

SUPERVISOR PUBBING AND WORKPLACE OSTRACISM: THE MODERATING ROLE OF AGE COHORTS AMONG IT SECTOR EMPLOYEES

¹Rabia Toheed, ²Dr. Yasir Aftab Farooqi, ³Mishal Mushtaq, ⁴Sidra shahzadi

¹Lecturer Superior University Campus M.B.Din

²Assistant Professor, Faculty of Management and Administration Sciences (FMAS)
University of Gujrat, Pakistan.

³Research Scholar.

⁴Research Scholar

Email: rabiatoheed2281@gmail.com

Email: yasir.aftab@uog.edu.pk

Email: mishal29202@gmail.com

Email: sidrashahzadi015@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author:

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Rizwana Mahar

Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between supervisor pubbing (the behavior of supervisors ignoring employees because of their excessive smartphone use) and workplace ostracism, and the moderating effect of age cohorts (Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z). The research is based on Affective Events Theory (AET) which conceptualizes supervisor pubbing as a negative affective workplace event that leads to rejection, exclusion, and social alienation, which results in perceived workplace ostracism. The survey was conducted on 385 IT sector employees in Pakistan, using validated measurement instruments, which was quantitative. The results of PLS-SEM analysis with bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) showed that the direct effect of supervisor pubbing on workplace ostracism was significant and positive ($\beta = 0.797, p < 0.001$). This relationship was significantly moderated by age cohorts ($\beta = 0.187, t = 3.672, p < 0.001$), with Generation X showing the highest ostracism perception after supervisor pubbing, Millennials showing moderate, and Generation Z showing weak but significant perception of ostracism. The findings enrich organizational behavior theory and provide actionable implications for fostering age-sensitive, inclusive supervisory practices in digitally intensive workplaces.

Introduction

The rapid diffusion of smartphones into nearly every facet of professional life has given rise to a new form of interpersonal neglect in workplaces: pubbing – the act of snubbing someone in favor of a mobile phone (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018). When this behavior is enacted by supervisors toward their subordinates, it constitutes supervisor pubbing: a phenomenon in which managers ignore or inadequately attend to employees during professional interactions because of their phone usage (Roberts & David, 2017). Given the centrality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship to employee wellbeing, performance, and organizational commitment, the



implications of supervisor pubbing extend well beyond a simple breach of etiquette.

Among its various negative consequences, supervisor pubbing has been theoretically and empirically linked to employees' experience of workplace ostracism – the perception of being ignored or excluded by others at work (Ferris et al., 2008). Workplace ostracism is a passive, subtle, often unintentional, and potentially significant form of interpersonal harm that is inflicted on targeted employees (Ferris et al., 2008). It is linked to lower levels of organizational commitment, higher turnover intention, and counterproductive work behaviors (Leung et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2016), and it is a violation of the basic psychological needs of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence.

This study is based on the Affective Events Theory (AET) of Weiss and Cropanzano (1996). AET suggests that discrete events in the workplace elicit affective responses which then influence employees' attitudes and behaviors. Within this framework, the supervisor's pubbing is viewed as a negative affective event, or a micro-level interpersonal incident that is a violation of the norms of professional attentiveness and a cue for disrespect or exclusion. The emotional aftertaste of multiple pubbing experiences builds up over time, leading to a greater feeling of social alienation and ostracism among employees (Koay, 2018; Jahanzeb et al., 2023).

But how people feel and react to these affective events is not consistent throughout the workforce. According to generational theory, employees from different generations (Generation X (1965–1980), Millennials (1981–1996), and Generation Z (1997–2012)) have unique attitudes toward technology use, norms for workplace communication, and norms for supervisory authority (Twenge, 2017; Dimock, 2019). These generational differences are likely to buffer the impact of supervisor pubbing on the relationship between supervisor pubbing and workplace ostracism.

Although the phenomenon of supervisor pubbing has garnered growing research interest, empirical studies specifically focused on the link between supervisor pubbing and workplace ostracism, and the moderating effect of generational cohort, are limited, especially in non-Western collectivist cultures such as Pakistan (Hasan et al., 2024). The high power distance and collectivist cultural orientation of Pakistan (Hofstede Insights, 2022) makes interpersonal relations between supervisors and subordinates particularly significant, with interpersonal respect and hierarchical deference being deeply entrenched norms. This study aims to fill this gap by examining two research questions: (1) Is there a positive relationship between supervisor pubbing and workplace ostracism? (2) Is this relationship moderated by age cohorts?



Literature Review

Supervisor Pubbing

Supervisor pubbing refers to supervisors' use of smartphones in professional interactions with subordinates, indicating a lack of attention, distraction, and social dismissal (Roberts & David, 2017). The concept was introduced in an organizational context by Karadağ et al. (2015) who highlighted that digital distractions negatively affect human interactions. This degradation has a lot of power connotations in hierarchical relationships: if a supervisor is visibly more interested in his/her phone than in an employee, he/she is telling the employee that he/she is less valuable than the phone.

Yasin et al. (2023) found that workers who had more frequent contact with their supervisor's pubbing had lower levels of job satisfaction, lower organizational self-esteem and higher emotional distress. Roberts and David (2017) showed that supervisor pubbing has a lasting impact on employee motivation and organizational identification, and that these conditions are psychological factors that are essential for engagement. Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2018) also found that the 'pubbing' experience was associated with decreased interaction satisfaction and communication effectiveness, which further supported the sense of social marginalization.

Workplace Ostracism

Ostracism in the workplace is the degree to which an individual feels ignored or excluded by others in the workplace (Ferris et al., 2008, p. 1348). Ostracism is a passive form of aggression or harassment, in which the aggressor does not make eye contact, does not include the target in conversations, or does not include the target in professional or social gatherings, making it hard to detect and respond to (Ferris et al., 2008). Although subtle, ostracism has a significant psychological impact, affecting employees' basic needs for belonging, self-worth, meaningful purpose and control (Koay, 2018).

From an empirical perspective, ostracism at work is linked to decreased organizational commitment, increased turnover intention, decreased psychological wellbeing, and increased deviant coping behaviors (Li et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2016). Jahanzeb et al. (2023) reported that repeated exclusionary incidents lead to emotional exhaustion and increased vulnerability to abnormal workplace behaviors, such as retaliatory deviance, withdrawal, and silence. Ostracism has a more negative impact on team performance and cohesion in service and IT-related industries where interpersonal collaboration is a key element (Hasan et al., 2024).

Affective Events Theory: Supervisor Pubbing as a Negative Affective Event

The Affective Events Theory (AET) (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996) suggests that affective reactions to discrete events in the workplace mediate the relationship between features of the workplace and employee outcomes. AET



differentiates two types of influence: affect-driven (emotional experiences directly motivate behavior) and judgement-driven (accumulated affect experiences lead to stable attitudes). Supervisor pubbing is a micro-level stressor that works mainly in the affect driven pathway.

Every time a pubbing occurs, a negative affective state is triggered: frustration, disrespect, feeling undervalued, which interferes with the normative social script of professional interaction. If they continue to happen, the affective impact of these incidents becomes permanent, resulting in negative attitudes such as a decrease in organizational identification and an increase in social exclusion (Weiss & Beal, 2005). This emotional toll of not receiving the attention of the supervisor can be particularly high in collectivist cultures like Pakistan, where interpersonal relationships play a crucial role in determining professional status and relational capital (Hofstede Insights, 2022).

Becker et al. (2018) showed that technology-mediated supervisory disengagement has a negative impact on the social and psychological contract between supervisors and subordinates, leading to a feeling of isolation and marginalization. The repeated experience of being ignored in favor of a device is a direct link to emotional injury, which can lead to a consistent perception of social exclusion in the workplace (Jahanzeb et al., 2023; Kwan et al., 2022).

Moderator: Age Cohorts

Individual differences moderate the affective consequences of workplace events (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), acknowledges AET. Theoretically, generational cohort membership is an individual difference variable that could influence communication expectations, emotional regulation strategies, and sensitivity to supervisor behavior (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Twenge, 2017).

The generation X workers (1965-1980) were the first generation to enter the professional world without the smartphone era and have expectations of attentiveness and hierarchy. They will likely feel it as a serious breach of professional standards, resulting in more negative affective responses and increased feelings of exclusion (Twenge, 2017; Roberts & David, 2017). This is reinforced by research on technology adoption trends, which indicates that older workers who prefer face-to-face communication are more likely to be affected by technology-mediated disrespect (Yasin et al., 2023).

Millennials (1981-1996) are a transitional generation who are comfortable with digital communication, but also expect interpersonal acknowledgment and feedback in hierarchical relationships (Twenge, 2017). Moderate phone use by supervisors is acceptable by Millennials, but excessive or contemptuous pubbing still causes emotional hurt and feelings of neglect, resulting in moderate ostracism perceptions. They are moderately sensitive,

which is a balance between digital acculturation and interpersonal expectations.

Digital natives, or Generation Z employees (1997-2012), are likely to view some level of phone use during interactions as normal and therefore less exclusionary (Twenge, 2017). As a result, Generation Z is predicted to have the least ostracism reaction to supervisor pubbing, although this effect is still present when pubbing is perceived as too much or disrespectful. This is in line with van Bommel's (2020) discovery that younger digital natives are the least emotionally responsive to supervisory behaviors through technology.

Proposed Research Model and Hypothesis Development

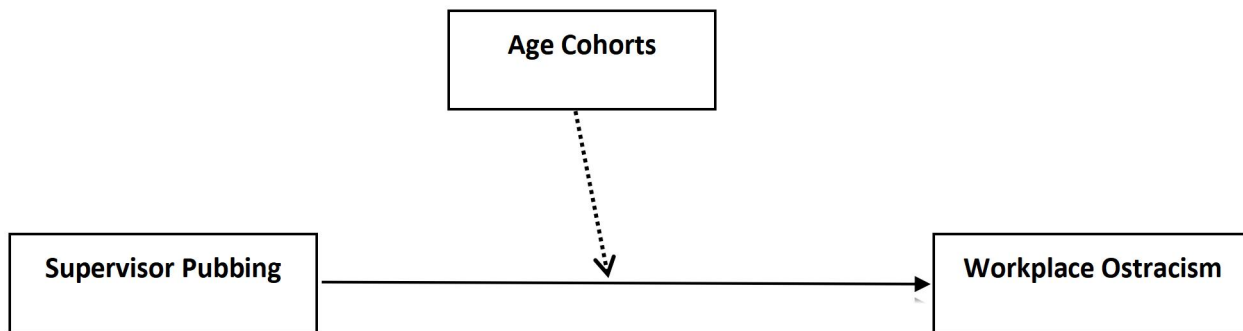


Figure 1: Proposed model of the study

H1: Supervisor pubbing is positively associated with workplace ostracism.

H2: Age cohorts moderate the relationship between supervisor pubbing and workplace ostracism, such that Generation X demonstrates the strongest positive relationship, Millennials a moderate relationship, and Generation Z the weakest.

Research Methodology

Research Philosophy and Approach

This study is based on positivist research philosophy, which assumes that social phenomena like supervisor pubbing and workplace ostracism are objective and measurable, and not dependent on subjective interpretations (Bryman, 2004; Lincoln et al., 2011). A deductive approach was used: theoretical propositions from AET and generational theory were translated into testable hypotheses which were then empirically tested (Saunders et al., 2019). The positivist paradigm is especially suitable for this study's objective of determining direction, magnitude, and significance of the relationships among well-defined constructs.

Research Design and Sample

Primary data were collected using quantitative cross sectional survey design from 385 employees of IT industry in Pakistan. The IT industry was chosen as the empirical context because it is an industry that heavily uses digital



technology, has a high frequency of supervisor-employee interaction, and represents a wide age range of employees (Pakistan Software Export Board, 2022). To guarantee familiarity with the dynamics of supervision, employees had to have been working in their current position for at least six months (Xu et al., 2022). Those who had limited supervisory contact were not included, such as freelancers.

The sample size was calculated using Cochran's (1977) formula for an unknown population with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, which resulted in a sample size of 385. To ensure generational representation, non-probability purposive sampling was used, which included Generation X (1965–1980), Millennials (1981–1996) and Generation Z (1997–2012) as per the definition of Pew Research Centre (Dimock, 2019). Structured online surveys were sent out through professional networks, e-mail and LinkedIn.

Measures

Supervisor Pubbing: Roberts and David's (2017) nine-item Boss Pubbing Scale measured employees' perceptions of supervisors being distracted by their phones during interactions (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$).

The ten-item Workplace Ostracism Scale (WOS) by Ferris et al. (2008) assessed the extent to which employees felt they were ignored or excluded from the workplace (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$).

Age Cohorts: Operationalised as a categorical moderator: Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z, as described by Dimock (2019).

All construct items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Often). The survey instrument was pre-tested for clarity and face validity prior to full deployment.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed with IBM SPSS for descriptive statistics and reliability analysis and with Smart PLS 4 for estimation of PLS-SEM. The significance of the direct and moderated path was tested through bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. Interactions were calculated by multiplying the categorical age cohort variable with the categorical supervisor pubbing variable. The Fornell-Larcker criterion was used to assess discriminant validity. Model fit was assessed using the SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual) with values < 0.08 being deemed acceptable (Henseler et al., 2015).

Results

Demographic Characteristics

Of the 385 respondents, 65.2% were male and 34.8% female. The dominant age bracket was 31–40 years (51.4%), followed by 21–30 years (22.6%), 41–50 years (17.1%), and 51–60 years (8.8%). Educational profiles indicated that 49.4% of the population had a bachelor's degree, 30.1% had a master's or



MPhil degree, 16.1% had a doctorate, and 4.4% had an intermediate qualification.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	65.2%
	Female	34.8%
Age Group	21-30	22.6%
	31-40	51.4%
	41-50	17.1%
	51-60	8.8%
	Education	Intermediate
	Bachelor's	49.4%
	Master's/MPhil	30.1%
	PhD	16.1%

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Analysis

The descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha values of the study constructs are shown in Table 2. The mean of the Supervisor pubbing was 3.90 (SD = 0.68), which represents moderately high and common pubbing behavior in the sampled IT organizations. The mean score for workplace ostracism was 3.77 (SD = 0.72), indicating a significant level of perceived social exclusion in the workplace. The reliability coefficients were both well above the 0.70 level (Cronbach's α : SP = 0.88; WO = 0.91), indicating good internal consistency.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Analysis

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean (SD)	Cronbach's α
Supervisor Pubbing	385	1.00	5.00	3.90 (0.68)	0.88
Workplace Ostracism	385	1.00	5.00	3.77 (0.72)	0.91
Age Cohort	385	1.00	4.00	2.12 (0.86)	—

Discriminant Validity

The Fornell-Larcker criterion was used to examine the discriminant validity. The correlation matrix with square roots of AVE along the diagonal is presented in Table 3. The AVE square root for supervisor pubbing (0.683) and workplace ostracism (0.740) were both greater than the inter-construct correlations, which indicated adequate discriminant validity. Age was found to have little correlation with either construct ($r = 0.059$ and $r = 0.157$ respectively) and so does not contaminate the primary relationship.



Table 3: Discriminant Validity Matrix (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

Construct	Age	Supervisor Pubbing	Workplace Ostracism
Age	1.000	—	—
Supervisor Pubbing	0.059	0.683	—
Workplace Ostracism	0.157	0.797	0.740

Note. Diagonal values = square root of AVE. Off-diagonal values = inter-construct correlations.

Common Method Bias Assessment

Common method bias was evaluated using Harman's single factor test. The first unroasted factor accounted for 38.2% of the total variance, which was below the 50% criterion, indicating that common method bias is not a significant threat to the validity of the results.

PLS-SEM Results: Direct and Moderation Effects

The results of the structural model from Smart PLS 4 are presented in Table 4. The direct effect of supervisor pubbing on workplace ostracism was strong and highly significant ($\beta = 0.797$, $SE = 0.038$, $t = 20.974$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. The model accounted for a significant amount of variance in workplace ostracism ($R^2 = 0.635$), suggesting that the model was well predictive.

Table 4: PLS-SEM Direct Effect (Supervisor Pubbing on Workplace Ostracism)

Path	β	SE	t-Value	p-Value	Decision
H1: SP \rightarrow WO	0.797	0.038	20.974	0.000	Supported

Note. SP = Supervisor Pubbing; WO = Workplace Ostracism. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. *** $p < 0.001$.

The moderation results are shown in Table 5. The interaction term (SP \times Age Cohort) showed a significant positive relationship with workplace ostracism ($\beta = 0.187$, $SE = 0.051$, $t = 3.672$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H2. The addition of the moderating term improved model R^2 by 0.034, representing a meaningful incremental contribution ($f^2 = 0.092$, indicating a small to medium effect size).

Table 5: Moderation Analysis (Age Cohorts as Moderator of SP \rightarrow WO)

Interaction Path	β	SE	t-Value	p-Value	Decision
SP \times Age Cohort \rightarrow WO	0.187	0.051	3.672	0.000	Supported (H2)

Note. SP = Supervisor Pubbing; WO = Workplace Ostracism; Age Cohort = Gen X | Millennials | Gen Z. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples.

Table 6: Slope Analysis (Age Cohort Conditional Effects (SP \rightarrow WO))

Age Cohort (Conditional)	β	SE	t-Value	p-Value	Interpretation
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Generation X	0.841	0.045	18.689	0.000	Strongest effect
Millennials	0.793	0.051	15.549	0.000	Moderate effect
Generation Z	0.712	0.062	11.484	0.000	Weakest effect

Note. Conditional slope estimates derived from bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. All effects significant at $p < 0.001$.

Bootstrapping SEM Results

Below given table illustrates the bootstrapping SEM model for Article 2, displaying standardized path coefficients, moderating interactions, and model fit indices.

Table 7: Supervisor Pubbing, Age Cohorts, and Workplace Ostracism

BOOTSTRAPPING SEM MODEL RESULTS				
SP1-SP9 (Indicators)	→	Supervisor Pubbing (SP) $\alpha = 0.88$ AVE = 0.467	$\beta = 0.797^{***}$ (t = 20.974)	Workplace Ostracism (WO) $\alpha = 0.91$ $R^2 = 0.635$
MODERATOR: Age Cohort (Gen X Millennials Gen Z) SP × Age Cohort → WO: $\beta = 0.187$, t = 3.672, p < 0.001 $f^2 = 0.092$				
Gen X: $\beta_{cond} = 0.841^{***}$ Strongest ostracism reaction (Traditional communication norms)		Millennials: $\beta_{cond} = 0.793^{***}$ Moderate reaction (Hybrid digital-interpersonal expectations)		Gen Z: $\beta_{cond} = 0.712^{***}$ Weakest but significant
WO1-WO10 (Indicators) SRMR = 0.061 R^2 WO = 0.635 $f^2 = 0.092$ n = 385 Bootstrap = 5,000 resamples				

Discussion

The results support both hypotheses strongly. H1 was confirmed by the strong positive direct effect of supervisor pubbing on workplace ostracism ($\beta = 0.797$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.635$), which is consistent with the increasing literature that shows supervisor pubbing is associated with negative relational and psychological outcomes (Roberts & David, 2017; Yasin et al., 2023). According to AET, every instance of supervisor pubbing is a micro-level negative affective event that breaches the normative social contract of professional interaction, which over time becomes a stable perception of social exclusion at work, resulting in negative emotions (frustration, disrespect, feelings of dismissal) (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996; Weiss & Beal, 2005).



Theoretically, this finding is important as it validates supervisor pubbing as a passive exclusion behavior, similar to other passive exclusion behaviors in the workplace, including supervisor incivility, abusive supervision, and perceived neglect (Jahanzeb et al., 2023; Kwan et al., 2022). This is exacerbated in the IT sector, where mentorship, technical support, and teamwork are essential for success, and a supervisor's demeanor or lack thereof can have a profound impact on the relationship (Hasan et al., 2024).

Collectivist and high power-distance cultural context of Pakistan further exacerbates the ostracism-generating potential of supervisor pubbing. In cultures where hierarchy is important and obligations are expected between people (Hofstede Insights, 2022), workers are especially attuned to the cues they receive from their supervisors regarding inclusion or exclusion. In such a setting, to be pubbed by a supervisor is not just a violation of etiquette, it's a public declaration of the employee's relational value in the hierarchy. The emotional impact of such experiences is magnified, too (Hofstede, 2001).

The findings that age cohorts significantly moderate the supervisor pubbing-ostracism relationship provide important nuance to both AET and generational theory. In line with Twenge (2017) and Roberts and David (2017), Generation X workers had the highest level of ostracism perceptions after the supervisor's pubbing ($\beta_{\text{conditional}} = 0.841$), which is likely due to their professional socialization before the advent of the digital age and the strong expectations they held for in-person attention. For Generation X, the supervisor's pubbing is a clear and meaningful violation of norms of professional respect, which increases emotional injury and ostracism perceptions.

The conditional relationship for millennials was moderate ($\beta_{\text{conditional}} = 0.793$). They have an experience of supervisor pubbing that is mediated by a blend of technology-mediated communication and expectations for interpersonal acknowledgment, especially in supervisor feedback and performance settings (Twenge, 2017; Costanza et al., 2012). The conditional relationship ($\beta_{\text{conditional}} = 0.712$) was statistically the weakest, but still significant, and is consistent with the fact that Generation Z are digital natives for whom some level of phone use during interactions is normalized. But the long-term impact of the effect on Generation Z indicates that too much or too little pubbing is beyond the generational tolerance for digital multitasking.

The results of the study that all three groups exhibited significant, but differently sized, ostracism reactions when the supervisor was pubbed have important theoretical implications. It implies that the affective impact of the supervisor's pubbing is not necessarily generational, but that supervisor



attentiveness is valued by all generations, with differences in the threshold of sensitivity. This contradicts the simple story of Generation Z's complete lack of interest in digital distraction in supervisory relationships.

Conclusion and Practical Implications

The results of this study indicate that supervisor phubbing is a significant predictor of workplace ostracism among IT sector workers in Pakistan and that generational cohort plays a significant moderating role in this relationship. The results, based on AET, confirm that phubbing by supervisors is a negative affective event that gradually creates perceptions of social exclusion, with the most severe effects being observed in Generation X and the least in Generation Z, but with a significant effect across all generations.

The results of this study from a managerial perspective emphasize the need for attentiveness in management as part of inclusive leadership. Organizations should implement leadership training programmes that actively discourage phone use during employee interactions and promote mindful, present communication practices. Training content should be age-sensitive: For Generation X teams, supervisors should focus on face-to-face interaction and clear communication; for Millennials, there needs to be a balance between digital efficiency and interpersonal interaction; for Generation Z, clear communication around when it is and isn't appropriate to use the phone in professional interactions may be particularly effective.

Clear technology-use policies at the organizational level can help eliminate the ambiguity that can keep phubbing going: norms for acceptable use of devices during meetings, one-on-one sessions, and performance feedback conversations. Supervisor phubbing awareness could be incorporated into onboarding, management development and 360-degree feedback programs for HR departments. If ostracism perceptions are already high, targeted team-cohesion and inclusion interventions could help to heal the relational wounds.

There are some limitations to this study. The cross sectional design does not allow causal inferences. Although Harman's test indicates that the effect is limited, self-reported measures can still have social desirability and common method bias. The sample is limited to the IT industry in Pakistan, which may limit the generalizability to other industries and cultural settings. Future studies should investigate the supervisor phubbing-ostracism relationship over time, in a variety of industries, and in different countries and cultures. Potential mediators (e.g., perceived supervisor support, organizational justice, trust) and boundary conditions (e.g., emotional intelligence, job autonomy) should be explored (Macias et al., 2024; Jahanzeb et al., 2023).

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