Employees' self-esteem in psychological contract: workplace ostracism and counterproductive behavior

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Abstract

Purpose – Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) has grown into a significant problem in the tourism industry, for both individual employees and organizations. Employees who feel ostracized in their workplace often engage in negative and disruptive behaviors. The purpose of this study is to explore the psychological mechanism between workplace ostracism and CWB among tourism employees.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on psychological contract theory and social cognitive theory, the study proposed a research framework to explain tourism employees' counterproductive behavior. Data were collected from 228 hotel employees at two time points in Huangshan, China. Hierarchical regression and SPSS-PROCESS Macro were used to test all the hypotheses.

Findings – Findings show that workplace ostracism significantly increases employee CWB, mediated by psychological contract violation. Workplace ostracism increases perceptions of psychological contract violation when employee self-esteem is higher. The mediating effect of psychological contract violation is also moderated by self-esteem.

Originality/value – Using the framework of psychological contract theory and social cognitive theory, the authors advance the organizational behavior literature in the tourism field. The authors contextualize the uniqueness of Chinese workplace behavior and highlight the need to understand ''losing face (mianzi) view'' in workplace relationships. This research contributes to better understanding the dark side of tourism workplace behavior by examining the effects of psychological contract violation and employee's self-esteem on workplace ostracism and CWB.

Keywords Tourism employees, Workplace ostracism, Psychological contract violation, Counterproductive work behavior (CWB), Self-esteem

Paper type Research paper

心理契约中的员工自尊:职场排斥与反生产行为

摘要

目的: 旅游业中的反生产行为（CWB）已经成为一个重要问题, 反生产行为对员工和组织都会产生影响。在工作场所感到被排斥的员工往往会从事消极和破坏性的行为。本文的目的是研究旅游业员工工作场所排斥与反生产行为之间的心理机制。

设计/方法: 基于心理契约理论和社会认知理论, 本研究提出了一个研究框架来解释旅游业员工的反生产行为发生机制。我们在中国黄山景区对228名酒店员工进行了两个时间点的问卷调查。采用分层回归和SPSS PROCESS Macro来测试所有假设。

结果: 结果表明 工作场所排斥显著增加员工反生产行为, 心理契约违背在其中起着中介作用。当员工自尊心较高时, 职场排斥对心理契约违反的感知影响更强。心理契约违背的中介效应也受到自尊心的调节。

独创性/研究价值: 我们运用心理契约理论和社会认知理论的框架, 推动了旅游领域的组织行为研究进展。我们讨论了中国情境下职场行为的独特性, 并强调在职场关系中需要考虑‘面子观’’。我们通过展示心理契约违背和员工自尊心对工作场所排斥和反生产行为（CWB）的影响, 有助于更好地理解旅游工作场所行为的负面影响。

关键词 旅游业员工, 职场排斥, 心理契约违背, 反生产行为, 自尊

文章类型 研究型论文

Autoestima de los empleados en el contrato psicológico: ostracismo en el lugar de trabajo y comportamiento contraproducente

Resumen

Propósito: *El comportamiento laboral contraproducente (CLC) en la industria turística se ha convertido en un problema significativo tanto para los empleados individuales como para las organizaciones. Los empleados que se sienten marginados en su lugar de trabajo suelen participar en comportamientos negativos y disruptivos. El objetivo de este trabajo es examinar los efectos de la violación del contrato psicológico y la autoestima del empleado en el ostracismo en el lugar de trabajo y en el comportamiento laboral contraproducente CLC y agregar nuevos conocimientos para comprender mejor el lado oscuro del comportamiento laboral turístico.*

Diseño/metodología/enfoque: *Realizamos una encuesta de cuestionario a 228 empleados de hotel en dos momentos en Huangshan, China. Se utilizaron la regresión jerárquica y el SPSS PROCESS Macro para probar todas las hipótesis.*

Resultados: *Los resultados muestran que 1) el ostracismo en el lugar de trabajo aumenta significativamente la CLC de los empleados. 2) La violación psicológica del contrato juega un papel mediador entre el ostracismo en el lugar de trabajo y CLC. 3) El ostracismo en el lugar de trabajo aumenta las percepciones de violación psicológica del contrato cuando la autoestima de los empleados es mayor. 4) El efecto mediador de la violación psicológica del contrato también es moderado por la autoestima.*

Originalidad/valor: *Utilizando el marco de la teoría del contrato psicológico y la teoría cognitiva social, avanzamos en la literatura del comportamiento organizacional en el campo del turismo. Contextualizamos la singularidad del comportamiento en el lugar de trabajo chino y destacamos la necesidad de comprender la 'pérdida de la visión de la cara (mianzi)' en las relaciones laborales. Esta investigación contribuye con nuevos conocimientos para comprender mejor el lado oscuro del comportamiento turístico en el lugar de trabajo al examinar los efectos de la violación psicológica del contrato y la autoestima de los empleados en el ostracismo en el lugar de trabajo.*

Palabras clave *Empleado turístico, Ostracismo en el lugar de trabajo, Violación del contrato psicológico, Comportamiento laboral contraproducente, Autoestima,*

Tipo de papel *Trabajo de investigación*

1. Introduction

Workplace ostracism involves employees feeling ignored or excluded at work (Ferris *et al.*, 2008) and is a significant problem for employee well-being and organizational performance. Workplace ostracism leads to employees' decline in well-being, negative attitudes and behaviors, such as emotional exhaustion, knowledge hiding and disengagement (Haldorai *et al.*, 2020; Qian *et al.*, 2017; Zhao *et al.*, 2016). While the extant literature is clear about the manifold negative impacts of workplace ostracism (Gürlek, 2021; Howard *et al.*, 2019; Singh and Srivastava, 2021), there has been limited recognition of how specific cultural contexts and individual personality characteristics may influence the effects of workplace ostracism. This research focuses on the workplaces in the Chinese tourism sector. In China, the responses of employees to workplace ostracism are somewhat different from responses that may occur in Western cultural contexts. Chinese workplace culture is typically guided by values and norms that stem from Confucian philosophy and shape relationships and social connections. Chinese employees tend to place a particularly high value on implicit psychological contracts and colleague relations (Hui *et al.*, 2004). Positive relationships are highly appreciated, and negative incidents can lead to more profound psychological issues (Yaakobi and Williams, 2016). Thus, this research argues that it is necessary to contextualize this cultural uniqueness and highlight the importance of "losing face (mianzi) view" in Chinese workplace behavior.

"Losing face" in workplace relationships, i.e. the cultural uniqueness "face (mianzi) view" of Chinese people (Peng and Tjosvold, 2011) may cause even more severe negative effects than in Western cultures. For this reason, feeling ostracized in a Chinese workplace context may threaten the mental health and well-being of employees even more strongly than in other cultures (Su *et al.*, 2021). Once individuals feel excluded, the compulsion to maintain their face often leads to the individual engaging in avoidance behavior as opposed to directly challenging the authority of those who are excluding them (Peng and Tjosvold, 2011). Further,

Chinese employees tend to be inclined to accommodate the situation, and research has shown that this often leads to a breach of their psychological contracts (Yaakobi and Williams, 2016; Yang *et al.*, 2020).

This research adopts a psychological contract and social cognition perspective to examine how workplace ostracism impacts on Chinese tourism employee behaviors and select the counterproductive workplace behavior (CWB) as the predicted variable. Psychological contract theory suggests that employees have inherent expectations that define their relationship with the employer (Jardat and Rozario, 1998). At the start of the role, employees form expectations and then assess how the organization fulfills this psychological contract over time; a breach of contract can significantly affect employee perceptions and impact the relationship in a negative way (Morrison and Robinson, 1997). Negative job experiences and the feeling of being ostracized by colleagues often cause employees to develop negative perceptions about the psychological contract (Howard *et al.*, 2019; Robinson, 1996), which can further lead to employees' CWB. Social cognitive theory suggests that the environment affects the shaping of individual characteristics, and individual characteristics can activate different responses in a specific environment (Bandura, 1986). On the one hand, the employees' self-esteem in China is highly related to "having face" (Kim *et al.*, 2009); that is, Chinese employees with high self-esteem will generate more implicit negative feelings when facing negative events to maintain their "face resources." On the other hand, individuals with high self-esteem will have higher expectations of their organizations, wherein the emergence of workplace ostracism may come as a particularly rude shock, shattering the psychological contract they believed they had struck with their organizations (Raja *et al.*, 2004). This line of argument leads us to speculate that self-esteem is an accelerator rather than an inhibitor of negative reactions by Chinese tourism employees. We propose that it might be an important boundary condition.

Our study is underpinned by two key questions:

Q1. In the Chinese tourism sector, does psychological contract violation play a mediating role between workplace ostracism and CWB?

Q2. Does high self-esteem moderate this relationship?

Existing causal studies on workplace ostracism and CWB suggest that it is imperative to explore the psychological mechanism between them. Our empirical study enriches knowledge about workplace ostracism in the tourism industry and demonstrates the applicability of psychological contract theory to this context. More importantly, given Chinese culture's heavy emphasis on "having face," we seek to explore how self-esteem, which is interlinked with "having face," plays a role in the responses of individuals to negative events. Our research results overturn the previous view of self-esteem as a positive factor that helps individuals to deal with challenges (Brown, 2010; Ford and Collins, 2010), reveal the dark side of self-esteem and enrich the knowledge in the field of self-esteem.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1 Psychological contract theory and social cognitive theory

This study adopts the psychological contract theory (Jardat and Rozario, 1998) to explain the relationship between workplace ostracism and employees' CWB. Psychological contract theory has been influenced by social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and is often used to understand workplace relationships (Kutaula *et al.*, 2020). Psychological contract theory holds that the relationship between the organization and employees is an exchange relationship and follows the principle of reciprocity (Kessler, 2013; Robinson, 1996). A psychological contract involves a set of beliefs about the responsibilities and obligations an employee holds between themselves and the organization based on their expectations and perceptions (Jardat and Rozario, 1998). When commencing their employment, employees

usually have a sense of obligation to the company (e.g. loyalty), as well as a set of expectations (e.g. promotion opportunities). The extent to which the organization fulfills the psychological contract can significantly affect employee perceptions of the exchange relationship (Morrison and Robinson, 1997).

Psychological contract theory also suggests that when an individual perceives that the organization has not fulfilled its obligations, the individual will feel that the psychological contract has been violated (Morrison and Robinson, 1997), which may lead to a series of negative outcomes, such as poor organizational commitment (Restubog et al., 2006), frequent deviant behavior (Griep and Vantilborgh, 2018) and high turnover rates (Karagonlar et al., 2016). Employees in the tourism industry are known to require higher levels of psychological capital to cope with various issues specific to work, such as high levels of emotional labor (Pizam, 2020). Employee efforts to cope with the stresses of their work inevitably involve some aspect of a psychological contract taking place, and thus, the theoretical framework of psychological contract is appropriate to the questions we seek to address.

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) can further explain the differential responses of employees with different characteristics in the Chinese context to workplace ostracism. The environment can shape the individual's cognition and behavior, and individuals can activate different responses to environments through their characteristics, such as personality and social role (Bandura, 1986). Thus, based on this perspective, we try to explain how individuals with different levels of self-esteem cope with workplace ostracism in the Chinese cultural environment that emphasizes relationship (guanxi), mianzi, Confusian value, etc.

2.2 Workplace ostracism and counterproductive work behavior

Workplace ostracism is "the extent to which an individual perceives being ignored or excluded by others in the workplace" (Ferris et al., 2008; p. 1348). Workplace ostracism often includes being deliberately ignored and being deliberately isolated by others. The relationship between workplace ostracism and CWB has been well-documented from different perspectives (Singh and Srivastava, 2021; Zhao et al., 2016). Examples of CWB include theft, sabotage, withdrawal and harassment (Gürlek, 2021; Spector et al., 2006). Based on the psychological contract theory, we suggest that when individuals face workplace ostracism, they will have negative reciprocal psychology toward organizations. Especially in the context of Chinese culture, which emphasizes "guanxi" (Chen and Bedford, 2021) and conflict avoidance (Peng and Tjosvold, 2011), individuals will silently deliver more retaliation to organizations since it can avoid direct interpersonal conflicts.

Thus, we hypothesize:

> *H1.* Workplace ostracism has a positive relationship with counterproductive work behaviors.

2.3 The mediating role of psychological contract violation

Psychological contract violation emphasizes the negative emotional experience, mainly involving anger and disappointment (Morrison and Robinson, 1997; Robinson and Morrison, 2000). Thus, once an employee perceives that the organization has failed to fulfill their expected obligations, they feel betrayed by their organization (Suazo, 2009; Yang, 2020) since the contract is violated; the employee's negative reaction will subsequently become an important driving factor for subsequent contingent behavior (Kessler, 2013; Yang et al., 2020). Some researchers have suggested that a friendly work environment promotes a sense of trust within employees, which facilitates communication between individuals and enhances the perception that the organization has fulfilled its part of the contract (Kutaula et al., 2020; Li et al., 2014). Conversely, workplace ostracism, which the employee may see as the organization's failure to sufficiently mitigate a negative work environment, represents

a breach of the tacit psychological contract and threatens the employee's sense of fulfillment. If individual employees feel that the reality of their work situation digresses too far from the terms of the psychological contract they have agreed to, they will feel that this agreement has been violated. This can lead to the following consequences in the exchange behind the contractual relationship: positive reciprocity behavior (i.e. organizational citizenship behavior) will decrease, and negative reciprocity behavior (i.e. service sabotage) will increase (Griep and Vantilborgh, 2018). Thus, we hypothesize:

> H2. Psychological contract violation plays a mediating role in the relationship between workplace ostracism and counterproductive work behaviors.

2.4 The moderating role of individual self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to an individual's psychological orientation of their own ability and value, which is a stable psychological trait (Rosenberg, 1965; Rosenberg et al., 1995). To maintain their positive self-construction, they will show a high degree of vigilance to ensure that they are treated fairly in the workplace and that their expectations are met in the exchange relationship with the organization (Raja et al., 2004). Linking the construct of self-esteem and psychological theory, it can be suggested that employees with high self-esteem enter the psychological contract with higher expectations toward their organization.

Yet, research has shown the formation of psychological contracts varies with the individual employee, and the formation process is regulated by individual and situational factors (Kessler, 2013; Montes et al., 2015). For example, an employee's level of self-esteem is one factor of an individual's psychological makeup, which may moderate the relationship between workplace ostracism and psychological contract violation. Some researchers suggest that high self-esteem, as a psychological resource, can help individuals resist the consequences of negative events (Brown, 2010; Lo Presti et al., 2018). While others argue that its value is limited and may even be a burden. Shih and Chuang (2012) show individuals with high self-esteem are more likely to attribute the failure to the organization or to others, rather than to themselves, when encountering negative feedback or events. Previous studies have indicated that individuals with high self-esteem are more likely to feel the violation of their psychological contract because of their need for a contractual relationship that provides equal returns and status (Raja et al., 2004). Moreover, individuals with high self-esteem are more sensitive in their responses to negative events and are more likely to produce extreme psychological reactions (Morrison and Robinson, 1997).

When contextualizing the effects for the Chinese hospitality workforce, the importance to the concept of "having face" (Peng and Tjosvold, 2011) might need to be considered, too. Due to the potential negative effects of self-esteem on workplace ostracism, and the subsequent declining workplace relationships, it can be assumed that there is an even higher impact and negative effect on the individual employee's well-being. These effects could then further exacerbate CWB and as well further threaten the "face resources" of Chinese employees (Su et al., 2021). Thus, we hypothesize:

> H3. Individual self-esteem positively moderates the relationship between workplace ostracism and psychological contract violation, such that the relationship is stronger when individual self-esteem is stronger.

According to the framework of constraint factors – psychological contract violation – negative behaviors (Kessler, 2013; Morrison and Robinson, 1997), this dynamic path would also be moderated by individual self-esteem. Based on the above, we propose a moderated mediation hypothesis (see Figure 1):

> H4. Individual self-esteem positively moderates the strength of the mediated relationship between workplace ostracism and counterproductive work behaviors via

Figure 1 Research model

Source: Figure by authors
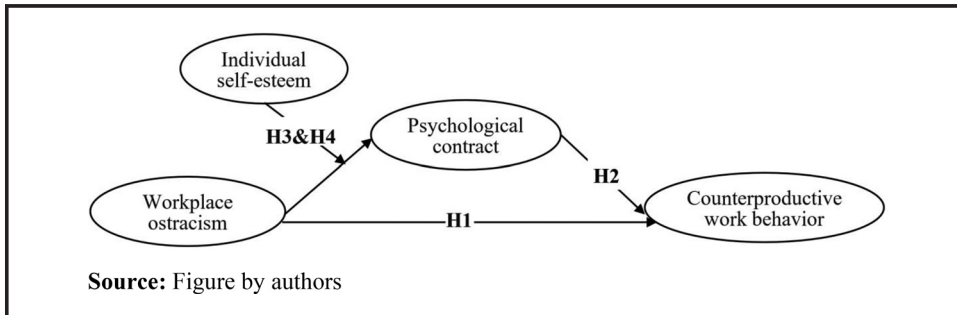
psychological contract violation, such that the relationship will be stronger when the individual self-esteem is stronger.

3. Method

3.1 Sample and procedures

The present study used the convenience sampling method. Huangshan Scenic Resort, a popular tourism destination in central China (Huangshan City), was selected as the case site for collecting data. With the assistance of the local tourism association, 13 hotel companies were contacted to seek permission for data collection, and all of them exhibited their inclination to take part in the survey on the condition of privacy. We collected data from front-line employees at two-time points from June to July 2020, with a one-month interval in between.

Choosing multiple time points of data collection is regarded to be conducive to reduce potential common method variance (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). At the first time point (T1), the participants completed measurements of workplace ostracism, individual self-esteem and provided their demographic information. At the second time point (T2), the participants reported on their experiences of psychological contract violation and CWB.

In total, 378 questionnaires at T1 and 254 questionnaires at T2 were completed. The match rate of the two-wave responses was 67.2%. After removing some incomplete samples from the T2 samples, the remaining 228 participants were adopted as final samples. Of the 228 participants, 43.42% were male; the average age was 40.65 years; the highest level of education of the majority of participants was high school (65.35%), followed by college degree (22.81%), bachelor degree (9.21%) and graduates (2.63%). Most participants had significant work experience in the tourism industry, i.e. 53.95% had 10 years or more, 20.61% between 6 and 9 years and 18.42% between 2 and 5 years of work experience.

3.2 Measures

We adopted mature scales and administered the survey in Chinese. Following the translation-back-translation procedure, we translated the original items into Chinese. Three tourism management experts were invited to evaluate the content validity of the scales. Referring to Schaffer and Riordan (2003), we conducted a pretest with 50 employees in the tourism industry, and the results showed that the scales had good reliability and content validity. All measurements used five-point Likert scales from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5) (see Table 1).

- *Workplace ostracism*. We adapted the ten-item scale developed by Ferris *et al.* (2008) to measure employees' perceptions of workplace ostracism. A sample item was "My co-workers/supervisors ignore me at work."

Table 1 Measurements and CFA analysis (reliability and validity analysis)

Variable	Item	Loading	AVE	CR	Cronbach α
Workplace ostracism (WO)	WO1	0.78	0.72	0.96	0.96
	WO2	0.81			
	WO3	0.86			
	WO4	0.77			
	WO5	0.89			
	WO6	0.87			
	WO7	0.94			
	WO8	0.86			
	WO9	0.91			
	WO10	0.79			
Counterproductive work behavior (CWB)	CWB1	0.81	0.74	0.97	0.96
	CWB2	0.66			
	CWB3	0.77			
	CWB4	0.85			
	CWB5	0.95			
	CWB6	0.95			
	CWB7	0.93			
	CWB8	0.86			
	CWB9	0.84			
	CWB10	0.96			
Psychological contract violation (PCV)	PCV1	0.91	0.86	0.96	0.96
	PCV2	0.95			
	PCV3	0.93			
	PCV4	0.91			
Individual self-esteem (IS)	IS1	0.77	0.63	0.89	0.89
	IS2	0.86			
	IS3	0.82			
	IS4	0.74			
	IS5	0.77			

Source: Table by authors

- *Individual self-esteem.* We adapted the five-item scale from Rosenberg (1965) to measure employees' individual self-esteem. Sample items from this scale include "I feel that I have a number of good qualities."

- *Psychological contract violation.* We adapted the four-item scale developed by Robinson and Morrison (2000), which includes sample items such as "I feel a great deal of anger toward my organization."

- *CWB.* We adapted the ten-item scale developed by Spector *et al.* (2006) to measure employees' CWB. A sample item from this scale is "Purposely wasted your employer's materials/supplies."

- *Control variables.* Previous studies have argued that demographic variables may affect the outcome variables together with workplace ostracism (Yang and Treadway, 2016; Zhao *et al.*, 2013). Age, gender, education and work experience are selected as control variables.

4. Results

4.1 Reliability and validity

As shown in Table 1, the Cronbach α values of all variables range from 0.89 to 0.96, which indicates that they have a high reliability. CFA results showed factor loadings of the main variables are ideal (>0.5), and no items were deleted. All *CR*s ranged from 0.89 to 0.97, and *AVE*s ranged from 0.63 to 0.86, meeting the requirement that *CR* and Cronbach α values exceed 0.7 thresholds (Hair *et al.*, 2013; Nunally, 1978) and *AVE*s were greater than

0.5 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). As each AVE square root was higher than other variables' correlations (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), and the correlation matrix showed that the highest correlation coefficient among the variables is 0.47 (see Table 2), which is far lower than 0.85 (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). This indicates good discriminant validity.

CFA was conducted to evaluate the discriminant validity and construct validity of the main variables in this study. The results show that the four-factor measurement model has a good fit ($\chi^2_{(373)}$ = 815.29; df = 373; CFI = 0.94; TLI = 0.93; $RMSEA$ = 0.07), indicating that there is a good discriminant validity among the variables. We also conducted Harman's test, and the results showed that the principal factor explained only 23.26% of the variance, meeting the standard requirement of being below the 30% threshold (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Our checks indicated that common method variance is not a serious threat to this study.

4.2 The main effect and mediating effect

H1 proposed that workplace ostracism had a positive impact on CWB. Hierarchical regression was conducted to test *H1*. As shown in Table 3, workplace ostracism had a significant positive impact on CWB (M_5, β = 0.38, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, *H1* was supported.

H2 proposed that workplace ostracism affects CWB through psychological contract violation. Model 4 in SPSS-PROCESS Macro was selected, and bootstrapping was set to 5,000 (Hayes, 2013). The results showed that the confidence interval results of the psychological contract violation mediation path ($\beta_{\text{indirect effect}}$ = 0.07, $LLCI$ = 0.0014, $ULCI$ = 0.1361) did not contain 0, reaching a significant level. Combined with the above evidence, we conclude that *H2* is also supported, with psychological contract violation playing a partial mediating role.

4.3 The moderating effect and moderated mediation effect

H3 proposed that the level of an individual's self-esteem would moderate the relationship between workplace ostracism and psychological contract violation. As shown in Table 3, the interaction between workplace ostracism and individual self-esteem had a significantly positive impact on psychological contract violation (M_4, β = 0.28, $p < 0.01$). Moreover, we adopted the pick-a-point approach of Aiken and West (1991); that is, we divided the moderator into high and low groups of "mean value $\pm$ 1SD." Then simple slope analysis was used to further explain the relationship between workplace ostracism and psychological contract violation at different levels of self-esteem (mean value $\pm$ 1SD). As shown in Figure 2, among individuals with high self-esteem, workplace ostracism has a significant positive effect on psychological contract violation (β = 0.53, t = 5.90, $p < 0.001$). Among individuals with low

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and validities of constructs

Variables	Mean	Std.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	1.57	0.50								
2. Age	40.65	8.84	−0.28**							
3. Education	2.14	1.08	−0.00	−0.42**						
4. Experience	3.22	0.98	−0.12	0.44**	−0.07					
5. WO	1.66	0.82	−0.08	0.15*	−0.80	0.06	*0.85*			
6. IS	4.37	0.55	0.05	−0.05	0.03	0.12	−0.06	*0.79*		
7. PCV	1.97	1.04	−0.14*	0.07	−0.10	0.08	0.29**	−0.03	*0.93*	
8. CWB	1.27	0.61	−0.07	0.03	−0.02	0.03	0.51**	−0.00	0.47**	*0.86*

Notes: **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$; WO = workplace ostracism; IS = individual self-esteem; PCV = psychological contract violation; CWB = counterproductive work behavior. The italic numbers in the diagonal row are square roots of AVE
**Source:** Table by authors

Table 3 Results for hypotheses testing using hierarchical regression modeling

Predictive variables		PCV			CWB
	M_1	M_2	M_3	M_4	M_5
Independent variables					
WO		0.29**	0.29**	0.16*	0.38**
Moderator					
IS			−0.02	−0.01	
Interaction term					
WO*IS				0.28**	
Control variables					
Gender	−0.31*	−0.28*	−0.28*	−0.28*	−0.05
Age	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	−0.09	−0.01
Education	−0.12	−0.11	−0.11	−0.09	0.00
Work experience	0.08	0.08	0.08	0.09	0.01
R^2	0.04	0.11**	0.11	0.17**	0.26**
Adjusted R^2	0.02	0.09**	0.09	0.14**	0.25**
ΔR^2	0.04	0.77**	0.00	0.06**	0.26**
F	2.06	5.64**	4.69**	6.43**	15.78**
ΔF	2.06	19.28**	0.07	15.04**	77.44

Notes: $N = 228$; ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$; M = model; WO = workplace ostracism; IS = individual self-esteem; PCV = psychological contract violation; CWB = counterproductive work behavior
Source: Table by authors

Figure 2 Moderating effect of self-esteem

Source: Figure by authors
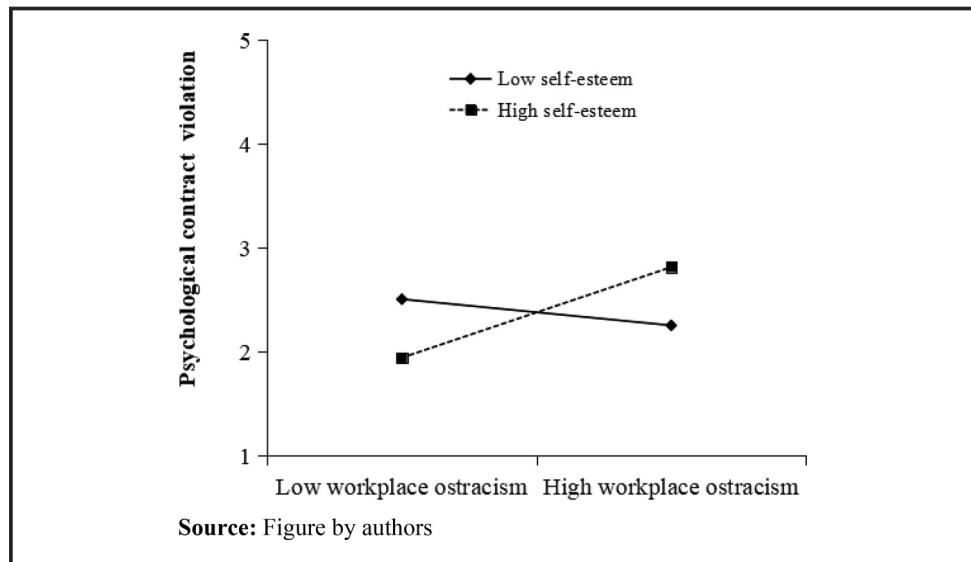
self-esteem, the effect of workplace ostracism on psychological contract violation was not significant ($\beta = -0.16$, $t = -1.01$, $p > 0.05$). Thus, *H3* was supported.

H4 proposed that individual self-esteem moderated the mediating strength of psychological contract violation. In accordance with the moderated mediation model analysis paradigm put forward by Edwards and Lambert (2007), Model 7 was conducted to run with bootstrapping set to 5,000. The results show that the mediating effects of psychological contract violation ($\beta_{\text{indirect effect}} = -0.01$, $LLCI = -0.0599$, $ULCI = 0.0440$, the confidence interval contained 0) do not reach a significant level in individuals with low self-esteem.

Conversely, among individuals with high self-esteem, the mediating effect ($\beta_{\text{indirect effect}}$ = 0.11, $LLCI$ = 0.0295, $ULCI$ = 0.1938, the confidence interval did not contain 0) reached a significant level. This led us to conclude that self-esteem levels moderate the mediation relationship of psychological contract violation between workplace ostracism and CWB. $H4$ was, therefore, supported.

5. Discussions and implications

5.1 General discussion

Adopting a psychological contract theory and social cognitive theory perspective, this paper examined the influencing factors of workplace ostracism on CWB in the Chinese tourism sector. Overall, the empirical evidence shows that workplace ostracism significantly increases employee CWB. We confirm that ostracism is also an important antecedent of CWB in the Chinese context. As a response to the negative experiences they had in the Chinese organization, employees, in turn, respond with negative behaviors toward that organization. This is the embodiment of the "negative reciprocity principle" in psychological contract theory (Montes *et al.*, 2015; Robinson, 1996) and is congruent with previous findings (Gürlek, 2021; Yang and Treadway, 2016; Zhao *et al.*, 2013). And the "interpersonal conflict avoidance" in the context of Chinese culture (Peng and Tjosvold, 2011) leads to negative organization-oriented behaviors in face of workplace ostracism, reflecting the view of environmental shaping behaviors in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986).

Further, this research suggests that workplace ostracism stimulates CWB through psychological contract violation. That is, the negative experience employees have had from being ostracized in the workplace interferes with their perception that the organization has fulfilled its part of the contract, leading to anger and disappointment on the part of the employee. Indeed, prior studies have confirmed that this negative psychological state is an important driving factor of deviant behaviors (Griep and Vantilborgh, 2018; Yang *et al.*, 2020). In the Chinese context, once workplace ostracism occurs, employees will form the mediating mechanism of psychological contract violation to act on CWB, which also reflects the cultural atmosphere of implicit social relations in China.

Finally, our results demonstrate that individual self-esteem positively moderates the effect between workplace ostracism and psychological contract violation. Also, individual self-esteem moderates the indirect effect of psychological contract violation. This is consistent with the conclusion that self-esteem is positively associated with "having face" (Kim *et al.*, 2009). This also reflects a situational particularity of this research. The dark side of self-esteem was explored in the context of Chinese workplace ostracism. Rather than being more resilient when experiencing workplace ostracism (Brown, 2010), employees with a high level of self-esteem are more likely to feel threatened by the potential loss of face when they are shunned by their peers and experience a deeper sense of betrayal, which, in turn, makes them more inclined to engage in negative behaviors.

5.2 Theoretical contribution

The theoretical contribution focuses on the following three aspects. First, this paper clarifies the intermediary mechanism between workplace ostracism and CWB in the context of the Chinese tourism workplace. Existing studies have explored the direct effects of workplace ostracism on CWB (Zhao *et al.*, 2013); few have approached this phenomenon to examine its internal mechanism through the lens of psychological contract theory. Further, we also contextualize the effects of workplace ostracism for Chinese workplaces given that they differ from Western cultural contexts (Yaakobi and Williams, 2016). This research emphasizes the importance of understanding the effects for employees who are working in a cultural context that attributes high value on relationships and implicit psychological contracts (Hui *et al.*, 2004) and where workplace ostracism poses a particular threat to the

employee's efforts to have and maintain "face" (Su *et al.*, 2021). The mediating role of implicit psychological contract is more typical in the context of Chinese culture (Hui *et al.*, 2004; Chen and Song, 2019). Our literature review revealed that workplace ostracism is the exclusionary behavior of several colleagues toward the shunned employee, which reflects the "individual-to-individual" relationship (Ferris *et al.*, 2008). Prior research also showed that psychological contract violation evokes negative emotions in the ostracized individual toward the organization, which reflects the "individual-to-organization" relationship (Huertas-Valdivia *et al.*, 2019). Our study shows how hostile treatment of colleagues gives rise to a negative attribution and behavioral response from individuals toward their organizations. The exploration of this mediation also enriches the existing empirical results of workplace ostracism.

Second, we identify the boundary conditions for the effect of workplace ostracism. Existing studies have tended to focus on the positive functions of self-esteem, serving as a psychological resource that buffers individuals in times of adversity (Brown, 2010; Ford and Collins, 2010). In this research, we examine the surprisingly detrimental dimension of high self-esteem when individuals seek to cope with workplace ostracism. This study is novel in using the lens of psychological contract theory and social cognitive theory to the Chinese tourism industry and in revealing that individuals with high levels of self-esteem engage in more detrimental behaviors than individuals with lower levels of self-esteem. This revelation may initially appear counter-intuitive, but it aligns with earlier research that suggests that those with high self-esteem have higher expectations of reciprocal contractual relations, with equal returns, and status (Raja *et al.*, 2004). These effects are particularly pronounced in a Chinese cultural context where the notion of "having face" (Peng and Tjosvold, 2011; Su *et al.*, 2021) is strongly emphasized. In the Chinese cultural context, this study found the dark side of individual self-esteem in workplace interaction, which is a contribution.

Third, this research tests and confirms the applicability of psychological contract theory in empirical studies of workplace ostracism in the tourism sector. Existing studies have explored workplace ostracism in the tourism sector from the perspectives of social exchange theory and affective event theory (Huertas-Valdivia *et al.*, 2019). This paper offers a new perspective on psychological contract theory. In developing our model and testing our hypothesis, we comprehensively explored the indirect effects of workplace ostracism and its boundary condition.

5.3 Practical implications

The study has several implications. First, to avoid the psychological and organizational harm caused by workplace ostracism, tourism managers could establish a healthy and positive workplace culture, such as encouraging employees to help each other and providing necessary organizational support. In addition, managers could encourage employees in the workplace to share experiences, become more familiar with each other, feel belonging within the team and develop individual and organizational resilience.

Second, we also suggest that managers need to pay attention to the level and fluctuation of psychological contract of employees. Although psychological contracts are implicit in nature and involve a range of expectations on the part of the employee. The rise and fall of psychological contracts can be reflected in observable work behavior, and it has a strong explanatory power for both organizational citizenship behaviors and CWB (Yang *et al.*, 2020). Managers could routinely engage in informal conversations to understand what employees really think since the relationship between the supervisor and the employee remains a key enhancer regarding engagement and employees in the tourism sector.

Finally, managers also need to be aware of the dark side of self-esteem in the Chinese workplace context. Our research shows that employees with high self-esteem are more sensitive to workplace ostracism. Although self-esteem is generally regarded as a positive

attribute in most situations, it can have a negative effect once implicit expectations are not met. Since individual status in the Chinese context is highly valued and expected by individuals with high self-esteem, when such individuals perceive themselves to be ostracized, managers would do well to find resolutions that do not further humiliate their employees (Brown, 2010; Rosenberg *et al.*, 1995). Managers need to be mindful of employees with high self-esteem and be attentive to their needs and expectations, such as establishing LMX relationships, home-work support and promotion needs.

5.4 Limitations and future directions

There are several limitations to our study, which offer potential directions for future research. First, although this paper adopts a two-stage questionnaire survey, the self-reported nature of the collected data precludes a definitive ruling out of common method variance. Future studies could improve on the strength of this paper's causal explanation by designing a longitudinal questionnaire survey that is conducted across multiple data sources. Second, the findings of this paper derive from the data collected by hotel employees in Huangshan City, China, and the extent to which these results are generalizable to other cultural and work contexts remains to be seen. Future research can select multiple regions or countries for comparison, using a cross-cultural approach. Finally, as workplace ostracism has become an increasingly important topic in the tourism management literature, future research can explore this issue from multiple perspectives, including both the actors and observers of workplace ostracism.

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