THE IMPACT OF PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT ON WORK ENGAGEMENT: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF WORKPLACE LONELINESS

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Abstract

The current study aims to examine the effect of perceived social support on work engagement and the mediating role of workplace loneliness. Workplace loneliness is the feeling that one's social needs are not being met at work (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). Research on workplace loneliness and perceived social support or employee engagement are very scarce. Social relationships are very important in people's lives, and we have to be aware that we spend most of our time in the workplace. Therefore, if we fail to bear such relationships, we will be apt to feel loneliness. Previous studies (Jung, Song, & Yoon, 2021) showed that workplace loneliness negatively affects job performance, role conflict, and role ambiguity (Senturan, Çetin, & Demiralay, 2017). Moreover, Öge and colleagues (2018) noted that workplace loneliness and work engagement had a negative relationship. The study is based on a cross-sectional design, with data being collected from a convenience sample of 178 participants (48 males, 130 females), aged between 21 and 53 years old (M=30.88, SD=9.00) through the following structured questionnaires: Loneliness at Work Scale (Wright, Burt, & Strongman, 2006), The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988) and The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003). Results showed that workplace loneliness and work engagement had a negative relationship (r=-.570, p<.01). Similarly, workplace loneliness also negatively correlated with perceived social support (r=-.729, p<.01). Also, workplace loneliness was found to be a strong mediator between perceived social support and work engagement. The paper shows that, by increasing the level of social support, leaders could have a strong positive effect on employees' levels of work engagement. Moreover, (reduced) workplace loneliness acts as one of the most important factors in fostering employee work engagement. Practical implications of the recent study are discussed as well as some directions for future research in the area. Future studies can improve the explanatory power of the proposed model by adding new variables that could further explain the link between perceived social support and work engagement such as work alienation, organizational commitment, or organizational citizenship behaviour.

Keywords: Perceived social support, work engagement, workplace loneliness, mediation.

1. Introduction

The last decade, especially the last two to three years, brought a series of social transformations at all levels, with a high impact on the workplace and job-related activities (Guo, 2020). Some of those transformations lead to significant modifications of social relations and interpersonal dynamics (work from home, hybrid, on-site – with a low number of colleagues), which lead to the spread of workplace loneliness. Moreover, the emergence of virtual teams and technology (Teams, Webex, Zoom, etc.) made employees in a position in which they have no need of leaving their place, making interactions between members of the organization difficult to maintain.

Being defined as a common negative emotion in the workplace (Guo, 2020), workplace loneliness usually manifests as a sorrow-like emotion resulting from the lack of interpersonal communication among employees in the work setting (Wright, 2005). Later, Wright and colleagues (2006), included also the individuals' sense of lack of membership and emotional deprivation of the organization. Emotional deprivation is linked with the fact that employees' attachment needs are not satisfied due to poor quality and quantity of interpersonal relationships. Loss of the sense of membership is related to the disconnection from organizational relations and a sense of alienation from the other members of the respective organization (Wright et al., 2006). Previous studies showed that workplace loneliness has a negative impact on both employees and the organizational level (Ozcelik & Barsade,

2018; Peng et al., 2017). Ernst and Cacioppo (1998), pointed out that loneliness has been associated with a series of effects such as depression, hostility, withdrawal, and even alienation. In organizational studies similar effects (anxiety, anger, depression, over-sensitivity) were observed at the individual level, plus a variety of effects at the organizational level such as job satisfaction, turnover intention, attachment, and commitment (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Wright, 2005).

Work engagement is usually defined as an independent, persistent, pervasive, positive, and fulfilling work-related affective–cognitive and motivational–psychological state (Schaufeli et al., 2002). This definition is in line with a series of studies that operationalize work engagement as being a motivational–psychological state with three dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Salanova & Schaufeli, 2008).

The first dimension, vigor, Vigor represents the energy levels and mental resilience of employees, together with the willingness to invest effort in the workplace and persistence when facing difficult tasks or demanding deadlines (González-Romá et al., 2006). The second dimension of work engagement, Dedication, is a measure of the employee's involvement in his/her work, and psychological identification with it, along with strong feelings of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. The third characteristic of engagement is called absorption, which describes an employee's immersion, high level of concentration, and engagement in work such that he/she loses track of time and has difficulties detaching from work (González-Romá et al., 2006).

The core dimensions of work engagement, namely vigor, and dedication (González-Romá et al., 2006), are considered to be the opposite of exhaustion and cynicism, the well-known dimensions of burnout. Moreover, a series of studies (Salanova, Agut, & Peiro´, 2005) have shown that work engagement correlates with both task performance and contextual, extra-role performance (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004). Other studies (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Bakker & Demerouti, 2008) mentioned that a high level of work engagement also correlates with a reduced level of employee turnover and intention to quit.

A large number of studies were focused on studying the possible predictors of work engagement due to its clear importance on both individual and organizational outcomes. Among those, particular attention was paid to perceived social support and all of its forms – perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, perceived coworker support, and less to the multidimensional perceived social support (family, friends, and relevant others). The studies (Ng & Sorensen, 2008; Simosi, 2012) showed that perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, and perceived coworker support are positively related to both job satisfaction and affective commitment. However, some studies (Inoue et al., 2013; Simbula, 2010) showed weak or no effect of those types of perceived support on work engagement.

Following the literature review findings, we propose the following research questions (Figure 1):

RQ1: What relations can be observed between perceived social support and work engagement?

RQ2: What relations can be observed between perceived social support and workplace loneliness?

RQ3: What relations can be observed between workplace loneliness and work engagement?

RQ4: Does workplace loneliness mediate the relation between perceived social support and work engagement?

Figure 1. Conceptual framework
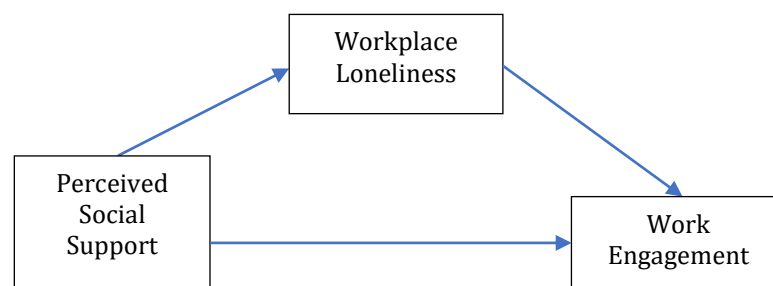
2. Methods

The sample consisted of 178 participants (48 males, and 130 females). The age range of the participants was between 21 and 53 years old (M=30.88, SD=9.00). For data collection, a purposive convenience sampling technique was used. A self-reported data collection technique was employed. Before completion, the purpose of the study was briefly explained to the participants and informed consent was obtained. All participants were ensured about the confidentiality of the data and that it would be only used for research purposes. They were invited to fill in a set of questionnaires compiling the following measures: Loneliness at Work Scale (Wright, Burt, & Strongman, 2006), The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988), and The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003).

Loneliness at Work Scale (Wright, Burt, & Strongman, 2006) is a questionnaire that comprises 16 items structured on 2 dimensions: emotional deprivation and social companionship. Each item consisted of a 5-point Likert Scale with different statements that inquire the extent to which the respondent agrees or disagrees. A response of 1 indicated strongly disagree and 5 indicated strongly agree. The internal consistency coefficient of the composite score was α=.933.

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988) consists of 12 items, covering three dimensions: significant others, family, and friends. The answers are distributed on a seven-options Likert scale from 1 (Very strongly disagree) to 7 (Very strongly agree). The internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's Alpha) was α=.919.

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003) is a 17 items scale distributed on 3 dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption. The answers are spread on a 7-point Likert Scale from 0 (never) to 6 (every day). The internal consistency coefficient of the composite score was α=.949.

3. Results

After collection, the data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0 version software. The analysis of Skewness and Kurtosis coefficients showed a normal distribution of data, therefore, to answer the proposed RQ, the Pearson correlation was used.

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for all the study variables are presented in Table 1. As can be observed, a series of significant positive and negative correlations were identified.

Specifically, to answer our first research question (RQ1: What relations can be observed between perceived social support and work engagement?) the Pearson correlation between the respective variables was computed. The results showed a significant positive correlation (r=.461, p<.01) between perceived social support and work engagement, meaning that, the higher the level of the perceived social support coming from family, friends, or relevant others, the higher the work engagement of employees in terms of vigor, dedication, and absorption.

The answer to the second research question (RQ2: What relations can be observed between perceived social support and workplace loneliness?) was obtained using the Pearson correlation coefficient. The results revealed a strong negative correlation between perceived social support and workplace loneliness (r=-.570, p<.01). Therefore, the higher the level of perceived social support coming from family, friends, or relevant others, the lower the workplace loneliness in terms of emotional deprivation or social companionship.

Regarding the third research question (RQ3: What relations can be observed between workplace loneliness and work engagement?), the Pearson correlation showed similar results (r=-.729, p<.01), the selected variables showing a strong negative correlation. Thus, a high level of workplace loneliness is related to a low level of work engagement.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations of the study variable.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1 Loneliness at work	34.05	13.28	-		
2 Work engagement	67.96	18.02	-.570**	-	
3 Social support	70.37	13.99	-.729**	.461**	-

n=178, **p<0.01

In order to answer our last research question (RQ4: Does workplace loneliness mediate the relation between perceived social support and work engagement?) and to test the mediation model (Preacher & Hayes, 2004), the PROCESS macro for SPSS version 3.5 was used. The model contains perceived social support as a predictor, workplace loneliness as a mediator, and work engagement as an

outcome variable (see Figure 1). The process shows that a change in the predictor variable (perceived social support) leads to a change in the mediator (workplace loneliness) and that change leads to a change in the outcome variable (work engagement). The statistical results related to this mediation process highlight the mediation effect on work engagement: perceived social support -> workplace loneliness -> work engagement (Table 2).

Table 2. Regression results for the first process of mediation.

Model	Coeff.	SE	t	p	CI(lower)	CI(upper)
Without mediator						
PSS -> WE (c)	.5939	.1311	4.5301	.0000	.3328	.8549
With mediator						
PSS -> WL (a)	-.6928	.0745	-9.2971	.0000	-.8412	-.5444
WL -> WE (b)	-.6783	.1874	-3.6188	.0005	-1.0517	-.3049
PSS -> WE (c')	.1240	.1780	.6963	.4884	-.2307	.4786

In Step 1 of the mediation model, the regression of the perceived social support of work engagement, ignoring the mediator, is significant, $F(1,176) = 20.52$, $p < .001$, $R2 = .21$, $b = .59$, $t(176) = 4.53$, $p < .001$. Step 2 shows that the regression of the perceived social support on the mediator, workplace loneliness, is also significant, $F(1,176) = 86.43$, $p <.001$, $R2 = .53$, $b = -.69$, $t(176) = -9.29$, $p < .001$. Step 3 of the mediation process shows that the mediator, workplace loneliness, controlling for perceived social support is significant, $F(2,175) = 18.44$, $R2 = .32$, $p < .001$, $b = -.67$, $t(175) = -3.61$, $p < .001$. Step 4 of the analysis reveals that controlling for the mediator, workplace loneliness, perceived social support score is a less significant predictor of work engagement, $b = .12$, $t(175) =.69$, $p > .005$ than in the previous case.

As suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986), the Aroian version of the Sobel test was conducted, and it was found that workplace loneliness mediates the relation between perceived social support and work engagement ($z = 3.35$, $p = .000$). The same results were obtained for the Goodman version of the Sobel test ($z = 3.39$, $p = .000$).

4. Conclusions

The current study aims to examine the effect of perceived social support on work engagement and the mediating role of workplace loneliness. Results showed that workplace loneliness is a strong mediator in the relationship between perceived social support and work engagement. Therefore, scholars and practitioners should pay attention to the organizational impact of workplace loneliness and implement measures to reduce it. As Peplau and Perlman (1982) or Wright (2005) mentioned, workplace loneliness negatively influences job satisfaction, organizational attachment, and commitment.

Despite the valuable findings of this study, it is not without limitations. One of the main weaknesses of this study was the use of a cross-sectional design, which does not allow for an assessment of the cause-effect relation. Also, another limitation, common to many studies, is related to the fact the questionnaires were self-reported, and the tendency is to investigate and report attitudes, rather than behaviors. Another issue to be considered when evaluating the results is the small sample, which makes the results difficult to generalize. Future studies should investigate along with workplace loneliness, work alienation, and its role in different organizational outcomes.

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