The Effects of Workplace Loneliness on Employee Commitment during the COVID-19 Outbreak

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ABSTRACT
Employee commitment is a fundamental work attitude which plays a vital role in organizational success. Committed employees are intrinsically inspired to demonstrate greater effort and are more likely to be the ambassadors of the organization. But unfortunately with the COVID-19 outbreak, majority of the employees felt lonely at workplace. Employees who experienced loneliness at workplace became less committed to their job. Unfortunately, even the scholars have paid less attention on this substance. Therefore, doing more research on workplace loneliness and employee commitment together is vital. Hence, the fundamental purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of workplace loneliness on employee commitment during the COVID-19 outbreak. The research was based on positivism philosophy and deductive approach. With the support of simple random sampling, researchers collected data from 221 executive employees from three leading apparel sector organizations in Sri Lanka. Through correlation analysis researchers proved that workplace loneliness including emotional deprivation and social companionship negatively related with employee commitment. Further, regression analysis evidenced that workplace loneliness can create 13.7% of an impact on employee commitment at workplace.
Key Words: Employee Commitment, Emotional Deprivation, Social Companionship, Workplace Loneliness

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I. INTRODUCTION

Attracting and retaining the most competent set of employees will continue to be one of the most demanding challenges employers will come up in this COVID-19 outbreak. None of the companies can flourish with shortage of committed employees (Ahmad, 2018). Indeed, committed employees are eager to perform the tasks, duties and responsibilities beyond the job description at any given cost (Radosavljevic et al., 2017). Some organizations are truly blessed to have employees who are genuinely committed to the workplace whereas in some organizations it might not be the case because, in organizational context the level of commitment may vary from one employee to another and it will not be the same for all times. On the other hand, maintaining employee commitment in a highly volatile business environment is really challenging (Radosavljevic et al., 2017). For instance, during the COVID – 19 outbreak, most of the giant organizations couldn't survive as anticipated due to poor commitment of employees as they paid more attention on other aspects such as job security, safe work environment, alternative work arrangements and possible health hazards (Radosavljevic et al., 2017). Most importantly, the "new normal" requires a massive change in terms of employee behavior. Hence, maintaining and uplifting employee commitment during the pandemic is challenging.

By nature, human beings are sociable animals and cannot survive alone. Undoubtedly, none of the human beings can tolerate the feeling of loneliness throughout his or her life span (Sarner, 2018). Even within and among the family, peers or co-workers, people have an inner desire to develop long lasting emotional bonds with each other. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, all human beings have a desire to fulfil physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs and self-actualization needs. But in an

individualistic world, social needs such as affection, belonging and friendship are often ignored in personal and work life. Along with COVID –19, social distancing is becoming so challenging because it is inconsistent with the natural behaviour and fundamental needs of human beings (Mishra & Majumdar, 2020).

Few decades back, the concept "loneliness at workplace" was an area which received little surveillance in the literature but at present, it is becoming a trending topic especially during this "new normal". Unlike before, employees extensively experience loneliness at workplace during COVID - 19 pandemic (Kniffin et al., 2020). Loneliness is a psychological state that springs due to lack in social relationships (Wright, et al., 2006). More often, the feeling of loneliness arises when an individual assumes others to be a threat due to their self-constructed barriers causing them to be deprived from the society. In other words, loneliness can be explained as complex emotional reflections arising due to not being able to meet the relationships and social needs like love and affection (Ayazlar & Guzel., 2014). Employees often feel disconnected and disheartened when they feel lonely at work. Most importantly, the new work arrangements arose during the outbreak of COVID-19 such as remote working, flexi working and telecommuting created some obvious negative effects on employee's emotional and psychological wellbeing (Wang et al., 2020). Willingly or unwillingly, organizations had to incorporate remote working practices for most of their daily operations while nurturing a sense of connection for both; remote workers and employees who work on premises.

According to Deloitte Virtual Office Survey 2020, nearly 32% of participants revealed that they often felt lonely while working distantly or remotely. Further, Buffer and AngelList conducted a survey and presented a report called "The State of Remote Work Report" in year 2020. In this particular survey respondents were asked "what is your biggest struggle with working remotely?" and majority of the respondents (nearly 20%) said that the biggest struggle they face is difficulties in collaboration and loneliness. Even based on the Loneliness and the Workplace 2020 U.S Report, loneliness is steadily increasing in Unites States and as a result employees are less committed and less productive at workplace. According to Syed (2020) during this season of pandemic, there is a significant growth in workplace loneliness than normal times but unfortunately, employers have paid less attention on this matter. In other words, during the pandemic employers are enthusiastic to develop strategic plans in order to ensure the continuity of the organization. But these plans have failed to address the unseen issue "workplace loneliness". Hence, managing loneliness at workplace during the pandemic is absolutely a challenge but yet essential for the survival of the organization.

Further, researchers proved that workplace loneliness has a negative impact on employees' attitudes causing low employee commitment (Ertosun & Erdil., 2011). Hence the unavailability of opportunities to foster social affiliations and emotional relationships within the organization directly affects commitment of employees towards the organization (Wright, et al., 2006). In other words, if an employee is experiencing loneliness at work it means he or she is suffering from low levels of energy and social inspiration and as a result it might diminish the employee's level of commitment toward the organization (Ertosun et al., 2011). Simply, employee commitment is defined as a psychological state that refines an employee's relationship with employer to continue membership in the organization (Choo, et al., 2016). Employees who are highly committed are more likely to build up a strong bond with the organization and more likely to fulfil the organization's strategic goals and objectives promptly. Even though, employee commitment is not a newly carved term, it is vital to recall this concept during the COVID-19 outbreak. Most importantly, it is vital to investigate the direct and indirect effect of workplace loneliness on employee commitment in twenty first century.

Even in Sri Lankan context, the COVID – 19 outbreak has directly and indirectly affected employee's level of commitment at workplace. Companies were in a hurry to alter their work practices along with technology but unfortunately, couldn't oversee the emotional and psychological preparedness of the employee which is required to work in a virtual environment (Dias & Eliatamby, 2020). Simply, employers highly concerned about the Corona virus and its consequences on health and safety. But unfortunately during this pandemic, loneliness at workplace had been a silent wave in the corporate world. However, scholars have discovered that employees who feel lonely at work are less committed and less productive at workplace (Wingard, 2020). Hence, keeping such employees committed during the COVID – 19 pandemic can be problematic. Though scholars around the world have discovered various factors such as job insecurity, lack of financial rewards, lack of non-financial rewards, organizational culture could hinder employee's level of commitment in the organization, the relationship between workplace loneliness and employee commitment has yet to be determined (Ertosun et al., 2011). Further, there is scant number of evidences from Sri Lankan context up to date connecting workplace loneliness and employee commitment with especial reference to apparel industry in Sri Lanka. Hence, doing more research on workplace loneliness and employee commitment together is vital.

Research Questions
Does workplace loneliness affect employee commitment of apparel sector employees in Sri Lanka?
Does emotional deprivation affect employee commitment of apparel sector employees in Sri Lanka?

Does social companionship affect employee commitment of apparel sector employees in Sri Lanka?

Research Objectives
To investigate the effect of workplace loneliness on employee commitment of apparel sector employees in Sri Lanka.
To investigate the effect of emotional deprivation on employee commitment of apparel sector employees in Sri Lanka
To investigate the effect of social companionship on employee commitment of apparel sector employees in Sri Lanka

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee Commitment
      With the ever growing rivalry in the business environment, having an eye on the nature of employee commitment towards the success of the organization has been an area of great interest to many academic and organizational researchers (Ertosun et al., 2011). According to Meyer and Allen (1991), employee commitment is defined as a psychological state that characterizes an employee's relations with the organization that provides implications on the decision whether to continue the membership with the organization or terminate membership. In other words, it is the degree to which employees feel dedicated to the organization (Specto, 2000). This emotional attachment between the employee and the organization and the trust that employees have built towards the organization are the "gold standards" in the employee commitment (Adrianto & Riyanto, 2020). It is revealed that committed employees are less likely to quit the job and the organization even at times in which they are dissatisfied because employees have a sense of loyalty and attachment towards the organization (Robbins & Judge, 2017). In fact, when employees feel unhappy about their current working conditions, they will sacrifice for the organization as long as they have a desirable level of commitment towards their workplace (Adrianto & Riyanto, 2020).
      Employee commitment is stated as an attitude to remain being treated as a member of an organization or the willingness exert higher level of effort to tasks assigned and acceptance on the organizational goals and values (Ertosun et al., 2011). Due to this multi-dimensional nature of employee commitment, there is a development of support for the three components model proposed by Meyer and Allen (1991). The three dimensions are as follows: Affective Commitment, Continuance Commitment and Normative Commitment. Affective commitment is the emotional attachment of the employees identified and involved in the organization (Adrianto & Riyanto, 2020). Mowday et al. (1982) figured out that affective commitment encompasses of four categories: personal characteristics, structural characteristics, job-related characteristics, and work experience. From the perspective of personal characteristics, employees like to make promises for many reasons like personal and professional ethics, personal responsibilities and personal to work interests (Boulian, et al., 1974) Structural characteristics too effect on affective commitment where researchers have found an indirect relationship between organization structure and employee's feelings on affective commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1991) all. Third, job related characteristics also have an impact on employee commitment as in the forms of support from supervisors, support from colleagues (Joiner & Bakalis, 2006). Continuance commitment means the commitments based on the costs borne by the employees for leaving the organization (Adrianto & Riyanto, 2020). This means more the duration an employee has been in an organization, more will be the benefits they receive, more will be the skills acquired and will possess a high degree of seniority in the organizational hierarchy (Adrianto & Riyanto, 2020). When employees are satisfied with their work, employee departure cost surges and then the employee will give a continuance commitment and continue to be a member of the organization. Finally, normative commitment is the obligation to stay with the organization (Wiener, 1982). This form of commitment arises when employees feel that they ought to continue their employment with the organization (Werf, 2020).

Workplace Loneliness
      Irrespective of the job, every employee will experience loneliness differently in his or her work life (Petriglieri, 2014). By nature, employees dislike to acknowledge that they are anxious, depressed or lonely at workplace (Kang, 2020). The feeling of loneliness is subjective and it varies from one person to another. Simply, loneliness at workplace is not the stage when an employee wants to be alone (Aytac, 2015). Fischer and Phillips (1982) argued that an employee needs not to be alone to feel lonely and it will depend on the level of support, closeness and security each employee seek in their interpersonal relationships (Jones and Hebb, 2003). However, directly or indirectly loneliness at work negatively influences the social and professional life of the employee (Ertosun et al., 2011). According to Wright et al. (2006) workplace loneliness has two dimensions as; emotional deprivation and social companionship. Emotional deprivation highlights the quality of interpersonal relationships in the place of work. This dimension is more or less similar to emotional loneliness and it includes

certain concepts such as being alienated, feeling isolated etc. In other words, emotional loneliness explains the degree to which employee is capable to develop quality relationships with his or her colleagues at workplace (Lam & Lau, 2012). Social companionship explains the degree to which social networks are available at workplace. This dimension includes certain concepts such as being a part of group, spending time, sharing etc. In other words, social loneliness occurs when there is a poor relationship or no relationship with other members of the organization (Lam & Lau, 2012). According to Hawkley et al. (2010) workplace loneliness is a serious psychological problem in the current context as it is an unpleasant and traumatic experience. On the other hand, it is an occupational hazard for employees (Aytac, 2015). Employees who feel lonely at work might ended up with depression, schizophrenia, social withdrawal, social phobia, alienation, hostility and shyness (Ernst & Cacioppo, 1998).

According to the "Loneliness and the Workplace- 2020 U.S. Report" there are four key determinants of loneliness; a lack of social support and irregular meaningful social interactions, poor physical and psychological health, negative feelings about one's personal relationships, a lack of balance in one's daily activities. Further, research findings of this report have been categorized based on gender, generation and community. In terms of gender, men are lonelier than women and as a percentage it was 46.1% and 45.3% respectively. Based on the gender, younger generations are lonelier than older generations and as a percentage it was 79% and 71% respectively. Finally based on the community, employees who are from urban (46.7%) and suburban (44.7%) areas feel less lonely compared to employees who come from rural areas and as a percentage it was 47%.

Workplace Loneliness and Employee Commitment

Yilmaz (2008) discovered that workplace loneliness is a significant factor which directly and indirectly affects the employee's level commitment as psychological support is highly required to enhance commitment of the employees who feel lonely at organizational context. Even Ertosun and Erdil (2011) found that employees who felt loneliness in the organization negatively influenced their level of commitment. Even Tabancali and Korumaz, (2015) discovered that loneliness at workplace is a significant predictor and has a negative impact on employee commitment. In other words, when an employee doesn't have social relationships or even just a single friend to exchange ideas, opinions his or her commitment reduces to a greater extent (Ayazlar & Guzel, 2014). Simply, it is really important to have a social companion at workplace and it is a vital factor to inspire and maintain employee's level of commitment in the long term (Ayazlar & Guzel, 2014). When employer provide more opportunities for employees to form friendships and social networks at workplace they are more likely to commit themselves to their respective job and to the entire organization.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
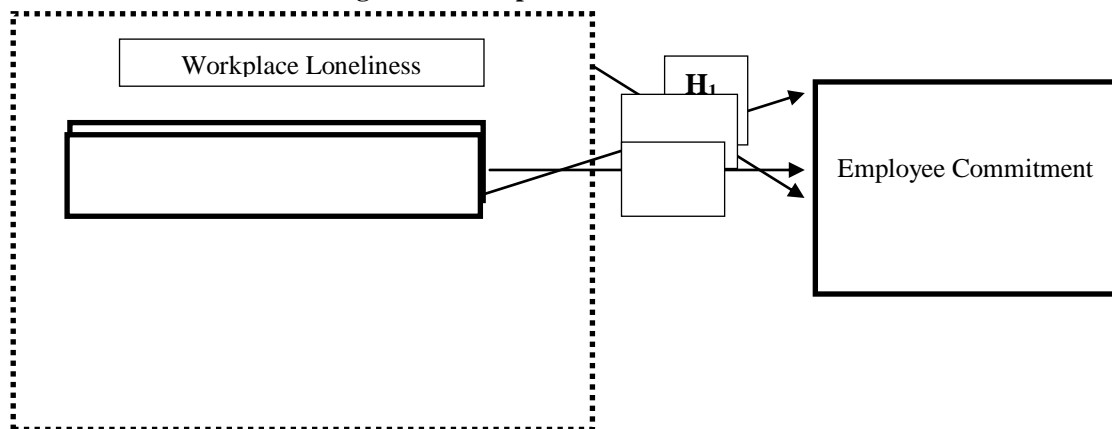
Hypotheses

H_1: Workplace loneliness has a negative effect on employee commitment of apparel sector employees in Sri Lanka

H_{1a}: Emotional deprivation has a negative effect on employee commitment of apparel sector employees in Sri Lanka

H_{1b}: Social companionship has a negative effect on employee commitment of apparel sector employees in Sri Lanka

IV.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study was based on positivism philosophy and deductive approach. The population of the study was 550 executive employees of three apparel sector organizations in Sri Lanka. Through simple random sampling, researchers distributed 225 questionnaires but only 221 were usable for data analysis. In order to execute the survey strategy, researchers prepared a standard questionnaire with five point Likert scale using 16 items of Loneliness at Work Scale (including two dimensions; emotional deprivation and social companionship) developed by Wright et al. (2006) and 24 items of Allen and Meyer (1990). Initially a pilot study was conducted with 30 participants in order to check the reliability of the instruments. The Cronbach's α value for workplace loneliness and employee commitment was 0.779 and 0.866 respectively. Overall hypotheses testing were done using regression analysis with the support of SPSS version 19.

Operationalization

Table I: Operationalization

	Dimensions	**No. of Items**	**Author**
Workplace Loneliness	Emotional Deprivation	09	Wright et al. (2006)
	Social Companionship	07	
Employee Commitment	Affective Commitment	08	Allen and Meyer (1991)
	Continuance Commitment	08	
	Normative Commitment	08	

Source: Survey Data, 2021

V.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents Profile

Table II: Respondents Profile

	Category	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Gender	Male	135	61.1 %
	Female	86	38.9%
Age	20 years to 29years	160	72.4%
	30 years to 39years	42	19.0%
	40 years to 49years	10	4.5%
	50 years and above	9	4.1%
Experience	0 years to 4 years	154	69.7%
	5 years to 9 years	42	19.0%
	10 years to 14 years	15	6.8%
	15 years and above	10	4.5%

Source: Survey Data, 2021

The table 2 provides a summary of the respondents of the current study. In this study, majority of the participants were male apparel employees and as a percentage it was 61.1 %. Based on the age category majority of the respondents were in between 20-29 years. Moreover, with respect to work experience, majority of the respondents had less than 4 years (69.7%) of experience in the company.

Descriptive Statistics

Table III: Descriptive Statistics

	N	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
Workplace Loneliness	221	3.5836	0.42571
Emotional Deprivation	221	3.7361	0.64517
Social Companionship	221	3.7442	0.64173
Employee Commitment	221	1.6653	0.33814

Source: Survey Data, 2021

Based on descriptive statistics, the respondents' loneliness at workplace (Mean = 3.5836, Std. Deviation = 0.42571) including the two dimensions; emotional deprivation (Mean = 3.7361, Std. Deviation = 0.64517) and social companionship (Mean = 3.7442, Std. Deviation = 0.64173) was found to be high whereas, the respondents' commitment at workplace (Mean = 1.6653, Std. Deviation = 0.33814) was at a very lower level during the period of the study.

Correlation

Table IV: Correlation

Variable		Employee Commitment
Workplace Loneliness	Pearson Correlation	-.370**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	221
Emotional Deprivation	Pearson Correlation	-.426**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	221
Social Companionship	Pearson Correlation	-.404**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	221

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Source: Survey Data, 2021

According to the above table workplace loneliness including the two dimensions; emotional deprivation and social companionship had a statistically significant relationship with employee commitment. According to correlation coefficient values, there were negative moderate relationships between workplace loneliness and employee commitment ($r = -0.370$, $p < 0.01$), emotional deprivation and employee commitment ($r = -0.426$, $p < 0.01$) and social companionship and employee commitment ($r = -0.404$, $p < 0.01$).

Hypotheses Testing

H_1: Workplace loneliness has a negative effect on employee commitment of apparel sector employees in Sri Lanka.

Table V: Model Summary

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.370a	.137	.133	.31490
a. Predictors: (Constant), Workplace Loneliness				

Source: Survey Data, 2021

Table VI: ANOVA

ANOVAb						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	3.439	1	3.439	34.679	.000a
	Residual	21.716	219	.099		
	Total	25.155	220			
a. Predictors: (Constant), Workplace Loneliness						
b. Dependent Variable: Employee Commitment						

Source: Survey Data, 2021

Table VII: Coefficients

Coefficientsa						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.600	.160		16.241	.000
	Workplace Loneliness	-.362	.061	-.370	-5.889	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Employee Commitment						

Source: Survey Data, 2021

Based on the R square value (0.137), workplace loneliness can account only for 13.7% of variance in employee commitment. According to the ANOVA table, the Sig value was 0.000 (less than 0.05) and F value was 34.679 and it showed the goodness of fit. This indicated that workplace loneliness can significantly predict employee commitment. Further, the linear regression equation was derived using the coefficient table and it was statistically significant (Employee Commitment = 2.600 − 0.362 * Workplace Loneliness). This means that increase in one unit of workplace loneliness results in decrease of 0.362 units of employee commitment.

H$_{1a}$: Emotional deprivation has a negative effect on employee commitment of apparel sector employees in Sri Lanka.

Table VIII: Model Summary

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.426[a]	.182	.178	.30655
a. Predictors: (Constant), Emotional Deprivation				

Source: Survey Data, 2021

Table IX: ANOVA

ANOVA[b]						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4.575	1	4.575	48.680	.000[a]
	Residual	20.580	219	.094		
	Total	25.155	220			
a. Predictors: (Constant), Emotional Deprivation						
b. Dependent Variable: Employee Commitment						

Source: Survey Data, 2021

Table X: Coefficients

Coefficients[a]						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.500	.121		20.588	.000
	Emotional Deprivation	-.224	.032	-.426	-6.977	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Employee Commitment						

Source: Survey Data, 2021

Based on the R square value (0.182), emotional deprivation can account only for 18.2% of variance in employee commitment. According to the ANOVA table, the Sig value was 0.000 (less than 0.05) and F value was 48.680 and it showed the goodness of fit. This indicated that emotional deprivation can significantly predict employee commitment. Further, the linear regression equation was derived using the coefficient table and it was statistically significant (Employee Commitment = 2.500 − 0.224 * Emotional Deprivation). This means that increase in one unit of emotional deprivation results in decrease of 0.224 units of employee commitment.

H$_{1b}$: Social companionship has a negative effect on employee commitment of apparel sector employees in Sri Lanka.

Table X1: Model Summary

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.404[a]	.163	.160	.30999
a. Predictors: (Constant), Social Companionship				

Source: Survey Data, 2021

Table XII: ANOVA

ANOVA[b]						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4.110	1	4.110	42.770	.000[a]
	Residual	21.045	219	.096		
	Total	25.155	220			
a. Predictors: (Constant), Social Companionship						
b. Dependent Variable: Employee Commitment						

Source: Survey Data, 2021

Table XIV: Coefficients

Coefficients[a]						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.463	.124		19.907	.000

Social Companionship	-.213	.033	-.404	-6.540	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Employee Commitment					

Source: Survey Data, 2021

Based on the R square value (0.163), social companionship can account only for 16.3% of variance in employee commitment. According to the ANOVA table, the Sig value was 0.000 (less than 0.05) and F value was 42.770 and it showed the goodness of fit. This indicated that social companionship can significantly predict employee commitment. Further, the linear regression equation was derived using the coefficient table and it was statistically significant (Employee Commitment = 2.463 – 0.213 * Social Companionship). This means that when social companionship reduces with one unit it decreases employee commitment by 0.213 units.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study focused on two significant concepts; workplace loneliness and employee commitment but undervalued notion thus far (Jung et al., 2021). According to the findings of the study researchers discovered that,

Workplace loneliness including the two dimensions; emotional deprivation and social companionship was found to be high whereas, employee commitment was at a very lower level during the period of the study.

Workplace loneliness has a negative effect on employee commitment. Further, workplace loneliness can account for 13.7% of variance in employee commitment. Hence, H_1 hypothesis was accepted.

Emotional deprivation has a negative effect on employee commitment. Further, emotional deprivation can account for 18.2% of variance in employee commitment. Hence, H_{1a} hypothesis was accepted

Social companionship has a negative effect on employee commitment. Further, emotional deprivation can account for 16.3% of variance in employee commitment. Hence, H_{1b} hypothesis was accepted.

Even Yilmaz (2008) discovered that workplace loneliness is a significant predictor to determine the employee's level of commitment at workplace. In other words, when an employee feels lonely it negatively influences on his or her level commitment at workplace (Ertosum at al., 2011). Most importantly, when an employee doesn't have friends and quality social networks to share ideas and opinions they feel helpless and lonely and it could be a prominent reason hinder their level of commitment at workplace (Ayazlar & Guzel, 2014). Even the researchers of the present study proved that workplace loneliness has a significant negative effect on employee commitment. Hence, workplace loneliness is really harmful for both employees and to their respective organizations.

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