality industry. To the best of our knowledge, two researches have investigated the outcome of workplace ostracism in hospitality industry, including employee service performance (Leung et al., 2011) and counterproductive work behaviors (Zhao et al., 2013). As workplace ostracism has been emphasized as pervasive in hospitality organizations and may impair the performance of hotels (Gkorezis et al., 2016; Zhao et al., 2013), researchers appeal for further studies to focus on workplace ostracism in the hospitality context (Zhao et al., 2013).

Responding to this appeal, our study goes beyond the existing consequences of workplace ostracism to focus on proactive customer service performance (PCSP). Moreover, as researchers call for more studies to explicate the mediating mechanisms and identify moderators to understand the influence of workplace ostracism better (e.g., Balliet and Ferris, 2013; Ferris et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2013), we also examine the underlying mechanisms and the boundary condition under which workplace ostracism exerts influence on hospitality employees. PCSP is a form of service behavior characterized by a self-stared, long-term-oriented, forward-thinking, and persistent approach to service delivery (Rank et al., 2007; Raub and Liao, 2012). As researchers have argued, service employees play an important role in shaping crucial customer outcomes (e.g., Liao and Chuang, 2004; Raub and Liao, 2012). However, customer service is highly uncertain and customized (Lengnick-Hall, 1996; Raub and Liao, 2012). Most of the effective service behaviors cannot be prescribed in advance through formalized job description and detailed standard operation procedures (Frese and Fay, 2001;
Parker, 2000; Raub and Liao, 2012). Moreover, unprompted and unsolicited service behaviors are extremely important in improving customers’ experiences (Bitner et al., 1990; Raub and Liao, 2012). Therefore, the extent to which employees take initiative to serve customers is critical for successful service delivery (Li et al., 2016; Raub and Liao, 2012). Workplace ostracism includes actions which are sometimes referred as “giving the cold shoulder” or “social death” (Sommer et al., 2000; Williams, 2001). When employees are faced with ostracism, it is likely that ostracized employees in the hospitality industry are less likely to be motivated to exhibit PCSP.

Employing the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), this study shed light on the mediating mechanisms between workplace ostracism and PCSP by suggesting job tension and customer orientation as two sequential mediators. According to the COR theory, individuals endeavor to obtain, retain, and protect valuable resources when they are threatened with resources loss (Hobfoll, 1989; Lyu et al., 2016b). As workplace ostracism can be a stressor in workplaces and may deplete the target’s resources (Williams, 2001; Wu et al., 2012), it is possible that workplace ostracism will positively affect job tension, which in turn impairs employees’ customer orientation. Customer orientation refers to an employee’s approach to place high importance on customers in an on-the-job context (Donavan et al., 2004). Job tension reflects the impact of stressors in the workplace (Pool, 2000; Xin et al., 2015), with which the employee is likely to experience resource loss and then conserve the resources by withholding concern for other parties’ needs, such as customers. Our argument is also in accordance with the model of proactive motivation, which contends that individuals’ engagement in PCSP is driven by a fundamental cognitive-motivational process: a “reason to” motivation (Parker et al., 2010). When being ostracized in the workplace, employees may perceive job tension and restrain their customer orientation, which would serve as a “reason to” withhold PCSP. Hence, we further hypothesize that workplace ostracism may elicit job tension and restrain customer orientation, which may further decrease the employees’ motivation to engage in PCSP.

We also investigate the boundary condition under which the impact of workplace ostracism on job tension would be strengthened or weakened. As noted by researchers (e.g., Boyes and French, 2009; Leung et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2012), the coping responses of resource loss differ among individuals. Although workplace ostracism is universally painful and aversive, it may have a stronger impact on those who are more vigilant regarding their surroundings (Robinson et al., 2013). Need for affiliation refers to individuals’ desire for social contact or belongingness (Veroff and Veroff, 1980; Wilson et al., 2005). Individuals with high need for affiliation tend to possess a strong sense of communion and gain social gratification from harmonious relationships with others (Murray, 1938; Wiesenfeld et al., 2001). It is likely that these individuals are more vulnerable to workplace ostracism to develop job tension.

In sum, our first purpose of this study is to go beyond the previous studies to see whether workplace ostracism would exert destructive effects on hospitality employees’ PCSP. Second, we intend to explore the underlying mechanism of this direct process by including sequential mediators of job tension and customer orientation based on COR theory. Finally, a new boundary condition, i.e. need for affiliation, is integrated into our theoretical model to help investigate the factors that might enhance the effects of workplace ostracism.

In addressing these research objectives, this study contributes to the field of workplace ostracism and PCSP simultaneously. First, it enriches the ostracism literature by extending the current outcome effects of workplace ostracism to PCSP and investigates when and why workplace ostracism exerts influence on employees’ PCSP in the hospitality industry. Moreover, this research adds to the literature on proactive behavior as well. It enhances our understanding of antecedents that may inhibit PCSP by focusing on workplace ostracism, a dark phenomenon within organizations.

Second, applying the COR theory, the examination of two sequential mediators (job tension and customer orientation) offers new insights into the mediating processes through which workplace ostracism influences PCSP. Third, by examining the moderating effect of need for affiliation, this study enriches current findings on moderators with which effects of workplace ostracism can be augmented. Lastly, in view of the critical roles employees play in the hospitality industry (Bettencourt and Brown, 2003), these results provide important managerial implications for organizations in this industry and help them minimize the occurrence of workplace ostracism and promoting PCSP. The conceptual model this study is illustrated in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1. The conceptual model of this study.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Conservation of resources (COR) theory

According to COR theory, resources can be broadly defined as the total capability an individual has to fulfill his or her central needs (Hobfoll, 2001; Wang et al., 2011). Resources can be from oneself and the environment, including physical resources (e.g., physical well-being), motivational resources (e.g., goal orientation), cognitive resources (e.g., experience), and social resources (e.g., help from supervisors) (Gao et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2011). Given the importance of resources, people endeavor to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources and reduce any threats of resource loss (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002).

COR theory provides an insightful perspective to understand the influence of workplace ostracism. Workplace ostracism drains away resources that are necessary to support individuals in workplaces (Leung et al., 2011). In this circumstance, individuals’ protection mechanism may be activated. In the process of guarding against further resource loss, individuals may perceive continuous stress and experience more resource loss, leading to various negative outcomes.
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