Information Management and Business Review (ISSN 2220-3796)
Vol. 15, No. 4(SI), pp. 86-93, December 2023

Modelling Workplace Ostracism among Workforces amid Pandemic Outbreaks

Nor Azairiah Fatimah Othman[1*], Farsha Farahana Ahmad Izhan[1], Veera Pandiyan Kaliani Sundram[2], Muhammad Majid[2], Syaidatul Zarina Mat Din[1], Zarina Abdul Munir[2], Murni Zarina Mohamed Razali[2]
[1]Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Johor Kampus Segamat, Malaysia
[2]Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Selangor Kampus Puncak Alam, Malaysia
norazairiah@uitm.edu.my*, farshaizhan97@gmail.com, veera692@uitm.edu.my, muhdmajid@uitm.edu.my, sasai2003@uitm.edu.my, zarin453@uitm.edu.my, murnizarina@uitm.edu.my

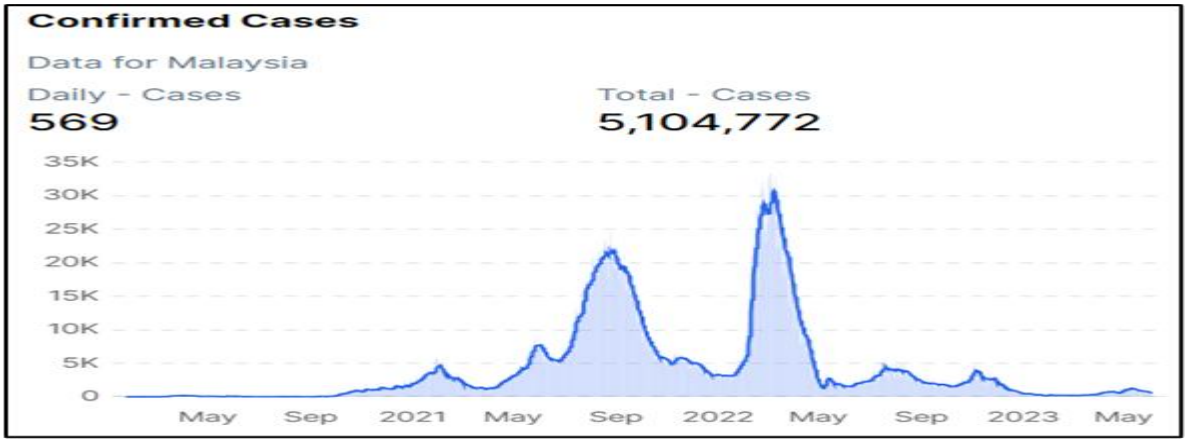
Abstract: Amid pandemic outbreaks, many jobs that were once thought to be safe are now considered potentially harmful since the virus can be easily spread from one person to another. Albeit vaccination program, the fear of infections at the workplace is still alarming as getting vaccinated is a voluntary act and the virus keeps evolving from time to time. As everyone must keep their working life at risk since social distancing and wearing face masks are no longer being forcefully practiced, people are taking safety precautions into their own hands, leading to changes in ostracized behavior in the workplace. Following the Theory of Protection Motivation, this paper made attempts to conceptually model workplace ostracism to understand why some workforces are changing their behavior towards ostracism during a pandemic outbreak. Towards the end, the findings from this study are expected to contribute towards achieving mentally stable workforces and sustainable human resources.

Keywords: *Workplace, Ostracism, Protection Motivation Theory, Workforce.*

1. Introduction and Background

COVID-19 has formed serious issues in disease management, workplace conditions, as well as social and economy globally (Ariza-Montes et al., 2022). The most critical problem resulting from COVID-19 is having employees adapt to new working conditions (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). According to Floyd, Dun, and Rogers (2000), COVID-19 has generated an unprecedented level of public fear, the need for physical distancing, and increasing health and safety concerns wherein the physical distance between people has become the norm in most countries, which restricts physical contact, reduces social engagement (Pawar et al., 2020) and it causes employees to feel disconnected (Nisar et al., 2021). Even though the prevention measures for COVID-19 have been shown to reduce transmission rates, the new norm is stimulating changes in people's behavior (Bavel et al., 2020). Due to fear, the behavior of people was changing towards preventing and avoiding themselves from being infected with the virus (Bavel et al., 2020), with some practicing ostracism towards each other in their workplace. According to National Health and Morbidity Survey, 4.57 million working adults were reported to bear mental health issues with 29% of employees reporting that they have poor mental health. Numerous studies have found that the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing practices are related to a rise in mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, distress, and insomnia (Vui-Yee & Yen-Hwa, 2020).

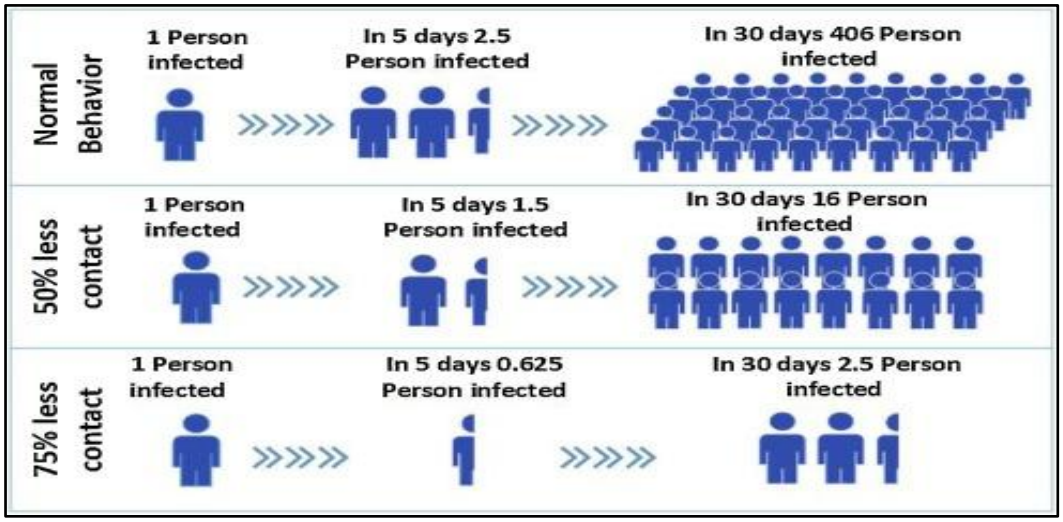
Figure 1: Total COVID-19 cases (KKMNOW, 2023)



According to KKMNOW (2023), as of 3 June 2023, Malaysia has recorded 5,104,772 confirmed cases as illustrated in Figure 1 and the cases are still increasing indicating that the virus is still spreading. Therefore, the objective of this study is to understand why ostracism occurs in the workplace among workforces amid pandemic outbreaks. This study adds to the existing knowledge of the ostracism field of study by investigating social exclusion in the working setting during the upsurge of contagious diseases worldwide which is different from existing ostracism-related scholarly works that were done by others.

Changes in the Working Setting: All organizations in both financial and non-financial institutions were affected by the COVID-19 outbreak (Barua & Barua, 2021) which brought about disruption, uncertainty, difficulty, and ambiguity (Azizi et al., 2021) business. Regardless of the outbreak, workforces must continue to work normally together even though most of the virus transmission occurred in workplaces (Bazzoli & Probst, 2022). Many jobs that were once thought to be safe are now considered potentially harmful because of COVID-19 (Sinclair et al., 2021). Moreover, the risk of infection is higher for employees in service sectors such as banking since they often engage with consumers while performing their duties (Yu et al., 2021) and the virus is easily spread from person to person (Rothan & Byrareddy, 2020). According to risk assessment studies, workplaces that bear high customer density and visit duration are linked to an increase in the total weekly cases of COVID-19 (O'Donoghue et al., 2020). Thus, the possibility of infection is always present which makes the employees live in fear of COVID-19 exposure and uncertainty at the workplace (Dennerlein et al., 2020). To respond to the risk, health experts have proposed a variety of ways to stop the virus' transmission, such as physical distancing, but it caused problems and challenges in providing the service to customers (Shaheen et al., 2022). A recent study reported that physical distancing can lead to ostracism and at the same time, trigger negative mental health effects of ostracism (Hales et al., 2021). According to Ahmed et al. (2021), the spread of the virus and the disease's severity can be decreased through less contact between an infected person and a healthy person as shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Social distancing (Ahmed et al., 2021)



Workplace Ostracism: Workplace ostracism concept and scale was introduced by Ferris et al., (2008). According to Shah and Hashmi (2019), ostracism is the degree to which an individual believes he or she is being ignored or excluded by the organizational phenomenon. In the workplace, ostracism is the sense that an employee is left out or ignored by coworkers (Ferris et al., 2008). Meanwhile, according to Xing and Li (2022), ostracism is workplace cold violence and cold treatment, varies with individual interpretations, is the employee's overall rejection feeling, and is a typical workplace issue. According to Harvey et al. (2019), there are different types of ostracism which are physical, social, and cyber. Other types of ostracism are role-prescribed when social situations call for them to engage in ostracism, defensive to protect against experiencing ostracism themselves, obvious when someone engages in ostracism due to failing to notice someone nearby, and not-ostracism when they only believe they are experiencing ostracism but are not in reality (Williams, 2007) and obvious ostracism when workplace ostracism due to protection during the

pandemic (Graupmann & Pfundmair 2023). Ostracism is a passive-aggressive type of behavior such as silence, ignorance, and a refusal to respond to greetings (Liu & Xia, 2016). It happens when an individual is purposefully excluded from a social connection or interaction (Harvey et al., 2019), giving ostracized employees silent treatment, avoiding eye contact, disregarding greetings, and isolation from social interaction (Anasori et al., 2021). Workplace ostracism is a short-term influence strategy that works well but may be harmful to relationships in the long run (Nezlek et al., 2015) which can influence both employees and organizations (Liu & Xia 2016). Previous studies reported that employees' psychological, emotional, and material resources will be reduced (Xing & Li, 2022), and participation and concentration at work will decrease (Chi & Liang, 2013). It may be more detrimental to the organization when those negative outcomes spread throughout the organization, causing job strain, emotional exhaustion, and a depressed attitude at work (Harvey et al., 2019; Muneer et al., 2017) with the one that ostracises others will have a diminished sense of belonging, more anger, ego depletion, and a reduced desire to work (Chen et al., 2022).

Effect of Ostracized Behavior: Ostracized people run into social suffering, developing a variety of pro and anti-social behaviors (Wesselmann et al., 2015). Those who are experiencing social exclusion may develop antisocial, introverted, closed, and uncooperative traits (Pellegrini et al., 2021). Ostracism increases physical pain, social pain, negative emotion, and impaired self-regulation due to an increased perception of rejection (Pasamehmetoglu et al., 2022). When one encounters workplace ostracism, their emotions of isolation would be increased, which might result in stress and depression (Sarwar et al., 2022) leading to turnover, and job dissatisfaction (Williams & Nida, 2022). The fear of contracting the virus and social isolation place employees in an uncertain situation (Lima et al., 2020) which is impactful on employees' engagement with work and organization (Shaw et al. 2020). On the side of positive impact, researchers discovered that exclusion could lead to prosocial effects such as increased assisting, cooperating, and funding behaviors that help other people or organizations (Lee & Shrum, 2012; Maner et al., 2007; Ouwerkerk et al., 2005; Xu et al., 2017).

Underpinning Theories: Social exclusion refers to the disadvantage experienced by some groups who are being cut off from mainstream society and unable to directly participate in daily life (Piachaud et al., 2009). While, Protection Motivation Theory (PMT) was developed by Rogers (1975), which describes what motivates people to take precautions when they feel a health threat.

Social Exclusion Theory: Social exclusion is interchangeably used with social isolation which is deemed as a lack of social coherence (Silver, 2007). It can take one of two different forms which are rejection and ostracism (Richman et al., 2016; Williams & Nida, 2011). This theory shows a connection to ostracism due to likeness to a phenomenon and process in which a person's need for belonging and connection is hindered because of rejection or ostracism by a social group or individual (Chen et al., 2022; Williams, 2007; Xia, 2008). The effect of social exclusion is rooted in the need-threat model as seen in Figure 3 (Williams, 2009) which states that people who are excluded go through a reflexive period in which neural pain responses like physical pain appear (Eisenberger et al., 2003) and are experiencing less happiness with basic needs like belonging, self-esteem, control, and purposeful existence (Williams, 2007).

Protection Motivation Theory: Previous research has used a variety of theories to explain workplace ostracism such as the social exchange theory, SET (Zhao et al., 2013), and the conservation of resources theory, COR (Ali et al., 2020). PMT is another well-known theory to investigate health-relevant contexts and disease outbreaks, including influenza, H1N1, Ebola, Norovirus, the current coronavirus pandemic (Fisher, 2015) and motivations behind employee safety behavior (Lee, 2022). It was created to better understand how and why people react to possible dangers to their health and safety and it has been widely utilized as a framework to anticipate protective actions (Rogers, 1975) to prevent the occurrence of a negative outcome (Roger, 1983). This theory was classified into threat and coping appraisal (Norman et al., 2015). Threat appraisal is to determine how dangerous the disease is and the possibility one would have it. Coping appraisal, on the other hand, evaluates one's anticipated response efficacy of suggested recommendations that can minimize or eliminate the threat and their ability to carry out the suggested behavior successfully (Yu et al., 2022). The stronger the appraisals, the higher one's protection motivation; thus, the more likely an individual is to adopt the recommended behaviors (Rogers, 1975). As illustrated in Figure 4, this study utilizes PMT theory to explain factors that influence the workforce's behavior to practice ostracism in the workplace.

Figure 3: Williams's temporal need-threat model of ostracism (Williams & Nida, 2022)

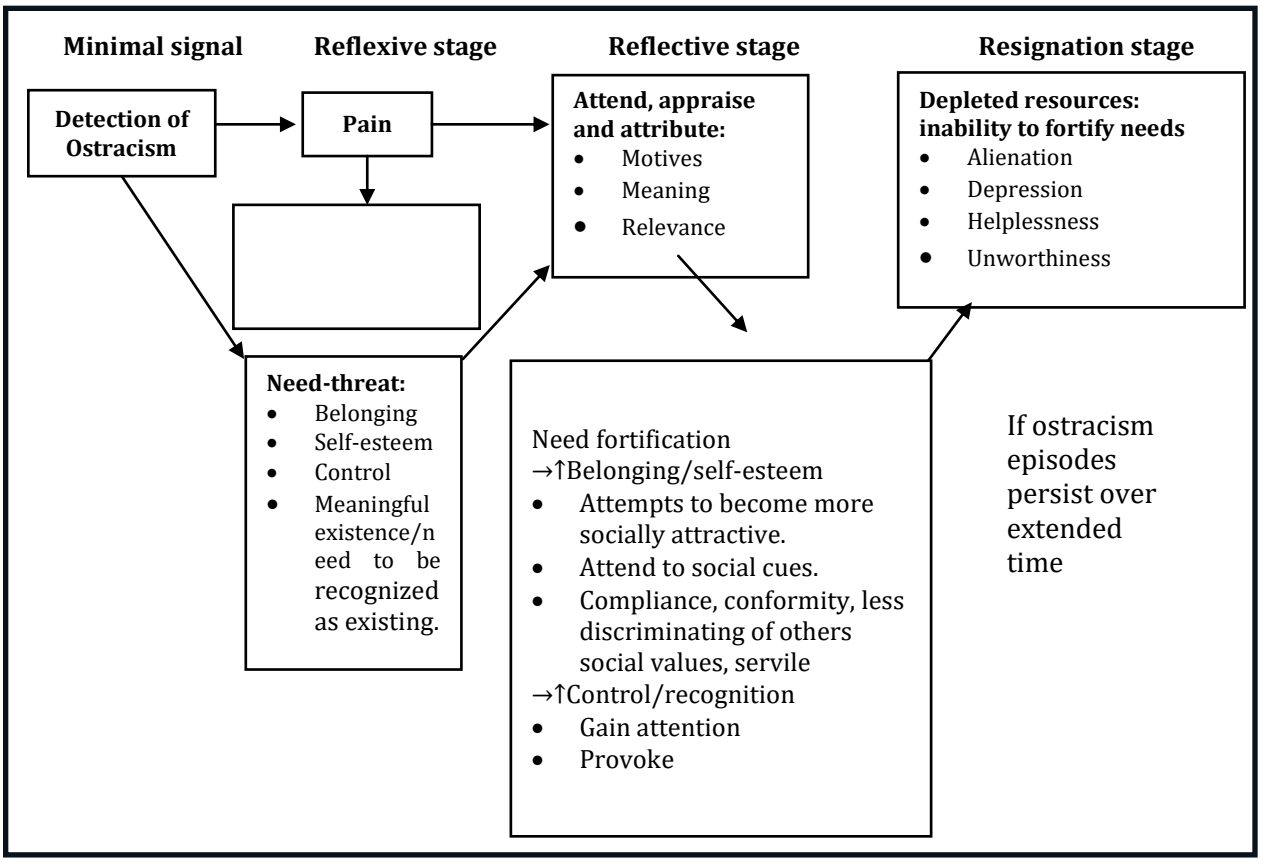
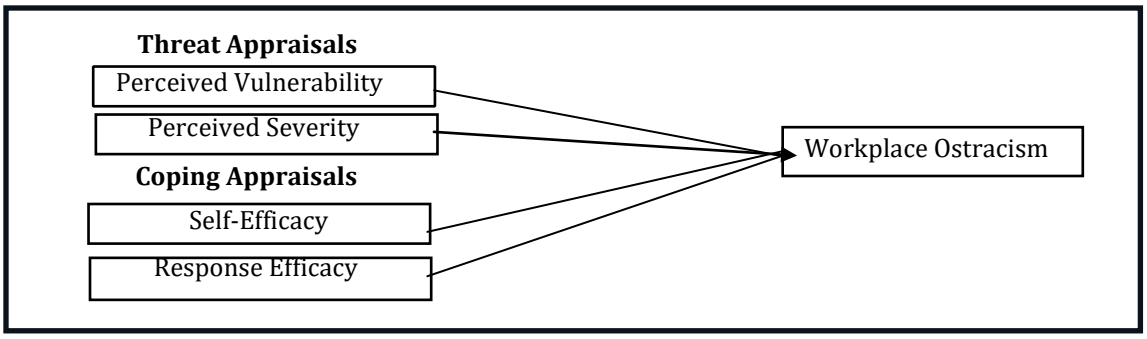


Figure 4: Conceptual framework



2. Methodology

This conceptual paper employs a qualitative research approach to explore and analyze the phenomenon of workplace ostracism among workforces during pandemic outbreaks. As such, the study aims to review and synthesize existing literature, theories, and conceptual frameworks to develop a comprehensive understanding of workplace ostracism in the context of pandemic outbreaks. Firstly, a comprehensive literature review is conducted to identify and examine scholarly articles, studies, and relevant publications related to workplace ostracism and pandemic outbreaks. This review involves searching academic databases, relevant journals, books, reports, and other reputable sources. The literature review helps identify key concepts, theories, and existing frameworks that contribute to understanding workplace ostracism in the specific context of pandemic outbreaks. Later, based on the findings from the literature review, a conceptual framework is developed to organize and structure the key concepts and relationships related to workplace

ostracism among workforces during pandemic outbreaks. The framework integrates relevant theories, concepts, and empirical evidence to provide a theoretical lens for understanding and analyzing the phenomenon. Additionally, comparisons and connections are made between workplace ostracism and the specific challenges and dynamics arising from pandemic outbreaks. Since this is a conceptual paper, data collection in the traditional sense is not applicable. Instead, the data is derived from the literature review and existing theories. The primary sources of data are scholarly articles, books, reports, and other relevant publications that contribute to the understanding of workplace ostracism and pandemic outbreaks. The conceptual framework developed earlier guides the discussion and enables a comprehensive analysis of the topic.

3. Discussion

In the era of disease outbreaks, it is comprehensible that people's behavior is somewhat changing as some are taking extra precautions to avoid becoming infected with the virus. PMT was often used in the field of health behavior in predicting individuals' intentions to engage in protective behavior (DeFranco & Morosan, 2017) against H1N1 (Sharifirad et al., 2014), and COVID-19 (Eberhardt & Ling, 2021; Kim et al., 2022) have evidencing PMT is helpful to explain on how people behave in pandemic situations (Lee, 2022). According to Pilch, Wardawy, and Probierz (2021), PMT helps to better understand how people behave in the face of potential health risks like the existence of influenza infection. People are motivated to participate in and adhere to protective measures when they think the outcome will be successful and the action is realistic (Meulenaer et al., 2018). Individual actions and attitudes toward the situation are changing with the rise of dangers (Su et al., 2022). Employees' awareness of the threats connected to the pandemic might affect their attitudes and behavior at work (Vu et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2021). According to Vu et al., (2022) during the COVID-19 outbreak, employees were concerned about their health and felt insecure about their work, so they reacted defensively; as such it is deemed appropriate to model ostracism in understanding employee health protection behavior in the workplace.

4. Conclusion

Although these days cases related to COVID-19 are minimally reported, as the decision to be vaccinated against the coronavirus is voluntary, and since the virus is constantly evolving and subsisting within the community, fear of the virus remains. Apart from the public, employers and employees are also highly affected by this pandemic situation. This is happening because they still need to carry on with their working life but are exposed to a high risk of being infected by close interaction with their colleagues. Therefore, some workforces are responding to potential threats to their health and safety at the workplace by practicing ostracism and jeopardizing their mental health and well-being. As research on ostracism in the workplace is still sparse, especially in Malaysian studies, understanding possible factors that can cope with workplace ostracism issues is expected to contribute towards achieving mentally stable workforces and sustainable human resources.

Acknowledgment: This project was funded by FRGS Grant, Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia with grant code FRGS/1/2022/SS02/UITM/02/13.

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