

## THE IMPACT OF WORKPLACE OSTRACISM ON PRO-JOB UNETHICAL BEHAVIOR IN SRI LANKA'S HOTEL INDUSTRY: THE MODERATING ROLE OF INTERPERSONAL SENSITIVITY

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### Abstract

Sri Lanka's hotel industry, integral to the nation's tourism and economic growth, depends on the integrity and collaboration of its workforce to deliver exceptional service. However, negative social experiences such as workplace ostracism can erode these standards by prompting employees to engage in behaviors that, while beneficial to job performance, violate ethical norms. Despite its implications, limited research has explored how workplace ostracism contributes to pro-job unethical behavior (PJUB) in Sri Lanka's hospitality sector, particularly in interaction with personal traits like interpersonal sensitivity. Grounded in Social Cognitive Theory, this study examines the relationship between workplace ostracism and PJUB, with interpersonal sensitivity assessed as a moderating variable. Adopting a quantitative, deductive research design, data were collected through structured questionnaires from 175 hotel employees in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, using a convenience sampling method. Measures included established scales for workplace ostracism, interpersonal sensitivity, and PJUB. Correlation and hierarchical regression analyses using SPSS revealed a significant positive association between workplace ostracism and PJUB ( $r = .59, p < .01$ ;  $\beta = .57, p < .001$ ), indicating that ostracized employees are more likely to rationalize unethical behavior aimed at securing job performance or recognition. Furthermore, the results confirmed the moderating role of interpersonal sensitivity (interaction term  $\beta = .18, p < .01$ ); the link between ostracism and PJUB was stronger among employees with higher interpersonal sensitivity. These findings highlight the complex interplay between social exclusion and personal traits in shaping ethical behavior in service settings. Practically, the study calls for hotel managers to promote inclusive work cultures and to identify and support employees who may be particularly vulnerable to ostracism-induced misconduct. Limitations include the cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported data, which restricts causal inference. Future research could incorporate longitudinal designs and explore other moderating variables, such as moral identity or organizational justice, in this context.

**Keywords:** *Hotel Industry, Interpersonal Sensitivity, Pro-job Unethical Behavior, workplace Ostracism.*

### 1. Introduction

The hotel and tourism sector in Sri Lanka plays a key role in national economic growth, employment generation and regional development. As one of the country's major foreign exchange earning sectors, the sector has been central to Sri Lanka's post-crisis economic recovery. According to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (2024), tourist arrivals increased to approximately 2.05 million in 2024, generating approximately US\$3.2 billion in tourism receipts, reflecting a strong recovery following the economic downturn and the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond its contribution to GDP and foreign exchange earnings, the tourism sector is highly labor-intensive and serves as a major source of employment in the service sector. Data from the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) indicate that the sector directly employed over 200,000 workers in 2023, while a significant number of indirect jobs were created in related sectors such as

transport, retail, handicrafts, and agriculture (Research & International Relations Division, 2023). Despite its economic importance, the hotel and tourism industry is characterized by demanding working conditions, rigid hierarchies, and high interdependence. The labor-intensive nature of hotel work, characterized by long hours, emotional labor, intense customer contact, and seasonal demand, increases employees' susceptibility to interpersonal conflict, emotional exhaustion, and workplace stress (Karatepe, 2013; Kim & Kang, 2015). Service delivery in hospitality is highly interdependent, making peer relationships particularly important for employee performance (Luo et al., 2019).

Furthermore, hierarchical structures and informal power relations, reinforced by seniority and supervisory preference, may contribute to perceived inequality and social isolation among frontline employees (Hofstede et al., 2010; Zeng et al., 2022). High labor turnover and skill shortages due to international labor migration further intensify workloads and weaken team cohesion (Cvetkoska et al., 2025; Flórez & Gómez, 2024). As a result, the Sri Lankan hotel and tourism industry provides an appropriate context for examining workplace social dynamics and employee well-being. One such phenomenon is workplace ostracism, defined as an employee's subjective perception of being ignored, excluded, or neglected by others in the workplace (Ferris et al., 2008).

Unlike overt forms of aggression, ostracism is often subtle and difficult to detect, yet it has profound psychological and behavioral consequences for employees (Robinson et al., 2004; Williams, 2007). As organizations increasingly rely on teamwork, interdependence, and social exchange, particularly in service-oriented industries, experiences of social exclusion can significantly disrupt employees' functioning and ethical decision-making. Recent organizational behavior research has consistently demonstrated that workplace ostracism is associated with various negative employee outcomes, including emotional exhaustion, reduced job performance, turnover intentions, and counterproductive work behaviors (Ferris et al., 2015; X. Liu et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2015). Expanding on this line of research, scholars have begun to examine pro-job unethical behavior (PJUB) behaviors that violate ethical norms with the intention of benefiting one's job performance, job security, or position within the organization (Wang & Li, 2018; Y. Zhang & Liao, 2015). Unlike deviant behaviors that are overtly harmful, PJUB is often rationalized as necessary or justified, making it more difficult for organizations to detect and control. Drawing on social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002), workplace ostracism can be understood as a contextual stressor that disrupts individuals' moral self-regulatory processes. When employees experience exclusion, they may engage in cognitive restructuring and moral justification to justify unethical actions in order to protect their employment or regain lost status. Empirical evidence from Asian organizational contexts suggests that excluded employees are more likely to engage in unethical behaviors as a defensive coping strategy (Soni et al., 2015; Wang & Li, 2018). However, individuals do not respond to exclusion in the same way, and individual characteristics play an important role in shaping behavioral responses.

One such individual difference is interpersonal sensitivity, which is defined as an increased awareness of and responsiveness to the evaluations, reactions, and social cues of others (Boyce & Parker, 1989). Employees who are high in interpersonal sensitivity are particularly attuned to relationship threats and are more likely to perceive exclusion as a serious threat to their social identity and self-worth (Marin & Miller, 2013). Previous studies have indicated that such individuals exhibit stronger emotional and behavioral reactions to workplace exclusion (Liu et al., 2016). However, empirical research examining interpersonal sensitivity as a boundary condition in the relationship between workplace exclusion and PJUB is limited.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Workplace bullying is increasingly recognized as a subtle but consequential personal misconduct that undermines employees' attitudes and behaviors. Extensive research has demonstrated that experiences of social exclusion are associated with a variety of adverse outcomes, including emotional distress, withdrawal, and counterproductive work behavior (D. Ferris et al., 2008; Williams, 2007). However, the extent to which workplace bullying leads to pro-job unethical behavior (PJUB), behaviors that violate ethical norms while ostensibly being perceived as benefiting job performance or organizational goals, has not been adequately explored. Existing studies have largely emphasized self-serving or retaliatory misconduct, providing limited insight into ethically questionable behaviors motivated by performance security or achievement motives (Liu et al., 2023; Zhang, 2020).

Furthermore, current understanding of unethical behavior related to neglect is informed mainly by evidence from manufacturing, information technology, and general organizational contexts. Despite the unique work characteristics of the hospitality industry, relatively little attention has been paid to it. Hotel organizations are inherently relational and emotionally intense, requiring continuous coordination among employees and frequent interaction with supervisors and customers (Karatepe, 2013). In particular, the Sri Lankan hotel and tourism industry is embedded within a collectivist cultural setting marked by hierarchical work arrangements, strong power distance, and employment uncertainty. Such contextual features may increase employees' sensitivity to social exclusion and shape how they respond to perceived marginalization. However, empirical investigations situated in this context are scarce, which limits the contextual relevance of existing findings.

Additionally, while previous research acknowledges that employees do not respond uniformly to mistreatment in the workplace, limited attention has been paid to interpersonal sensitivity as a conditioning factor in the relationship between workplace neglect and PJUB. Interpersonal sensitivity reflects an individual's heightened awareness and responsiveness to social cues and related evaluations. Drawing on social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002), employees who are highly sensitive to interpersonal cues are more likely to cognitively interpret neglect as a threat to their social status and job security, thereby increasing the likelihood of justifying unethical behavior as an adaptive response. Despite its theoretical relevance, this moderating process has been the subject of little empirical investigation, particularly within service-oriented and South Asian contexts. With this in mind, this study examines the relationship between workplace exclusion and pro-work unethical behavior among hotel employees in Sri Lanka, with personal sensitivity incorporated as a moderating variable. By situating the investigation in a hospitality context and adopting a social cognitive perspective, this study seeks to contribute to a nuanced understanding of how social exclusion shapes ethically questionable behavior in service organizations and to inform managerial efforts aimed at reducing the ethical harms arising from workplace exclusion.

The study addresses two primary research questions:

1. What is the nature of the relationship between workplace ostracism and pro-job unethical behavior in Sri Lanka's hotel industry?
  2. Does interpersonal sensitivity moderate this relationship?
- By examining these questions, this research advances theoretical understanding of workplace ostracism while providing practical insights for managing its consequences in service organizations. The findings have particular relevance for hospitality managers seeking to mitigate unethical behaviors that may undermine service quality and organizational effectiveness.

## **3. Literature Review**

Workplace ostracism, as a form of interpersonal exclusion, disrupts employees' sense of belonging and social identity, which can trigger defensive or retaliatory behaviors aimed at self-preservation. According

to social cognitive theory(Bandura, 2002)Individuals interpret and respond to environmental stimuli, such as ostracism, through cognitive and affective processes. When employees perceive exclusion, they may rationalize unethical actions that ostensibly benefit their job performance or security, as a means to regain control or compensate for their diminished status. This aligns with the concept of pro-job unethical behavior (PJUB), where employees violate ethical norms to safeguard their job-related interests (Wang et al., 2018). The theoretical underpinning suggests that ostracism creates a psychological state conducive to moral disengagement, enabling individuals to justify unethical actions as necessary for job survival or advancement.

Empirical evidence supports this reasoning. Studies have demonstrated that workplace ostracism correlates with counterproductive work behaviors, including unethical actions (Ferris et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2015). For instance, research in Asian organizational contexts found that ostracized employees engage in PJUB to mitigate perceived threats to their job security or status (Thau et al., 2015; Wang & Li, 2018). These findings underscore the role of ostracism as an antecedent to PJUB, particularly in service industries where interpersonal dynamics are critical. Thus, we hypothesize:

*H1: Workplace ostracism is positively related to pro-job unethical behavior.*

Leveraging Social Cognitive Theory(Bandura, 2002), it is posited that individuals do not react to environmental stimuli in isolation; instead, they interpret and respond to social contexts through the lens of their personal attributes and cognitive-affective mechanisms. A salient individual characteristic in this regard is interpersonal sensitivity, which is characterized as the propensity to be acutely cognizant of and influenced by the evaluations and interpersonal signals of others(Boyce & Parker, 1989). Within the framework of workplace ostracism, individuals exhibiting heightened levels of interpersonal sensitivity are more inclined to perceive social exclusion as a significant threat to their social identity, thereby undermining their self-esteem and sense of belonging. Following Social Cognitive Theory, such individuals may resort to self-regulatory mechanisms that encompass moral justification and cognitive restructuring, allowing them to rationalize unethical behaviors as essential for self-preservation or career viability. Consequently, when individuals with pronounced sensitivity experience ostracism, they may be more susceptible to engaging in pro-job unethical behavior (PJUB) as a compensatory psychological response or as a strategy to reclaim social or occupational dominance. This moderating function is particularly pertinent in collectivist and hierarchical workplace settings, such as the hotel industry in Sri Lanka, where the interdependence of interpersonal relationships and job security is profoundly established. Empirical evidence reinforces this notion: Liu et al. (2013) and Yang & Diefendorff (2009) observed that individuals with elevated interpersonal sensitivity exhibit more pronounced emotional and behavioral responses to workplace exclusion. Therefore, we hypothesize

*H2: Interpersonal sensitivity moderates the relationship between workplace ostracism and PJUB, whereby the positive correlation is amplified for individuals with greater interpersonal sensitivity.*

#### **4. Methodology**

This research utilized a quantitative, cross-sectional survey methodology to find the effects of workplace ostracism on pro-job unethical behavior within the hotel industry of Sri Lanka, with interpersonal sensitivity serving as a moderating variable. The sample population consisted of operational and administrative personnel employed in medium to large-scale hotels located in the Northern Province. Data were gathered via a structured self-administered questionnaire, employing established measurement scales. Workplace ostracism was assessed using a 10-item instrument developed by Ferris et al. (2008).Pro-job unethical behavior was evaluated with a 5-item scale adapted from Wang & Li

(2018). Interpersonal sensitivity was measured through a 7-item scale constructed by Boyce & Parker (1989). Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Demographic variables, including gender, age, tenure, and education, were incorporated as control variables.

A total of 175 responses were obtained through convenience sampling. The data were analyzed utilizing IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics and reliability analyses were conducted to evaluate internal consistency. Pearson correlation analysis was employed to investigate the interrelationships among the variables. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was executed to assess the direct influence of workplace ostracism on PJUB and the moderating effect of interpersonal sensitivity, adhering to established protocols for moderation testing (interaction term approach). All ethical standards were meticulously adhered to, encompassing informed consent and the confidentiality of participants' data.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Analysis

Descriptive statistics were computed to assess the central tendency, dispersion, and distributional properties of the study variables. As presented in Table 1, the mean values indicate moderate to relatively high perceptions of workplace ostracism, interpersonal sensitivity, and pro-job unethical behavior among hotel employees in Sri Lanka. Skewness and kurtosis values for all constructs were within acceptable thresholds ( $\pm 2$ ), confirming the normality of the data. Reliability analysis demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency for all measurement scales. Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeded the recommended minimum value of 0.70, indicating large-scale reliability.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Study Variables**

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Workplace Ostracism	3.42	0.71	-0.48	0.36	0.88
Interpersonal Sensitivity	3.58	0.65	-0.41	0.29	0.84
Pro-Job Unethical Behavior (PJUB)	3.61	0.73	-0.52	0.33	0.90

### 5.2. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to assess the relationships among the study variables. As presented in Table 2, workplace ostracism was positively and significantly correlated with pro-job unethical behavior ( $r = .59, p < .01$ ), supporting the proposed association between social exclusion and unethical behavior aimed at protecting job-related interests.

**Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix**

Variable	1	2
1. Workplace Ostracism	-	
2. Interpersonal Sensitivity	.46**	-
3. Pro-Job Unethical Behavior (PJUB)	.59**	.38**

Interpersonal sensitivity also exhibited significant positive correlations with both workplace ostracism and pro-job unethical behavior, indicating that employees who are more sensitive to interpersonal cues are more likely to perceive exclusion and respond through ethically questionable actions.

Table 2 correlation matrix presents the Pearson correlation coefficients among workplace ostracism, interpersonal sensitivity, and pro-job unethical behavior (PJUB). The results indicate that workplace

ostracism is positively and significantly related to interpersonal sensitivity ( $r = .46, p < .01$ ), suggesting that employees who experience higher levels of ostracism tend to exhibit greater sensitivity in interpersonal interactions. This finding implies that social exclusion in the workplace may intensify employees' emotional reactivity and vigilance toward others' behaviors and intentions. Further, workplace ostracism shows a strong positive association with pro-job unethical behavior ( $r = .59, p < .01$ ). This indicates that ostracized employees are more likely to engage in unethical behaviors intended to benefit their job or organisation, potentially as a compensatory mechanism to restore social standing or job security. Interpersonal sensitivity is also positively and significantly correlated with PJUB ( $r = .38, p < .01$ ), suggesting that employees who are more emotionally sensitive in social interactions may be more inclined to justify or engage in ethically questionable behaviors to cope with perceived interpersonal threats or exclusion.

Overall, the significant correlations provide preliminary support for the proposed relationships among workplace ostracism, interpersonal sensitivity, and pro-job unethical behavior, justifying further multivariate analyses to examine causal pathways and mediating mechanisms.

**Tabel:03 Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Pro-Job Unethical Behavior (PJUB)**

Variables	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Workplace Ostracism	.57***	.49***	.44***
Interpersonal Sensitivity	—	.29**	.26**
Workplace Ostracism $\times$ Interpersonal Sensitivity	—	—	.18**
R <sup>2</sup>	.35	.41	.44
$\Delta R^2$	—	.06**	.03**
F	112.84***	78.36***	62.91***

### 5.3. Hierarchical Regression Results

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine the effect of workplace ostracism on pro-job unethical behavior (PJUB) and to test the moderating role of interpersonal sensitivity. As shown in Table 03, workplace ostracism was entered in Step 1 and emerged as a strong positive predictor of PJUB ( $\beta = 0.57, p < 0.001$ ), explaining 35% of the variance in unethical behavior ( $R^2 = 0.35$ ). In Step 2, interpersonal sensitivity was added to the model. Interpersonal sensitivity significantly predicted PJUB ( $\beta = .29, p < .01$ ), and the explained variance increased significantly ( $\Delta R^2 = .06, p < .01$ ). Workplace ostracism remained a significant predictor ( $\beta = .49, p < .001$ ), indicating that both variables independently contribute to pro-job unethical behavior. In Step 3, the interaction term between workplace ostracism and interpersonal sensitivity was introduced. The interaction effect was positive and statistically significant ( $\beta = .18, p < .01$ ), accounting for an additional 3% of variance in PJUB ( $\Delta R^2 = .03, p < .01$ ). The overall model was significant ( $F = 62.91, p < .001$ ) and explained 44% of the variance in PJUB ( $R^2 = .44$ ).

These findings indicate that interpersonal sensitivity moderates the relationship between workplace ostracism and pro-job unethical behavior, such that the positive effect of ostracism on unethical behavior is stronger among employees with higher levels of interpersonal sensitivity.

## 6. Results and Discussions

The findings of this study provide robust evidence for the association between workplace ostracism and pro-job unethical behavior within the hotel sector of Sri Lanka. Descriptive statistical analyses validated that the distributions for all variables were within acceptable limits, and the reliability of the measurement scales was deemed high, as evidenced by Cronbach's alpha coefficients surpassing 0.70. Pearson correlation coefficients indicated that workplace ostracism exhibited a significant positive correlation with PJUB, thereby supporting the hypothesis that employees who experience exclusion are

more likely to resort to unethical behaviors to safeguard or enhance their occupational standing. This observation is consistent with previous research indicating that ostracism may elicit deviant coping mechanisms (D. Ferris et al., 2008; Wang & Li, 2018). Moreover, interpersonal sensitivity demonstrated significant positive correlations with both workplace ostracism and moral disengagement, implying that individuals with elevated levels of interpersonal sensitivity are more susceptible to the effects of social exclusion and are more likely to engage in cognitive rationalizations for unethical conduct (Fida et al., 2015; Marin & Miller, 2013). Hierarchical regression analysis confirmed that workplace ostracism is a significant predictor of PJUB. Importantly, the interaction between ostracism and interpersonal sensitivity was also found to be significant, suggesting the presence of a moderating effect. Simple slope analyses revealed that individuals characterized by higher interpersonal sensitivity illustrated a more pronounced relationship between ostracism and unethical behavior. This reinforces the concept that personality traits influence how employees perceive and react to social threats (Bandura, 2002; Williams, 2007). In summary, the results imply that in high-contact sectors such as hospitality, ostracism may not manifest as overt conflict but rather as calculated, unethical actions aimed at preserving job relevance. It is imperative for organizations to acknowledge that such behaviors may arise from underlying social stressors and to address both structural and individual factors that contribute to workplace exclusion and disengagement.

## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This research reveals that workplace ostracism noticeably influences pro-job unethical behavior among hospitality employees in Sri Lanka, especially among those exhibiting elevated interpersonal sensitivity. These results accentuate the pivotal significance of interpersonal dynamics in shaping ethical conduct within service-oriented settings. Considering that ostracism may provoke moral disengagement and defensive behaviors, hotel management must cultivate an inclusive workplace culture actively.

Proposed interventions encompass the implementation of regular team-building initiatives, the establishment of emotional and psychological support frameworks, and the training of managers to identify and address nuanced forms of exclusion. Furthermore, assessing and providing support for employees with heightened interpersonal sensitivity through coaching or counseling may aid in alleviating their vulnerability to unethical responses during periods of stress. By addressing both the environmental and individual determinants contributing to ostracism, organizations can facilitate ethical behavior and uphold service quality.

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