

The Silent Exit: Dehumanization, Self-Esteem, and the Rise of Withdrawal at Work

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of organizational dehumanization on employee withdrawal behavior. The current study also investigates the mediating role of organizational-based self-esteem (OBSE) in the relationship between organizational dehumanization and employee withdrawal behavior. Time-lagged multi-source data is collected through adopted questionnaires from telecommunication and information technology industry employees. Initially, 850 questionnaires were distributed, after analyzing the study, 453 responses were retained for the final analysis. Cronbach's Alpha was employed to test the reliability of the scales adopted. The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to test the convergent and discriminant validities of the scales adopted. The study's hypotheses were tested using Path Analysis, i.e., a statistical technique to test the variables' relationships. Other required tests for data screening and scales validity, such as frequency distribution, descriptive statistics, analysis of variance, reliability analysis, and correlation analysis, were also employed.

The results concluded that Organizational dehumanization was significantly and negatively associated with OBSE, indicating that employees experiencing the same kind of dehumanization experiences at work reacted by reporting lower OBSE. Additionally, Organizational dehumanization was found to be positively associated with withdrawal at work. The mediation analysis showed OBSE to mediate the relationship between OD and EWB. This indicates to us that dehumanization is an antecedent of low OBSE, which subsequently predicts withdrawal behavior.

Introduction

Several studies on organizational dehumanization have shown that dehumanized treatment can significantly impact a wide range of organizational members' attitudes, cognitions, emotions, and behaviors (Lagios, Caesens, Nguyen, & Stinglhamber, 2021; Utych & Fowler, 2021). Theoretical and empirical research shows that organizational deviant behaviors can react to the bigotry individuals feel in their work lives. When employees believe they have been assaulted, they are likely to react with hatred, irritation, and a desire for retaliation. Employees often perceive negativity from management and the organization (Muhammad & Sarwar, 2021). Therefore, researchers considered the adverse effects of dehumanization by management in earlier decades. And most scholars also look at the harmful action from the supervisor's perspective. As a result, studies have mainly concentrated on the management style in shaping employee perceptions and attitudes. It looks like dehumanization has its consequences. However, no conclusion can be drawn about how dehumanized employees behave differently. Studies tried to conclude by studying employees' physical and mental health problems due to the dehumanization employees face in organizations (Dhanani, Beus, & Joseph, 2018; Gardner & Ryan, 2017; Jones et al., 2017).

It is also necessary to consider that negative emotional responses to dehumanized practices will take time to appear. Due to dehumanized practices, employees feel degraded in the organization. Once employees perceive dehumanized practices, they threaten their resources at the organization, which can lead to adverse outcomes (Sainz, Delgado, & Moriano, 2021). These hassles in perceived dehumanization result in touching responses such as reducing employees' self-esteem. Employees who believe they have been treated as unsuitable may be less productive, less devoted to the business, or even seek to hurt the firm to "get even." (Rubbab, Khattak, Shahab, & Akhter, 2022) Although, there are already repeated calls from different researchers to change our focus to how people might recover from experiences of dehumanization at the workplace.

According to comprehensive studies, a large body of organizational research supports the idea that dehumanized practices at the organizational level cause unfavorable reactions (Xia et al., 2019). It has been shown that experiencing dehumanization results in reduced work performance and more excellent retreat behavior. Lately, organizational experts have realized that the genuine problem of stress at work may result from the organizational side's distorted practices. Researchers have shown that dehumanized practices can cause stress-related effects such as psychological strain, sadness, and unproductive behavior. Every adverse or unreasonable practice will trigger negativity in the minds of employees (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017). Facing robotic treatment in the working environment will engender negativity in employees' minds in the form of loss of OBSE.

Researchers have looked at the "dark side" of people's reactions to dehumanization and found that retribution, retaliation, and counterproductive work behaviors are expected. We propose that the organizational-centered approach has also permeated this literature; studies have focused on questions relevant from an organizational dehumanized perspective, that is, why employees engage in these behaviors and how dark side behaviors might be stopped. Recently, scholars have suggested that organizations can also be a source of obstruction and injury (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019). However, the negative side needs researcher consideration because the literature is scarce in finding how the behavior and performance of employees are influenced by organizational dehumanization in the organization. So, organizational dehumanization is a relatively new concept in organizational behavior bodies. This notion was recently presented in organizational behavior by Caesens et al., (2017). This idea was borrowed from social psychology (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014).

When people believe that they are being treated like robots, they feel dehumanized. Dehumanization can erode the value of one's presence in society (Caesens et al., 2017; Nguyen, Dao, Nhan, & Stinglhamber, 2021; Väyrynen & Laari-Salmela, 2018). Dehumanization has the potential to affect one's attitude and behavior. The impact of organizational dehumanization on attitudinal outcomes was studied by Caesens et al. (2017). Organizational dehumanization results in adverse outcomes in organizational settings, such as reduced job satisfaction, affective commitment, stress at work, psychosomatic strains, plans to leave, etc. (Caesens, & Stinglhamber, 2019; Sainz, Delgado, & Moriano, 2021; Nguyen & Stinglhamber, 2021; Nguyen & Stinglhamber, 2020). However, the behavioral outcomes have yet to be taken into account. It is worth considering the antecedents and consequences of organizational dehumanization in a working environment. Because negative thoughts of dehumanization built from robotic treatment in the working environment may build reasons for turnover intentions, reducing the level of citizenship and commitment (Kee & Chung, 2021). Dehumanized perception results in adverse emotions, moods, and individual dispositions, all of which are caused by various situations and classified according to their nature and length (Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2019; Gray et al., 2001).

Organizational-based self-esteem:

Organizational-based self-esteem (OBSE) refers to the self-evaluative belief that an individual holds about their value within the context of their organization. This concept plays a critical role in understanding the interaction between individual self-perception and organizational

culture. OBSE, therefore, reflects the extent to which individuals feel respected, valued, and integral to the organization. It is derived from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals derive part of their self-esteem from the groups to which they belong, including organizations. Consequently, OBSE encapsulates the belief that one's self-worth is enhanced or diminished based on the organization's treatment of them and their sense of belonging to it (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). On the one hand, research has consistently emphasized the positive relationship between OBSE and employee attitudes such as job satisfaction, commitment, and engagement. Employees with high OBSE often have greater enthusiasm, proactive behavior, and loyalty to their organization. For example, studies have shown that OBSE positively correlates with motivation to behave in an organizational way, and in so doing increases (Fuller et al., 2006). These behaviors, such as helping colleagues or going beyond the call of duty, are beneficial for both individual and organizational performance. Conversely, when employees feel ignored, undervalued or unfairly treated by their organization, their OBSE suffers. On the other hand, low OBSE often leads to negative outcomes, such as lower job satisfaction, burnout and higher turnover intentions. Moreover, employees with low OBSE might therefore be more likely to engage in negative work behaviors like job withdrawal, deviance and low organizational commitment (Riketta, 2005). This suggests not only that OBSE has implications for individuals' physical and psychological well-being, but also that it is closely related to organizational productivity and the long-term commitment of employees.

Employee withdrawal behavior

Employee withdrawal behavior refers to a variety of actions, both psychological and physical, through which employees' distance themselves from their organizational roles. These behaviors range from subtle manifestations such as reduced engagement, daydreaming, and presenteeism to more overt forms like habitual lateness, absenteeism, and intentions to quit (Hanisch & Hulin, 1990). Withdrawal is increasingly conceptualized not as an isolated behavioral issue but as a systemic response to environmental stressors and unmet psychological needs at work.

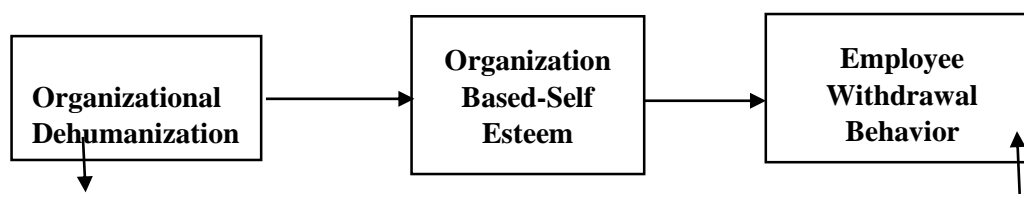
Organizational Dehumanization and Organization-Based Self-Esteem

Researchers interested in the employee-organization interaction have recently turned their attention to the organizational dehumanization notion (Caesens et al., 2017; Muhammad & Sarwar, 2021). The above approach is based on social psychological literature (e.g., Leyens et al., 2001; Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). According to previous studies, organizational dehumanization perceptions of employees hurt employee attitudes (e.g., wellbeing and turnover intention) (Demoulin et al., 2020) because it sabotages individuals' basic needs (Caesens, & Stinglhamber, 2019). Caesens et al. (2019) stated that dehumanization might lead to disappointment and depression and other employees' adverse outcomes, which needs further exploration. Caesens et al. (2017), along with Nguyen and Stinglhamber (2021), also stated that dehumanization could be different at the organizational level. So, it is worth studying and bringing a dehumanization perspective to the organizational context. In addition, it is much needed to bring clarity about dehumanization and its adverse effects on employees' behavior. Shore, Coyle-Shapiro, and Tetrick (2012) also recommended that "being in a relationship with an organization that is destructive, demeaning is likely to invoke perceptions of relational devaluation, unfairness, and is also likely to thwart an individual's basic needs". Earlier research by Gillet, Forest, Benabou, and Bentein (2015) and Väyrynen and Laari-Salmela (2018) also suggested that disregarding employees' basic needs, such as self-esteem or belongings, has a negative impact on their health and subjective well-being.

One of the behaviors that is likely to have an impact on other organizational processes is organizational-based self-esteem. To what extent employees believe they are essential, meaningful, effective, and worthwhile within the organization they work is characterized as

organizational self-esteem (Chung, & Yang, 2017). This concept is given a great deal of attention when it comes to behavioral research. Employees' overall opinion of their capability, worthiness, and relevance as a part of the organization was referred to as organizational-based self-esteem by Hobfoll and Freedy (2018). Employees' sense of worth is founded on a history of interpersonal and systemic events. Arslan (2016) and (2019) suggested that self-esteem is influenced by different maltreatment at the organization. So, it is worth studying self-esteem as an outcome of organizational dehumanization. Until now, different studies attempted to investigate either antecedents or outcomes of organizational dehumanization. But no study was found that considers self-esteem with organization dehumanization. Previous research suggested that organization-based self-esteem is strongly influenced by organizational factors (Korman, 1970). Employees with a high degree of organizational-based self-esteem were shown to be more prepared to handle the uncertainty associated with changes in systems than those with a low level of organizational-based self-esteem (Bowling, Eschleman, Wang, Kirkendall, & Alarcon, 2010; Hui & Lee 2000).

Theoretical Framework



Literature Review

Organizational Dehumanization:

For the past several decades, experts in organizational behavior have directed their studies towards how the minds of employees interact with their work environments. Throughout its history, organizational behavior has mainly explored the behaviors that are openly displayed at work. These behaviors consist of the way managers lead, their achievements, and their performance. It has also been found in research that how employees view what happens at work and the organizational culture shapes much of their choices. Research by Cropanzano and Wright (2001) indicates that these perspectives have a major role in shaping employees' attitudes, emotions, and behaviors, so they are extremely important.

In recent times, literature has highlighted problems of dehumanization in organizations and different kinds of abuse at work. For Haslam (2006), the concept of dehumanization in social psychology includes how someone feels when they are perceived as a machine that contributes to an organization, rather than a person. Employees may be treated in such a way by being ignored emotionally, seen only as a number, or regarded as a part that doesn't matter instead of as an important part of the team. These are instances where employees might suffer from treatment that is not fair or positive. Shore et al. (2012) state that when workplaces are toxic, employees' confidence and sense of belonging diminish, which may lead to stress.

According to the theoretical model of dehumanization that was developed by Haslam (2006), the denial of humanity can lead to both mechanical and animalistic types of dehumanization. Animalistic dehumanization refers to the tendency to reject human characteristics that distinguish us from other animals. These characteristics include reason, civility, maturity, moral awareness, and refinement. When workers are subjected to this kind of dehumanization, they are stereotyped as being immoral, naive, rude, and irrational at the same time. A dehumanizing trend can be attributed to a number of factors, including genocide, conflict, and immigration (for example, Kelman, 1973). Mechanistic dehumanization, as defined by Haslam (2006), takes place when workers are treated as if they were lifeless pieces of machinery. People are regarded to be

dehumanized in this manner because they are perceived to be deficient in attributes that are deemed to be human. These characteristics include cognitive openness, interpersonal warmth, agency/depth, and creativity.

Employee withdrawal behavior

Organizational dehumanization leads to withdrawal behavior and results in increased absenteeism and employee intentions to leave their organization. The phenomenon emerges when employees perceive their work environment as unappreciative or distant towards them. When employees perceive a lack of respect and appreciation from their organization, they might experience emotional exhaustion leading to disconnection from their work. A substantial quantity of emotional resources including energy and passion is essential to keep both engagement and performance levels high at work. Employees may choose to conserve their essential emotional resources by withdrawing when they experience dehumanization due to bad leadership or lack of recognition or when they feel they are just a part of the machine according to Schaufeli & Bakker (2004). This type of organizational disengagement tends to appear through increased absenteeism such as sick leave or tardiness as well as turnover intentions which reflect an employee's desire to quit the organization. When employees perceive that their work contributions receive insufficient recognition or are undervalued, they will demonstrate both of these behaviors to protect their personal well-being.

Dehumanization is something that occurs within organizations quite a lot, when employees feel they are not being treated fairly or with respect. It makes them feel like their work doesn't matter and that they aren't being acknowledged as unique individuals. Employees feel disenfranchised when they come to believe they are not connected to the purpose, value, or even team of the organization. Those who feel more isolated are more likely to be emotionally drained and depleted by the need to withdraw from their work to recover and protect themselves.

Employees, in turn, may engage in passive coping strategies, including calling in sick more often or reducing the degree of effort they exert. Absenteeism, as an emotional escape strategy Employees who feel the compulsion to escape from a stressful or inhuman environment will, for example use absenteeism as an escape mechanism to offer relief. To avoid further burnout, they might decide not to go to work, and especially where they believe their emotional requirements are not being satisfied. Employees who do not feel their work is valued, or that the environment in which they work is toxic, or fail to perceive that their organization supports them, are more likely to report an intention to turnover. The fact is, that once employees do not have an emotional attachment to the company, they will begin to seek other options or start seeking other environments where they feel their hard work will be more appreciated, they will get more support or the opportunity for those professional and personal development growth potentials.

Employees are more likely to leave their current position if feelings of alienation persist unaddressed. Prolonged alienation can result in high turnover rates, increased absenteeism, elevated recruitment and training costs, and diminished team morale (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). These consequences not only impact employees' mental well-being but also hamper organizational performance and productivity. Dehumanization at the workplace is a crucial factor that contributes to withdrawal behaviors such as absenteeism and intentions to leave the organization, as stated in the conclusion. They are more prone to emotionally and physically retreat from the organization in order to safeguard their emotional resources if they are feeling alienated or unappreciated by their employer. This can assist in minimizing withdrawal behaviors and enhancing overall employee engagement, contentment, and retention. Addressing dehumanization in organizations can be accomplished through improved leadership, recognition, and supportive work environments.

Organizational Dehumanization and Employee Withdrawal Behavior

Mistreatment of employees is linked with deviant, withdrawal behaviors and turnover intentions. Different studies provided support for the relationship between the Dehumanization of employees and their deviant behaviors. Frustrated employees who don't trust their organization give their reactions through deviance, like time theft, to get even with their organization (Lorinkova & Perry, 2017).

Organization-Based Self-Esteem

The term "organizational-based self-esteem" refers to the extent to which individuals believe that they are valued, respected, and appreciated by the organizations in which they are employed. According to Pierce et al., (1989), this significant psychological concept has an effect on the self-perception of employees in the workplace, which in turn shapes their attitudes, behaviors, and overall well-being. Both personal and organizational factors, such as an individual's sense of achievement, competence, and social belonging in the workplace, play a role in this. Organizational factors include things like culture, values, and how employees are treated. OBSE has attracted a lot of attention from the last few years because it can significantly affect job satisfactions, job commitment, motivation and performance. An increased level of organizational-based self-esteem (OBSE) will generally entail positive work attitudes such as taking an active role in one's work, showing compassion for others and company citizenship behaviors (OCBs). On the other hand, a decreased OBSE will bring about job dissatisfaction, withdrawal behaviors, and increased intentions to leave one's current position (Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

OBSE is directly affected by an organization's management practices and organizational culture. When their employers help people to gain a stronger feeling of self-worth, employees have a rising sense that they are worthwhile. This kind of environment stresses respect, inclusiveness and equal treatment. Attributions such as supportive leadership, open and honest dialogue and recognition from employees are the means to fostering OBSE. Limits to opportunities for personal growth are also strong contributors that undermine OBSE.

Research shows that individuals are more likely to embrace success-oriented self-conceptions of their tasks in the corporate environment when businesses acknowledge employee accomplishments and provide opportunities for future development (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). When it comes to shaping OBSE, feedback, especially positive reinforcement and praise, is of paramount importance. People who are regularly provided positive feedback by their boss are also the most likely to have their organizational-based self-esteem (OBSE) at a high level. If individuals are recognized for their helpful contributions, this idea becomes absorbed into their consciousness and they find it a precondition for getting along in the firm (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). On the other hand, insufficient or negative feedback could severely undermine OBSE, causing people to feel undervalued and detached.

Population

The target population comprises employees in Pakistan's public and private Information Technology & Telecom organizations.

Sampling Technique

A stratified random sampling technique ensured representation from various job levels. Stratification was based on sector (public/private), industry, and job role (managerial/non-managerial). This approach minimizes sampling bias and enhances the representativeness of the sample.

Sample Size

A total of 850 questionnaires were distributed, of which 453 were received, February 2024.

Instrumentation

Measurement Scales

All constructions were measured using established, validated scales:

- **Organizational Dehumanization (OD):** Assessed using the 11-item scale by Caesens et al. (2017).

- **Organization-Based Self-Esteem (OBSE):** Measured with the 10-item scale developed by Pierce et al. (1989).

- **Negative Outcomes (Employee Withdrawal Behavior):** Employee Withdrawal Behavior 8-item scale adopted from (Lehman, & Simpson, 1992).

All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

Methodological Analysis:

- **Correlation Analysis:** Pearson's correlation coefficients to examine bivariate relationships.

- **Hypothesis Testing:** Path Analysis and PROCESS Macro to test direct, mediation, and moderation hypotheses.

- **Mediation and Moderation Analysis:** Bootstrapping techniques were used to estimate indirect effects and confidence intervals.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table: Descriptive statistics

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Gender	1.00	2.00	-	-
Age	1.00	5.00	-	-
Education	1.00	3.00	-	-
Experience	1.00	4.00	-	-
Organizational Dehumanization	1.45	4.82	3.22	.92
Organization-Based Self-Esteem	1.60	4.90	3.06	.84
Employee Withdrawal Behavior	1.25	4.63	3.03	.76

Correlation Analysis

Table: Correlation Analysis

Variables	OD	OBSE	EWB
1 Organizational Dehumanization	-	-	-
2 Organization-Based Self-Esteem	-.40**	-	-
3 Employee Withdrawal Behavior	.43**	-.45**	-

Regression Analysis through Path Analysis

Path analysis in AMOS was employed to test the hypothesized relationship of the current study. The direct, indirect relationship, along with moderating effects, were tested through path analysis in AMOS.

Organizational Dehumanization on OBSE

Based on the study results of path analysis, the relationship of organizational dehumanization with organization-based self-esteem is found to be negatively significant ($\beta = -.33$, $p < 0.01$).

Path analysis results revealed that the relationship of organizational dehumanization with employee withdrawal behavior is found positively significant ($\beta = .30$, $p < 0.01$).

Table: Boot Strapping Results for Direct Effect of Organizational Dehumanization

Paths			Estimate	SE	t	P
OD	→	OBSE	-.33	.04	-9.31	.00
OD	→	EWB	.30	.03	6.85	.00

N= 453, OD = Organizational Dehumanization, OBSE= Organization Based Self Esteem, EWB = Employee Withdrawal behavior.

Indirect Effect of Organizational Dehumanization on EWB through OBSE:

The mediating role of Organization-based self-esteem between organizational dehumanization and employee withdrawal behavior was found significant (Indirect effect= .10, LLCI= .06, ULCLI= .14). The lower and upper-level confidence intervals have no zero between them.

Table: Indirect Effect of Organizational Dehumanization on EWB through OBSE.

Indirect Path			95% Bias Confidence Interval			
			Indirect effect	Boot SE	LL	UL
H 9	OD	→ OBSE → EWB	.10	.02	.06	.14

OD = Organizational Dehumanization, OBSE= Organization Based Self Esteem, EWB = Employee Withdrawal behavior.

Findings:

Based on the results, several key findings emerge regarding the relationships among organizational dehumanization (OD), organization-based self-esteem (OBSE), and employee withdraw behavior.

Organizational Dehumanization (OD) and Organization-Based Self-Esteem (OBSE)

The negative association between organizational dehumanization and organization-based self-esteem indicates that employees who perceive themselves as being treated as objects or mere tools by their organization tend to experience a diminished sense of self-worth within the workplace (Caesens et al., 2017). This relationship reflects how dehumanizing practices, such as ignoring employees' individuality, denying them respect, or treating them impersonally, undermine their psychological needs for recognition and belonging. When employees feel devalued or depersonalized, their OBSE suffers, leading to decreased motivation, commitment, and engagement. This erosion of self-esteem can also impair employees' ability to identify positively with their organization, weakening their emotional attachment and loyalty. The findings align with social identity and self-determination theories, which emphasize the importance of feeling valued and respected for maintaining healthy self-concept and well-being at work.

Organizational Dehumanization (OD) and EWB.

The positive relationships between OD and withdrawal behavior (EWB) suggest that dehumanizing work environments foster a range of counterproductive behaviors (Andrighetto et

al., 2017). When employees feel dehumanized, they are more likely to disengage from tasks, delay work completion, or avoid responsibilities altogether (procrastination). They may also exhibit withdrawal behaviors such as absenteeism, reduced effort, or psychological disengagement from the organization. Furthermore, dehumanization can lead to deviant behaviors, including rule-breaking, sabotage, or unethical actions, as employees may feel justified in retaliating against an organization that treats them unfairly or disrespectfully. These behaviors can be understood through moral disengagement theory, which posits that dehumanization reduces anticipatory guilt and moral self-regulation, enabling unethical conduct. Overall, the findings highlight how OD not only harms employees' psychological states but also has tangible negative consequences for organizational functioning and productivity.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the complex interactions among OD, OBSE, and negative employee outcomes, EWB. The results are discussed in light of strong theoretical frameworks and recent empirical evidence, and contribute to a detailed understanding of the way dehumanizing organizational climates are associated with individual attitudes and behaviors and the extent to which personal psychological resources might mitigate or enhance these direct and indirect effects.

The descriptive statistics showed that the average scores were above the mid-point for all the study variables, indicating the existence of organizational dehumanization, moderate levels of OBSE. The standard deviations were less than 1, suggesting that the responses to the measures are homogeneous and could be reliable and generalizable within the contextual domain of the study (Field, 2018). Results of correlational analysis showed that OD was positively and significantly correlated with EWB, and negatively with OBSE. These results align with existing evidence that suggests dehumanizing work settings undermine employees' worth and heighten their tendency to engage in counterproductive work behaviors (Caesens et al., 2017; Akpunar et al., 2022).

Organizational dehumanization, more particularly, was significantly and negatively associated with OBSE, indicating that employees experiencing the same kind of dehumanization experiences at work (i.e., the perception that they are treated impersonally or as a mere means) reacted by reporting lower OBSE (Christoff, 2014; Caesens et al., 2017).

The mediation analysis showed OBSE to mediate the relationship between OD and EWB. This indicates to us that dehumanization is an antecedent of low OBSE, which subsequently predicts withdrawal behavior. This finding corresponds to recent findings that self-esteem is an important psychological mechanism while the negative organizational climates are transferred to disengagement and withdrawal behaviors (Demirkaya & Turgut, 2022; Akpunar et al., 2022). An obvious implication for organizations is that not developing their employees' self-esteem could lead to higher withdrawal and turnover rates.

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