

AGE DISCRIMINATION AND FEAR OF BEING LEFT BEHIND AT WORK

Andrea Vukcevic¹, & Ivana B. Petrovic²

¹University of Donja Gorica, Faculty of International Economics, Finance and Business (Montenegro)

²University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Psychology (Serbia)

Abstract

It is widely known that ageism causes numerous negative effects. It leads to discrimination of employees expressed as unequal treatment, isolation, rejection and related forms of negative behavior at work, based on their age. Fear of missing out (FoMO) at work is defined as a persistent fear that an employee will miss out on important business opportunities compared to others. We wanted to explore whether age discrimination affects the FoMO at work and is there a role (moderator/mediator) of resiliency in that relationship. Results are based on an online survey of 211 employees from Montenegro, from private and public sectors. Survey included Workplace Age Discrimination Scale (WADS, 9 items, 5-point frequency scale, Cronbach's alpha 0.93), Workplace FoMO Scale (10 items, 5-point Likert scale, Cronbach's alpha 0.95), Employee Resilience Scale (9 items, 5-point frequency scale, Cronbach's 0.95) and set of questions about the employee and organization. It was found that younger employees (age group 18-25 years) felt being more discriminated against than their older colleagues did ($F(3, 207) = 7.010, p < .001$). In addition, less experienced employees were more discriminated against than those with more experience at work were ($r = -.22, p < .001$). There were no differences in discrimination based on gender and income. Employees' experience of being discriminated against at work was related to their fear of missing out ($r = .198, p < .004$). Resilience at work was unrelated both with discrimination and with fear of missing out at work. Main finding about the relationship of discrimination and fear of being left behind at work highlights a key negative effect of ageism and age discrimination. Finding that younger people feel more discriminated at work could be explained by the fact that Montenegro is a high-power distance country (based on Hofstede's research), where the social status and respect are gained by age. Research indicates cross-cultural validity of the workplace FoMO.

Keywords: Ageism, fear of missing out at work, Montenegro.

1. Introduction

Age discrimination is one of the forms of discrimination that occurs at the workplace. However, unlike other types of discrimination, age discrimination is not recognized as a "serious problem" (at least not as much as racial, gender and sexual discrimination) despite the consequences in the domain of wellbeing and productivity (Duncan & Loretto, 2004). In fact, it is observed that the "younger" employees (those under 25 years of age) and the "older" employees (over 45 years) are the most frequent victims of age discrimination. Those from the "younger" category report lower level of salary and fewer non material benefits, while those from the "older" category report fewer opportunities for employment, advancement and training opportunities. Age discrimination is defined as unequal "treatment", deprivation, exclusion and rejection of employees based on their age (Posthuma et al., 2012).

Increasingly "mediated lives" (Groenestein et al., 2024) and continuous connectivity gave rise to the widely known as Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) that was first conceptualized and operationalized by Przybylski et al. (2013). Their seminal paper paved the way to understanding FoMO as worries and anxiety induced by the idea of missing out on activities. This feeling leads to higher social media engagement, but it is also associated with lower general mood and satisfaction with life. Based on the extant literature since Przybylski and colleagues paper, we can see that FoMO is characterized as a unpleasant, distressing emotional state stemming from missing social experiences, based on continuous comparison, that make people strongly want to stay connected (Groenestein et al., 2024). Authors that first operationalized Workplace Fear of Missing Out defined it "as pervasive apprehension that, relative to other employees, one might miss valuable career opportunities when away or disconnected from work" (Budnick et al. 2020, p. 112). Budnick and colleagues operationalized workplace FoMO as fear stemming from informational and social exclusion. Informational FoMO deals with task related information that could make employees

feel more/less competent at work. Social exclusion as a factor of FoMO is linked with social networking and acquaintances that could be the basis for important business opportunities.

Although work-related FoMO is a topic that can frequently be noticed in online media, unlike digital FoMO, it is not yet well researched (Hayran et al., 2020). Unlike digital FoMO which is based on the fear of missing out the pleasurable and rewarding experiences, mainly on social media, workplace FoMO should be explored outside the limits of technology using behavior at work (Budnick et al. 2020). Budnick et al. research on the FoMO at work found that it was clearly a separate construct from general, digital FoMO. It was related to burnout and more frequent work-related technology use (i.e., checking messages and mail). The good and the bad news for organizations so far are that although FoMO at work increases employees' involvement with messages relevant for carrying out one's job, at the same time it impairs employees' health.

The main goal of the research was to explore the relationship between experienced age discrimination and the FoMO at work. In addition, we wanted to explore if those with stronger resilience report lower levels of workplace FoMO. Resilience was examined as a potential moderator of the relationship between age discrimination and the FoMO at work. We also included control variables such as: gender, income level, duration of overall work experience and experience at the current organization.

2. Method

The data was collected from a sample of 211 respondents from all three regions of Montenegro (the south, the central region and the north), both from private and public sectors. Participants were recruited using a “snowball” technique.

Online questionnaire included:

1. Workplace Age Discrimination Scale (WADS, Marchiondo et al., 2016): nine items, 5-point frequency scale from never to always, sample item: *I have been passed over for a work role/task due to my age*, Cronbach's alpha 0.93;

2. Workplace FoMO Scale (Budnick et al., 2020): ten items, 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, Cronbach's alpha 0.95. There are two subscales: Informational exclusion, sample item: *I worry that I might miss important work-related information*, and Social exclusion, sample item: *I worry that I will miss out on networking opportunities that my coworkers will have*;

3. Employee Resilience Scale (Näswall et al., 2019): nine items, 5-point frequency scale from never to always, sample item: *I collaborate effectively with others due dealing with business challenges*, Cronbach's 0.95, and

4. Set of questions about the employee and organization.

In line with Brislin's recommendations, the scales were translated using committee technique with three bilingual psychologists in three iterations (Brislin et al., 1973). All the translations were checked for the back translation. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS – version 25.

3. Results

We found that experience of age discrimination was more pronounced among younger employees. One way ANOVA revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in the experienced age discrimination, $F(3,207) = 7.010, p < .001$. The “youngest” (category between 18 and 25 years of age) reported on average slightly higher experienced age discrimination compared to the three older age groups. There was a statistically significant negative, weak correlation between age and age discrimination ($r = -.22, p < .001$). Also, in line with the negative correlation of age with experiencing age discrimination, there was a weak negative, but statistically significant correlation between the overall duration of work experience and age discrimination ($r = -.22, p < .001$), and weak, negative correlation between work experience in the present work organization and age discrimination ($r = -.15, p = .034$).

Exploring further, the relationship between FoMO at work and employees' age, the scores on the Social exclusion FoMO subscale correlated significantly with age ($r = -.164, p = 0.017$), indicating that older respondents reported less feelings of being left out of events involving social interactions and networking at work. In addition, there was a statistically significant correlation between FoMO at work and years of work experience ($r = -.186, p = .007$). Social exclusion correlates negatively with age as we probably develop more social networking mechanisms on one side, and become more resilient if being excluded, on the other.

For the main research question - the relationship of age discrimination and work FoMO, there was a statistically significant correlation ($r = .198, p = .004$), meaning that employees that experience stronger age discrimination also report greater fear of missing out at work. That is a sort of a “new” face of age discrimination. It makes employees feel left out at work. At the level of factors of FoMO, age discrimination

correlated significantly with Social exclusion ($r = .257, p = .000$), whereas there was no significant correlation with Informational FoMO.

Lastly, there was no statistically significant correlation between resilience and age discrimination ($r = -0.11, p = 0.109$), nor between resilience and work FoMO ($r = 0.02, p = 0.83$), thus resilience did not play a role in the relationship between age discrimination and work FoMO.

4. Discussion

In this research, the main hypothesis about the correlation between experienced age discrimination and the FoMO at work was confirmed. Also, statistically significant results were found when it comes to the connection between age of respondents and age discrimination, years of work experience and age discrimination. There was a difference between the “youngest” age category of employees compared to other “older” categories. This can partly be explained by the fact that Montenegro is a high-power distance collectivist culture (Hofstede, 2001). Traditionally, young people in Montenegro grow up with the sentences as “What do you know about life, you’ve just started living” and “Whatever elders are, respect them”, sending them the message that age determines value and respect.

FoMO at work correlated with age, more precisely, there was a weak negative correlation between social exclusion and age. The older the employees are, the less concerned they are with the social aspects of the FoMO at work. Young people are generally the ones who, in the stage of identity creation, need validation from their peers in order to be sure that they are “on the right path” of development (Berndt & Murphy, 2002). On the other hand, it is clear that the elderly do not need that type of validation as they have permanent, established relationships that they nurture and maintain over time, without fear of missing out on something or someone new, mainly because the majority of the elderly have achieved their professional aspirations.

Initial insight into the cross-cultural validation of workplace FoMo is probably the strongest contribution of this research. On the other hand, among limitations of this research, besides the nature and the size of the sample, we must stress cross-sectional design of the study as it limits developing causal models. However, as there are still not too many studies on workplace FoMO, cross-sectional design is still the “natural first step”. Longitudinal design would also enable exploring organizational interventions.

This research has important practical implications on the organizational and wider social levels because it indicates an important problem faced by employees from the youngest age category (from 18 to 25 years old). Findings support the concept of job design from the lifespan perspective (Truxillo et al. 2012). There is a need to develop strategies that would support strengthening the notion of equal rights for employees of all ages. It is important to point out the fact that age discrimination does not have to be explicit and extreme in order to affect employees. First step would be to raise awareness about age discrimination, especially about the existence of subtle, hidden manifestations of age discrimination, particularly those disguised in cultural norms.

5. Conclusion

Although it is a matter of reporting on the low presence of the fear of missing out in the age category from 18 to 25, it must be taken into consideration that it is a negative phenomenon, and that the aspirations of every democratic, healthy and developed society should be minimization of unequal treatment and the feeling of vulnerability of any age group. The presence of age discrimination, even in the smallest degree, is a sign for employees, organizations, society and the state to develop integrated strategies in order to protect and empower those who feel discriminated against. Likewise, realizing that a negative phenomenon is never isolated (if there is one, there are others as well), but leaves a mark on mental and physical health, it is clear that while fighting against age discrimination, we will win a double battle. FoMO at work is an important relatively novel concept that needs to be thoroughly explored. Presented research also provides an indication of its cross-cultural validity. As an emerging concept and scale it gave valid and meaningful results in another culture, quite different from the USA as an originating culture (on the social, economic, political, cultural levels).

Acknowledgment

The Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia under Contract No. 451-03-137/2025-03/200163 - funding research at the University of Belgrade - Faculty of Philosophy funded the work of Ivana B. Petrovic.

References

- Berndt, T. J., & Murphy, L. M. (2002). Influences of friends and friendships: Myths, truths, and research recommendations. In R. V. Kail (Ed.), *Advances in child development and behavior* (pp. 275-310). Academic Press.
- Brislin, R. W., Lonner, W. J., & Thorndike, R. M. (1973). *Cross-cultural research methods*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Budnick, C. J., Rogers, A. P., & Barber, L. K. (2020). The fear of missing out at work: examining costs and benefits to employee health and motivation. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 104, 112-117. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/j.chb.2019.106161>
- Duncan, C., & Loretto, W. (2004). Never the right age? Gender and age-based discrimination in employment. *Gender Work & Organization*, 11(1), 95-115. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2004.00222.x>
- Groenestein, E., Willemsen, L., van Koningsbruggen, G. M., Ket, H., & Kerkhof, P. (2024). The relationship between fear of missing out, digital technology use, and psychological well-being: A scoping review of conceptual and empirical issues. *PLoS ONE*, 19(10), e0308643. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0308643>
- Hayran C, Anik L, & Gürhan-Canli Z (2020). A threat to loyalty: Fear of missing out (FOMO) leads to reluctance to repeat current experiences. *PLoS ONE*, 15(4), e0232318. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0232318>
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Marchiondo, L. A., Gonzales, E., & Ran, S. (2016). Development and validation of the Workplace Age Discrimination Scale. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 31, 494-513. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-015-9425-6>
- Näswall, K., Kuntz, J., Hodliffe, M., & Malinen, S. (2019). Employee resilience: development and validation of a measure. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 34(5), 357-365. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JMP-02-2018-0102>
- Posthuma, R. A., Wagstaff, M. F., & Campion, M. A. (2012). Age stereotypes and workplace age discrimination. In J. W. Hedge & W. C. Borman (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of work and aging* (pp. 299-307). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Przybylski, A. K., Murayama, K., DeHaan, C. R., & Gladwell, V. (2013). Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of fear of missing out. *Computers in human behavior*, 29(4), 1841-1848.
- Truxillo, D. M., Cadiz, D. M., Rineer, J. R., Zaniboni, S., & Fraccaroli, F. (2012). A lifespan perspective on job design: Fitting the job and the worker to promote job satisfaction, engagement, and performance. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 2(4), 340-360. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2041386612454043>