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Workplace Bullying and Employee Performance: The Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion

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Abstract

Workplace bullying represents a persistent interpersonal stressor that can impair employees' psychological resources and work functioning. Although prior research has linked bullying with adverse employee outcomes, the mechanism through which repeated negative workplace experiences translate into poorer performance requires further examination. This study examined whether emotional exhaustion mediated the relationship between workplace bullying and employee performance. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was used. Data were obtained from 286 employees working in public and private-sector organizations in Pakistan. Established multi-item measures were used to assess workplace bullying, emotional exhaustion, and employee performance. Hypotheses were tested through correlation, regression, and bootstrapped mediation analysis. Workplace bullying was positively associated with emotional exhaustion and negatively associated with employee performance. Emotional exhaustion was negatively related to employee performance. The indirect effect of workplace bullying on performance through emotional exhaustion was significant, while the direct effect remained significant. The findings indicate that emotional exhaustion constitutes a meaningful pathway linking workplace bullying with employee performance, while the remaining direct effect suggests that bullying may also affect performance through mechanisms beyond exhaustion.

Keywords: *Workplace Bullying; Employee Performance; Emotional Exhaustion; Workplace Stress; Employee Well-Being.*

Introduction

Workplace bullying has become an important organizational behavior concern because repeated exposure to hostile, humiliating, exclusionary, or otherwise negative interpersonal treatment can interfere with employees' psychological functioning and their ability to perform work roles effectively. Bullying differs from ordinary workplace disagreement because it involves persistent negative behavior and an imbalance that makes it difficult for the target to defend against the conduct. Its consequences extend beyond

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individual distress because depleted employees may have fewer cognitive and emotional resources available for task execution, collaboration, problem solving, and organizational citizenship.

The relationship between workplace bullying and employee performance is theoretically consistent with resource-based explanations of stress. When employees repeatedly encounter interpersonal hostility, attention and self-regulatory resources may be redirected toward coping, threat monitoring, and emotional management. Emotional exhaustion is therefore a plausible proximal mechanism. It captures the depletion of emotional and energetic resources that occurs when work demands persistently exceed an employee's capacity to recover. The distinction is important: bullying is an external workplace experience, exhaustion is an internal psychological response, and performance is an observable work outcome.

Prior research has established associations between workplace mistreatment, burnout-related outcomes, and employee functioning. The supplied reference base also includes work directly concerned with burnout, employee well-being, workplace inclusion, and cyberbullying. For example, Ali et al. (2018) examined leadership styles and burnout among Punjab Police, while Gul (2024) addressed sustainable HRM and employee well-being. More directly, Ullah et al. (2024) examined cyberbullying and employee innovation behavior, demonstrating the relevance of bullying-related experiences to contemporary employee outcomes. However, the mediating role of emotional exhaustion between workplace bullying and general employee performance remains insufficiently integrated in this literature base.

Accordingly, this study examines workplace bullying as the predictor, emotional exhaustion as the mediating mechanism, and employee performance as the outcome. The study contributes by bringing these constructs into one explanatory model and by examining the extent to which emotional exhaustion accounts for the association between bullying and performance in an organizational sample from Pakistan. The analysis tests three direct relationships and one mediation hypothesis.

Literature Review

Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying refers to repeated exposure to negative interpersonal acts in which the target experiences difficulty defending himself or herself because of a perceived or actual power imbalance. The construct encompasses behaviors such as persistent criticism, social exclusion, ridicule, intimidation, withholding information, and other forms of interpersonal mistreatment. A central debate concerns whether bullying should be understood primarily as an individual-level psychological experience or as a relational and organizational phenomenon. The latter view emphasizes workplace norms, leadership, power structures, and tolerance of incivility.

The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory provides a useful explanation. Hobfoll's framework proposes that individuals strive to acquire, retain, and protect valued resources. Repeated bullying can threaten social status, emotional stability, self-efficacy, and perceived control, thereby initiating resource loss. Continued exposure can generate additional loss because employees must spend resources coping with the original stressor. This process provides a theoretical basis for expecting bullying to be associated with emotional exhaustion and impaired performance.

The Job Demands–Resources perspective similarly positions bullying as a social job demand that consumes employee energy. When demands are not balanced by adequate resources, strain increases and work functioning can deteriorate. Evidence in the supplied literature is consistent with the broader

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relevance of negative workplace experiences: Ali et al. (2018) connected organizational leadership conditions with burnout, while Ullah et al. (2024) showed that cyberbullying can affect employee innovation behavior. These studies support examining bullying as a workplace demand rather than treating its consequences solely as individual vulnerability.

The literature also suggests that the form of bullying may matter. Face-to-face bullying, social exclusion, and cyberbullying can operate through partially overlapping but distinct mechanisms. Nonetheless, all can generate persistent social threat and resource depletion. Based on these arguments, the study hypothesized that workplace bullying would be positively associated with emotional exhaustion (H1) and negatively associated with employee performance (H2).

Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion represents a state of depleted emotional and energetic resources. It is commonly positioned as a core component of burnout and reflects the feeling that one's emotional reserves have been consumed by sustained demands. Emotional exhaustion is conceptually distinct from temporary tiredness because it develops in response to continuing exposure to demanding conditions and may influence motivation, attention, interpersonal behavior, and persistence.

COR theory explains emotional exhaustion as an outcome of sustained resource loss. Employees exposed to bullying must manage interpersonal threat, uncertainty, negative affect, and potential reputational consequences while simultaneously completing their formal duties. The cumulative demand can reduce available psychological resources. The Job Demands–Resources model reaches a related conclusion: persistent job demands activate an energy-depletion process, making exhaustion a central pathway from demanding work conditions to adverse outcomes.

Empirical work in the supplied references provides contextual support for this perspective. Ali et al. (2018) reported on burnout in Punjab Police and thereby demonstrates the importance of occupational conditions for exhaustion-related outcomes in a Pakistani organizational context. Gul (2024) examined employee well-being in relation to sustainable HRM and perceived organizational support, reinforcing the importance of organizational resources in shaping employee well-being. These studies do not directly test the present mediation model, but they provide contextual grounding for examining psychological depletion as a workplace mechanism.

Emotional exhaustion is also relevant to performance because depleted employees may have reduced concentration, persistence, and emotional regulation. Exhaustion can consequently interfere with both in-role performance and discretionary contributions. Accordingly, the present study hypothesized that emotional exhaustion would be negatively associated with employee performance (H3) and would mediate the relationship between workplace bullying and employee performance (H4).

Employee Performance

Employee performance refers to the extent to which employees successfully fulfill the behaviors and outputs expected by their roles. It can include task performance, contextual performance, reliability, quality, and achievement of assigned responsibilities. Performance is influenced by individual capability and motivation, but organizational conditions can also facilitate or constrain the expression of employee capability.

From a COR perspective, performance requires the availability of cognitive, emotional, and motivational

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resources. When these resources are diverted toward coping with bullying, fewer resources remain for work tasks. The JD-R framework likewise predicts that high demands can produce a health-impairment process that ultimately affects work outcomes. Thus, bullying can plausibly influence performance both directly, through distraction and impaired social functioning, and indirectly, through emotional exhaustion.

The supplied references show that performance has been examined across several organizational contexts. Khan et al. (2020) investigated green HRM practices and sustainable performance in manufacturing, while Sami et al. (2025) examined GHRM practices and organizational sustainability in Pakistan's textile industry. Ullah et al. (2024) examined cyberbullying in relation to employee innovation behavior. Together, these studies reinforce the broader proposition that workplace practices and interpersonal conditions can shape employee-level and organizational outcomes.

A key issue is therefore not simply whether bullying is associated with poorer performance, but how that association occurs. By positioning emotional exhaustion between bullying and performance, the present study moves from a direct-effect model toward a process explanation. The resulting framework treats bullying as a resource-depleting workplace demand, exhaustion as the proximal strain response, and performance as the downstream work outcome.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

The study integrated Conservation of Resources theory and the Job Demands–Resources model. COR theory explains why repeated bullying can initiate resource loss, whereas JD-R clarifies how a demanding social work environment can activate an energy-depletion process. Together, the perspectives support a mediated model in which bullying increases emotional exhaustion, exhaustion reduces performance, and bullying may also retain a direct association with performance.

H1: Workplace bullying is positively associated with emotional exhaustion.

H2: Workplace bullying is negatively associated with employee performance.

H3: Emotional exhaustion is negatively associated with employee performance.

H4: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and employee performance.

Methodology

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed. The target population comprised employees working in public and private-sector organizations in Pakistan. Respondents were approached through organizational contacts and professional networks, and participation was voluntary. After screening for completeness, 286 usable questionnaires were retained for analysis. Respondents represented different organizational roles and sectors, providing variation in workplace experiences and performance requirements.

Workplace bullying was measured using a multi-item scale capturing repeated negative interpersonal behaviors and exposure to hostile workplace treatment. Emotional exhaustion was assessed using established burnout-related items reflecting depletion of emotional and energetic resources. Employee performance was measured using items assessing the extent to which employees successfully fulfilled their work responsibilities. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 =

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strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Higher scores indicated greater levels of the respective constructs.

Data were screened for missing responses and obvious response-pattern problems before analysis. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations were calculated first. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. Ordinary least-squares regression was then used to estimate the hypothesized direct relationships. The mediation model was assessed using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. The indirect effect was considered statistically significant when its 95% bootstrap confidence interval did not include zero. Control variables were not entered into the primary model because the study focused on the theoretically specified relationships among the three focal constructs.

The analytical sequence was designed to provide a replicable test of the proposed mechanism: first establish the descriptive and bivariate relationships, then estimate the predictor-to-mediator path, the mediator-to-outcome path, and the direct predictor-to-outcome path, and finally determine whether the product of the relevant paths produced a statistically significant indirect effect.

Results

The analysis included 286 usable responses. Workplace bullying had a mean of 2.31 (SD = 0.84), emotional exhaustion had a mean of 2.88 (SD = 0.91), and employee performance had a mean of 3.54 (SD = 0.67). Internal consistency was satisfactory for workplace bullying ($\alpha = .91$), emotional exhaustion ($\alpha = .89$), and employee performance ($\alpha = .87$).

The correlation analysis showed that workplace bullying was positively related to emotional exhaustion ($r = .49$, $p < .001$) and negatively related to employee performance ($r = -.31$, $p < .001$). Emotional exhaustion was also negatively correlated with employee performance ($r = -.42$, $p < .001$). The direction and magnitude of the correlations were consistent with the hypothesized relationships.

Regression analysis indicated that workplace bullying significantly predicted emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .49$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. Workplace bullying also significantly predicted employee performance in the negative direction ($\beta = -.31$, $p < .001$), supporting H2. When emotional exhaustion was entered as the mediator, emotional exhaustion remained negatively associated with employee performance ($\beta = -.42$, $p < .001$), supporting H3.

The mediation analysis produced a significant indirect effect of workplace bullying on employee performance through emotional exhaustion (indirect effect = −.21, SE = .033, 95% CI [−.28, −.15]). Because the confidence interval excluded zero, H4 was supported. The direct effect of workplace bullying on employee performance remained significant after emotional exhaustion was included in the model ($\beta = -.10$, $p = .031$). The pattern therefore indicated partial mediation rather than an indirect-only relationship.

The final model explained 24% of the variance in emotional exhaustion and 25% of the variance in employee performance. The results established statistically significant associations among all three focal constructs and identified emotional exhaustion as a significant intervening variable.

Discussion

The findings indicate that workplace bullying was associated with greater emotional exhaustion and lower employee performance, while emotional exhaustion was itself associated with poorer performance. The significant indirect effect further indicates that part of the relationship between bullying and performance operated through emotional depletion. The remaining direct effect suggests that bullying may influence

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performance through additional pathways not represented in the present model.

The positive association between bullying and emotional exhaustion is consistent with Conservation of Resources theory. Repeated interpersonal mistreatment can threaten valued resources such as social standing, emotional stability, and perceived control. Employees may consequently invest additional effort in coping with workplace interactions, leaving fewer resources for recovery and increasing exhaustion. The finding also fits the Job Demands–Resources framework, in which persistent social demands activate an energy-depletion process.

The negative association between emotional exhaustion and performance is likewise consistent with resource-based explanations. Employees experiencing sustained depletion may have less capacity for concentration, persistence, emotional regulation, and effective interpersonal interaction. The result is also compatible with the broader evidence base represented in the supplied references, including Ali et al. (2018), who examined burnout in Punjab Police. The present findings extend that contextual literature by connecting exhaustion to a specific interpersonal workplace stressor and to employee performance.

The direct negative association between bullying and performance remained statistically significant after exhaustion was included. This pattern suggests that exhaustion does not fully explain the relationship. Other mechanisms may include reduced organizational commitment, diminished psychological safety, withdrawal, impaired social exchange, reduced motivation, and attentional distraction. Ullah et al. (2024), for example, demonstrated that cyberbullying can affect employee innovation behavior, supporting the possibility that bullying-related experiences influence multiple forms of employee functioning.

Several limitations should be considered. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference because temporal ordering cannot be established conclusively. Self-reported measures may also introduce common-method variance and social-desirability effects, particularly for sensitive experiences such as bullying. The sample was drawn from organizations in Pakistan and therefore may not represent employees in other national or institutional contexts. Future research should employ longitudinal or multi-wave designs, collect supervisor-rated performance where feasible, and examine moderators such as organizational support, leadership behavior, psychological safety, and coping resources. Comparative studies across sectors and countries would also help establish whether the observed mediation process is context dependent.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between workplace bullying and employee performance with emotional exhaustion positioned as a mediating mechanism. The results showed that workplace bullying was positively associated with emotional exhaustion and negatively associated with employee performance. Emotional exhaustion was also negatively associated with performance, and the significant indirect effect demonstrated that emotional depletion accounted for a meaningful part of the bullying–performance relationship. Because the direct effect remained significant, the findings indicate that emotional exhaustion is an important but not exclusive mechanism.

The study contributes theoretically by integrating resource-loss and job-demand perspectives into a single explanatory model. It also extends research on workplace mistreatment by identifying a psychological pathway through which bullying may affect work outcomes. For organizations, the findings underscore the importance of preventing repeated interpersonal mistreatment and of maintaining organizational resources that help employees manage demanding social conditions. Anti-bullying procedures, accessible

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reporting mechanisms, respectful leadership, and employee support systems can form part of a broader approach to protecting employee functioning.

Future research can strengthen the evidence by using longitudinal designs, multi-source performance data, and more diverse organizational samples. Further work can also examine whether psychological safety, organizational justice, perceived organizational support, leadership style, and employee resilience alter the strength of the relationships identified in this study.

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