

Workplace Bullying and Work Demands Impact on Work Stress among Malaysian Customs Officers

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ABSTRACT

This study intends to examine the relationship between workplace bullying and work requirements towards work stress. It was conducted on customs officers in the eastern region of Malaysia. A total of 124 respondents were given a self-administered questionnaire towards getting their responses on the said variables. Data analysis was done using SPSS. The findings indicate that workplace bullying has a significant relationship with job stress. In addition, job demands also show a positive relationship with job stress. Therefore, the findings of this study are useful for academics and other researchers in examining issues related to workplace bullying, job demands, and job stress. The findings offer ideas or solutions to reduce workplace bullying and job demands that contribute to job stress.

Keywords: Workplace bullying, work demands, work stress, custom officers

INTRODUCTION

Bullying in the workplace should not be taken lightly, nor should the work demand in an organization. Studies on workplace bullying and work demands were selected to decide whether the situation is serious. This is also to decide whether it affects employees, especially about work pressure. Bullying has been common in the workplace, both in the private and public sectors. This has been expressed by some individuals on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and the X app (formerly Twitter). For example, a man, through the TikTok application, shared his experience of being severely bullied at work, which caused his mental and physical health to deteriorate (Kosmo, 2023).

A study conducted by a non-governmental organization (NGO) found that 64 percent of the country's citizens had experienced some form of discrimination in the past 12 months. The Association for Education Diversity (AOD) in its 2023 State of Discrimination in Malaysia survey of 3,238 respondents found that 38 percent reported experiencing discrimination based on socioeconomic status, 33 percent based on age, and 32 percent based on ethnicity (Yeo, 2023). Moreover, Yeo (2023) also stated that the element of discrimination was caused by factors such as skin color and language by 32 percent, 28 percent by place of residence and political stance, 26 percent by gender identity, 24 percent by gender, 22 percent by religion, and 19 percent by personal ability or health level. Not only that, but some of them also complained about the demands of the work they faced.

This study aims to examine the relationships among three workplace factors, namely bullying behavior, work demands, and work stress, among customs officers in the eastern region. Moreover, bullying in the workplace and work demands are related and affect a person's work stress. Unfortunately, few studies have been conducted in the context of public departments, particularly among customs officers. Therefore, this issue needs to be addressed before it becomes more serious, regardless of whether it is in the private or public sector. Thus, the goals of the study are to find the relationship and impacts between workplace bullying and work stress, and between job demands and work stress.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work Stress

Work stress is defined as a discrepancy between the physiological demands of the workplace and the employee's inability to manage or cope with those demands (Babatunde, 2013). Work stress refers to how sources of stress in the work environment (stressors) can lead to manifestations of psychological, behavioral, or physiological distress, as well as to long-term health effects (Landsbergis, Dobson, LaMontagne, Choi, Schnall, & Baker, 2017). Clegg (2001) stated that work stress is any force that pushes psychological or physical factors beyond their capacity, producing tension in an individual. Meanwhile, Shahid, Latif, Sohail, and Ashraf (2012) stated that work stress is a harmful factor caused by the work environment. Park (2007) argued that work stress arises from various sources and affects people in different ways. Work stress is the difficulty employees face due to increased workload, discomfort while working, and dissatisfaction (Faeni, Puspitaningtyas, & Safitra, 2021). They also said that work stress is a tense situation that causes physical and mental imbalance, affecting an employee's perception, focus, and condition. Rahani (2015) believes that work stress is an obstacle that has restricted a person from performing a desired job.

Martha (2016) states that work stress is a physically and emotionally harmful condition that occurs when the work performed is not following an employee's skills, abilities, and strengths. According to Carr, Kelley, Keaton, and Albercht (2011), work stress is defined as the perceived gap between the demands placed on a person and the ability to meet those demands. Choudhury (2013) states that work stress differs for each person, depending on the situation, duration, and level of stress experienced. Malik and Björkqvist (2019) argue that work stress is a stimulus for psychological stress due to the different work pressures experienced by this generation, which is an inevitable phenomenon. Stress occurs when personal discomfort is triggered by factors that affect one's emotional stability (Suryani & Yoga, 2019). Chukwunoso, Phina, and Chike (2022) said that work-related stress occurs when employees are exposed to high pressure or demands in the work environment from a single party, with limited time to meet those demands. Thus, this study purported that work stress is a psychological pressure on employees in the workplace. It is important to understand and recognize the level of work stress among employees, as it affects the organization's performance and is directly and indirectly related to employees' psychological pressures.

Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying has been defined as a repeated activity with the intention of causing mental and sometimes physical pain to the victim. This behavior is directed at individuals who are unable to defend themselves for several reasons (Malik & Björkqvist, 2019). Bullying is a negative action when someone intentionally causes injury or discomfort to another individual through physical contact, words, or other means, such as making mean faces or gestures, as well as intentional exclusion from a group (Volk, Dane & Marina, 2014). Workplace bullying is unacceptable behavior that occurs everywhere, in which an individual harasses, offends, or socially excludes employees or other individuals on a regular basis (Jahanzeb, Fatima, & De Clercq, 2021). Munro and Philips (2020) said that bullying is unwanted behavior by an individual or group that is offensive, intimidating, malicious, or insulting, and is an abuse of power that denigrates, humiliates, or causes physical or emotional harm to another individual.

According to Chukwunoso et al. (2022), workplace bullying is divided into bullying related to individuals and bullying related to work. Bullying related to individuals involves general humiliation, neglect, insults, spreading rumors or gossip, intruding on privacy, yelling, and other related issues. Bullying related to work includes excessive workload, giving unclear instructions, safety violations, giving unreasonable tasks, and tasks with impossible deadlines. Musa (2016) said that bullying is divided into three types, namely personal bullying, work-related bullying, and physical bullying. Personal bullying involves interaction between the bully and the victim. Work-related bullying can cause an unpleasant work environment, the work performance of the bully victim, placing blame, and deliberately making the bully victim uncomfortable. Meanwhile, physical bullying involves violent attacks, physical violence, and threats to the victim. Thus, this study posits that workplace bullying has a detrimental effect on vulnerable employees. The vulnerable employees have no control over themselves, especially when dealing with bullies. They would feel intimidated by workplace bullies.

Work Demands

Work demands are physical, social, or organizational aspects of a job that require continuous physical and mental effort and are associated with certain physiological and psychological costs (Broetje, Jenny, & Bauer, 2020). Mäkikangas, Leiter, Kinnunen, and Feldt (2021) define work demands as job aspects that require cognitive or emotional effort. Work demands are also all the demands that force individuals or employees to put greater effort and energy into carrying out their tasks to achieve goals and meet needs but also create personal opportunities for them to grow and develop (Ingusci, Signore, Giancaspro, Manuti, Molino, Russo, et. al., 2021). They also said that when job demands are high, they can be considered threats and challenges for individuals or employees at work. Examples of job demands include workload, time pressure, emotional and cognitive challenges in interactions with others, high responsibility, new projects, and challenging demands (Ingusci et al., 2021). Bakker and Demerouti (2014) said that although work needs are not necessarily negative, they can become obstructive when the employee has not fully recovered. An elevated level of effort is required to fulfill the need. Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) said that work demands are the degree to which the environment holds stimuli that require attention and response, as well as tasks that need to be done.

Work demands are measurable job characteristics that include time pressure and workload (Bowen, Edwards, Lingard, & Cattell, 2014). Being exposed to high work demands over an extended period leads to employee exhaustion and psychological disengagement from their jobs (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). High work demands and low job resources not only increase the likelihood of employee burnout but also physiological and psychological distress (Adil & Baig, 2018). Moreover, high work demands, complex work processes, and increasingly high organizational goals cause each employee to work quickly, focused, and optimally. This causes employees to experience work pressure, which makes them stressed and leads to conflicts among them (Suryani & Yoga, 2019). Thus, this study purported that work demands are perceived as challenges by employees in their workplace. They further perceived that their organizations place a high demand on them in terms of their work productivity.

The Relationship between Workplace Bullying and Work Stress

Robert (2018) stated in his study that workplace bullying impacts work stress. Bullying in the workplace has a serious impact on organizations because it reduces the probability of achieving company goals due to low work performance. Workplace bullying and work stress are well-studied phenomena in organizational psychology. Studies have shown that one of the main causes of workplace stress is interpersonal conflict. This behavior also negatively affects the work capacity of individuals, groups, and organizations (Malik & Björkqvist, 2019). Although the low percentage shows that only a few employees are bullied daily, being bullied daily is a severe form of abuse and can cause serious harm to employees (Bir & Hassan, 2014). Kim, Cha, and Kim (2019) said that reducing bullying incidence helps new employees experiencing high work stress. Bullying affects work stress, which will affect turnover in the workplace (Lee, Lee, & Bernstein, 2013).

Min (2017) and Chukwunoso et al. (2022) reported a positive relationship between workplace bullying and work stress. Analysis of the frequency of workplace bullying shows that it is serious and severe, with repeated incidents endured by employees (Bir & Hassan) [29]. Malik and Björkqvist (2019) showed that the main cause of work stress is workplace bullying, or interpersonal conflict at work. The findings of a study conducted by Saleh, Niroumand, Dehghani, Saleh, Mousavi, and Zakeri (2020) support earlier studies that show a positive relationship between work stress and workplace bullying (i.e., workplace violence). Robert (2018) also showed a strong, significant correlation between bullying in the workplace and work stress, where $r=0.864$. Based on the stated facts, this study hypothesizes that - H_1 : There is a significant relationship between workplace bullying and work stress.

The Relationship between Work Demands and Work Stress

Min (2017) states that the Job Demand-Control (JD-C) model emphasizes the importance of daily environmental stressors in long-term stress experiences. Employees will experience elevated levels of work stress when the demands of the work are not in line with inadequate decision-making. Adil and Baig (2018) said that employees will invest more time to achieve higher job demands, which will adversely affect their work-life balance. They

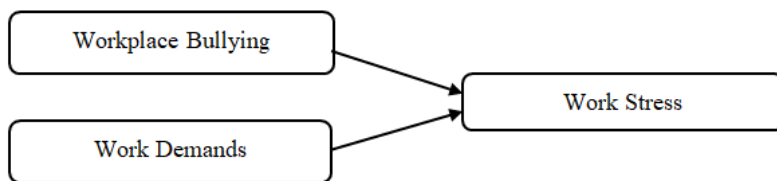
tend to initially put maximum effort into managing their work stress, even though their health will be affected. High job demands and low job control can lead to a state of stress that can damage employees' health in the organization (Belkic, Landsbergis, Schnall, & Bakker, 2024).

A study on job demands and work stress in organizational employees conducted by Schaubroeck, Lam, and Xie (2000) showed a positive relationship. Moreover, Moustakas and Constantinidis (2010) found that work stress is primarily caused by the work environment, including work demands, workload, stressors, and a lack of power within the organization. Chatzigianni, Tsounis, Markopoulus, and Sarafis (2018) stated that work stress is a harmful physical and emotional response that occurs when work demands exceed the employee's resources, abilities, and needs. Employees who face high work demands are likely to be exhausted, which is indirectly related to employee work stress and, in turn, causes health problems (James & Anitha, 2016). Based on these findings, it is expected that employees facing high work demands will bring elevated levels of work stress to the organization. Based on the discussion above, this study hypothesizes that - H₂: There is a positive relationship between work demands and work stress.

Study Framework

Figure 1 depicts the study's framework, with workplace bullying and work demands as independent variables and work stress as the dependent variable.

Figure 1: Study's Framework



METHODOLOGY

Self-administered questionnaires were distributed among customs officers. The method contributed to the study's novelty, as the data were collected from a customs department to obtain their insights on workplace bullying and work demands in relation to their work stress. Table 1 depicts the research tools being adopted and adapted for this study. Bullying behavior is measured using an instrument developed by Einarsen, Hoel, and Notelaers (2009) comprising 22 items. Work demands are measured using the Karasek (1979) Work Demands Instrument, with 14 items. Work stress is measured using the occupational stress instrument developed by Crank, Regoli, Hewitt, and Culbertson (1995), with 5 items.

Table 1: Research Tools

Variables	Total Items	Sources
Workplace Bullying	22	Einarsen, Hoel, and Notelaers (2009)
Work Demands	14	Karasek (1979)
Work Stress	5	Crank, Regoli, Hewitt, and Culbertson (1995)

RESULTS

Demographic Analysis

A total of 124 questionnaires were collected among public officers in a government agency in the eastern region of Malaysia. They were in the professional rank officers of the agency. The demographic analysis is presented

in Table 2. The respondents who completed the questionnaire were female, 68 (54.8%), compared with male respondents, 56 (45.2%). Subsequently, most respondents were married (n=83; 66.9%) compared with singles (n=33; 26.6%) and divorcees (n=7; 5.6%). 56 respondents showed their age as 30-39 years old (45.2%). These are followed by respondents aged 40-49 years (n=31; 25.0%), 20-29 years (n=27; 21.8%), and, finally, respondents aged 50+ (n=9; 7.3%). Ethnicity, respondents showed that they are Melayu (n=76; 61.3%), the majority. The second majority was the local ethnicity (n=38; 30.6%). Furthermore, these were followed by Cina (n=7; 5.6%) and India (n=3; 2.4%) ethnicities. Most of the respondents had a high certificate (n=77; 62.1%). These were followed by respondents with qualifications of diploma (n=22; 17.7%), degree (n=23; 18.5%), and master's (n=1; 0.8%). Finally, respondents were asked about their length of service at the department. Most respondents served the department for more than 20 years (n=30; 24.2%) or for 6 to 10 years (n=30; 24.2%). These were followed by respondents serving 11-15 years (n=28; 22.6%), 16-20 years (n=4; 19.4%), and 1-5 years (n=12; 9.7%).

Table 2: Demographic Analysis

Demographic Items		N	%
Gender	Male	56	45.2
	Female	68	54.8
Marital Status	Single	33	26.6
	Married	83	66.9
	Others	7	5.6
Age (years old)	20-29	27	21.8
	30-39	56	45.2
	40-49	31	25.0
	>49	9	7.3
Ethnicity	Melayu	76	61.3
	Local Ethnics	38	30.6
	Cina	7	5.6
	India	3	2.4
Education Level	High School	77	62.1
	Diploma	22	17.7
	Bachelor	23	18.5
	Master	1	0.8
Length of Service (years)	1-5	12	9.7
	6-10	30	24.2
	11-15	28	22.6
	16-20	24	19.4
	>20	30	24.2

Reliability Analysis

The reliability analysis was conducted on the used instruments. Table 3 presents the reliability results for the variables used: workplace bullying, work demands, and work stress. The instrument of workplace bullying had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.95 after one item was dropped. The work followed this demand instrument, which had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90 after 4 items were dropped. Finally, work stress had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.80 after one item was dropped. Thus, all variables are above 0.70 as purported by Hair et al. (2007).

Table 3: Reliability Analysis

Variables	No of Questions	Question Dropped	Cornbach's Alpha
Workplace Bullying	22	1	0.95
Work Demands	15	4	0.90
Work Stress	5	1	0.80

Correlation Analysis

Table 4 depicts the correlation analysis among independent variables and the dependent variable. Based on the results of the Pearson correlation analysis test that has been obtained for the overall relationship between variables in this study, as shown in Table 4.17, researchers found that workplace bullying and work demands are positively and moderately correlated with a coefficient value of 0.471** at a significant level of 0.01 ($r=0.471$, $p<0.001$). This means that work demands will increase moderately (0.471) if workplace bullying increases. The relationship between workplace bullying and work stress was also found to be positively and strongly correlated at the 0.01 significance level, with a coefficient of 0.595** ($r=0.595$, $p<0.01$). This means that if workplace bullying increases, work stress will increase. This result shows that workplace bullying is the most significant independent variable, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.596**, showing an association with increased work stress among customs officers. This shows that high workplace bullying in a job also affects work stress ($r=0.596$, $Sig=0.000$).

The results of the correlation analysis of the job requirements variable showed a significant positive relationship with work stress. The r value obtained was 0.564** while the p value was 0.000, which is smaller than the significance level of 0.01 ($r=0.428$, $p<0.01$). This shows a strong level of correlation. These results show that job requirements are the second strongest independent variable, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.564, showing that they increase work stress among customs officers. Overall, the results of this study show that the two independent variables, workplace bullying and job requirements, show a strong positive correlation, as the p -value is below the 0.01 significance level.

Table 4: Correlations Analysis

Variables	1	2
1. Workplace Bullying	1	
2. Work Demands	0.47**	1
3. Work Stress	0.60**	0.56**

** $p<0.01$, significant correlation at the 0.01 level.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 5 presents the multiple regression analysis of workplace bullying, work demands, and work stress. The main purpose of this study is to find the relationship and assess the strength of the association between workplace bullying and work demands on work stress among customs officers.

The multiple regression model resulting from this study is valid based on the F value of 49.85, which is significant at the 0.01 level ($F=49.848$, $p<0.01$). Since the regression analysis in this study involves more than one independent variable, the adjusted R^2 value is the proportion of variation in the dependent variable explained by the two independent variables, namely bullying behavior, and work demands. From the multiple regression equation above and the study findings, the adjusted R^2 value of 0.449 shows that the independent variables of bullying behavior and work demands contribute 44.9 percent to the variance in work stress among customs officers ($R^2 = 0.449$). The remaining 55.1 percent is influenced by or explained by other variables not included in this study. Based on the R^2 value of 44.9 percent, the study is large.

Furthermore, the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variables, the study findings based on Table 4.18 also show that the Standardized Coefficients (β) value for the bullying behavior variable is significant at the 0.01 level ($\beta=0.42$, $p<0.01$). In comparison, the β value for work demands is also significant at the 0.01 level ($\beta = 0.36$, $p > 0.01$). Based on the findings of this study, hypothesis testing also shows that the independent variable, bullying behavior, has a significant positive relationship with work stress ($t=5.522$, $p<0.01$). The independent variable of work demands also shows a significant positive relationship with work stress ($t=4.736$, $p<0.01$), which does not exceed the 0.01 significance level. Therefore, this analysis clearly shows that bullying behavior and work demands affect the work stress of customs officers. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 states that there is a significant relationship between workplace bullying and work stress, and Hypothesis 2 states that there is a positive relationship between work demands and work stress. Thus, both hypotheses are supported.

Table 5: Multiple Regression Analysis

Variables	Work Stress	
	β	Sig.
Workplace Bullying	0.425	0.000
Work Demands	0.313	0.000
R	0.677	
R^2	0.458	
Adjusted R^2	0.449	
F	49.848	
Sig. F	0.000	

Table 6 presents the hypothesis results, which support both H_1 and H_2 .

Table 6: Hypothesis Results

Hypothesis	Result
H_1 : There is a positive relationship between workplace bullying and work stress.	Supported
H_2 : There is a positive relationship between work demands and work stress.	Supported

DISCUSSIONS & CONCLUSION

This paper discusses in greater detail the overall research findings obtained, examines their implications, and provides recommendations for future researchers. The findings indicate that workplace bullying behavior and job demands among staff in the customs department affect their work stress. These findings support the study

by Min (2017), which showed that workplace bullying behavior and job demands significantly affect work stress. An explanation for these findings is that workplace bullying affects employees' work stress, depending on its frequency. Bullying behavior does not necessarily involve individuals of different genders or ethnic backgrounds; in fact, most reported bullying cases involve perpetrators of the same gender as the victims (Al Bir & Hassan, 2014). Similarly, job demands faced by employees also contribute to their level of work stress.

This study is expected to produce empirical data on the occurrence of workplace bullying and work demands, and their relationship with work stress. A study is considered important if it contributes to knowledge, is used to inform the formation of relevant policies, and benefits practitioners and those involved in the study (Baker, 1994). This study can also serve as a reference on workplace bullying and work demands, to inform the design and implementation of proper policies or guidelines to curb this issue.

The findings have clearly shown that bullying behavior and work demands have an impact on work stress among customs officers. Bullying behavior needs to be emphasized by the department, and an awareness program should be held to inform department members. Work assignments should be given based on proper needs, experience, and skills, in line with the length of service of department employees. This can address the problem of work stress faced by department employees. In this regard, it can strengthen and further improve the quality and performance of employees in carrying out their duties and responsibilities, as well as in realizing the department's goals, mission, and vision. This study was conducted to find the relationship between the effects of workplace bullying and work demands on work stress among customs officers. The results of this study are expected to help the department in understanding the status or rate of bullying and work demands that impact employees' work stress, as well as in taking initiatives and preventive measures to address this issue. This can thus strengthen the quality and performance of staff work.

The results of this study show that workplace bullying and work demands among customs officers are matters that should not be taken lightly, as they will affect employees' work stress. This will affect officers' performance in carrying out their duties and responsibilities. Management needs to be aware of bullying among department members so that the problem can be addressed immediately. This will affect the smoothness with which they carry out their duties and achieve the department's vision and mission. Management also needs to continually provide and increase awareness among staff and encourage employees to voice their opinions and share information about this issue. In addition, the results of this study can serve as a guide and reference for top management in examining and understanding workplace demands. Management needs to know which tasks and responsibilities are proper for employees based on their experience and skills to reduce employee work stress. Management also needs to show the types of support that can help employees minimize the work stress they face in meeting work demands.

In conclusion, this study found that bullying behavior affects work stress among staff of the customs office. Job demands also significantly affect employees' work stress. Widespread workplace bullying occurs because it is not viewed as an illegal act, allowing bullies to escape accountability for their behavior easily. Due to the harmful effects that bullies can have on employees, organizations, and senior management, immediate and firm action must be taken to address this issue. Training programs should be conducted to teach staff how to respond when they are bullied. Organizations and senior managers should also check job demands to ensure employees do not feel overburdened by excessive workloads. Restructuring and improvements should be implemented to meet employees' needs, enabling them to perform their duties and responsibilities effectively and smoothly. Overall, organizations must create a healthy workplace where employees respect one another and develop good, systematic work procedures. In doing so, organizations will be able to achieve their mission, vision, and goals effectively and smoothly.

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