



RESEARCH PAPER

When Social Exclusion Turns Deviant: Workplace Ostracism, Coworker Contact Quality, and Interpersonal Deviance

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of workplace ostracism on interpersonal deviance among banking employees in Pakistan, focusing on coworker contact quality as a mediating relational mechanism. Workplace ostracism is a subtle yet pervasive form of social mistreatment that disrupts interpersonal relationships and organizational norms. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory, exclusion weakens reciprocal exchange relationships, potentially fostering norm-violating behaviors toward colleagues. Using a quantitative three-wave time-lagged design, data were collected from 330 full-time employees in Pakistan's banking sector. Workplace ostracism was measured at Time 1, coworker contact quality at Time 2, and interpersonal deviance at Time 3. Established scales were employed, and mediation analysis was conducted. Workplace ostracism positively predicted interpersonal deviance and negatively predicted coworker contact quality. Coworker contact quality partially mediated this relationship, indicating relational deterioration as a key explanatory pathway. Organizations should cultivate inclusive climates and strengthen coworker interactions to reduce deviance. Proactive relational management is critical in interdependent service environments like banking.

KEYWORDS Workplace Ostracism; Coworker Contact Quality; Interpersonal Deviance; Social Exchange Theory; Banking Sector

Introduction

Organizations are increasingly reliant on collaboration, knowledge sharing and interpersonal coordination to maintain the performance and quality of service. Yet, these relational demands are coexisting with "silent" interpersonal problems that are difficult to observe but expensive in impact - in particular, forms of social exclusion, which undermine cooperation and disrupt everyday operations at work (Howard et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021). Workplace ostracism, or employees' perceptions of being ignored, excluded, or left out, has thus become a focal issue in organizational behavior research because it has a broad and consistent negative impact (Howard et al., 2020; Mohammad et al., 2023).

At the micro-behavioral level, ostracism hurts precisely because it is often unclear and low-visibility, making it possible for it to continue and gradually erode the relational standing of employees. Meta-analytic and systematic review evidence indicates that ostracism at work is linked to a wide range of negative outcomes, such as impaired attitudes, decreased well-being, and increased counterproductive and deviant behavior (Howard et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021). Recent empirical studies have also shown that workplace ostracism is well associated with workplace deviance, and also, importantly, interpersonal deviance-harmful actions directed at coworkers (e.g., insulting others, blaming others, and speaking rudely to others or undermining others) (Hua et al., 2023;

Luo et al., 2022). These behaviors aren't minor; interpersonal deviance harms the coordination of teams, their trust, and their day-to-day effectiveness at performing their job, particularly in interdependent service environments where team members need to rely on their peers to do their job well (Luo et al., 2022; Attia et al., 2025).

To explain why ostracism can manifest itself into interpersonal deviance, the current study roots in Social Exchange Theory (SET). SET suggests that the relationships in the workplace are based on reciprocity norms—that employees respond to the treatment they receive by Functional (returning favorable behavior when the exchanges are fair) and Maladaptive (withdrawing or retreating if the exchanges are violated) (Ahmad et al., 2023; Madison & Kellermanns, 2025; Madison et al., 2025). Ostracism represents a signal of withdrawal of respect and relation investment and is a violation of expected exchange norms, making negative reciprocity more likely. Recent research on the application of exchange logic in an organizational setting emphasizes that when the expectation of reciprocity is not met, employees are more likely to experience norm violations that go against the organization or other employees (Ahmad et al., 2023; Madison & Kellermanns, 2025). Thus, SET provides a coherent basis for predicting that ostracism has the effects of increasing interpersonal deviance through degraded relational exchanges.

However, a key limitation completely in the current literature is that much of what we know about ostracism-to-deviance has been explained primarily through intrapersonal mechanisms (e.g., need frustration, emotional exhaustion, psychological strain), rather than relational mechanisms that operate throughout in everyday coworker's interactions (Luo et al., 2022; Attia et al., 2025). This is an important conceptual issue because ostracism is fundamentally interpersonal; it occurs in relationships and it is carried out through patterns of interaction and non-interaction. Evidence shows that ostracism is related to deviance, but relatively less studies explicitly focus on how ostracism alters the quality of coworker interaction, as it is the most direct relational context in which ostracism operates (Hua et al., 2023; Li et al., 2021).

To address this gap, the current study is centered around coworker contact quality (the perceived positivity, respectfulness, and constructiveness of interactions with coworkers) as a relational mechanism that links ostracism to interpersonal deviance. According to research studies on coworker interaction and contact quality, high-quality coworkers offer support, and social functioning and cooperative behavior are enhanced by high-quality contact while low-quality contact breaks down the support and undermines relationship norms (Burmeister et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). In addition, scholarship using "contact quality with coworkers" approaches explicitly recognize it as a meaningful measure of social resources available through peer interactions, with downstream behavioral implications (Zhang et al., 2022; Amir et al., 2021). From a SET perspective, ostracism should negatively affect the quality of coworker contact due to the exclusion of exclusion opportunities and communique devaluation - both of which negatively affect reciprocal exchange relationships (Ahmad et al., 2023; Madison & Kellermanns, 2025). Reduced quality of contact then increases interpersonal deviance through interpersonal obligations and constraints on harmful peer-directed behavior (Hua et al., 2023; Attia et al., 2025).

This mechanism is particularly important in collectivist and relationship-oriented contexts where the importance of social inclusion and group belonging is central to working within society. Research that compares cultural contexts that include Pakistan will often highlight that relationship structures and social harmony norms are especially important for behavior in the workplace that makes exclusion and relationship

breakdown more consequential (e.g. comparative Pakistan- China cultural framing) (Ali et al., 2025). As such, in Pakistan where interpersonal relationships and workplace relationships are frequently crucial for coordination and support, the relational disruptions could also be more closely associated with harmful interpersonal consequences than in highly individualistic settings (Ali et al., 2025). At the same time, workplace deviance has been underlined as a continuing organization problem in the public and general institutional settings in Pakistan, preserving the practical significance of research into its relationships antecedents (Chaudhary et al., 2025).

Beyond the conceptual and contextual gaps, there is a methodological limitation too. A substantial portion of research on workplace mistreatment and deviance is based on cross sectional self reports research designs, which are prone to the problems of overestimating associations due to common method bias and undermining confidence regarding causal ordering (Podsakoff et al., 2012; Podsakoff et al., 2024). To overcome these concerns, the current study uses a three-wave time-lagged research design with time separation between the predictor, mediator, and outcome, following the best practice in reducing method bias in organizational survey research (Podsakoff et al., 2012; Podsakoff et al., 2024).

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between work organization ostracism and interpersonal deviance by testing the mediating mechanism of coworker contact quality using the Social Exchange Theory. This is a study which contributes in three ways. First, it broadens SET by qualifying a relational pathway of exclusionary treatment violating the reciprocal exchange of coworkers and a rise in peer-directed deviance (Ahmad et al., 2023; Madison & Kellermanns, 2025). Second, it advances the research on workplace ostracism by refocusing the explanation on a coworker-interaction mechanism, conceptually closer to the nature of ostracism itself (Li et al., 2021; Hua et al., 2023), rather than on strictly intrapersonal mechanisms. Third, it presents evidence from an under-researched emerging economy context in which the dynamics of relationships are particularly at the forefront, which also reinforces the contextual validity and contextual understanding of ostracism- deviance mechanisms (Ali et al., 2025; Chaudhary et al., 2025).

Literature Review

Social Exchange Theory

This study is based on Social Exchange Theory (SET), which assumes that social behavior in organizations occurs through norms of reciprocity, mutual obligation and balanced relationships of exchange (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017). According to SET, employees assess the degree to which they are treated by others and respond by adapting their attitudes and behavior. When they feel treated fairly, respectfully, and inclusively, people are likely to respond with their own cooperative and prosocial behaviors. Conversely, when treatment is perceived as unfair or exclusionary the employees are more likely to withdraw positive behaviors or engage in negative reciprocity, including deviance (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Ahmad et al., 2023).

Workplace ostracism is a blatant violation of social exchange norms as it indicates relational devaluation and withdrawal of social resources including attention, respect, and interaction (Ferris et al., 2008; Howard et al., 2020). Such exclusion compromises the perception of employees about equal exchange relations and reduces the sense of responsibility to maintain the interpersonal rules or norms. Recent research examining

the use of SET in mistreatment situations suggests that outcasted employees may respond with exclusionary treatment in a retaliatory or norm-violating manner towards the coworkers instead of towards the organization in general (Luo et al., 2022; Hua et al., 2023). Thus, SET presents a strong theoretical framework for understanding the mechanisms of transformation from workplace ostracism to interpersonal deviance.

Workplace Ostracism and Interpersonal Deviance

Interpersonal deviance relates to voluntary behaviors in which norms are not respected and workplace rules are directly violated and affect other organizational members, like being rude at work, disrespectful, withholding cooperation, or intentionally undermining co-workers (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). Unlike organizational deviance, which is aimed at the organization as an abstract entity, interpersonal deviance is played out within the context of day-to-day social interactions and is therefore thoroughly embedded in relationship dynamics. As such, it is a quite relevant behavioral outcome when considering social mistreatment phenomena that occur at the interpersonal level.

From a Social Exchange Theory (SET) angle, interpersonal deviance can be viewed as a form of negative-reciprocity which is caused by perceived violations of norms of exchange (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017). SET assumes that relationships in workplaces are regulated by an implicit understanding of mutual respect, inclusion, and reciprocity. When these expectations are met, employees are inspired to engage in cooperative and respectful interactions. However, when employees feel that they are being treated unfairly or are being cut off from, they are likely to restore the balance in the exchange relationship by decreasing positive behaviors or engaging in retaliatory behaviors. Interpersonal deviance can therefore be a behavioral response whereby employee's reciprocate perceived social mistreatment.

Workplace ostracism is a particularly powerful breach of social exchange norms because it is the withdrawal of social interaction, attention, and acknowledgment - all of which are essential social resources that enable exchange relationships to thrive (Ferris et al., 2008; Howard et al., 2020). Being ignored or excluded sends messages of personal devaluation in the form of relational exclusion, and a message that the ostracized employee is no longer a worthwhile exchange partner in the social system of the workplace. This withdrawal interferes with anticipated patterns of reciprocity and undermines the motivation of employees to follow interpersonal norms of civility and cooperation.

Importantly, ostracism stands in contrast to overt mistreatment in that it is ambiguous, indirect and difficult to confront, thereby potentially compounding its behavioral consequences. Often ostracism does not have a clear perpetrator or explicit incident, so ostracized employees may feel frustrated, resentful, and lose their sense of social obligation, without having formal avenues for redress (Howard et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2022). In such situations interpersonal deviance becomes a psychologically- and socially-accessible way of responding to exclusion to provide a way for employees to express discontent and reestablish perceived equity in their immediate social environment.

Empirical research has consistently supported the relationship between the workplace ostracism and deviant behavior. Recent research shows that ostracized employees have a higher propensity to engage in interpersonal deviance that involves

incivility, hostility, and counter-normative interactions with coworkers (Luo et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2022). These behaviors are not random or indiscriminate but rather are often directed at other peers reflecting the violation that initially occurred in the relational domain. This pattern is in line with SET's proposition that reciprocity tends to occur in the same exchange domain, hence interpersonal deviance being a theoretically congruent response to social exclusion (Hua et al., 2023).

Moreover, interpersonal deviance may have a symbolical function for ostracized employees by signaling resistance to exclusion and restoring agency in social interchanges. When employees feel they have been denied the inclusion and respect they deserve, engaging in deviant interpersonal behavior can undermine social bonds even further, but equally it gives employees a chance to regain more control over interactions that have become unbalanced. In this sense, interpersonal deviance is not simply a dysfunctional behavior but is a predictable outcome of a disrupted exchange relationships of exclusion and social withdrawal (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Luo et al., 2022).

Taken together, Social Exchange Theory postulates that workplace ostracism damages employee motivation to sustain cooperative interpersonal exchanges by violating the norms of inclusion and reciprocity. As a result, ostracized employees are more likely to engage in interpersonal deviance as a type of negative reciprocity in the same relational domain in which the mistreatment occurred.

Hypothesis 1: Workplace ostracism is positively related to interpersonal deviance.

Coworker Contact Quality and Interpersonal Deviance

While, ostracism in the workplace has a direct effect on interpersonal deviance through negative reciprocity, Social Exchange Theory also suggests that such deviant responses seldom occur in a vacuum. Instead, violations of exchange norms first change the quality of ongoing social exchanges, which shape subsequent behavioral reactions. In the case of ostracism at work, effective employees' day-to-day exchanges with colleagues are the first and foremost relationships that are influenced by ostracism. Accordingly, to understand the role of ostracism in interpersonal deviance, one must examine the impact of ostracism on the quality of coworker contact as a key relational mechanism.

Coworker contact quality is the quality of the experiences of positive, natural, and cooperative interactions among employees with coworkers of similar status (Fasbender & Wang, 2017; Fasbender et al., 2020). High-quality contact is considered to be mutual respect, openness and constructive contact while low quality is in the form of strained, superficial or avoidant contact. Importantly, coworker contact quality reflects the relational climate of everyday social exchanges, which makes it a theoretically appropriate construct in explaining how social exclusion translates into behavioral outcomes.

From a Social Exchange Theory perspective coworker contact quality is the continuous embodiment of exchange relationships at work. When interactions with coworkers are positive and cooperative, employees experience that social resources, such as support, respect and inclusion, are being reciprocated, supporting norms of mutual obligation and discouraging norm-violating behavior (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017). In contrast, where contacts are degradation, employees can interpret interactions

with their co-workers as not balanced or not reciprocal, which diminishes their impetus to be civil and co-operative.

Low quality coworker contact weakens informal social controls that usually limit interpersonal deviance. When employees feel apathetic toward others in the workplace, they care less about relational repercussions and are less motivated to safeguard the social bonds they build with others, this increases the probability of rude, disrespectful or undermining behaviors directed at others (Ehrhardt & Ragins, 2019; Luo et al., 2022). Empirical evidence supports this view with deteriorated coworker interactions associated with higher levels of interpersonal conflict, incivility and deviant behavior (Zhang et al, 2022; Attia et al, 2025).

Moreover, coworker contact quality is particularly relevant in the explanation of interpersonal deviance because it is in the same relational domain as the outcome. SET assumes a hypothesized domain specificity of reciprocity, i.e., that violations in social exchanges are most likely to generate behavioral responses in social interactions at the expense of abstract organizational targets (Croppanzano et al., 2017; Hua et al., 2023). As such, when the quality of coworker contact is negative, interpersonal deviance becomes a more likely response because employees feel less relational obligations and decreased incentives to control their behavior towards peers.

Taken together, these arguments suggest that a critical role of coworker contact quality is in the development of interpersonal deviance. When the quality of contacts is low, employees are more likely to engage in behaviour that contravenes interpersonal norms and that harms coworkers.

Hypothesis 2: Coworker contact quality is negatively related to interpersonal deviance.

The Mediating Role of Coworker Contact Quality

Integrating the above arguments, this study proposes that coworker contact quality mediates the relationship between ostracism at work and interpersonal deviance. Social Exchange Theory (SET) offers a happening basis for this indirect effect since it emphasizes that responses to interpersonal treatment are affected through altering exchange relationships, reciprocity expectations, and perceived obliges (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Ahmad et al., 2023).

Workplace ostracism - experiences of being ignored or excluded by employees indicates a disregard of the relational value and social resources, hence a breach of the norms of inclusion and reciprocity given to workplace exchange (Ferris et al., 2008; Howard et al., 2020). Because ostracism is carried out through non-interaction (e.g. avoidance, silence, exclusion), it is expected to weaken the quality of everyday exchanges employees have with coworkers, reducing opportunities for positive, cooperative, and meaningful interaction (Howard et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2022). Consistent with this logic, the quality of coworker contact reflects employees' experiences of positive, natural, and cooperative interactions with coworkers and captures the strength of relational ties in daily peer interactions (Fasbender & Wang, 2017; Fasbender et al., 2020).

Once the quality of coworkers contacts fails, the relational context that typically constrains harmful behavior is compromised. High-quality coworker contact leads to a sense of trust, mutual respect, and informal social controls that foster adherence to the norms, while lower-quality contact leads to a lack of relational commitment and lowered

felt obligation to behave courteously and cooperatively toward peers (Ehrhardt & Ragins, 2019; Cropanzano et al., 2017). Under SET, the lower quality of exchanges leads to decreased motivation to reciprocate positively and an increased possibility for negative reciprocity via behavior in violation of interpersonal norms (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Luo et al., 2022). Accordingly, lower coworker contact quality should increase the likelihood of interpersonal deviance, i.e., rude, disrespectful, or undermining behavior toward coworkers (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Luo et al., 2022; Hua et al., 2023).

Importantly, the notion of coworker contact quality as a mediator seems consistent with the domain-consistent reciprocity logic of SET: Insofar as the original violation occurs in the interpersonal exchange domain (ostracism), behavioral reactions are likely to occur within the same relational domain (interpersonal deviance), especially in terms of deterioration in daily coworker exchanges (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Hua et al., 2023). This mediation approach develops the ostracism literature by moving explanation away from purely intrapersonal reactions to a more relational mechanism that is more conceptually related to the nature of ostracism itself (Howard et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021).

Based on these arguments, coworker contact quality is expected to transmit the effect of workplace ostracism to interpersonal deviance.

Hypothesis 3: Coworker contact quality mediates the relationship between workplace ostracism and interpersonal deviance.

Conceptual Framework

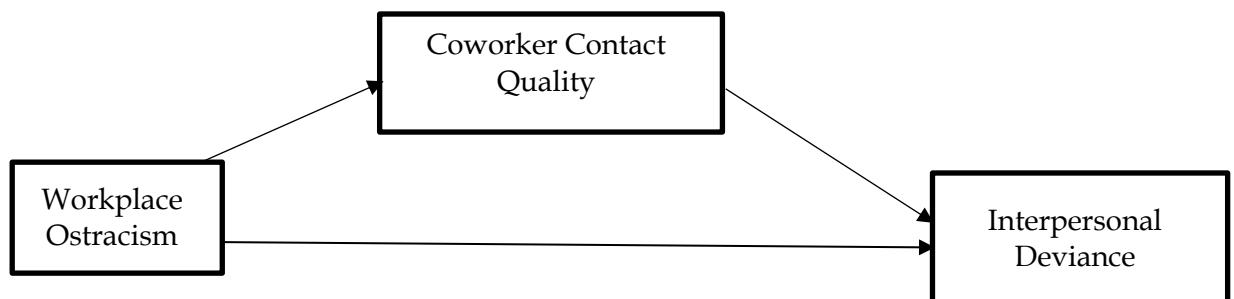


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Material and Method

Research Design

The design used in this study was a time-lagged survey which helped test the role of mediating variable of coworker contact quality in the link between workplace ostracism and interpersonal deviance. As a design, time-lagged design was used to boost the causal inference and diminish the effects connected with the common method bias through the temporal isolation of the measurement of predictor, mediator, and outcome variables (Podsakoff et al., 2012; Podsakoff et al., 2024). This is a well-liked design decision in the field of organizational behavior studies, specifically the mediation models based on a social exchange process, which takes time to develop (Hayes, 2018; Wang et al., 2017).

The reason is that data were collected in three waves, each four weeks of time had passed between them. Workplace ostracism and demographic variables at Time 1 were measured. At Time 2, quality of coworker contact had been tested. The interpersonal deviance was assessed at Time 3. This sequence over time is an indicator of the speculated causal order based on the Social Exchange Theory in which ostracism breaks exchange relations that in turn influence deviant behavior patterns.

Sample and Procedure

Full-time workers in the banking industry of Pakistan were used as the data collection source. The banking industry was viewed as a suitable setting, as employees work in highly interdependent and service-focused settings with social exclusion and contact quality being of utmost feature to understand employee behavior (Howard et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2022). Through a structured questionnaire through organizational contacts and professional networks in commercial banks, a structured questionnaire was used to recruit participants. The participants also reported unique identification code using standardized requirements to correspond to responses over the three survey waves maintaining anonymity. The study was voluntary and the respondents were assured that their answers would stay confidential and not be employed in any other way other than academic research. When it was Time 1, 450 questionnaires were sent to employees fitting the following inclusion criteria (a) full-time workplace in an organization of the banking sector and (b) frequent contact with their colleagues. This created 392 responses that were usable. Questionnaires were then used at Time 2 when only respondents who were able to respond to the survey at Time 1 were administered with 356 responses being used. At Time 3, 330 complete and matched questionnaires were received, and they constituted the final sample ($N = 330$). The attrition analysis showed that the groups of respondents who completed all three waves, and those who dropped out did not differ in terms of common demographic characteristics, which is in line with advice on longitudinal survey research (Wang et al., 2017).

Measures

All constructs were measured using established scales that have demonstrated reliability and validity in prior research. Unless otherwise stated, responses were recorded on Likert-type scales.

Workplace Ostracism

Workplace ostracism was measured using the widely used scale developed by Ferris et al. (2008). The scale captures employees' perceptions of being ignored, excluded, or left out by others at work. Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A sample item is: "*Others at work ignored me.*" The scale has been extensively validated and used in recent ostracism research (Howard et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2022).

Coworker Contact Quality

Coworker contact quality was measured using the three-item scale developed by Fasbender and Wang (2017) and further validated by Fasbender et al. (2020). This scale assesses employees' experiences of positive, natural, and cooperative interactions with coworkers of similar status. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A sample item is: "*My interactions with my coworkers are cooperative.*" This measure captures the relational quality of daily

coworker exchanges, making it particularly suitable for testing social exchange based mediation.

Interpersonal Deviance

Interpersonal deviance was measured using the interpersonal deviance subscale developed by Bennett and Robinson (2000). The scale assesses behaviors that violate interpersonal norms and harm coworkers, such as rudeness or disrespect. Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (daily). A sample item is: *"I acted rudely toward someone at work."* This scale has been widely used in deviance research and remains the dominant operationalization in contemporary studies (Luo et al., 2022; Hua et al., 2023).

Control Variables

Consistent with prior research, several demographic variables were included as controls to rule out alternative explanations. These included gender, age, and organizational tenure, as these factors have been shown to relate to workplace deviance and interpersonal behavior (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Wu et al., 2022). All control variables were measured at Time 1.

Analytical Strategy

The hypothesized mediation model was tested using PROCESS Macro (version 5.0) for SPSS, Model 4, as developed by Hayes (2018). PROCESS Model 4 is specifically designed to estimate indirect effects in simple mediation models using observed variables and is widely accepted in SSCI-indexed organizational research (Hayes, 2018; Sarstedt et al., 2023).

Indirect effects were estimated using 5,000 bootstrap samples, and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals were computed. An indirect effect was considered statistically significant if the confidence interval did not include zero. Consistent with recommendations, the direct effect of workplace ostracism on interpersonal deviance was included in the model to avoid inflated mediation estimates (MacKinnon et al., 2002; Hayes, 2018).

Common Method Bias

Several procedural and statistical remedies were employed to mitigate common method bias. Procedurally, predictor, mediator, and outcome variables were collected at different points in time, and respondents were assured of anonymity to reduce evaluation apprehension (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Statistically, Harman's single-factor test was conducted, and no single factor accounted for the majority of variance, suggesting that common method bias was unlikely to pose a serious threat.

Results and Discussion

Sample Characteristics

The final sample consisted of 330 full-time employees working in commercial banks in Pakistan. Of the respondents, 210 (63.6%) were male and 120 (36.4%) were female. Participants had a mean age of 34.8 years ($SD = 7.6$) and an average organizational tenure of 6.2 years ($SD = 4.1$). With respect to education, 186 respondents

(56.4%) held a bachelor's degree, whereas 144 respondents (43.6%) held a master's degree or higher. These characteristics indicate a mature and experienced sample suitable for examining interpersonal processes and deviant workplace behaviors. (See Table 1)

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 330)

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	210	63.6
	Female	120	36.4
Age (years)	≤ 25	42	12.7
	26–30	78	23.6
	31–40	124	37.6
	> 40	86	26.1
Education	Bachelor's	186	56.4
	Master's or above	144	43.6
Organizational tenure	≤ 5 years	138	41.8
	6–10 years	122	37.0
	> 10 years	70	21.2

Note. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations among the study variables. Workplace ostracism had a mean of 3.42 ($SD = 1.21$), coworker contact quality had a mean of 3.61 ($SD = 0.78$), and interpersonal deviance had a mean of 2.67 ($SD = 1.04$). Workplace ostracism was positively correlated with interpersonal deviance ($r = .46, p < .01$) and negatively correlated with coworker contact quality ($r = -.41, p < .01$). Coworker contact quality was negatively correlated with interpersonal deviance ($r = -.39, p < .01$). All correlations were in the expected directions and below thresholds that would indicate multicollinearity concerns (See Table 2).

Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Workplace Ostracism	3.42	1.21	—		
2. Coworker Contact Quality	3.61	0.78	-.41**	—	
3. Interpersonal Deviance	2.67	1.04	.46**	-.39**	—

Note. N = 330. ** $p < .01$.

Hypothesis Testing (Direct Effects)

Hypotheses were tested using PROCESS Macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap samples, controlling for gender, age, and organizational tenure. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, workplace ostracism was positively associated with interpersonal deviance ($\beta = .38, SE = .05, t = 7.60, p < .001$). Supporting Hypothesis 2, coworker contact quality was negatively associated with interpersonal deviance ($\beta = -.29, SE = .06, t = -4.83, p < .001$) (see Table 3).

Table 3
Regression Results for Direct Effects

Predictor	Outcome	β	SE	T	p
Workplace Ostracism	Interpersonal Deviance	.38	.05	7.60	< .001

Coworker Contact Quality	Interpersonal Deviance	-.29	.06	-4.83	< .001
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Note. Control variables (gender, age, tenure) included but not shown.

Mediation Analysis (PROCESS Model 4)

The mediating role of coworker contact quality was examined using bootstrapping procedures. Results indicated that workplace ostracism was negatively related to coworker contact quality ($\beta = -.41$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$). Coworker contact quality, in turn, was negatively related to interpersonal deviance ($\beta = -.29$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect of workplace ostracism on interpersonal deviance through coworker contact quality was significant (Effect = .12, Boot SE = .03), with a 95% confidence interval that did not include zero (LLCI = .06, ULCI = .19). Because the direct effect of workplace ostracism on interpersonal deviance remained significant, the results indicate partial mediation, supporting Hypothesis 3 (see Table 4).

Table 4
Mediation Results (PROCESS Model 4)

Path	Effect	Boot SE	LLCI	ULCI
Ostracism → Contact Quality	-.41	.07	-.55	-.28
Contact Quality → Deviance	-.29	.06	-.41	-.18
Indirect Effect	.12	.03	.06	.19

Note. Bootstrapping based on 5,000 samples. LLCI = lower-level confidence interval; ULCI = upper-level confidence interval.

Model Summary

The mediation model explained 17% of the variance in coworker contact quality ($R^2 = .17$) and 31% of the variance in interpersonal deviance ($R^2 = .31$), indicating meaningful explanatory power for interpersonal deviant behavior grounded in social exchange processes (see Table 5).

Table 5
Model Summary Statistics

Outcome Variable	R ²	F
Coworker Contact Quality	.17	22.14**
Interpersonal Deviance	.31	38.76**

** $p < .01$.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to investigate the extent that workplace ostracism is translated into interpersonal deviance by concentrating on the quality of contact between coworkers as a mediating mechanism based on Social Exchange Theory (SET). The results provide a relational account of the behavioral effects of social exclusion, and are a promising addition to the expanding literature on the social and interactional nature of mistreatment in the workplace (Howard et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021).

Consistent with an expectations derivation based on SET, ostracism at work was found to be positively related to interpersonal deviance. This finding supports the idea that when employees perceive exclusion or social neglect, they perceive such treatment as a violation of reciprocity exchange norms which suppress their motivation to comply with interpersonal standards of respect and cooperation (Crapanzano et al., 2017; Ahmad et al., 2023). Interpersonal deviance thus becomes a form of negative reciprocity, which

employees could express behaviorally in the same social domain as the one where the mistreatment occurred. This result is consistent with previous empirical evidence of the relationship between ostracism at work and deviant behaviour in the workplace, and shows that it applies to peer-directed deviance within interdependent settings of services (Luo et al., 2022; Hua et al., 2023).

The results further suggest the relationship between the quality of coworker contact and interpersonal deviance is negative. High-quality coworker interactions-enhanced by cooperation and respect, and naturally engaging, even seem to operate as forms of informal social control - to discourage norm-violating behavior (Ehrhardt & Ragins, 2019; Zhang et al., 2022). When the quality of coworker contact declines, relationships weaken, and employees often feel less committed to managing their behavior in relationships with coworkers, leading to greater potential for interpersonal deviance. This finding supports research that calls out the central importance of everyday coworker interactions for influencing employee behavior and preserving interpersonal norms in the workplace (Fasbender et al., 2020; Attia et al., 2025).

More importantly, the results show that coworker contact quality is a partial mediator between workplace ostracism and interpersonal deviance. This mediating effect gives insight in the way in which social exclusion translates into harmful behaviour. Rather than just causing immediate emotional responses to your environment, ostracism indirectly causes deviance by eroding the quality of the social exchanges that employees have with co-workers on a daily basis. As these exchanges become negative, the relational environment becomes less nurturing and less norm-enforcing, and this creates conditions in which deviant interpersonal behavior is more likely to occur (Howard et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021). The finding of partial mediation thus indicates that the consequence of workplace ostracism on interpersonal deviance is both direct and indirect by way of relational degradation, highlighting the multiple nature of social exchange violations.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings contribute to the theoretical development of the workplace ostracism literature by re-enfocusing explanatory attention away from largely intrapersonal mechanisms (e.g., emotional exhaustion, psychological distress) towards relational exchange processes conceptionally more related to the nature of ostracism itself (Wu et al., 2022; Hua et al., 2023). By empirically documenting the quality of coworker contacts as a mediating agent, this research appeals to the calls for research to more explicitly include social interaction dynamics in models of mistreatment and deviance in the workplace.

The context of banking sectors enhances the interpretations of these findings. Banking organizations are defined by high levels of task interdependence, high levels of performance pressures, and high levels of coworker coordination, making interpersonal relationships especially significant to effective functioning. In such environments, social exclusion can be particularly disruptive because it compromises access to important relational resources necessary for carrying out the day-to-day work associated with the job. The results therefore suggest that the relational breakdowns in tight coupling systems (such as service systems) may escalate into deviant interpersonal behavior with potential implications for team effectiveness, service quality, and organizational climate (Luo et al., 2022; Attia et al., 2025).

Overall, the results highlight the fact that ostracism in the workplace should be understood not only as an individually experienced stressor but as a relational

phenomenon with larger behavioral consequences. By showing that the quality of coworker contact deterioration is a key pathway through which ostracism can contribute to interpersonal deviance, the findings in this study provide a more integrative understanding of how social exclusion can affect the behavior of employees over time.

Conclusion

This paper examined workplace ostracism and its impact on interpersonal deviance through the finding of the quality of coworker contacts as one of the crucial methods of relational mechanism. The social exchange approach can help understand the findings as ostracism in the workplace does not simply exist as an individual issue, but it is a relationship phenomenon resulting in a change in interactions between coworkers at the workplace and ultimately leading to the behavior of employees. Once the individual employees feel social exclusion, their communication with the fellow employees becomes worse and as a result, the interpersonal norms are undermined and the people are more likely to find themselves involved in deviant behavior towards their fellow employees.

The research is a contribution to a more multifaceted image of mistreatment at work since it shows that behavioral consequences of being ostracized lie in the changes in relational exchange processes rather than being an effect of the immediate psychological responses. By so doing, it puts into light the significance of comprehending the significance of everyday interactions and social interactions towards the realization of the consequence of behaviours in organizations.

The concentration on the sphere of banking provides us with additional understanding of how these processes take place in highly interdependent and performance-driven service setting. The results indicate the need to maintain a positive and healthy coworker interactions which are not only significant to the well-being of the employee, but also to the prevention of behaviors that may destroy teamwork, quality of service and organizations that operate.

In general, this study highlights the relevance of social inclusion and quality of relational exchange in influencing the workplace behaviours. Identifying coworker contact quality as one of the primary peer-to-peer investigative opportunities that bind ostracism to the social deviance experienced, the study gives information about the mechanics of social exclusion at the organizational level and prescription towards creating a setting that encourages inclusive and collaborative work environments. **Theoretical Contributions**

This study makes several important theoretical contributions to the literature on workplace ostracism, interpersonal deviance and the Social Exchange Theory (SET). First, it makes a contribution to ostracism research in that it offers a relational explanation for how social exclusion translates into deviant behaviour in the workplace. While previous research has largely focused on intrapersonal mechanisms, such as emotional exhaustion, need frustration, or psychological distress, to explain the effects of ostracism at work (Howard et al, 2020; Wu et al, 2022), the current research shows that alterations in coworker exchange relationships are a crucial mechanism through which ostracism impacts behavior. The finding of coworker contact quality as a mediating mechanism brings this research closer to aligning with theoretical explanation with the inherently social nature of ostracism (Li et al., 2021, Hua et al., 2023). While prior research has increasingly relied on complex process models to explain the behavioral consequences of workplace mistreatment such as moderated mediation frameworks linking abusive

supervision to individual and team-level outcomes (Tariq et al., 2025), the present study advances this stream by isolating a relational exchange mechanism through which workplace ostracism translates into interpersonal deviance.

Second, this research extends Social Exchange Theory by empirically showing how ingroup's violation of exchange norms at the interpersonal level spreads through the behavior patterns of daily interactions to determine behavioral consequences. Another important idea is that SET states that employees react to the perceived imbalance in reciprocity by adjusting their behaviours accordingly (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017). The current research highlights this process by demonstrating the link between ostracism at work and the quality of coworker interactions - this in turn contributes to the weakening of informal social controls, leading to greater interpersonal deviance. In doing so, the study helps to clarify the mechanistic role of exchange quality as an intervening construct of mistreatment and negative reciprocity in enhancing contemporary applications of SET in organizational behavior research (Ahmad et al., 2023).

Third, the study adds to the study of deviance in the workplace by focusing on interpersonal deviance as a theoretically congruent result of social exclusion. Much of the deviance literature has focused on organizationally directed behaviors or aggregated counterproductive work behavior (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Luo et al., 2022). By specifically focusing on interpersonal deviance, the present study shows that it is most likely to be manifested in the same relational domain that the mistreatment happened, in line with the domain-specific reciprocity logic of SET (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Hua et al., 2023). This distinction contributes to the literature on deviant behaviors in a more nuanced way by offering a clearer theoretical perspective on how and where deviant behaviors arise in the wake of social exclusion.

Finally, this research adds to the expanding literature on cross-cultural organisational behaviour by presenting evidence from the banking sector, in the context of an emerging economy. Much of the empirical work already conducted on ostracism at work has been carried out in the Western context, which limits the generalizability of the theoretical models (Howard et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021). By showing the applicability of SET-based explanations in the Pakistani banking sector, this study tests the limitations of the ostracism and deviance theories and emphasizes the significance of relational exchange processes in the collectivist and highinterdependence work setting.

Recommendations

The results of this research have some important practical implications for managers, human resources professionals and policy makers of the banking industry where the level of inter-person coordination and service quality is strongly susceptible to effective coworker relationships. First, the positive link between ostracism at work and interpersonal deviance suggests that social exclusion should be taken seriously as a major organizational risk (rather than a minor interpersonal problem) by banks. Because ostracism can be subtle and hard to observe, it's important for managers to learn to identify insidious signs of social exclusion, such as consistent withdrawal, avoidance or breakdown in communication between employees (Howard et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021). Early recognition of such behaviors can help avoid letting the escalation of relational tensions into overtly deviant behavior.

Second, the mediating role of coworker contact quality implies that the negative consequences of ostracism can be offset by banks taking an active role in fostering high quality interactions between coworkers. Human resource practices that foster collaboration, mutual respect, and constructive interaction, like team-based task design, cross-function collaboration and peer mentoring, reinforce everyday exchange relationships and also reinforce interpersonal norms (Fasbender et al., 2020; Ehrhardt & Ragins, 2019). By enhancing the quality of the contact between coworkers on a day-to-day basis, banks may minimize the consequence that individuals will respond to exclusionary experiences by engaging in deviant behavior.

Third, the results highlight the importance of relational climate management within high pressure situations in the service context. Banking organizations are defined by performance goals, customer pressure and regulatory mandates that may amplify stress and indirectly lead to exclusionary practices. Managers should thus focus on inclusive leadership behaviours, such as fair communication, respectful treatment, and fair involvement in decision-making processes, to ensure balanced social exchange relationships between employees (Croppanzano et al., 2017; Ahmad et al., 2023). Such practices can strengthen the sense of reciprocity and belonging among employees in order to minimize motivation for negative reciprocity as in the form of interpersonal deviance.

Fourth, training and development efforts should go beyond the improvement of technical skills and include interpersonal and relationship skills. Programs focused on communication skills, conflict management and respectful workplace behavior can help equip employees with the tools necessary to ensure positive interactions with coworkers, even under the demands of their work. Programs focused on communication skills, conflict management and respectful workplace behavior can help to equip employees with the tools necessary to maintain positive coworker interactions, even under demanding conditions (Zhang et al., 2022). Given that coworker contact quality functions as an important mechanism between ostracism and deviance, investing in relational skill development may have important behavioral benefits.

Finally, at a policy level, banks should include clear guidelines related to ostracism in the workplace as well as interpersonal mistreatment in their codes of conduct and ethical frameworks. Formal reporting and grievance mechanisms may offer constructive alternatives to deviant behavior to employees who are affected by exclusion. By indicating that organizational norms of social inclusion and respectful interaction are valued by the bank, banks can dissuade ostracism and foster healthier exchange relations throughout the organization (Luo et al., 2022).

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged and addressed in future studies. First, despite the use of a three-wave time-lagged design to minimize common method bias and strengthen causal inference, the data are still observational in nature. As such, causal conclusions should be drawn with some hesitation. The researcher should use experimental research or quasi-experimental research in the study to test the hypotheses of the causal effect of workplace ostracism on interpersonal deviance in a more stringent way.

Second, the research employed self-reported. can be liable to social desirability/perceptual biasness, particularly within the scale of deviant behaviors. Even

though, procedure remedies, to alleviate this issue, were implemented but in future research, multi-source data, perhaps supervisor or peer ratings, could be utilized as a way of eliciting a more multifaceted measure of interpersonal deviance and quality of coworker interaction.

Third, the banking industry is highlighted in one national context and this fact renders it more difficult to generalize the results between contexts. Although this context offers a setting that has some theoretical implication, a future study can examine the possibility of similarity in the suggested relationships in other industries, organizational structures or cultural backgrounds. The relative analysis of various industries or nations would help in the identification of the boundary conditions of the model.

Lastly, the quality of coworker contact as a solitary intervening variable was also examined in the study. It may be possible to think of the concept of other mediators or moderators in the future such as leadership behaviors, team climate or person differences to further explain the processes by which work place ostracism influences behavioral outcomes. A longitudinal design with greater time interval can also assist in the process of defining such a dynamic exchange relationship of time.

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