

E-ISSN: 3108-4192

APSSHs

Academic Publications of Social Sciences and Humanities Studies

2021, Volume 1, Page No: 57-70

Available online at: <https://apssh.com/>

Asian Journal of Individual and Organizational Behavior

Workplace Ostracism and Deviant Behavior: A Moderated-Mediation Analysis of Emotional Intelligence, Knowledge Sharing, and Organizational Conflict

Agnar Nygård¹, Kim Min ji¹, Lee Ji woo¹, Park Seo yeon^{1*}

1. Endicott College of International Studies, Woosong University, Daejeon, Republic of Korea.

Abstract

Workplace deviant behavior (WDB) and workplace ostracism (WO) are increasingly recognized as harmful organizational phenomena that promote self-protective and self-serving behaviors. Despite their significance, there is limited research on the factors that influence the relationship between WO and WDB, including organizational conflict (OC), knowledge-sharing behavior (KSB), and emotional intelligence (EI). This study aims to develop and empirically test a moderated-mediation model examining how WO affects WDB through OC and KSB, while considering the moderating role of EI. Data were collected from 250 employees in public higher education institutions in Pakistan and analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The results demonstrate that WO significantly increases WDB, with OC and KSB serving as significant mediators in this relationship. Additionally, EI was found to moderate these effects. The findings provide both theoretical and practical implications for understanding the interplay of WO, OC, KSB, and EI, offering insights to mitigate the negative impacts of workplace ostracism and deviant behaviors.

Keywords: Workplace deviant behavior, Knowledge-sharing behavior, Workplace ostracism, Emotional intelligence, Social identity theory, Organizational conflict, Conservation of resources theory

How to cite this article: Nygård A, Min ji K, Ji woo L, Seo yeon P. Workplace Ostracism and Deviant Behavior: A Moderated-Mediation Analysis of Emotional Intelligence, Knowledge Sharing, and Organizational Conflict. Asian J Indiv Organ Behav. 2021;1:57-70. <https://doi.org/10.51847/LZRA290Izs>

Received: 14 March 2021; **Revised:** 19 June 2021; **Accepted:** 23 June 2021

Corresponding author: Park Seo yeon

E-mail ✉ p.seoyeon.seoul@naver.com

Introduction

Organizations around the world face increasing challenges from counterproductive, unethical, and harmful workplace behaviors, which contribute to corporate scandals and organizational fraud [1-3]. Workplace deviant behavior (WDB) has become a significant concern because it negatively impacts organizational performance and employee well-being [1, 4]. Given that modern work environments involve extensive social interactions, the dynamics of interpersonal relationships within the workplace play a critical role in shaping employee behaviors [3, 5]. WDB can manifest in various forms, including counterproductive work behaviors, antisocial conduct, workplace violence, and organizational misconduct, affecting not only the organization but also its workforce [3, 6].

Research indicates that employees who experience ostracism are more likely to engage in WDB as a form of retaliation or self-protection [7]. Studies suggest that a significant proportion of employees report experiencing workplace ostracism, which fosters feelings of exclusion, rejection, and social isolation, thereby increasing the likelihood of conflicts and deviant behaviors [1, 8, 9]. Ostracized individuals may perceive themselves as different or socially inadequate, which can escalate interpersonal conflicts and undermine organizational cohesion [10, 11].



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Although WDB is a pressing concern globally, research examining its antecedents—particularly the role of WO—is limited. Workplace ostracism can impair interpersonal interactions, disrupt social norms, and encourage deviant behavior [12, 13]. Emotional intelligence (EI) has been proposed as a critical factor in moderating these effects, helping employees regulate emotions and respond constructively to workplace challenges [14, 15].

Theoretical frameworks, including social identity theory and conservation of resources (COR) theory, provide a lens for understanding these dynamics. Social identity theory posits that ostracized employees may restrict resource and information sharing, fostering conflict and dysfunctional outcomes [16]. COR theory suggests that individuals strive to protect valuable personal and professional resources, and perceived threats—such as ostracism—can trigger behaviors aimed at safeguarding these resources, sometimes at the organization's expense [17, 18].

Prior studies have largely overlooked the mediating roles of organizational conflict (OC) and knowledge-sharing behavior (KSB) in the WO–WDB relationship, as well as the moderating influence of EI. When employees encounter conflict or resource scarcity, knowledge-sharing practices may decline, amplifying deviant behaviors [19, 20]. Public sector employees, in particular, may be more vulnerable to such harmful behaviors, underscoring the need for targeted research in this context [21]. Building on these theoretical foundations, the present study examines the mediating effects of OC and KSB in the link between WO and WDB, and investigates how employees' EI moderates these relationships.

Literature Review

Workplace deviant behavior

Workplace deviant behavior (WDB) has increasingly drawn attention in contemporary organizations, especially in the context of globalization, technological advances, competitive pressures, and workplace stress [22, 23]. Bennett and Robinson [24] defined WDB as voluntary behaviors that violate important organizational norms and are perceived as harmful to the organization or its members. Similarly, Litzky *et al.* [25] conceptualized workplace deviance as antisocial actions directed against the organization. Various terms have been used in prior research to describe WDB, including workplace aggression, counterproductive work behavior, antisocial behavior, and workplace incivility [26]. While deviance can be both positive and negative, this study focuses specifically on negative deviant behaviors.

Scholars have categorized WDB into two main types: interpersonal deviance and organizational deviance [27]. Interpersonal deviance involves behaviors that harm colleagues, such as insulting or mocking others, while organizational deviance targets the organization itself, including acts like theft or unauthorized disclosure of confidential information. WDB can also lead to employee stress and negatively impact organizational outcomes, including lower commitment and increased absenteeism [28, 29]. Kidwell and Martin [30] noted that deviant behavior has received considerable media attention due to its harmful consequences for organizations.

Research in public sector contexts indicates that WDB is more prevalent in such environments compared to the private sector [31]. For instance, Gallus *et al.* [32] found that 71% of employees in U.S. public organizations reported experiencing workplace incivility over a five-year period, with around 6% encountering such behaviors frequently. Factors contributing to WDB include moral disengagement and aggressive tendencies, which increase the likelihood of misconduct, theft, and fraud [33]. In Pakistan, public sector employees often face environments characterized by injustice, favoritism, inconsistent procedures, and political pressures, which can exacerbate negative emotions and trigger deviant behaviors [34].

Social exchange theory (Blau [35]; cited in Omar *et al.* [36]) provides a framework for understanding these dynamics. According to the theory, social interactions are governed by reciprocity, which can be positive or negative. Negative reciprocity occurs when employees perceive unfair treatment and respond by engaging in deviant behaviors [37-39].

Workplace ostracism

Ostracism is broadly defined as social exclusion or rejection by others [40, 41]. Workplace ostracism (WO) specifically refers to instances where an individual or group is ignored or excluded by others in the workplace [42]. Different terms have been used in the literature to describe WO, including social exclusion, rejection, being out of the loop, or abandonment [6, 43, 44]. Research indicates that WO negatively affects employees' psychological well-being and sense of belonging, which is a fundamental human need [45, 46]. Examples of WO include coworkers excluding colleagues from social interactions, ignoring their input during meetings, or failing to involve them in workplace activities.

Studies have consistently shown that WO has detrimental organizational consequences, such as reduced job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment, diminished organizational citizenship behavior, and increased interpersonal conflicts, harassment, and counterproductive behaviors [26]. WO has been studied both as a direct predictor of negative outcomes and through mediating mechanisms. For example, organizational recognition has been tested as a mediator in the WO–performance relationship [47], while self-esteem has been examined as a mediator linking WO to work performance [48]. Person-organization fit has also been explored as a mediator between WO, organizational citizenship, and deviant behavior [12, 20].

Chung [20] highlighted that workplace ostracism impacts four fundamental human needs. First, individuals may internalize blame or perceive themselves as possessing negative traits, which can lower their self-esteem. Second, exclusion from a desired group undermines an individual's need for belonging. Third, ostracism diminishes a person's sense of control, as their actions receive little attention or recognition from others. Finally, it threatens an individual's sense of expressive existence, illustrating the perceived consequences of social invisibility. Similarly, Victoria Bellou [49] described workplace ostracism as an organizationally discouraging behavior that manifests both as direct actions and as withholding behaviors, causing emotional distress and influencing behavioral responses.

Grandey *et al.* [50] reported that workplace ostracism can spill over into personal life, creating work-family conflict as stressed employees are more likely to experience distress outside the workplace. Over time, reduced interactions at work due to ostracism have been shown to negatively affect employees' physical and psychological health, as well as their work attitudes and behaviors [48]. Mlika *et al.* [51] found in a public sector setting that 82.9% of employees reported engaging in ostracism toward colleagues without clear purpose, while 58.5% acknowledged that ostracism could isolate and harm them.

From a theoretical perspective, social exchange theory [52] suggests that ostracized employees are less motivated to engage in positive exchanges with colleagues. Wu *et al.* [53] observed that essential work-related resources, such as information and opportunities gained through collaboration, are often conserved by employees in response to ostracism, which can reduce access to information and negatively affect job performance. Conservation of resources theory [17] further explains that individuals strive to build, protect, and maintain valuable personal and job-related resources. When ostracized, employees are less able to share emotions or build supportive relationships, leading to a loss of resources necessary for completing work demands [54]. Such resource depletion generates negative emotions and may prompt employees to engage in behaviors that harm the organization [18]. Empirical evidence has consistently shown a positive association between workplace ostracism and deviant behaviors [7, 10, 55]. Consequently, the first hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Workplace ostracism (WO) has a significant positive effect on workplace deviant behavior (WDB).

Mediating role of organizational conflict

Organizational conflict (OC) has been defined as a process in which one party perceives that its interests are opposed or negatively affected by another party [56]. Roloff [57] further elaborated that OC arises when members engage in activities that are incompatible with the objectives of other colleagues, groups, or organizational stakeholders. Conflicts have been classified in multiple ways. For instance, Jehn and Jehn [58] identified two primary types: relationship conflict, arising from interpersonal tensions, and task conflict, resulting from disagreements over work tasks and coordination. Relationship conflict involves hostility, distrust, and emotional strain due to differences in background, values, roles, or expectations [58, 59]. Task conflict, on the other hand, can be beneficial, fostering creative solutions and efficient resource utilization. However, unresolved task conflicts may harm self-respect and trigger defensive or aggressive reactions, which in turn escalate relationship conflicts [60, 61].

Research in public institutions indicates that high work pressure, unclear roles, and insufficient management commitment significantly contribute to organizational conflict [62]. Such conflicts adversely affect productivity, employee satisfaction, and organizational outcomes, often leading to physical and emotional strain among employees and creating morale problems [27, 63, 64].

From the perspective of social identity theory (SIT), organizational members belong to different social groups, and conflicts often arise due to differing attitudes, interests, goals, or values [64, 65]. Individuals who feel excluded from the group may perceive a lack of shared identity, leading them to mistrust others and respond negatively. Ostracized employees, experiencing reduced interaction, are less likely to share resources and information, which can provoke further conflict [16]. Prior studies also indicate that workplace conflict can trigger negative emotions and promote deviant behaviors [66, 67]. For example, Chung [20] found that ostracism significantly influences both organizational conflict and workplace deviant behavior. Accordingly, the second hypothesis is formulated:

H2: Organizational conflict (OC) significantly mediates the relationship between workplace ostracism (WO) and workplace deviant behavior (WDB).

Mediating role of knowledge-sharing behavior (KSB)

Knowledge-sharing behavior (KSB) refers to the process of distributing and transferring knowledge among individuals, groups, or organizations to facilitate collective benefits [68]. Ling *et al.* [69] described KSB as the circulation of knowledge and information within an organization, aimed at generating new ideas and enhancing organizational objectives. By sharing knowledge willingly, employees contribute to the creation of novel insights, which serve as a strategic resource and a source of competitive advantage. However, some individuals may withhold knowledge, perceiving it as valuable and exclusive, which can hinder KSB [70]. Prior research has identified multiple counterproductive manifestations of KSB, such as knowledge hoarding, partial sharing, withholding, delays in information exchange, and disengagement from collaborative processes.

Both organizational and individual factors influence KSB. Organizational determinants include managerial support, organizational size, technology infrastructure, and cultural norms surrounding knowledge sharing, while individual factors encompass age, gender, role, and tenure [71]. Tao and Bing [72] found that employees are more likely to share knowledge when they feel a strong connection to the organization and its members, particularly when knowledge sharing is linked to enhanced productivity and task quality.

Workplace ostracism has been shown to suppress KSB. Ostracized employees often disengage from knowledge sharing, leading to knowledge hiding [18, 73]. Social exchange theory posits that individuals reciprocate treatment they receive from others, and ostracism activates a form of negative reciprocity, prompting employees to withhold knowledge and engage in counterproductive behaviors [74]. Studies have further confirmed that ostracism negatively influences employees' willingness to share knowledge, potentially resulting in organizational losses [75, 76]. Hormozi and Naeini [77] also demonstrated a negative relationship between knowledge management practices—including knowledge creation, transfer, and utilization—and deviant workplace behavior.

Based on this literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Knowledge-sharing behavior (KSB) significantly mediates the relationship between workplace ostracism (WO) and workplace deviant behavior (WDB).

Moderating role of emotional intelligence (EI)

Emotional intelligence (EI) is defined as a set of non-cognitive abilities, skills, and competencies that enable individuals to effectively manage environmental demands and pressures [78]. Zhang *et al.* [79] described EI as the capacity to perceive, regulate, and respond to one's own emotions. Similarly, Ashkanasy and Daus [80] emphasized EI as a key predictor of workplace behavior, encompassing the ability to understand and manage emotions, motivate oneself, and navigate interpersonal relationships effectively.

Imran [81] highlighted that EI, alongside technical skills, can help organizations identify and develop top talent, facilitating success in professional settings. O'Neil [82] suggested that while cognitive intelligence contributes about 20% to career success, management and emotional skills account for the remaining 80%. Day and Carroll [83] further described EI as a combination of affective skills, motivation, and adaptability that enhance an individual's capacity to address environmental challenges, while Williams [84] and Kelly and Barsade [85] emphasized its role in shaping employee responses to workplace stressors such as ostracism.

Research indicates that employees with high EI are better equipped to manage the negative emotions elicited by workplace ostracism, such as anger, frustration, or depression, allowing them to maintain effective interpersonal interactions [86]. High EI also mitigates the adverse impact of ostracism on employee attitudes and behaviors, reducing the likelihood of engaging in deviant conduct [87, 88]. Accordingly, the final hypothesis is formulated:

H4: Emotional intelligence (EI) significantly moderates the relationship between workplace ostracism (WO) and workplace deviant behavior (WDB).

Prior studies indicate that individuals with higher emotional intelligence (EI) demonstrate enhanced problem-solving abilities and collaborative behaviors [89, 90]. EI is particularly crucial for devising constructive solutions, as it enables individuals to recognize and regulate their emotions effectively. Conflict management, in particular, relies on such emotional competencies to arrive at productive resolutions. Goleman [91] identified five components of EI, including social skills, which pertain to the ability to navigate interpersonal issues and prevent negative emotions from obstructing communication. Empirical evidence suggests that employees with higher EI are more adept at conflict resolution compared to their lower-EI counterparts [89]. Similarly, Salovey and Mayer [92] emphasized that employees with high EI can avoid negative cycles triggered by perceptions of workplace ostracism (WO). Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Emotional intelligence (EI) significantly moderates the relationship between workplace ostracism (WO) and organizational conflict (OC).

Additionally, research has highlighted a positive relationship between EI and knowledge-sharing behavior (KSB) [93]. Karkouloulian *et al.* [94] argued that for effective knowledge sharing, management must first understand their own emotions and then those of their colleagues. Turnispeed and Vandewaa [95] further noted that EI fosters helping behavior toward coworkers, suggesting a direct positive impact on KSB. Employees with higher EI are less likely to engage in knowledge hiding, even when experiencing ostracism, as they are better able to trust others and interpret social cues accurately [96]. Accordingly, the next hypothesis is formulated:

H6: Emotional intelligence (EI) significantly moderates the negative relationship between workplace ostracism (WO) and knowledge-sharing behavior (KSB).

Research Design and Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative, deductive research approach. Following Cooper *et al.* [97], a quantitative design is considered suitable for examining relationships between latent constructs (**Figure 1**), testing theoretical frameworks, and evaluating hypotheses. Such a design also facilitates the analysis of associations among variables and the assessment of dependencies while testing the proposed relationships. To achieve the study objectives, a survey-based method was employed, with a structured questionnaire serving as the primary data collection instrument for statistical analysis. A cross-sectional strategy was utilized, as it is well-suited for gathering survey data and addressing the research questions. The unit of analysis consisted of permanent faculty members at higher education public institutions in Pakistan.

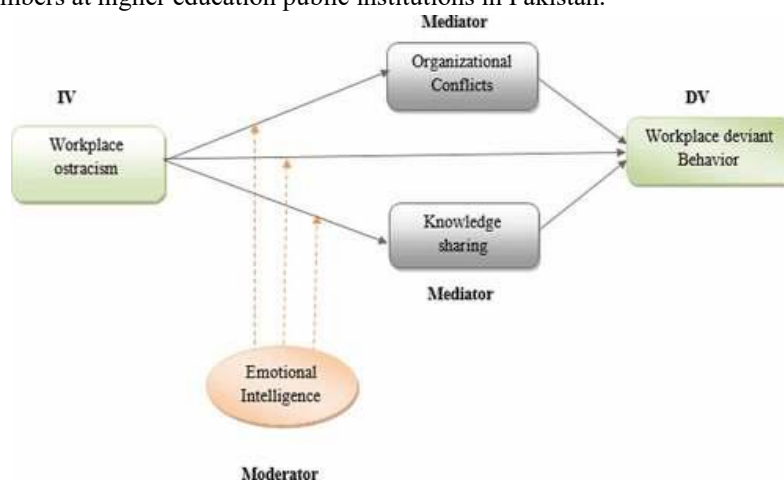


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of WDB

Population and sampling technique

The population for this study comprised full-time knowledge workers employed at public sector universities in Pakistan. The research specifically focused on permanent employees to examine the impact of workplace ostracism (WO) on their behavior. Only full-time faculty members across various universities, primarily located in Punjab, were included. Knowledge workers were chosen as respondents for several reasons. First, employees in public universities are often more exposed to ostracism compared to their counterparts in private institutions, largely due to organizational politics. Second, the permanent nature of public-sector employment increases the likelihood that ostracized employees may engage in deviant behaviors [10].

Given these circumstances, a cluster sampling technique was employed. A simple random sampling approach was not feasible due to the unavailability of an updated list of faculty members on the Higher Education Commission (HEC) website or university registrar offices. Additionally, logistical challenges such as political instability, inefficiencies in local governance, and security concerns limited the researchers' ability to visit universities across Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). Consequently, specific clusters of universities were randomly selected for the survey.

Sample size

Based on the recommendations of Hair *et al.* [98, 99], an appropriate sample size for studies involving latent constructs ranges from 10 to 20 times the number of constructs. In this study, five latent constructs were analyzed: one independent variable (WO), one dependent variable (workplace deviant behavior, WDB), two mediators (organizational conflict, OC, and knowledge-sharing behavior, KSB), and one moderator (emotional intelligence, EI). Accordingly, a minimum sample of 100 was deemed sufficient for robust statistical analysis. To mitigate potential non-response bias and ensure adequate representation [100], 300 questionnaires were distributed. A total of 250 completed responses were ultimately retained for analysis.

Questionnaire design

All constructs were measured using validated scales adapted from previous research and modified to fit the current context [101]. Responses were recorded using a five-point Likert scale, which allows participants to express the extent of their agreement or disagreement while capturing greater variability in responses [100, 102]. Specifically, workplace ostracism was measured using a 10-item scale by Ferris *et al.* [103], while WDB was assessed with a 16-item scale by Bennett and Robinson [24]. Organizational conflict, covering task and relationship dimensions, was measured with an 8-item scale adapted from Jehn and Jehn [58] and Spector and Jex [104]. Knowledge-sharing behavior was measured using an 8-item scale from De Vries *et al.* [105], and emotional intelligence was evaluated using the 10-item EI Scale developed by Wong and Law [106].

Data Analysis and Results

The data were analyzed using SmartPLS version 3.2.8. The analysis followed a two-stage approach: first, evaluating the measurement model for reliability and validity, and second, assessing the structural model to examine the relationships among constructs through path coefficients (**Figure 2**).

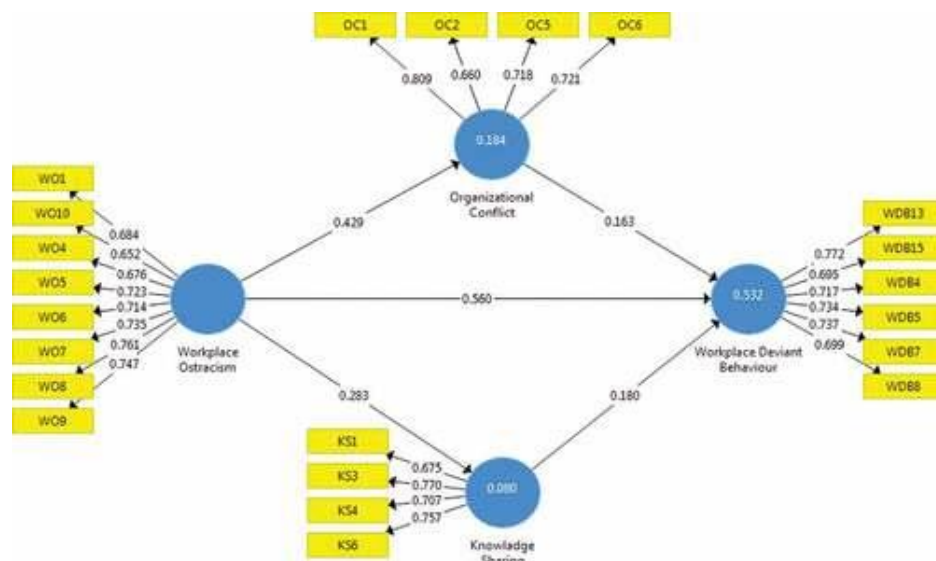


Figure 2. Measurement Model of WDB

Construct reliability and validity

The reliability of the measurement model was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR). Cronbach's alpha values above 0.6 are generally considered acceptable, while CR values of 0.7 or higher indicate satisfactory internal consistency [107]. As presented in **Table 1**, Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.708 to 0.861, and CR values varied between 0.819 and 0.892, suggesting that the constructs were measured consistently and reliably.

Validity assessment ensures that the measurement instrument accurately captures the theoretical constructs it intends to measure [90]. Convergent validity was examined by inspecting factor loadings, CR, and the average variance extracted (AVE), with AVE values exceeding the threshold of 0.5 considered acceptable [98]. **Table 1** demonstrates that all constructs achieved CR values above 0.7 and AVE values above 0.5, confirming the adequacy of the measurement model in terms of convergent validity [108].

Table 1. Construct Reliability and Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Emotional Intelligence	0.850	0.892	0.624
Knowledge Sharing	0.708	0.819	0.531
Organizational Conflict	0.712	0.819	0.532
Workplace Deviant Behavior	0.820	0.870	0.527
Workplace Ostracism	0.861	0.892	0.508

Discriminant validity

As recommended by Henseler *et al.* [109], assessing discriminant validity in PLS-SEM is crucial to ensure that constructs are empirically distinct. This can be examined using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, which evaluates whether the items of one construct are truly capturing that construct rather than others in the model. Discriminant validity is confirmed if the HTMT confidence interval does not include the value of 1, and the HTMT value remains below the threshold of 0.90 [98]. As reported in **Table 2**, all HTMT values are below 0.90, indicating that the constructs demonstrate satisfactory discriminant validity.

Table 2. Discriminant validity (HTMT)

Construct	EI	KS	OC	WDB	WO
Emotional Intelligence (EI)					
Knowledge Sharing (KS)	0.205				
Organizational Conflict (OC)	0.548	0.545			
Workplace Deviant Behavior (WDB)	0.283	0.521	0.588		
Workplace Ostracism (WO)	0.247	0.333	0.521	0.809	

Direct hypothesis

The structural model analysis indicates that workplace ostracism exhibits a strong positive effect on workplace deviant behavior ($\beta = 0.560$). The significance of this relationship was confirmed using a bootstrapping procedure, yielding a p-value of 0.000. The results of all tested hypotheses are summarized in **Table 3**. Additionally, the model's R^2 value of 0.532 indicates that 53.2% of the variance in workplace deviant behavior is accounted for by the independent variables, namely workplace ostracism, knowledge-sharing behavior, and organizational conflict. These findings suggest that the model demonstrates a moderate level of predictive relevance and explanatory power [99].

Table 3. SEM path coefficients of direct hypothesis

Hypothesis	Path Relation	Beta	S.D	t values	p values	Decision
H1	WO -> WDB	0.560	0.054	11.388	0.000	Supported

Mediation analysis

To examine whether knowledge-sharing behavior (KSB) and organizational conflict (OC) act as mediators between workplace ostracism (WO) and workplace deviant behavior (WDB), a bootstrapping approach was employed. Bootstrapping is recognized as a robust and rigorous method for assessing indirect effects, particularly suitable for PLS-SEM models with moderate sample sizes [98, 110, 111].

Using SmartPLS 3.0 with 500 resamples, both the direct and indirect pathways were analyzed. The direct relationship between WO and WDB was strong and significant ($\beta = 0.560$, $p < 0.001$). When the mediators KSB and OC were incorporated into the model, the direct effect of WO on WDB decreased but remained statistically significant (KSB: $\beta = 0.170$, $p = 0.007$; OC: $\beta = 0.151$, $p = 0.006$). This reduction in the direct effect, alongside significant indirect paths through KSB and OC, indicates a partial mediation effect. Therefore, both KSB and OC partially transmit the influence of WO on WDB, supporting hypotheses H2 and H3.

Table 4. Mediation assessments of OC and KSB

Hypothesis	Path Relation	Beta	S.D	t values	p values	VAF
H2	WO -> OC -> WDB	0.170	0.026	2.708	0.007	0.300
H3	WO -> KS -> WDB	0.151	0.019	2.736	0.006	0.269

Moderation analysis

The moderating role of emotional intelligence (EI) was examined using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), following the methodology outlined by Rigdon *et al.* [112] (**Figures 3–5**). The analysis first confirmed a significant positive relationship between workplace ostracism (WO) and workplace deviant behavior (WDB), consistent with our first hypothesis ($\beta = 0.560$, $p < 0.001$).

To test the fourth hypothesis, the interaction term between WO and EI was included in the model. The results indicate that EI significantly attenuates the impact of WO on WDB ($\beta = 0.185$, $p = 0.003$), suggesting that employees with higher emotional intelligence are better able to manage the negative effects of ostracism and are less likely to engage in deviant workplace behaviors. This finding highlights the protective role of EI in mitigating the detrimental outcomes associated with social exclusion at work.

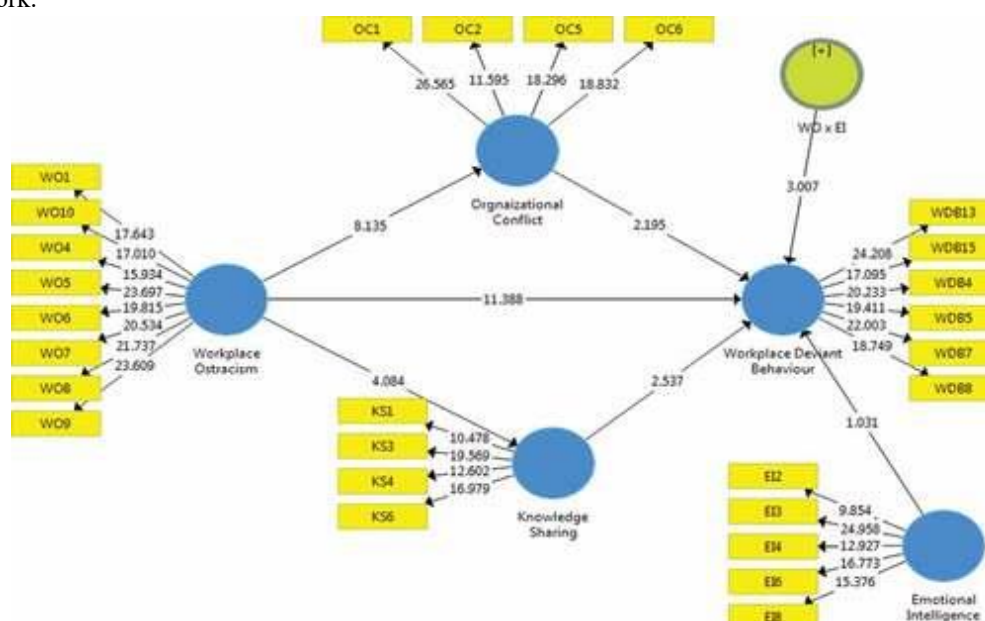
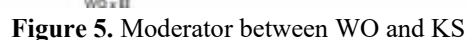
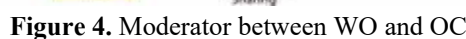


Figure 3. Moderator between WO and WDB



Hypothesis	Path Relation	Beta	S.D	t values	p values	Decision
H4	WO x EI -> WDB	0.185	0.061	3.007	0.003	Accepted
H5	WO x EI -> OC	0.244	0.095	2.567	0.011	Accepted
H6	WO x EI -> KS	-0.415	0.075	5.516	0.000	Accepted

Discussion and Conclusions

Mediation analysis indicated that organizational conflict partially mediates the relationship between WO and WDB. These findings align with Chung [20], who reported that ostracism increases OC, which in turn contributes to deviant behavior.

Knowledge-sharing behavior was also found to partially mediate the WO–WDB link. The results suggest that when ostracized employees share knowledge, their reduced interaction with colleagues may inadvertently increase engagement in WDB, echoing prior research [113-115].

The moderating role of EI was confirmed across multiple relationships. Higher levels of EI significantly weakened the impact of WO on WDB, supporting prior studies [3, 23, 88]. Employees with strong EI are better equipped to manage the negative emotions associated with ostracism, reducing their likelihood of engaging in deviant behavior. Similarly, EI moderated the WO–OC relationship, indicating that emotionally intelligent employees are more capable of coping with ostracism without escalating workplace conflict [15, 89].

Furthermore, EI positively moderated the WO–KSB relationship. Highly emotionally intelligent employees continued to engage in knowledge sharing despite experiencing ostracism, whereas those with lower EI tended to withdraw and withhold information [8, 96, 113]. This finding underscores the role of EI in promoting cooperative behaviors and reducing the negative consequences of social exclusion.

Overall, the findings indicate that WDB can be mitigated through targeted interventions aimed at enhancing knowledge sharing and fostering EI among employees. For public-sector higher education institutions, practical strategies might include designing interdependent work structures that encourage collaboration, implementing policies to minimize ostracism, and providing training to develop emotional intelligence. Such measures can strengthen social interactions, reduce conflict, and limit the occurrence of deviant behaviors, ultimately contributing to healthier organizational environments.

Theoretical and managerial implications

This study offers several important theoretical contributions. First, it integrates social identity theory and conservation of resources theory to provide a robust framework for understanding how workplace ostracism (WO) relates to workplace deviant behavior (WDB). The findings reveal that the relationship between WO and WDB is partially mediated by both organizational conflict (OC) and knowledge-sharing behavior (KSB). To the best of our knowledge, few studies have examined the mediating role of OC and KSB in this context, making this study among the first to explore these mechanisms. Furthermore, the application of social identity and resource conservation theories in the domain of WO extends our theoretical understanding of the processes through which ostracism influences deviant workplace behaviors. The findings also align with prior research, confirming the associations among WO, OC, and KSB [20, 77] and the subsequent effects of OC and KSB on WDB [3, 113, 116].

From a managerial perspective, WO is costly for organizations because it discourages knowledge sharing and contributes to deviant behaviors among employees. Public-sector institutions should develop policies and procedures to reduce ostracism, such as creating opportunities for all employees to express opinions, contribute to decision-making, and participate in collaborative problem-solving [39, 117]. Top management should also foster high-performance work practices and cultivate a culture of trust, cooperation, and inclusion to enhance social interactions and facilitate access to information. By doing so, organizations can reduce WDB and promote healthier workplace environments.

Second, this study contributes to social identity theory by highlighting the moderating role of emotional intelligence (EI). Findings indicate that higher EI strengthens KSB among knowledge workers, even in the face of ostracism, whereas lower EI allows ostracized employees to withhold knowledge [8, 15, 113]. This aligns with prior research demonstrating that individuals with higher EI are less likely to engage in knowledge-hiding behaviors in response to ostracism [96, 115]. Moreover, KSB can mitigate WDB by enhancing social interactions and reducing negative behavioral responses [77]. For public-sector higher education institutions, these findings highlight the importance of designing interdependent work structures that require collaboration, as reliance on colleagues reduces the likelihood of ostracism and related deviant behaviors.

Limitations and future research directions

While this study provides valuable insights, it has certain limitations. The focus was limited to WO as a predictor of WDB; however, other potential factors—such as gender differences, locus of control, or abusive supervision—could also influence deviant behaviors and warrant exploration in future studies. Additionally, the study targeted knowledge workers in selected public universities in Pakistan, which may limit generalizability. Collecting data from all public universities was not feasible due to time and logistical constraints.

The cross-sectional design captures employee perceptions and behaviors at a single point in time, which may change over time. Future research should adopt a longitudinal approach to track WDB and related behaviors over time. Comparative studies between public and private universities could also provide a broader understanding of sector-specific differences in WO and WDB. Beyond higher education, the findings may be extended to other industries such as software companies, banks, and financial institutions.

Future studies could explore additional moderators and mediators (e.g., personality traits, belongingness, or locus of control) to better understand the mechanisms linking WO and WDB. Researchers may also examine other outcomes influenced by

WO, such as turnover intentions, employee productivity, and organizational performance, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the consequences of workplace ostracism.

Acknowledgments: None

Conflict of interest: None

Financial support: None

Ethics statement: None

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