

## Cyber Ostracism In The Context Of Its Organizational Precursors And Outcomes

Suudan Gökçe GÖK\*

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### Abstract

Employees play a major role in efficiency and sustainability of organizations in this ever-competitive market upon the advent of digitalization in today's globalized world. The effective use of labor force affects attitudes and behaviors of employees and relationships between organizations and employees. The phenomenon of ostracism refers to social interactions in which one or more group members are ignored and excluded. The phenomenon of exclusion observed among all living things living in a community and in social relationships with each other is also common in working life, which is a part of social life. Exclusion can cause mental, physical, and organizational negativities on individuals. These negative outcomes increase the importance of exclusion that is common in organizations. From this perspective, the aim of the study is to discuss cyber ostracism in the context of organizational precursors and outcomes, and address how they affect organizations and their employees along with some solutions. A qualitative method was adopted for this study, and thus a document review was performed as a means of data collection.

**Keywords:** Ostracism, organizational ostracism, cyber ostracism

### Örgütsel Öncülleri ve Sonuçları Bağlamında Siber Dışlanma

#### Öz

Globalleşen Günümüz dünyasında dijitalleşmeyle beraber artan rekabet ortamında örgütlerin verimliliklerini ve devamlılıklarını sağlayabilmeleri için çalışanların rolü büyük önem arz etmektedir. İş gücünün etkin kullanımı örgüt çalışanlarının gerek tutum ve davranışlarını gerekse örgüt ve çalışan ilişkilerini etkilemektedir. Dışlanma olgusu, bir veya daha fazla grup üyesinin görmezden gelindiği ve dışlandığı sosyal etkileşimleri ifade etmektedir. Topluluk halinde yaşayan ve birbirleri ile sosyal ilişkiler içinde bulunan bütün canlılar arasında gözlemlenen dışlanma olgusu, sosyal yaşamın bir parçası olan çalışma hayatında da yaygın olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Dışlanma kişiler üzerinde zihinsel, fiziksel ve örgütsel olumsuzluklara sebep olabilmektedir. Bu olumsuz çıktılar, örgütlerde yaygın olarak karşımıza çıkan dışlanmanın önemini arttırmaktadır. Bu bağlamda bu çalışma ile örgütsel öncülleri ve sonuçları bağlamında siber dışlanmaya değinilerek, örgütleri ve çalışanları nasıl etkilediği, çözüm önerileri ile ortaya konmaya çalışılacaktır. Bu çalışmada nitel araştırma yöntemi benimsenmiş ve bu doğrultuda veri toplama tekniği olarak doküman incelemesi yapılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dışlanma, sosyal dışlanma, siber dışlanma

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\* Academician Doctor, Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University PSMYO, Accounting and Tax Applications Department, suudan.gok@hbv.edu.tr, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3822-2605>

## 1. Introduction

The widespread use of information technologies and internet brings various problems along with the benefits. A different form of ostracism has emerged with the increasing use of information technologies and the Internet in the workplaces. Along with Internet access, the use of social media is also increasing paving the way for different forms of ostracism in organizations. Employees working in harmony within the organization is something expected but it is difficult to realize such situation. Conflicts among employees in organizations, problems arising from individual and organizational reasons can lead to undesirable negative behaviors. These behaviors may affect the individual, other employees and the organization negatively. Since the different types of exhibited behavior threaten the outputs of the organization, organizations take certain precautions and implement different practices to prevent these unexpected behaviors.

Social psychologists argue that people have strong urges to create and sustain reliable and positive social group memberships, and this results from the basic need of belonging (Baumeister and Tice, 1990; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The fact that this need arguably and usually represents group membership is explained from the perspective of protection and reproduction opportunities based on the principles of evolutionary psychology, and that is why it is considered to develop in not only people but also other social species by means of natural selection (Gruter and Masters, 1986; Williams, 2001, 2007). On the contrary, the fear of being ostracized from major social groups and relations tends to profoundly take root in people, and it generates a tendency of anxiety and causing pain in such a form of ostracism (Eisenberger et al., 2003).

The phenomenon of ostracism stands for social interactions in which one or more than one group members are ignored and excluded, and researchers take more and more interest in this phenomenon (Williams, 2007). There have been scores of experimental studies over ostracism and its effects in recent years (Stroud et al., 2000; Eisenberger et al., 2003). The analyses, most of which are qualitative, inferred that ostracism is both rampant and harmful (Williams et al., 2000; Zadro et al., 2004; Zadro and Williams, 2006; Eisenberger et al., 2003; Williams, 2007; Gunnar et al., 2003).

In this context, cyber ostracism has become an important problem of today's organizations. Such behaviors which have been understood in recent years are frequently discussed in the literature. These are one of the undesired behaviors in organizational ostracism and discussed in the context of social, psychological exclusion and social rejection in the

literature. In this context, this study will focus on cyber ostracism in the context of its organizational precursors and outcomes, and how it affects organizations and employees, and solutions will be recommended. There are studies on psychological, social and organizational ostracism in Turkish literature, however, there are no studies on cyber ostracism (Coşkun, 2018; Çelik and Koşar, 2014; Halis and Demirel, 2016; Şahin and Coşkun, 2009; Yıldırım and Akın, 2018) . In this context, the effects of macro economic variables on ostracism types will be discussed in the present study to contribute to the Turkish literature. Furthermore, the research topic will be investigated in the context of Turkey, and the aim of the study is to conceptualize cyber ostracism.

## **2. Conceptual Framework**

In today's globalizing world, employees have a crucial role for organizations to ensure their efficiency and continuity in an increasingly competitive environment in parallel with digitalization. Effective use of the workforce affects both the attitudes and behaviors of employees and the relationship between the organization and employees. One such behavior is organizational ostracism.

Ostracism, feeling invisible, abstraction and rejection from the social interactions of those around you, and being treated as if you do not exist is a common phenomenon that occurs in a wide range of social environments (Williams, 2001). Such experiences are often collected under the term of ostracism (Williams, 1997, 2007), but are also expressed in many different words. In everyday language, terms such as "shy", "avoidance," "anger", "exile", "expulsion", "ignoring", "neglect", and "silent treatment" are examples of behavior and experiences that may reflect different manifestations of the ostracism phenomenon (Williams, 1997, 2001). Furthermore, this diversity is also clearly seen in the scientific literature. For example, *feuding* means "deliberate and systematic exclusion of an individual who was once included in the group" (Anderson, 2009). Ostracism, observed among all living things living in a community and in social relations with each other, is also common in working life, which is a part of social life (Hales et al., 2016; Zhao et al., 2013; Robinson, et al., 2013; Ferris et al., 2008; Hitlan et al., 2006; Fox and Stallworth, 2005). Ostracism is a ubiquitous phenomenon, it occurs in various social environments and creates negative effects on individuals (Ramsey & Jones, 2016). It is a part of individuals' lives and is a phenomenon they can encounter throughout their lives. Every individual can be exposed to ostracism throughout his/her life and can potentially be the source of ostracism (Williams, Cheung and Choi, 2000). Ostracism can have negative mental and physical effects on individuals and cause organizational problems as well

(Lustenberger & Jagacinski, 2010; Yang, 2012; Robinson et al., 2013; Williams, 2007a; Zhao & Xia, 2017). These negative outcomes increase the importance of ostracism that we commonly encounter in organizations.

## **2.1. Types of Ostracism**

While the types of ostracism in organizations are classified in different ways, they are primarily divided into physical, social and cyber/virtual ostracism (Harvey et al., 2018: 3). Physical ostracism involves distancing or removing yourself or others from a social situation. Other forms of physical ostracism include expulsion, exile, and lonesome privacy (Harvey et al., 2018: 3). Social ostracism is considered as a comprehensive phenomenon that indicates being left alone in any type of relationship and not being included social communication (Williams, 2007). Social exclusion is sometimes defined as direct declaration of dislike, a humiliation statement, or simply being left alone or isolated which may occur without the previous behaviors (Twenge et al., 2001).

### **2.1. 1. Social Ostracism**

Social ostracism, interpersonal rejection, maltreatment and exclusion have been the focus of organizational studies (Balliet and Ferris, 2013; Zhao et al., 2013). It leads to a great deal of adverse consequences both in organizational and individual level as it causes social pain (Chung, 2008). Ostracism is described as "the extent of one's perception of being ignored or ostracized by others in a workplace" (Ferris et al., 2008). It threatens the fundamental requirements of self-esteem, the need for belonging, control and meaningful existence. Organizational ostracism studies report that it can be caused by any organizational member including auditors, in-group or out-of-group coworker or customer. However, the perception of being ostracized is subjective. The ostracized individual at a workplace could behave in a police and behavioral way to his/her colleagues (Ferris, 2015; Zhao et al., 2013). Such adverse outcomes affect one's ability to sustain life, health, job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behavior (Wu et al., 2013). However, many studies concentrated on this aspect and reported its effects on interpersonal behaviors, civil conduct and organizational performance (Balliet and Ferris, 2013; Zhao, 2017; Wu et al., 2013). Researchers have recently paid more attention to the overall effect on organizational progress (Zhao, 2017). These studies have promoted the importance of social ties in organizations (Wesselmann et al., 2013).

Social ostracism is considered to be an overarching phenomenon that points to being left alone in any context and lack of social interaction with one (Williams, 2007). There is a

relation or interaction between ostracized and ostracizing individuals or groups that goes on for a while over the course of social ostracism. At some point of that relation or interaction, the group or the individual explicitly tells the ostracized person that he/she is not liked or wanted, and ends relations with him/her or starts to keep him/her out of the group (Twenge et al., 2001).

When it comes to psychological ostracism described as a state of being ignored or disregarded, ostracized people think their current state would not improve under the circumstances or they could not develop new relations. As a result, they may have a feeling that they fail to build social relations. Therefore, psychologically-ostracized individuals feel pain as they cannot clearly get a positive feedback from their relations with other individuals or groups (Molden et al., 2009).

The prevalence of imposing ostracism is categorized in two groups: Fully and partially. In case of full ostracism, an individual is both ignored by all members, and excluded from all group activities (Williams, Sommer, 1997). In case of partial ostracism, an individual is ignored by some members of the group and partially excluded from group activities (Chen & Williams, 2007; Jones et al., 2009). Williams (1997) reports that this form of ostracism can manifest itself in a physical or social manner. Physical ostracism is described as desolation (seclusion), exile or time-out in a separate room. Social ostracism is being ostracized with the presence of others (Williams & Sommer, 1997). This form of ostracism blocks meeting four basic needs of people and leads to negative feelings in them (Williams, 2009). The needs that are blocked are:

- Need for self-esteem,
- Need for belonging,
- Need for control
- Need for meaningful existence (Williams, 2007).

### **2.2.2. Cyber Ostracism**

Cyber ostracism is defined as observed or perceived ostracism in non-face to face forms of communication. These include not responding to e-mails, social media, Whatsapp groups, or phone calls, or being neglected over the Internet. Cyber ostracism can be more or less annoying than social or physical ostracism. It is also more ambiguous (for example, ostracism may be intentional or may be due to a technological problem) and lacks the ease of explaining such situations in face-to-face communication (Williams et al., 2000: 750).

Cyber ostracism can occur in organizations as follows:

- Ignoring social media connection requests.
- Not responding to e-mails.

- Colleagues' antipathetic behavior for comments.
- Being removed from a friends list.
- Not being included into groups.
- Regular reset or deletion of passwords within the management.
- Not being included in new software applications (Harvey et al., 2018: 45)

In his model, Williams (2009) stated that business units and virtual communication may be associated with both increased cyber ostracism and feelings of exclusion and decreased sense of belonging. In addition, certain aspects of organizational culture, such as competitiveness, can lead to ostracism. Employees who focus on their own results in competitive organizations can ostracize others intentionally or unintentionally in order to obtain valuable resources. Moreover, ignoring colleagues can be normative and even approved as part of organizational culture. That is, it can be tolerated or modeled by managers when others are excluded and then copied by subordinates (Gamian et al., 2018: 14-14).

When organizational outcomes are examined around these classifications; ostracism behaviors are considered as potential determinants of both organizational and personal factors (Gamian et al., 2018: 14). People who are in any way different from the group norms are in danger of being ignored or rejected. It has been stated that some personal characteristics such as low self-esteem, high neuroticism, low compatibility, and low expression are associated with organizational ostracism (Gamian et al., 2018: 14). In this context, it has been determined in the literature that the personality traits of both employers and employees have an effect on ostracism status (Wang, 2014: 7). Gender is considered an important personal factor that leads to differences in organizational ostracism. However, it is not possible to make a clear generalization based on gender (McCarty, 2015: 2). Another personal factor that leads to organizational ostracism is age. It is stated that adults are more affected by ostracism than compared to young children and adolescents. This is attributed to the continued development of social cognition in the brain during adolescence (Tutar et al., 2018: 182).

Further research should also focus not just on targeted employees but on sources of ostracism and observers as well, in addition to the negative effects of ostracism on the whole organization. As the literature on workplace bullying suggests, negative activities cause severe damage to the whole organization in the form of increased absenteeism, lowered job performance and higher employee turnover (Hoel, Sheehan, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2011). It is possible that silent treatment and exclusion at the workplace can also damage an organization's image and generate real monetary costs.

The causes of cyber ostracism are analyzed in organizations in two aspects in: Purposeful/intentional and non-purposeful/unintentional

#### **2.2.2.1. Unintentional ostracism**

Researchers argue that ostracized individuals are not aware of the fact that they exhibit ostracizing behaviors in some cases. An ostracizing person/persons may be distracted, confused or preoccupied and forget about someone else without even realizing it. For instance, a group of people who go on a lunch may forget inviting one of their friends as this person may work somewhere else or be new in the workplace. In this case, nobody has any harmful intention or any intention at all. This is one of the intentional causes (Gök, 2020).

#### **2.2.2.2. Intentional ostracism**

It is reported that ostracism is intentionally imposed in organizations. If the work commitment of an ostracized person is poor, the cognitive cost of ostracism tends to be far less. This is because social relations of such people in a workplace are poor. Therefore, being indifferent to them or exhibiting other ostracizing behaviors do not affect them much. On the other hand, intentional ostracism serve to change/remove conflict solutions and response to conflicts or behaviors considered to be abnormal (Robinson, O'Reilly and Wang, 2013).

### **3. Effect of Cyber Ostracism on Organizational Ostracism**

Organizational ostracism, which is the breach of social norms that must be adopted in a workplace, manifests itself in the form of keeping quiet, refraining from talking and avoiding eye contact, distantiation and keeping essential information back (Williams, 2001; Li and Tian, 2016; Mlika et al., 2017). Organizational ostracism is a phenomenon that causes "social pain" that people may experience at least once in their career and on a regular basis in some cases (Eisenberger, Lieberman and Williams, 2003; MacDonald and Leary, 2005; Ferris et al., 2008; Nezlek, Wesselmann, Wheeler and Williams 2015). Social pain is characterized by isolation that one keeps to himself/herself, refrains from sharing with others and in time ends up having the urge to protect himself/herself.

Ostracism, rejection or ignorance of a person (or a group) by another person (or another group) is described as blocking one's interpersonal relations, success in career or positive self-esteem (Hitlan et al., 2006: 217). Therefore, organizational ostracism includes behaviors that disconnect one from valuable interpersonal relations in a workplace, from coworkers for instance, superiors or social friendship in general and that yet qualify for the active and official

breach of labor contract. In addition, it blocks the completion of tasks and efficient cooperation at work, and thus adversely affects individual and organizational efficiency, too (Hitland et al., 2006).

### **3.1. Macro-Organizational Variables That Affect Cyber Ostracism**

Several organizational factors are related to workplace ostracism. Taking macroorganizational features into consideration, Robinson and Schabram (2017) highlighted organizational structure, organizational culture and organizational diversity in relation to ostracism. It is necessary to gather empirical data to determine the risks of these various factors for promoting ostracism. Future research should thus concentrate on completing longitudinal studies that would demonstrate both causal and reverse-causal directions.

#### **3.1.1. Organizational structure**

Organizational structure stands for delegation, organization and coordination of tasks and roles. First of all, ostracism may be affected by physical positions of employees in an organization. The extent of delegation among departments, and the number of telecommunication and virtual employees may affect the likelihood of ostracism. It is established that the ability of employees to work from a distance enhances the sense of isolation and quitting (Harpaz, 2002).

#### **3.1.2. Culture**

Organizational culture stands for common values and norms, attitudes and behaviors. Culture, therefore, can affect ostracism in a few different ways. While many aspects of culture are well-established, the common aspect is whether or not it projects the competitive or collaborative conduct of an organization (Deutsch, 1968). Organizations may promote unintentional ostracism. The worst-case scenario is the one where such an environment promotes the competition of individuals to ostracize from valuable sources (Lancaster, 1986). In this case, ostracism is avoided as it would hurt the interests of actors, and punitive ostracism is less likely to emerge due to close relations.

#### **3.1.3. Organizational diversity**

An organization is diverse to the extent of being composed of individuals and groups with various dimensions such as race, cultural background, language, age and gender. Individual members join an organization with different expectations about social interactions based on past cultural experiences inside and outside the organization. Ostracism may occur once there is incoherence with those expectations, and none of the individuals is designed by



an actor. For instance, employees who are heavily invested in their work would suffer from ostracism more than their coworkers who consider their work a paycheck. As those with self-esteem intertwined with their career development consider their work a duty (Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006), they deem ostracism a personal failure (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin and Schwartz, 1997). Other studies suggest that employees with a higher degree of commitment to their organization are more likely to be affected compared to other employees (Gouldner, 1960).

#### **4. Results and Conclusion**

The increasing use of social media and internet applications in the digitalized world has become a part of the lives of employees and thus affects business life. A number of negative situations occurring in the virtual environment result in ostracism and cause the individual to feel excluded from the organization or the group in which he/she is included. This in turn negatively affects the performance and productivity of the employee and negatively affects the output of the organization.

Presence of perceived ostracism in organizations threatens the efficiency and effectiveness of the organizations, and therefore their success; which has made it necessary for organizations to take measures to ensure that employees will not be ostracized. At this point, organization managers have important duties to reduce or eliminate the perception of ostracism in organizations. Organizations that adopt an approach that prioritizes their employees will try to increase their performance by motivating their employees. In addition, organizations that try to prevent behavior that will cause negative outcomes in the organization or take the necessary measures against such behavior will have the upper hand. On the other hand, further studies are needed that managers and interested parties can refer to. In this context, the negative effects of cyber ostracism and the reduction of the perception of ostracism and the attitudes and behaviors that will lead to ostracism in organizations have been discussed in the present study. We are of the opinion that this study may contribute to the relevant parties (sector, enterprises, managers, employees, legislators, etc.) and the literature due to the limited number of studies on this subject.

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