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Workplace Ostracism and Employee Silence in the Sri Lankan Apparel Industry: The Moderating Role of Negative Reciprocity Beliefs

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Abstract

In today's dynamic apparel industry, interpersonal relationships significantly influence employee behavior and organizational outcomes. This study investigates how workplace ostracism influences different forms of employee silence, such as acquiescence, defensive, and prosocial, and examines whether this impact is moderated by Negative Reciprocity Beliefs (NRBs). Drawing on the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, we argue that ostracized employees, perceiving a threat to their psychological and social resources, may withdraw their input to conserve energy and protect themselves. Employees with high NRBs are particularly inclined to respond to exclusion with retaliatory silence. Using a time-lagged survey design, data were collected from 241 lower-level employees through convenience sampling across five apparel organizations in Northern Sri Lanka. Workplace ostracism, NRBs, and employee silence were measured using validated scales. Results from hierarchical regression analyses showed that workplace ostracism significantly predicted both acquiescence silence ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < .001$) and defensive silence ($\beta = 0.49$, $p < .001$), while its effect on prosocial silence was nonsignificant ($\beta = 0.04$, $p = .409$). Moreover, NRBs significantly moderated the impact between workplace ostracism and both acquiescence silence ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < .01$) and defensive silence ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < .001$), but not prosocial silence ($\beta = 0.02$, $p = .549$). These findings suggest that employee silence is a coping response to ostracism, especially among individuals with strong retaliatory beliefs. While this study contributes to understanding interpersonal dynamics, its reliance on self-report data restricts causal interpretations. Future research could explore multi-source designs to further unpack these dynamics across different cultural and industrial contexts.

Keywords*: Acquiescence silence, Defensive silence, Employee silence, Negative reciprocity beliefs, Sri Lankan apparel industry, Workplace ostracism*

Introduction

Employee silence occurs when individuals withhold their true thoughts, feelings, or concerns about their workplace from those who could enact change (Pinder & Harlos, 2001), leading to significant consequences for both employees and organizations (Yao et al., 2022). At the individual level, silence is associated with low organizational commitment (Deniz et al., 2013), reduced organizational citizenship behavior (Hao et al., 2022), job dissatisfaction (Parlar Kılıç et al., 2021), and diminished performance (Hao et al., 2022). Organizationally, it hampers performance (Dhaqane, 2024) and stifles innovation (Maqbool et al., 2019). Identifying the causes of silence is critical, as failing to address it deprives management of insights needed for improvement or early problem resolution (Chou & Chang, 2020). Although encouraging employee voice is essential (Azevedo et al., 2021), researchers note that silence persists, increasing the risk of poor outcomes (Yao et al., 2022). Unlike overt behaviors like aggression, silence is subtler and less detectable (Harlos & Knoll, 2021), making its negative effects harder to recognize (Cortina & Magley, 2003).

As a counterproductive knowledge behavior, employee silence is a common workplace phenomenon often stemming from rigid organizational cultures and hierarchical task structures (Lee & Lee, 2024). Such cultures exacerbate social interaction challenges, particularly due to employees' lack of discretion and autonomy in addressing their issues (Langfred & Rockmann, 2016). This issue is particularly acute in the Sri Lankan apparel industry, a critical sector contributing significantly to the nation's economy (accounting for ~44% of total exports in 2022; Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2022). The industry employs over 350,000 workers, predominantly women from low-income backgrounds, who often face heavy workloads, strict production targets, and limited upward mobility (Wickramasinghe & Wickramasinghe, 2017). These conditions are compounded by diverse demands and adverse workplace experiences like ostracism, which further disengages employees, fostering silence and impairing job performance (Jahanzeb & Fatima, 2018). Research confirms that employee silence undermines in-role performance (Lee & Lee, 2024; Jahanzeb & Fatima, 2018), while cultural factors significantly influence this behavior (Kong & Jogaratnam, 2007).

In Sri Lanka's high-power-distance culture**,** where hierarchical respect and deference to authority are deeply ingrained (Hofstede Insights, 2023), employees are less likely to voice concerns due to fear of reprisal or perceptions of futility (Daniels & Greguras, 2014). Given the intrinsic link between culture and communication (Reissner, 2005), employees in such cultures often rely on formal hierarchies, valuing supervisor input over low-level contributions (Daniels & Greguras, 2014). This dynamic correlates with acquiescent and opportunistic silence (Knoll et al., 2021), as it encourages conformity and acceptance of norms (Daniels & Greguras, 2014). Employees in these settings, favoring

directive leadership, may view silence as a means to avoid conflict and protect themselves, believing the status quo is unchangeable (Daniels & Greguras, 2014).

The study has two primary objectives. First, it responds to calls for research on employee silence in non-Western settings (e.g., Van der Wal, 2015; McKearney et al., 2023). Most prior studies have focused on Western contexts (McKearney et al., 2023), but generalizing these findings is problematic due to significant cultural differences. Sri Lanka's collectivistic and high-power-distance society (Hofstede Insights, 2023) presents an ideal setting to examine how cultural norms shape silence behaviors differently from individualistic, low-power-distance Western workplaces. While existing research often examines high-individualism, low-power-distance environments, many non-Western contexts exhibit collectivism (prioritizing group harmony) and high-power distance (respect for hierarchy) (Yang, 2020). Studies suggest that employee silence is more prevalent in such cultures (e.g., Lee & Lee, 2024; Wickramasinghe & Wickramasinghe, 2017), as employees avoid challenging authority and adhere to group norms by withholding dissenting opinions (Daniels & Greguras, 2014).

Most empirical studies on employee silence and workplace ostracism have been conducted in Western or East Asian settings, limiting the generalizability of findings to collectivistic and high power-distance societies (McKearney et al., 2023; Knoll et al., 2021). In Sri Lanka, where hierarchical authority, deference to supervisors, and group harmony are deeply embedded, employees may respond to interpersonal mistreatment in distinct ways, yet systematic empirical evidence remains scarce (Wickramasinghe & Wickramasinghe, 2017). Prior research has largely treated employee silence as a unidimensional construct or focused on isolated forms such as acquiescent or defensive silence, leaving unclear whether workplace ostracism uniformly affects all forms of silence or selectively triggers disengagement-oriented responses (Dyne et al., 2003). Moreover, contextual boundary conditions shaping employees' reactions to ostracism are insufficiently understood, particularly in relation to negative reciprocity beliefs (NRBs). Although NRBs have been shown to intensify retaliatory responses to workplace mistreatment, their role in explaining silence in high power-distance cultures remains underexplored (Greco et al., 2019; Koay et al., 2022); therefore, the present study examines workplace ostracism as an interpersonal antecedent of multiple forms of employee silence and investigates the moderating role of NRBs within the Sri Lankan apparel sector.

Second, this study advances the literature on employee silence by identifying workplace ostracism as a key interpersonal antecedent. Workplace ostracism involves the exclusion, rejection, or ignoring of an individual (or group) by others, which undermines their ability to build positive relationships, advance professionally, or maintain a strong workplace reputation (Hitlan et al., 2006). Unlike more overt forms of mistreatment, workplace ostracism is a subtler yet equally harmful transgression (Bilal et al.,

2021). In Sri Lankan apparel factories**,** where teamwork and social cohesion are critical for meeting production demands, ostracism can be particularly damaging, leading to decreased morale, higher absenteeism, and reduced productivity (Wickramasinghe & Wickramasinghe, 2017). Because ostracism is passive**,** affected employees often resort to covert retaliation (Yao et al., 2022). The lack of formal penalties for such behavior also makes it an easy tactic for employees to employ. Ostracism's impact is amplified in collectivistic cultures, where interpersonal relationships hold significant value (Uskul & Over, 2017). Common manifestations include exclusion from meetings, work-related discussions, or informal social interactions like lunch invitations (Robinson et al., 2013). Such exclusion can be uniquely distressing, as the pain of being ignored or sidelined is deeply felt (Bernstein & Claypool, 2012).

Beyond the direct relationship between workplace ostracism and employee silence, the study examines how NRBs moderate this connection. This exploration clarifies the conditions under which employee silence is exacerbated or mitigated. Employees' behavioral responses, whether ethical or unethical, may differ depending on their NRBs when faced with negative treatment such as workplace ostracism. This aligns with prior research, including Koay et al. (2022), who demonstrated that NRBs strengthen the association between abusive supervision and cyberloafing. Similarly, Wu et al. (2014) found that NRBs significantly influences the relationship between workplace incivility and interpersonal deviance. Moreover, organizations can actively manage NRBs through targeted interventions (Koay et al., 2022). Thus, recognizing NRBs' moderating role offers practical avenues to mitigate or prevent employee silence.

The study employs the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to frame the theoretical arguments regarding the relationship between workplace ostracism and employee silence. COR theory rests on two core tenets: the primacy of resource loss and resource investment. Resources can take various forms that individuals value, whether tangible (e.g., workstations and equipment) or intangible (e.g., social support and quality time with family). Hobfoll (1989) associates the first principle with stress and strain, while the latter is primarily examined in the context of coping. According to Schwarzer and Reuter (2023), psychological stress arises when individuals anticipate or experience resource loss. Hobfoll et al. (2003) further assert that individuals suffer greater psychological harm from resource loss than they gain from resource recovery. Consequently, people are motivated to protect and conserve their resources, actively avoiding situations that threaten further loss (Schwarzer & Reuter, 2023). In stressful contexts like workplace ostracism, this tendency may lead employees to adopt silence as a coping strategy.

By applying COR theory, this study integrates research on workplace ostracism and employee silence, with a specific focus on how NRBs moderate their relationship.

This study makes two key contributions. First, it deepens our understanding of how workplace ostracism exacerbates employee silence in apparel organizations, specifically examining all three forms of silence. Second, it extends the literature on employee silence by investigating the underexplored moderating role of NRBs in the ostracism-silence relationship. Using a quantitative approach, we assess the impact of workplace ostracism on employee silence while exploring how NRBs moderates this dynamic. Given the persistent challenge of eliminating workplace ostracism (Yao et al., 2022), understanding the contexts in which it occurs could help mitigate its effects. For Sri Lankan apparel firms, which rely heavily on workforce stability and productivity, addressing ostracism and its consequences is crucial for sustaining competitive advantage in global supply chains. For instance, examining NRBs as a potential aggravating factor may yield valuable managerial insights for addressing ostracism and its consequences, particularly when NRBs are considered. We propose that NRBs significantly drives ostracized employees to adopt "tit-for-tat" behaviors (Ayub et al., 2021). To curb covert retaliation, organizations should focus on reducing employees' NRBs in the workplace.

Research Questions

RQ1: Does workplace ostracism significantly associated with employee silence among employees in the Sri Lankan apparel sector?

RQ2: Does workplace ostracism significantly associated with acquiescent silence among employees in the Sri Lankan apparel sector?

RQ3: Does workplace ostracism significantly associated with defensive silence among employees in the Sri Lankan apparel sector?

RQ4: Does workplace ostracism significantly associated with prosocial silence among employees in the Sri Lankan apparel sector?

RQ5: Does negative reciprocity beliefs moderate the relationship between workplace ostracism and employee silence in the Sri Lankan apparel sector?

Conceptual Model

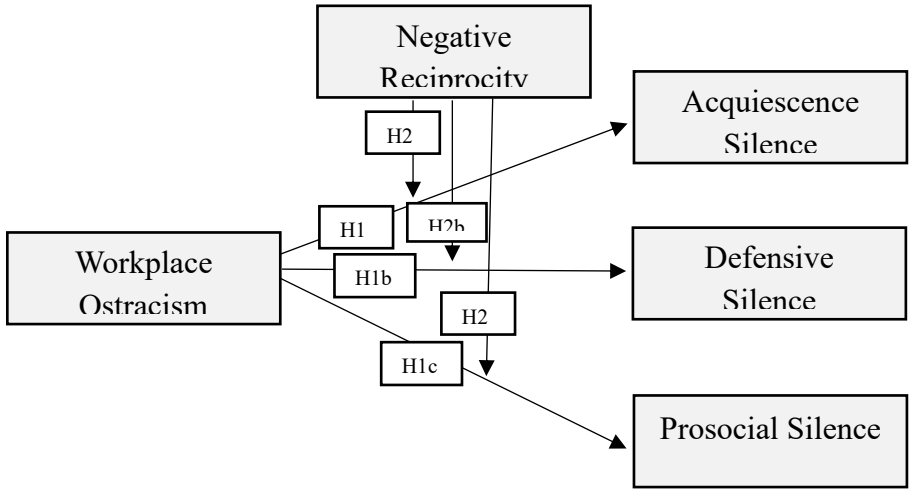

Figure 1: Hypothesized Research Model

Literature review

Employee silence

Employee silence is a significant topic in organizational behavior (Yao et al., 2022; Pinder & Harlos, 2001), recognized both as an individual-level behavior (Deniz et al., 2013) and a collective organizational phenomenon, such as group silence (Chou & Chang, 2020). Our focus is on individual employees, particularly their underlying motives for choosing silence. Although silence (the intentional withholding of ideas) and voice (the expression of ideas) are often viewed as opposites, both behaviors are complex and multidimensional (Shahjehan & Yasir, 2016). Drawing on Dyne et al. (2003), this study highlights key distinctions between the two. First, silence and voice arise from different motivations. Silence involves deliberately withholding ideas, information, or opinions, often driven by a desire to avoid personal consequences, discomfort, or defensive reactions from others. In contrast, voice is a prosocial behavior motivated by the intent to improve work through constructive expression (Dyne et al., 2003).

Second, silence and voice are phenomenologically distinct (Liu et al., 2023). For instance, non-communication stemming from a lack of ideas differs phenomenologically from the deliberate withholding of ideas, which often reflects considerations of voice opportunity and psychological safety (Zou et al., 2025). Third, the theoretical frameworks for silence and voice diverge in their antecedents and consequences (Sherf et al., 2021). While a proactive personality tends to drive greater voice behavior, as individuals actively seek to improve situations, it plays a lesser role in explaining silence. As noted by Osei et al. (2022), silence is more closely tied to voice opportunities than to the

abundance of ideas an individual holds. Fourth, treating silence as a distinct workplace phenomenon, rather than merely the absence of voice, enables a deeper understanding of its boundary conditions and workplace barriers. For example, promoting organizational learning requires managers not only to encourage employee voice but also to identify and address the factors that suppress it (Azevedo et al., 2021).

Dyne et al. (2003) posit that employee silence comprises three dimensions: acquiescence silence, defensive silence, and prosocial silence. Acquiescence silence, characterized by the deliberate withholding of pertinent ideas, information, or opinions, stems from a sense of resignation, reflecting individuals who are "fundamentally disengaged" and unwilling to exert effort to change or voice their views. In contrast, defensive silence involves withholding relevant input out of fear and self-protection (Dyne et al., 2003), representing a conscious effort to avoid external threats (Brinsfield, 2013). Prosocial silence, however, arises from altruism or cooperation, where individuals intentionally refrain from sharing work-related thoughts to benefit others or the organization (Dyne et al., 2003); this behavior is forward-thinking, prioritizing collective welfare over self-expression.

Workplace ostracism

Numerous studies have identified factors that trigger employee silence, such as autonomy and psychological safety (Hao et al., 2022). However, interpersonal factors like workplace ostracism remain underexplored. Workplace ostracism occurs when colleagues ignore greetings, dismiss suggestions in meetings, or exclude coworkers from social events such as lunch (Robinson et al., 2013). While behaviors like being left out of lunch or corporate memos may seem trivial compared to overt workplace stressors (Yao et al., 2022), research consistently shows that their negative effects can surpass those of harassment and aggression (Li & Lin, 2024; Kim, 2024).

As a form of emotional abuse, workplace ostracism can originate from multiple sources within an organization. Individuals may face exclusion from colleagues, subordinates, supervisors, or even customers (Scott, 2021). Perceptions of ostracism differ widely: some may interpret a missed lunch invitation as intentional exclusion, while others may attribute it to oversight (Robinson et al., 2013). Regardless of intent, those who experience ostracism often describe it as painful, distressing, and deeply unpleasant (Bernstein & Claypool, 2012).

Workplace ostracism is not only physically draining but also psychologically distressing. It can reduce organizational citizenship behaviors (Gogia et al., 2024), undermine job satisfaction and commitment (Wang et al., 2021; Manninen et al., 2024), and impair service recovery performance (Paşamehmetoğlu et al., 2022). Studies have also examined its negative impact on employee interactions (Liu et al., 2023; Li et al., 2025). For instance, Hua et al. (2023) found a strong link between workplace ostracism

and rising interpersonal deviance, while Shankar et al. (2024) linked it to counterproductive work behavior.

Workplace ostracism and employee silence

Drawing on COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), we argue that workplace ostracism and employee silence stem from employees' conscious choice to remain silent, even when they possess valuable insights, due to perceived risks and resource depletion. Speaking up may entail significant costs, as both generating ideas and managing subsequent disputes can drain physical, emotional, and cognitive resources (Yao et al., 2022). Burris (2012) further emphasizes the dangers of voicing dissent, particularly when it threatens the status quo, as individuals may be labeled as troublemakers and face negative repercussions. Similarly, Travis et al. (2011) found that vocal employees risk losing social support if their opinions provoke peer disapproval. When employees doubt their ideas will receive a favorable response, the likelihood of resource loss from speaking up increases substantially (Dyne et al., 2003).

While prior research links silence to stress and strain (Schlosser & Zolin, 2012; Jahanzeb & Fatima, 2018), this relationship is particularly detrimental in collectivistic, high-power distance cultures (Yao et al., 2022). In such contexts, cultural norms emphasize hierarchical respect, discouraging employee voice, especially since personal relationships hold significant importance (Daniels & Greguras, 2014). Studies consistently indicate that employees often withhold suggestions to avoid appearing confrontational or challenging their supervisors' authority (Knoll et al., 2021). Instead, they resort to silence as a means of preserving the status quo (Daniels & Greguras, 2014). When workplace ostracism occurs, these dynamics can intensify self-defeating behaviors, further exacerbating psychological stress.

Silence serves as a coping mechanism for individuals, adopted either when they perceive speaking up as futile, leading them to withhold ideas and suggestions (Fernando & Prasad, 2019), or when they fear negative personal consequences, prompting them to disengage and suppress critical organizational information (Chenji & Sode, 2019). Ostracized employees, feeling powerless, often resort to acquiescence silence as a form of disengagement, seeking to avoid retaliatory actions (Fernando & Prasad, 2019). Similarly, Khalid et al. (2020) found that workplace ostracism is positively linked to defensive silence. Since defensive silence stems from fear of external threats, ostracized employees anticipate adverse outcomes if they speak out against their exclusion (Chenji & Sode, 2019; Kiewitz et al., 2016). In high-power distance cultures, employees frequently perceive voice as risky and costly, leading them to adopt defensive silence as a means of self-protection.

Building on these arguments, we argue that workplace ostracism elicits acquiescence and defensive silence. However, we contend that prosocial silence represents an exception, as it is associated with positive, other-oriented emotions (Dyne et al., 2003). Ostracized employees are unlikely to engage in

prosocial silence, which stems from altruistic motivations. This reasoning is supported by Gouldner's (1960) norms of reciprocity, which posit that individuals tend to reciprocate the treatment they receive, fostering positive exchanges when treated favorably (Aggarwal & Larrick, 2012). When employees experience workplace ostracism as harmful interpersonal mistreatment, they are more inclined to respond with disengagement behaviors like acquiescence or defensive silence (Jahanzeb & Fatima, 2018; Chenji & Sode, 2019). This rationale supports our prediction that prosocial silence, being cooperatively motivated, will show no significant relationship with workplace ostracism. Based on this reasoning, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1a: There will be a positive relationship between workplace ostracism and acquiescence silence

H1b: There will be a positive relationship between workplace ostracism and defensive silence

H1c: There will be no significant relationship between workplace ostracism and prosocial silence

The moderate role of NRBs

The concept of reciprocity is crucial for understanding the relationship between workplace ostracism and employee silence. As defined by Gouldner (1960), reciprocity involves the mutual exchange of goods and services in a way that benefits both parties. It serves as a key driver of social exchange and reinforces the stability of the social system (Daspit et al., 2016). Reciprocity is a universal principle that transcends cultural boundaries and manifests in two forms: positive reciprocity, which reflects a humane response to kindness, and negative reciprocity, which signifies self-serving retaliation against perceived mistreatment (Falk & Fischbacher, 2006). Focusing on negative interpersonal experiences, this study examines NRBs to explore the emergence of employee silence, a detrimental workplace phenomenon. Extant research links NRBs to the development of unethical employee behavior (Greco et al., 2019; Meier & Spector, 2013), highlighting its relevance in organizational contexts.

The NRBs posit that individuals tend to respond to negative treatment with comparable negativity (Greco et al., 2019). Those with strong NRBs are more likely to perceive negative interpersonal cues and engage in self-serving behaviors (Liu et al., 2023). When ostracized, these individuals often exhibit heightened behavioral and psychological reactions, such as reduced job satisfaction, a greater inclination toward retaliation, and the onset of negative emotions (Poon & Wong, 2019). These reactions may lead them to respond with silence (Yao et al., 2022). Faldetta (2021) observed that individuals with high NRBs are more prone to direct retaliation when mistreated. In contrast, in non-Western cultures, where voicing concerns carries risks and may be deemed inappropriate (Daniels & Greguras, 2014), research indicates that NRBs, including retaliation for interpersonal mistreatment, often manifest in covert and indirect ways (Lee & Lee, 2024).

This aligns with COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which posits that in the absence of persistent threats, individuals accumulate resources to build resilience against future challenges. However, when faced with chronic stressors such as workplace ostracism, people tend to focus on protecting their existing resources, often adopting passive and defensive behaviors (Robinson et al., 2013). Consequently, those with a high NRBs frequently remain silent, even when their input or suggestions could benefit others or the organization (Yao et al., 2022). Their deliberate silence serves as a form of retaliation to vent negative emotions and regain a sense of control (Daniels & Greguras, 2014). Thus, they prioritize self-interest over fostering interpersonal harmony (Henle et al., 2023).

NRBs influence both acquiescence silence and defensive silence. For instance, acquiescence silence reflects a form of disengagement from work (Jahanzeb & Fatima, 2018). Following reciprocity norms, employees often respond to negative treatment with "tit-for-tat" behavior (Chenji & Sode, 2019). Workplace ostracism can lead employees to disengage as a coping strategy (Fernando & Prasad, 2019). Similarly, defensive silence is a proactive, strategic response where individuals deliberately withhold ideas or opinions. They view this as an effective way to protect themselves, particularly when facing ostracism (Dyne et al., 2003).

On the other hand, people with low NRBs tend to act altruistically, aiming to curry favor with supervisors and avoid the stress and conflict that ostracism might bring (Zollo et al., 2022). Even when ostracized, these individuals are inclined to react more constructively compared to those with high NRBs. This is supported by empirical findings; for example, Zhao et al. (2016) showed that the positive association between workplace ostracism and knowledge hiding was not moderated by NRBs among individuals with low NRBs, suggesting their tendency to avoid retaliatory behaviors. Consequently, they are less likely to withhold pertinent information or ideas that could prove advantageous to others or the organization (Yao et al., 2022).

We predict that workplace ostracism will be positively related to both acquiescence silence and defensive silence, with NRBs moderating these relationships. We hypothesize that NRBs do not moderate the relationship between workplace ostracism and prosocial silence. Thus, we put forth the following hypotheses:

H2a: NRBs strengthen the positive association between workplace ostracism and acquiescence silence, particularly among employees who exhibit high levels of negative reciprocity.

H2b: NRBs strengthen the positive association between workplace ostracism and defensive silence, particularly among employees who exhibit high levels of negative reciprocity.

H2c: The relationship between workplace ostracism and prosocial silence is not moderated by NRBs.

Methods

Sample and procedure

We collected time-lagged data from employees in apparel organizations in Sri Lanka's Northern Province. Apparel employees are highly susceptible to ostracism due to the industry's high-pressure, hierarchical, and interdependent work environment, where exclusion can disrupt productivity and morale (Jayaratne, 2019). The repetitive nature of garment work may further intensify ostracism's psychological effects, potentially increasing employee silence as a coping response. Our sample selection thus provides a meaningful context for examining these dynamics.

Data were collected from employees across five apparel organizations, representing diverse roles such as sewing machine operators, cutters, quality checkers, and various support staff, all from the lower-level workforce. After obtaining consent from the HR department, participants were selected using convenience sampling through workplace interactions. Given the sensitive nature of topics like workplace ostracism, employee silence, and NRBs, convenience sampling via direct workplace interactions was a practical approach. This method facilitated access to participants who might otherwise be reluctant to discuss such potentially stigmatizing experiences (Etikan et al., 2016).

A standardized protocol was followed: each participant received a package containing a cover letter outlining the study objectives, a questionnaire, a confidentiality agreement, and a return envelope. Completed surveys were returned to the HR departments for later retrieval. The survey items were originally developed in English and then back-translated into Tamil (Perrewé et al., 2002). To ensure clarity and participant understanding, a preliminary study was conducted with 20 employees. Based on the findings, some questions were refined and adjusted.

At Time 1, we distributed 326 questionnaires and collected 272 responses, achieving a strong 83% response rate. The survey measured workplace ostracism, NRBs, and demographic details such as age, gender, education, and employment tenure. To ensure accurate data linkage across both waves, we used a unique participant-generated key. Participants created this key by following survey instructions, such as combining their initials with their birth month and date. This method allowed us to reliably match responses from different collection points.

A three-week interval between data collection waves was implemented to reduce potential biases like illusory correlation and consistency motifs (Peng, 2013). Research suggests workplace ostracism often provokes immediate behavioral responses (Ren et al., 2018). Three weeks later, at Time 2, we recontacted the same 272 participants to gather data on employee silence, securing 241 responses and a respectable 88% response rate.

Out of the 241 final participants, 61% were female and 39% were male. The average age of respondents was 30.2 years (SD = 5.4), and their average organizational tenure was 5.7 years (SD = 3.1). In terms of educational qualifications, 47% had completed the G.C.E. Ordinary Level, 24% the G.C.E. Advanced Level, and 29% held vocational or diploma-level qualifications. Regarding marital status, 55% of the participants were single, and 45% were married. Participants represented a range of occupational roles within the apparel sector, including sewing machine operators (43%), cutters (18%), quality checkers (16%), and support staff such as helpers, ironers, and maintenance workers (23%). All participants were members of the lower-level workforce.

Measures

To assess the study variables, we employed established measures, with responses recorded on a five-point rating scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

Workplace ostracism

This variable was measured using a 10-item scale developed by Ferris et al. (2008). A sample item is "others at work did not invite you or ask if you wanted anything when they went out for a coffee break." The scale demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.93).

NRBs

NRBs was assessed using a seven-item scale from Wu et al. (2006). An example item is, "I have the impression that my organization is up to something that could hurt me." The scale showed high internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.98).

Employee silence

We evaluated employee silence using a 15-item scale developed by Dyne et al. (2003). The scale included three constructs: acquiescence silence, defensive silence, and prosocial silence, each measured with five items. Sample items were: "I am unwilling to speak up with suggestions for change because I am disengaged", "I do not speak up and suggest ideas for change, based on fear", and "I protect proprietary information in order to benefit the organization". The original items were adapted by

replacing 'this employee' with 'I'. The Cronbach's alpha values for the constructs were 0.76, 0.91, and 0.802, respectively.

Control variables

We controlled for participants' gender, age, organizational tenure, marital status, and occupational roles, as these demographic factors may influence workplace perceptions (Weng et al., 2020; Khalid et al., 2018). Gender was coded as a binary variable (0 = female, 1 = male), while marital status was treated as a categorical variable (1 = single, 2 = married, 3 = divorced). Occupational role was coded as a nominal variable: software development = 1, network administration = 2, quality assurance = 3, cybersecurity = 4, and database management = 5. Age and tenure were measured in years.

Analysis

To test the proposed hypotheses, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses using SPSS 25.0.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics, Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	Workplace Ostracism	Acquiescence Silence	Defensive Silence	Prosocial Silence	NRBs
Workplace Ostracism	3.45	0.82	1				
Acquiescence Silence	3.12	0.76	.46**	1			
Defensive Silence	3.33	0.79	.51**	.53**	1		
Prosocial Silence	3.68	0.81	.07	.14	.11	1	
NRBs	3.49	0.88	.42**	.47**	.50**	.09	1

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation coefficients for the study variables. As shown, workplace ostracism was positively and significantly correlated with both acquiescence silence ($r = .46$, $p < .01$) and defensive silence ($r = .51$, $p < .01$), suggesting that employees who experience exclusion or social rejection at work are more likely to withhold input either due to

disengagement or fear of negative consequences. In contrast, the correlation between workplace ostracism and prosocial silence was not significant (r = .07, ns), indicating that ostracism does not influence silence driven by altruistic or cooperative motives. NRBs was moderately and positively associated with workplace ostracism (r = .42, p < .01), acquiescence silence (r = .47, p < .01), and defensive silence (r = .50, p < .01), suggesting that employees who endorse retaliatory norms are more likely to respond to ostracism by withdrawing their input. Notably, NRBs showed no significant correlation with prosocial silence (r = .09, ns). These patterns provide initial support for the hypothesized relationships and justify further analysis using moderation models.

Table 2: Regression Results – Main and Moderation Effects

Variables	**Predictor**	**B**	**SE**	**β**	**t**	**p**
Acquiescence Silence	Workplace Ostracism (WO)	0.48	0.07	0.46	6.86	< .001
	Workplace Ostracism × NRBs	0.21	0.06	0.19	3.50	< .01
Defensive Silence	Workplace Ostracism	0.52	0.06	0.49	8.67	< .001
	Workplace Ostracism × NRBs	0.25	0.07	0.22	3.57	< .001
Prosocial Silence	Workplace Ostracism	0.05	0.06	0.04	0.83	0.409
	Workplace Ostracism × NRBs	0.03	0.05	0.02	0.60	0.549

Discussion

Using a time-lagged design, this study examined the conditions under which ostracized employees in apparel companies exhibit disengaged behaviors, such as employee silence. Consistent with our hypotheses, workplace ostracism increased acquiescence silence and defensive silence but showed no significant effect on prosocial silence. Moreover, NRBs strengthened the link between workplace ostracism and both acquiescence silence and defensive silence, though its moderating role was absent in the case of prosocial silence.

Although employee silence is a common organizational phenomenon (Yao et al., 2022), existing research still lacks a comprehensive understanding of its drivers. To address this gap, our study investigates workplace ostracism (Hitlan et al., 2006) as an interpersonal antecedent of employee silence in apparel organizations. Further, it introduces NRBs as a moderating variable, a previously underexplored factor that helps explain the relationship between workplace ostracism and employee silence. By integrating NRBs as an intervening variable, this study provides important theoretical and practical implications.

Our results strongly support the proposed theoretical framework. Specifically, workplace ostracism was shown to increase employee silence, with NRBs acting as moderators. This relationship holds for both acquiescence silence and defensive silence. When NRBs is high, there is a strong positive correlation between workplace ostracism and employee silence, whereas the association weakens as NRBs decrease. However, NRBs do not influence the link between workplace ostracism and prosocial silence. Unlike acquiescence and defensive silence, prosocial silence stems from altruistic motives to benefit colleagues or the organization. Since workplace ostracism is a negative behavior, it tends to trigger counterproductive employee silence rather than prosocial silence, which is driven by cooperation rather than retaliation. Thus, employees may engage in prosocial silence primarily to support their peers.

Theoretical implications

This study makes several key contributions to the existing literature. First, it investigates how workplace ostracism influences employee silence among employees in Sri Lanka's apparel sector. Research on the interpersonal antecedents of employee silence remains limited, particularly in non-Western cultural contexts (McKearney et al., 2023). By examining workplace ostracism, a relatively understudied factor in Sri Lanka, this study enhances scholarly understanding of the interpersonal drivers of employee silence.

Previous research has explored the relationship between workplace ostracism and employee silence, but these studies were limited to examining only one dimension of silence. For example, Khalid et al. (2020) studied defensive silence, while Imran et al. (2023) focused on acquiescent silence. Although their findings were insightful, a notable gap remains in understanding how workplace ostracism affects different forms of employee silence, including acquiescent, defensive, and prosocial silence. This study addresses this gap by examining multiple dimensions of silence, offering a more comprehensive perspective.

This study provides new insights into the contexts in which counterproductive work behaviors emerge. Our findings support the hypothesis that NRBs influence the outcomes experienced by ostracized employees. In response to workplace ostracism, they exhibit disengaged behaviors such as employee silence. This aligns with Koay et al.'s (2022) findings, which suggest that individuals with strong NRBs are more likely to engage in cyberloafing when facing abusive supervision. Further reinforcing NRBs' moderating role, Zhao et al. (2016) demonstrate their significant effect on the relationship between workplace ostracism and knowledge hiding. Building on NRBs' theory, we argue that workplace ostracism elicits negative behavioral responses, which may manifest as counterproductive work behaviors, including employee silence. These results validate our theoretical framework.

Drawing on COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), our findings indicate that employees subjected to workplace ostracism often withhold ideas or information due to perceived risks and potential costs (Chenji & Sode, 2019). In collectivist cultures such as Sri Lanka, an individual's identity is deeply tied to their membership in collective groups, including family and workplace (Wickramasinghe & Wickramasinghe, 2017). Consequently, ostracized employees in such cultures tend to avoid direct confrontation, unlike in individualist cultures where social exclusion may provoke retaliatory ostracism (Daniels & Greguras, 2014). Building on these insights, we propose that employees perceive ostracism as an interpersonal stressor. Thus, even when possessing valuable knowledge, ostracized employees may opt for silence, both as a means of coping with negative emotions and as a subtle strategy to maintain interpersonal harmony.

Second, beyond examining the direct effect of workplace ostracism on employee silence, this study also explored contextual factors to' understand how NRBs moderate this relationship (Yao et al., 2022). By incorporating NRBs as a moderating variable, the research provides deeper insight into why and when ostracized employees choose silence. The findings reveal that NRBs influences the conditions under which ostracized employees' resort to silence, supporting the hypothesis that NRBs strengthen the positive link between workplace ostracism and employee silence. Specifically, ostracized employees with high NRBs were more likely to exhibit silence, particularly in the forms of acquiescence and defensive silence. Conversely, when NRBs' levels were low, the relationship between ostracism and silence weakened. This suggests that high NRBs justify retaliatory behavior, such as withholding valuable input, whereas low NRBs encourage self-sacrificing and benevolent actions, reducing the tendency toward retaliation.

Third, the study's findings offer new insights that expand the current literature on employee silence. Notably, most prior research has conceptualized silence as a unidimensional construct. While the inclusion of prosocial silence, a positive social behavior, into the broader framework of employee silence aligns with this unidimensional perspective (e.g., Wang et al., 2020), this study reveals an unexpected nuance. Workplace ostracism, despite being a negative work behavior, was found to have an insignificant relationship with prosocial silence. These finding challenges conventional assumptions and underscores the need for a multidimensional approach to studying silence. Thus, the study's unique examination of interpersonal antecedents of silence and their varying effects across silence types represents a significant advancement in the existing literature.

Practical implications

This study offers key practical implications, emphasizing the significant impact of perceived workplace ostracism on employee silence. To address this, apparel companies should actively reduce workplace ostracism by fostering a culture of openness, transparency, and fair competition, while educating employees about its harmful effects (Yao et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2013). Organizations should also employ effective leadership to cultivate an inclusive environment and enhance group cohesion through structured team activities (Robinson & Schabram, 2019). However, obstacles like inadequate transparency, resource constraints, and communication gaps may impede progress. To counter these challenges, companies can implement complaint mechanisms to offer psychological support and guidance for affected employees (Mattar et al., 2025).

Second, the study reveals that individuals with low political skills or limited organizational socialization are more vulnerable to workplace ostracism (Wu et al., 2012). While complete eradication of ostracism is impractical, indirect approaches can minimize its occurrence. Managers should focus on delivering targeted training and counseling to improve employees' political skills. Effective methods may include critique sessions, behavioral modeling, video-based role-playing, and drama exercises (Yao et al., 2022). By equipping employees with these skills, organizations can reduce their susceptibility to ostracism.

Third, the research highlights that NRBs intensify the relationship between workplace ostracism and employee silence. This effect is stronger when NRBs are high and weaker when NRBs are low. To counteract this tendency, apparel firms should integrate NRBs into their strategies. During hiring, managers could evaluate candidates' NRBs using scenario simulations or questionnaires. Even if high-NRBs candidates are hired, organizations can offer specialized training to boost moral self-regulation. Techniques like clarity-seeking, forgiveness-seeking, and mindfulness can help employees manage ostracism's negative impacts. Supporting this, Shinde and Garg (2025) found mindfulness aids

coping by fostering present-moment focus. Since mindfulness is a critical skill, firms should implement programs like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) to cultivate it (Yao et al., 2022).

Limitations and future research

While this study contributes to the existing literature, it has certain limitations. First, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce common method variance (CMV), potentially influencing the results. Although measures such as using validated scales and ensuring participant confidentiality were implemented to mitigate CMV (Podsakoff et al., 2003), future research could strengthen the findings by adopting a multisource, longitudinal design.

The study's generalizability may be limited because the data was collected in a collectivist, high-power distance culture, where voicing concerns may be perceived as inappropriate. In such contexts, silence might be a more effective strategy for employees to retain supervisor support. Rather than openly retaliating against workplace ostracism, employees in collectivist cultures may exhibit disengagement or indirect mistreatment to maintain interpersonal harmony (Daniels & Greguras, 2014). In contrast, employees in individualistic cultures might respond with direct retaliation, differing from the passive reactions observed in high-power distance settings.

Third, the findings highlight the critical moderating role of NRBs in the relationship between workplace ostracism and employee silence. This suggests NRBs are a key factor for future research exploring the relationship between silence and other workplace mistreatments, such as supervisors' negative affect (Wu et al., 2014), abusive supervision (Faldetta, 2021), and perceived organizational politics (Bahadır et al., 2024). While workplace ostracism may be inevitable, emotional intelligence, as a self-regulatory mechanism, could help buffer its negative effects (Imran et al., 2024). Future studies could examine how emotional intelligence functions as a coping tool in such contexts. Additionally, while self-rated measures were used, this approach may have exacerbated single-source bias. To enhance generalizability, future research should incorporate multi-source evaluations.

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