Work Alienation and Work Engagement. The Mediating Role of Perceived Social Support

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Abstract

In the present research, we aimed to study the relationship between work alienation and work engagement and the mediating role of perceived social support. The current study used data from 178 participants (48 men and 130 women) aged 21 to 53 years (M=30.88, SD=9.00). Participants were invited to complete the following instruments: Work Alienation Scale (Nair & Vohra, 2009), The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988), and The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003). Findings indicate that work alienation and work engagement correlate significantly negatively (r=-.755, p<.01). Similarly, work alienation also correlated significantly negatively with perceived social support (r=-.744, p<.01). Also, perceived social support has proven to be an important mediator between work alienation and work engagement (z=-10.17, p<.01).

Keywords: work alienation, work engagement, perceived social support, mediation.

1. Introduction

The last three years brought a series of disruptive transformations at all levels of society, with a very high impact on both the family and the workplace and job-related activities (Guo, 2020). A series of 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 alienation. Moreover, the emergence of virtual teams and technology (Teams, Webex, Zoom, etc.) put employees in a position where they do not need to leave their place, making social interactions quite difficult to keep. This absence of casual conversations and impromptu interactions can make employees feel disconnected from the team and the organization's culture. Moreover, without physical presence, it can be challenging to establish strong emotional connections with co-workers and supervisors. This can lead to reduced engagement, motivation, and commitment to the organization.

In this context, the phenomenon of work alienation has regained some of the well-deserved attention. As mentioned in previous studies (Kanungo, 1982; Wegner, 1975), this phenomenon arises when employees perceive their working conditions as being prejudicial to their needs and quality of life. Moreover, Kanungo (1979) and Schacht (1970), pointed to the fact that the core meaning of work alienation is represented by a dissociative state of the employee regarding a series of elements related to his or her work environment.

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This state in which employees feel disconnected, disengaged, and detached from their work leads to a sense of powerlessness and lack of personal fulfillment.

2. Literature review

It is important to note that work alienation is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, and individual experiences may vary based on personal characteristics and specific work environments. The analysis of the relevant literature showed that a series of variables can predict the employees' feelings of work alienation. Some of them are related to environmental or organizational factors (Ozer et al., 2017). In a meta-analysis performed by Chiaburu and colleagues (2014), among the observed predictors of work alienation were mentioned job design, personality factors (Big 5), leadership style, excessive workload, and limited opportunities for skill development and growth. Previously, Mottaz (1981) identified that low job autonomy and a deficit of meaningful work could also lead to work alienation.

Other scholars (Santas et al., 2016; Tummers & Den Dulk, 2013) have identified a series of work alienation effects which include various employee attitudes and behaviors. Among those are job satisfaction work engagement, absenteeism, intention to leave the organization, burnout, task, and contextual performance, or counterproductive work behavior. Employees experiencing work alienation tend to be dissatisfied with their jobs. They may feel disconnected from their tasks, colleagues, and the overall work environment, leading to a lack of fulfillment and motivation. Furthermore, Brender-Ilan (2012) has found that alienation negatively relates to self-regulation, work engagement, and organizational commitment. Disengaged employees are less likely to be committed to their roles, show initiative, or go above and beyond their job requirements.

Empirical studies developed in the last decade have found that this state (work alienation) is related to poor job performance (Kartal, 2018), low organizational commitment (Tummers & den Dulk, 2013), low satisfaction (Chiaburu et al., 2013), and "should therefore be avoided at any cost" as it was stated by Vanderstukken and Caniëls (2021, p. 640). The lack of motivation and detachment from work can lead to decreased efficiency and quality of work output.

Moving forward, work engagement was defined by Schaufeli and colleagues (2002) as an independent, persistent, pervasive, positive, and fulfilling work-related affective–cognitive and motivational–psychological state (Schaufeli et al., 2002). This conceptualization is persistent with a series of scholars that also defined 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, represents the energy levels and mental resilience of employees, together with the disponibility to put a lot of effort into the workplace and tenacity and determination in dealing with difficult tasks or demanding deadlines (González-Romá et al., 2006). The second component 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, passion, and pride. The third element of engagement is Absorption, describing an employee's immersion, high

level of concentration, work engagement, and difficulties in detaching from work (González-Romá et al., 2006).

A large number of studies were trying to identify the possible predictors of work engagement due to its clear importance on both individual and organizational outcomes - task performance (Salanova, Agut, & Peiro´, 2005), extra-role performance (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004), low level of employee turnover (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). 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 of Ng and Sorensen (2008) and Simosi (2012) showed that perceived organizational, supervisor, and coworker support is 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. Some scholars argue that perceived coworker support represents the core of social support (Cureton, 2014; Simbula, 2010), and others consider that perceived social support (family, friends, relevant others) is more important since is more sound resource to employees (Caesens et al., 2014).

Following the literature review findings, we propose the following hypothesis (Figure 2):

Hy1: Work alienation negatively correlates with work engagement

Hy2: Work alienation negatively correlates with perceived social support

Hy3: Perceived social support positively correlates with work engagement

Hy4: Perceived social support mediates the relation between work alienation and work engagement
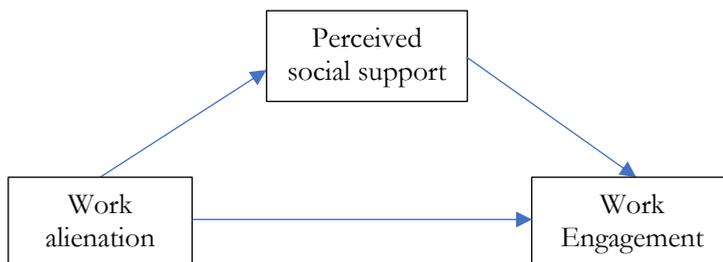

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

3. Methods

The research employed a convenience sample of 178 participants (48 males, and 130 females). The participants were between 21 and 53 years old (M=30.88, SD=9.00). The questionnaires were distributed via a Google Forms platform. In the preamble, the purpose of the study was explained, and informed consent was compulsory for moving forward to completion. The set of questionnaires compiled the following measures: Work Alienation Scale (Nair & Vohra, 2009), The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988), and The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003).

Work Alienation Scale (Nair & Vohra, 2009) is a questionnaire that comprises 8 items. The answers can be provided using a 5-point Likert Scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The internal consistency coefficient was α=.936.

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 can be provided following a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (Very strongly disagree) to 7 (Very strongly agree). The internal consistency coefficient obtained for the present sample 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 for the composite score was α=.949.

4. Results

Data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0 version software and the PROCESS macro for SPSS version 3.5. Table 1 shows the average variations indicators together with the correlations for all the selected variables.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations

	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1 Work alienation	21.03	12.27	-		
2 Work engagement	67.96	18.02	-.755**	-	
3 Social support	70.37	13.99	-.744**	.461**	-

Specifically, to answer our first hypothesis (Hy1: Work alienation negatively correlates with work engagement) the Pearson correlation between the respective variables was computed. The results (see Table 1) showed a significant negative correlation (r=-.755, p<.01) between work alienation and work engagement. Thus, a high level of work alienation is linked to a low level of work engagement. Furthermore, the in-depth analysis of the dimensions of work engagement (Table 2), namely vigor (r=-.739, p<.01), dedication (r=-.750, p<.01), and absorption (r=-.654, p<.01) also revealed significant negative correlations with work alienation.

Table 2. Correlation matrix between work alienation and work engagement dimensions

		Vigor	Dedication	Absorption
Work	Pearson correl.	-.739**	-.750**	-.654**
alienation	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000

The second hypothesis (Hy2: Work alienation negatively correlates with perceived social support) was confirmed by the corresponding results (Table 1) that revealed a strong negative correlation between work alienation and perceived social support (r=-.744, p<.01). Therefore, the higher the level of perceived social support coming from family, friends, or relevant others, the lower the work alienation. Moreover, this hypothesis was

confirmed also at the level of perceived social support dimensions (Table 3): significant others (r=-.551, p<.01), family (r=-.620, p<.01), and friends (r=-.622, p<.01).

Table 3. Correlation matrix between work alienation and perceived social support dimensions

		Significant others	Family	Friends
Work	Pearson correl.	-.551**	-.620**	-.622**
alienation	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000

Regarding the third hypothesis (Hy3: Perceived social support positively correlates with work engagement), the results showed a positive correlation (r=.461, p<.01) between the selected variables (Table 1). Similarly, with one exception (significant others and absorption), all perceived social support scales positively correlate with work engagement dimensions (Table 4).

Table 4. Correlation matrix between perceived social support and work engagement dimensions

		Vigor	Dedication	Absorption
Significant others	Pearson correlation	.405**	.328**	.218
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.003	.055
Family	Pearson correlation	.351**	.379**	.265*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.001	.019
Friends	Pearson correlation	.419**	.426**	.357**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.001

To answer our last hypothesis (Hy4: *Perceived social support mediates the relation between work alienation and work engagement*) and to test the mediation model (Preacher & Hayes, 2004), the PROCESS macro for SPSS version 3.5 was used. The model is constructed with work alienation as the predictor, perceived social support as a mediator, and work engagement as an outcome variable (Figure 1). The results of this mediation process highlight the mediation effect on work engagement: work alienation -> perceived social support -> work engagement (Table 5).

Table 5. Regression results for the mediation process

Model	Coeff.	SE	t	p	CI(lower)	CI(upper)
Without mediator						
WA -> WE (c)	-1.1089	.1105	-10.0392	.0000	-1.3289	-.8889
With mediator						
WA -> PSS (a)	-.8440	.0675	-9.6964	.0000	-1.0222	-.6738
PSS -> WE (b)	-.2892	.1420	-9.6964	.0452	-.5720	-.0064
WA -> WE (c')	-1.3542	.1619	-8.3647	.0000	-1.6767	-1.0317

In the first step of the mediation model, the regression of work alienation on work engagement, ignoring the mediator, is significant, $F(1,176) = 100.78$, $p < .01$, R2 = .57, b = -1.10, $t(176) = -10.03$, $p < .01$. The second step shows that the regression of the work alienation on the mediator (perceived social support), is also significant, $F(1,176) = 94.02$, $p < .001$, R2 = .55, b = -.84, $t(176) = -9.69$, $p < .01$. The third step of the mediation process shows that the mediator, perceived social support, controlling for work alienation is

significant, F(2,175) = 54.55, R2 = .59, p < .001, b = -.28, t(175) = -2.03, p < .05. The last step reveals that controlling for the mediator, perceived social support, work alienation score is a less significant predictor of work engagement, b = -1.34, t(175) =-8.36, p > .01. As recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986), the Sobel test (Aroian version) was used and has revealed that workplace loneliness mediates the relation between perceived social support and work engagement (z = -10.17, p < .01).

4. Conclusion

The findings of the current study showed that perceived social support mediates the relationship between work alienation and work engagement. Work alienation and work engagement represent opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to an individual's emotional and cognitive connection to their work. When employees experience high levels of work alienation, they are likely to feel disconnected, disengaged, and demotivated in their work (Lagios et al., 2022). Therefore, scholars and practitioners should pay attention to the organizational impact of work alienation and implement measures to reduce it, and, at the same time increase the level of social support. The results are in line with the previous empirical studies that showed that work alienation reduces the connection employees have with their work setting (Hirschfeld & Feild, 2000).

The fact that perceived social support correlates with work engagement is supported by previous studies (Caesen & Stinglhamber, 2014) and it is in line with the JD-R model which stated that social support is an important part of the employee's resources helping them to better control their job demands and to efficiently perform their tasks (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Moreover, this is in line with Malik and colleagues (2015) findings which had already emphasized a significant relationship between supervisors' support and work engagement. Furthermore, the results mirror the findings of Eisenberger and colleagues (2020) who identified that perceived support from the organization leads to an increased level of employee engagement, an observation which is points to the fact that employees' positive behavioral outcomes, such as work engagement, are a consequence of perceived organizational support (Jangsiriwattana, 2021). The same results were reported by Mekhum and Jermsittiprasert (2019) revealing that both supervisors and co-workers perceived social support positively influence work engagement.

Although this study yielded valuable findings, it is not exempt from limitations. A primary drawback lies in the utilization of a cross-sectional design, preventing the establishment of cause-effect relationships. Additionally, a common constraint in many studies pertains to the reliance on self-reported questionnaires, which may lead to a focus on attitudes rather than behaviors. Furthermore, the small sample size must be taken into account when interpreting the results, as it hinders their generability. Upcoming studies should investigate together with work alienation, workplace loneliness, psychological empowerment, and their role in different organizational outcomes.

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