

When Bullying Speaks Louder Than Words: Psychological Distress as a Pathway to Employee Silence in Sri Lankan Telecommunication Sector

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Abstract: Workplace bullying is an emerging phenomenon within organizations that has adverse effects on the well-being and productivity of employees. This research explores the effect of workplace bullying on employee silence, considering the mediation effect of psychological distress in the telecommunication organizations through the lens of COR Theory and CAPS Theory. Drawing data from telecommunication employees from a developing country context, this study addresses the gap in the existing literature and strengthens the theoretical perspectives by integrating psychological distress as a key mechanism linking workplace bullying and employee silence, an area that has received constricted empirical attention. Data were gathered from 411 employees through self-reported questionnaires using convenient sampling and the analysis was done through SPSS and PROCESS Macro model 4. The findings revealed that the workplace bullying is associated with employee silence by both directly and indirectly exploding psychological distress. It indicates that employees who experience bullying are more likely to hold on their opinions due to strain. This study fills the contextual gap in the existing literature concerning developing countries' perspectives. This study refines the theoretical understandings by clarifying the mediating mechanism of psychological distress and advances the applicability of stress-based theories in Asian countries. Practically, the study pinpoints the need for anti-bullying policies to promote open organizational communication. These new insights, provide the cornerstone for further research on mistreatment of employees and employee behaviors in emerging countries.

Keywords: *Employee Silence, Psychological Distress, Telecommunication Sector, Workplace Bullying*

Introduction

Workplace bullying is an enormous issue in organizations, and it seriously affects employees' well-being and how things happen in the company. It's basically when people keep being mean and hostile to others, like through name-calling, shaking people, making threats, intimidating them, messing up their work, or leaving them out. This creates an environment where everyone feels scared and mentally stressed out (Al Shaikh et al., 2025). Not only does this mess with people's morale, but it also messes with how much work gets done and how well the company functions (Yao et al., 2020a;

Mehmood & Sajid, 2020). Employee silence is when employees keep their opinions, concerns, or ideas to themselves. It's one of the ways they cope with workplace bullying. Employees keep silence because they're afraid of getting in trouble, they think it won't make a difference if they speak up, or they're not sure if the organization will do anything about it (Prouska & Psychogios, 2018). However, this silence actually messes up communication, stops innovation, and just keeps the same old problems going (Knoll & van Dick 2013). Psychological distress includes anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion.

In telecommunications industry, with rapid technological advancements and fierce competition, (Einarsen et al., 2020) it's crucial to understand how workplace bullying, employee silence, and psychological distress works. Employees in the telecommunication sector in Sri Lanka operate under stressful circumstances like workload, performance evaluation, customer complaints, and deadlines, which make them prone to experience workplace bullying and psychological pressure. Therefore, it becomes pertinent to conduct research on workplace problems in the telecommunication sector. Three out of five experience workplace violence issues and one in five feels unsafe at work in Sri Lankan service sectors (IFC, 2022). In addition, Sri Lankan studies suggest that employees often avoid expressing opinions and feedback because of fear, organizational hierarchy, and lack of trust in management (Prasadika & Nishanthi, 2018). Therefore, there is a need to understand the negative treatments in the workplace and its effects on employees. When employees are dealing with psychological distress, they're more likely to hold back from being actively involved and sharing knowledge within the company, that in turn less productivity and innovation (Prouska & Psychogios, 2018; Mehmood et al., 2024).

While past studies have independently analyzed the topics of workplace bullying, psychological distress, and employee silence, few empirical studies have looked into the mediating effect of psychological distress in the association between workplace bullying and employee silence in developing country environments. In terms of the mediating studies that have been done, most have considered variables like psychological safety, emotional exhaustion, and organizational trust, whereas the mediating effect of psychological distress as an independent psychological process connecting bullying with silence is yet to be explored.

Moreover, the majority of existing studies have taken place in Western settings, making it difficult to extend the results to collectivist and high-power distance cultures like Sri Lanka.

The overall objective of the study is thus to establish how psychological distress mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and employee silence in organizations within the telecommunication clusters.

Specifically, the study aims to:

1. examine the impact of workplace bullying on employee silence,
2. examine the impact of workplace bullying on psychological distress,
3. examine the impact of psychological distress on employee silence, and
4. examine the mediating role of psychological distress in the relationship between workplace bullying and employee silence.

Despite increasing recognition of workplace bullying research, there remains a contextual gap in understanding how psychological distress specifically mediates the relationship between bullying and employee silence, particularly within Sri Lankan contexts in the telecommunication sector as the Sri Lanka is a high-power distanced country with different cultural setting than western countries where limited empirical evidence exists. Here, employees are afraid of supervisors, lack of psychological safety due to hierarchy (Gustiawan et al., 2023) that turns to negative behaviour (Lainidi et al., 2025). Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by examining how workplace bullying influences employee silence through the mediating role of psychological distress, as suggested in recent auditor-based and organizational studies (Thanuja & Nirojan, 2025). In addition, this research tries to fill that gap supported by recent empirical findings

linking bullying, psychological strain, and silence behaviors in a western country (Khan et al., 2021).

Based on the Conservation of Resources Theory and Cognitive-Affective Personality System (CAPS) theory the bullying and its impact on silence and distress is explained in this study which is a key contribution where two theories are integrated for the study. According to the COR theory, employees strive to preserve and save their emotional and psychological resources when facing any form of stress such as workplace bullying (Hobfoll, 1989). Consequently, employees choose to be silent in an attempt to conserve themselves from any further psychological damage. Additionally, the CAPS theory sheds lighter on the processes undertaken by employees psychologically before exhibiting their behavioral responses to workplace bullying (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). When employees see bullying as a threat to them or an injustice, they end up experiencing negative emotions such as stress, fear, and anxiety, which eventually leads to silence behavior.

In fact, employee silence seems to be prevailing, specifically in high power distance contexts where rigid hierarchy

exists (Prouska & Psychogios, 2016). Even though inclusive statistics are dearth in empirical evidence from Sri Lanka suggests that employees mostly keep their own opinions and feedback due to fear and lack of trust (Prasadika & Nishanthi, 2018). Moreover, this study aims to address the mediating role of psychological distress among bullying and employee silence in a comprehensive way which is under explored together with COR and CAPS theories.

Combining COR Theory and CAPS Theory in this paper is one of the major theoretical contributions made by this study, in that previous studies tended to examine these theories independently. Combining both theories allows this study to make a more complete analysis of how workplace bullying affects employee silence as a result of psychological stress. The present study makes an important contribution to the field of organizational behavior by explaining the emotional resource drain and cognitive-emotional processes behind employee silence in Sri Lanka. Examining psychological distress as a psychological phenomenon may provide valuable insight for the literature and practice.

Conceptual Model

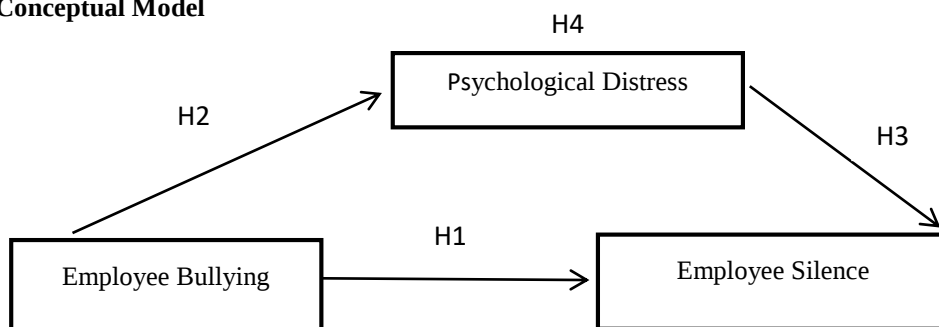


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Workplace bullying and employee silence

Workplace bullying is a serious issue in today's organizations among employees (Zapf et al., 2003; Einarsen et al., 2011). Workplace bullying, as defined by Zapf et al. (2003), entails "persistent negative actions directed at one or more employees, which are unwanted by the victim, and which involve a power imbalance." This definition focuses on the persistence of undesirable behaviors directed at a worker in the work environment. While Einarsen et al. (2011) acknowledge this definition, they go a step further and define workplace bullying as "repeated and persistent negative acts towards one or more individuals, which involve a power imbalance and create a hostile work environment." Making a hostile work environment entails bullying behaviors such as verbal abuse, intimidation, and exclusion—all relevant in removing psychological resources and well-being among employees. Such harmful behavior undermines not only the individual victims but also the culture and effectiveness of entire organizations, some researchers point out; Nielsen and Einarsen, 2012).

Workplace bullying is extremely prevalent; such negative behaviors have an extended effect on morale and productivity within the larger workplace. Bullying relates to increased psychological distress, reduced job satisfaction, impaired performance, and a higher turnover rate (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). Hence, organizations have to make very strict policies against bullying, train employees, and create a supportive culture (Herscovis & Barling, 2010; Houshmand et al., 2012).

In line with this, few studies have focused on the relationships between workplace bullying, or other related constructs like

employee silence, and other variables in the workplace. However, to my knowledge, little research has empirically tested the relationship between workplace bullying and employee silence. Our study addresses this gap by providing a theoretical explanation, from the theoretical view of conservation of resource theory, of workplace bullying's role in employee silence. According to the Conservation of Resources theory, people are inclined to strive to acquire and maintain resource gain and to conserve their valued resources, as Hobfoll indicated in 1989, such as emotional well-being and psychological safety. However, relevant to these resources, workplace bullying represents an important threat and a key source of increased psychological distress. Drawing on COR theory, when individuals feel that there will be or have been a loss of resources, they experience stress. They may use protection behaviors to prevent further resource loss (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

This premise is supported by several empirical studies on the link between workplace bullying and employee silence. For instance, Knoll and van Dick (2013), found that more victims of bullying prefer to remain silent to avoid further victimization and to protect their psychological resources as well. On the other hand, Rai and Agarwal (2018), managed to establish that workplace bullying reduces psychological safety, which in turn enhances employee silence.

COR theory postulates that when individuals are under threat from workplace bullying, their motivation is to protect their resources, both physical and psychological. Bullying at work presents a serious threat to different kinds of resources and contributes to increased stress and a state of emotional exhaustion. The theoretical perspective that is presented here has empirical evidence. For example, Yao et al. (2020) found out that employees bullied at work often keep

silent as a kind of self-protective measure to preserve their reduced psychological resources. On the other hand, Houshmand et al. (2012) came up with findings that the stress resulting from bullying causes them to experience emotional exhaustion, causing them to hold on to ideas or concerns as they try to avoid the depletion of more resources.

Thus, a hypothesis can be made based on the logic of the conservation of resource theory as well as some empirical data:

H1: workplace bullying has a significant impact on employee silence.

Workplace bullying and psychological distress

Workplace bullying has very serious effects on the mental health and general well-being of workers. Bullying is a form of persistent, negative behavior that has been conceptualized as being characterized by an imbalance in power, as often found in acts of verbal abuse, intimidation, and exclusion in the workplace (Zapf et al., 2003; Einarsen et al., 2011). COR theory offers a theoretical rationale that explains how workplace bullying impacts psychological distress. According to COR theory, people protect, maintain, and acquire resources that have valued meanings attached to them, such as emotional well-being and psychological safety. When there is a threat to or loss of such resources, it engenders stress and psychological distress. Any psychological strain increase, therefore, is a serious threat to such resources through workplace bullying as staff struggles to cope with the environment created (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

Some studies have tested the relationship between workplace bullying and psychological distress. For example, Houshmand et al. (2012) examined the effects of bullying on the turnover intentions of those who experienced bullying behavior; the results indicated that both individual and unit-level

bullying were positively related to increased psychological distress and emotional exhaustion, which resulted in higher turnover intention. Further, Nielsen and Einarsen (2012) conducted a meta-analytic review and thereby found that workplace bullying exposure was rather strongly associated with increased psychological distress, decreased job satisfaction, impaired performance, and higher turnover.

Similarly, Rai and Agarwal (2018) conducted a study into the connection between workplace bullying and psychological safety for employee silence. Results indicated that workplace bullying had negative impacts on psychological safety, producing psychological distress. Workplace bullying makes an employee feel insecure, stressed, and inferior to others; hence, they will rarely speak up. A study by Yao et al. (2020) revealed that one of the reasons employees who are bullied may stay silent is to protect themselves and save their psychological resources. According to Hershcovis and Barling (2010), such workplace bullying should be addressed at the organizational level, which may include policies and programs concerning the same. An organization can minimize adverse effects on the psychological well-being of employees who are bullied by creating a supportive organizational culture.

Therefore, based on the reasoning drawn from the conservation of resource theory and some empirical evidence, it can be hypothesized that:

H2: workplace bullying has a significant impact on psychological distress.

Psychological distress and employee silence

Anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion are severe dysfunctional, and discouraging factors of employees' effective functioning at work and speaking up, which is continuously fostered by workplace bullying and leads

to a reduced sense of well-being. (Zapf et al., 2003; Einarsen et al., 2011). The interaction between psychological distress and employee voice has been well explained. Employees who are at high levels of distress do not express their concerns, ideas, or suggestions due to the fear of negative repercussions and the lack of safety in psychological spheres safety (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). According to COR theory, this is more of a protective measure to save remaining psychological resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

This theoretical persuasion is also confirmed by empirical research. For example, Schat and Kelloway (2000) showed that because of workplace violence or harassment, employees who suffered from psychological distress relied on silence to help prevent further depletion of resources. The idea was replicated by Lee and Brotheridge (2006) who established stress from emotional labor as leading to burnout, followed by silence afterward. Investigating employee silence, Bond et al (2010) established that an intense level of stress or emotional exhaustion is developed, which follows the broader trend of distress-induced silence.

Thus, a hypothesis can be derived from conservation of resource theory, underpinned by empirical findings:

H3: Psychological distress has a significant impact on employee silence.

Psychological distress as a mediator in the impact of workplace bullying on employee silence

While there is some research into workplace bullying, little of it has looked at the impact of workplace bullying, psychological distress, and employee silence. My study focuses on the COR theory to test how workplace bullying affects employee silence through the mediating impact of psychological distress. Although much research has surveyed the direct effects of workplace

bullying and psychological distress, very few have examined psychological distress as a mediating role in the relationship between workplace bullying and employee silence. Guided by COR theory, individuals strive for the gain, maintenance, and protection of specific valued resources that include emotional well-being and psychological safety. (Hobfoll, 1989). Drawing on COR theory, psychological distress can mediate this relationship by explaining how the stress and emotional exhaustion caused by bullying lead to silence as a protective mechanism (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

Several studies support this mediating role. Kiewitz et al. (2016) exposed that, compared with less-bullied employees, those who suffered from more bullying had higher levels of psychological distress and were connected with greater intentions to keep silent. The exploratory study conducted by Karim and Rehman (2012) in the healthcare sector also evidenced that psychological distress has a mediating effect in the relationship between workplace bullying and employee silence. The inference that may be drawn accordingly would, hence, be the importance of initiatives or interventions objectively aimed at reducing bullying and negative outcomes on employee well-being and communication. Additionally, Matthiesen and Einarsen (2007) reported that support programs at work organizations and training reduce the level of psychological distress due to bullying and increase openness to communication. Hoel et al. (2010) showed that antibullying policies and a supportive organizational culture were able to buffer the impact of bullying on psychological distress and employee silence.

Therefore, based on the reasoning drawn from the conservation of resource theory and some empirical evidence, it can be hypothesized that:

H4: Psychological distress significantly mediates the impact of workplace bullying on employee silence.

Methodology

We collected the data from Telecommunication sector employees from Sri Lanka. Telecommunication sector is highly demanding, due to highly competitive in nature and technology driven working culture thus needs performance pressures. Due to these issues, it is a stressful environment with facing rapid technological changes, with hard and fast deadlines in service and handling customer complaints on service disruptions (Einarsen et al., 2020). Because of its nature of high competitive it contributes to bullying incidents (Hoel et al., 2020). Studies shows that employees who works as a high contact employee in service industries experience bullying due to continuous interaction (Grandey et al., 2019). Therefore, selection of sample is meaningful for the study. Data were collected from four main telecommunication service providers from Lankan symbolizing heterogeneous employee levels including, technical, engineering, customer service employees, sales and marketing managerial and supervising and administrative officers. Since this research was sensitive, convenient sampling was chosen as it is easily accessible and less cost and less time needed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The google forms were distributed conveniently as employees needs anonymity, privacy maintenance and fear of retaliation. Google forms are usually protecting confidentiality and high data security. Ethical consideration was maintained throughout the study as the participation in this study is fully voluntary basis and the consent was given by all participants. No personal information was collected and they had the right to withdraw at any time. Each participant was told that the data were collected for academic purpose only.

Therefore, the sensitive information was gathered through self-reported google forms. In addition to that they are efficient, and improve the response by honest way (Evans & Mathur, 2005).

A 500 google forms were shared and 411 were returned. Response rate was approximately 82 %. Since the accurate population is unknown, researchers adopted Cochran (1977) formula for sample size computation. Further, according to Hair et al. (2019), the sample size above 200 is considered as adequate for analyses. Therefore, sample for the study is acceptable. Data were analyses through SPSS with PROCESS Macro model 4 to examine the mediating effects. Since, the questionnaires used in this study are previously validated, thereby ensuring reliability and content validity.

Measures

A 22 items scale for workplace bullying was adopted from Einarsen et al. (2009) including A sample item include and the s “Someone withholding information which affects my performance” and the reliability value for this scale was 0.91.

A 10 items scale for psychological distress was adopted from Kessler et al. (2002). A sample item includes “I feel nervous often” and the reliability value for this scale was 0.89.

A 5 items scale for employee silence was adopted from Milliken (2000). A sample item includes “I deliberately withheld ideas and suggestions for improvements” and the reliability value for this scale was 0.87.

Data Analysis

There is no missing data as data were collected through google form. The normality was asses with the help of skewness and kurtosis value of each variable. Here, normality is less critical and less problematic as the sample size is above 200 (Hair et al., 2019). In this study, the skewness results ranged

approximately -0.85 and +0.81, while kurtosis values were within the satisfactory range of -1.37 to 2.59 for all the three main study variables. These values fall within the suggested thresholds, stating that the data do not significantly deviate from normality (Hair et al., 2019; Kline, 2015). Addition to that, multicollinearity was assessed using VIF method to ensure variables were not extremely correlated. All the values are below the threshold value of 5, stating no significant multicollinearity among the independent and mediator variables (Hair et al., 2019). Therefore, the assumptions for regression analysis were satisfactory.

Out of 411, 64% were male and rest are female. The respondents between 30-40 age range are high in workers consist of 49% and employees in the range of 55-60 are less. With respect to educational qualification, degree holders are almost half than other qualifications. As for marital status, approximately two thirds were married. Concerning job roles, administrative officers were responded one third than other group of people. All the participants were from middle and lower level employees as they are easy to reach.

Descriptive Statistics

The internal consistency of each constructs were in acceptable range that are indicating good reliability. Cronbach value stated diagonally. Mean value and standard deviation of each was also acceptable indicating above 4 and 0.3 respectively. As per the Table 1, employee bullying positively correlate with psychological distress with 0.58 and employee silence with 0.52. In addition to that, psychological wellbeing positively correlates with employee silence with 0.52. The KMO Bartlett's results for the above three variables are 0.86, 0.82 and 0.79 for bullying, psychological distress and employee silence respectively. Therefore, this ensures the validity by confirming data is appropriate for analysis. Moreover, the content validity and construct validity for the study are established as the researchers have utilized standard questionnaire (Hossan et al., 2025). The high mean value among the three study variables could be the reason of both methodological and contextual factors. This sector is considered as high work demands and pressurized environment, that may intensify the respondents' experiences about bullying. Additionally, responses are based on subjective perceptions.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics with Correlation

Variable	M	SD	EB	PD	ES
EB	4.28	0.32	.83		
PD	4.24	0.37	.58**	.63	
ES	4.19	0.49	.52**	.52**	.80

Note: Reliability value is diagonally given

Mediation Analysis with PROCESS Macro

The Table 2 illustrates the regression model tested the impact of bullying on psychological distress and the results showed it has the positive significant effect on psychological distress explaining approximately 34% of variance with beta

value of 0.67. Then bullying was tested with employee silence and the results has shown positive effect accounting for 27 % of the variance with beta vale 0.78. Finally, psychological distress was tested and the results have shown significant positive effect on employee silence explaining 34% variance with 4.73 beta

value. Finally, the mediation effect stated that employee silence is determined by both bullying and distress explaining 34% with beta value of 0.49, which shows partial mediation. It shows that workplace bullying impacts employee silence

through psychological distress is a one part. However, employees who are bullied, remain silent due to other factors than the psychological distress as well within the workplace.

Table 2: Regression Analysis

Path	β	t	p	R ²
Bullying → Psychological Distress	.67	10.8	0.01	.337
Bullying → Employee Silence	.78	8.61	0.01	.270
Psychological Distress → Employee Silence	.43	4.73	0.01	.340
Employee Bullying → Psychological Distress → Employee Silence	.49	4.63	0.01	.344

The results have revealed that the indirect effect of employee bullying on employee silence through psychological distress was significant, with $B = 0.29$, $\text{BootSE} = 0.09$, Hence the confidence interval did not include zero, the mediation effect was supported as the direct effect from

bullying to silence is significant even after the inclusion of psychological distress after the 5000 bootstrap samples in SPSS and zero was excluded in the confidence interval. Therefore, mediation effect was supported.

Table 3: Mediation Results

Boot Effect	B	Boot SE	95% LLCI	95% ULCI
Total Effect	0.78	0.09	0.60	0.96
Direct Effect	0.49	0.11	0.28	0.70
Indirect Effect	0.29	0.09	0.13	0.51

Discussion

The findings of this study show that employee bullying significantly raises the employee silence behaviour. These findings are in line with the prior studies that argue employees who experience hostile behaviour, intimidation, ostracism and abusive behaviour are more likely to avoid speaking, exchanging of ideas, stating the problems due to fear of unfavorable outcomes (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Raj and Agarwal (2018) found that bullying creates hostile workplace that promotes silence. In this study, employee bullying has the significant positive effect on psychological distress. This also in line

with the previous studies which suggests continuous exposure on employee bullying can damage emotional side of employees, heightening anxiety, frustration and weaken to cope with challenges in the workplace. In fact, bullied employees frequently experience from emotional tiredness that increases the discomfort (Chan et al., 2019; Houshmand et al., 2012). On the other hand, psychological distress also found significantly influencing to employee silence. Employees those who face high level of stress are less likely to express their concerns, providing feedback and less participation in the discussions happening in the workplace. This finding also adhered with the study of Xu et al.

(2015) stating psychologically distressed employees do not interact and avoid communications. Importantly, psychological distress partially mediates the impact of employee bullying on employee silence. It revealed that bullying not only directly leads to keep the employee silence, but also indirectly increases silence by creating psychological distress.

This study contributes to the nascent literature by addressing the important gap as the previous studies focused separately on each impacts while this study highlight the role of mediation of psychological distress which is limited researched (Liu et al., 2020; Krishna et al., 2023). Prior studies used other mediators such as psychological safety, breach of psychological contract (Prouska & Psychogios, 2018). Furthermore, workplace bullying linked with mental health issues, its indirect effect on silence through distress remains under explored particularly in developing country context where the high power distance exists and fear on authority punishments may lead to silence. This study can be understood in high power distanced country including Sri Lanka. In such contexts, employees are willing to accept powers and not questioning the authority (Hofstede, 2001). Consequently, bullied employees may hesitate to disclose mistreatment in the workplace due to negative consequences. Such contextual characteristics may create silence specially in hierarchy driven sectors. Therefore, the cultural context may intensify the silence among bullied employees.

Theoretical Implications

This study significantly advances the organizational literature by combining the Cognitive-Affective Personality System and Conservation of Resources theory to explain how employee bullying leads to psychological distress that results

employee silence. Through integrating two theories it is obvious employee silence is a passive reaction influenced by both cognitive and affective process. The findings show that bullying act as a potential situational trigger that provide negative cognitive and emotional responses. This extends the CAPS theory by validating that worst workplace behaviors disrupt employees' internal systems. According to CAPS theory, individual behaviors are shaped by environment and its reactions on cognitive and affective. In this study, bullying acts as a negative stimulus that worsen distress. This stress influence in remaining silent. Therefore, this mediation suggests hoe employee emotionally process bullying before showing silence, providing application for CAPS theory in telecommunication sector.

According to recent studies, toxic environment deteriorates employees' perceptions (Liu et al., 2023; Zhang & Farh, 2024). As per the findings from COR theory, it provides empirical support for the controversy that employees get resource loss more likely to conserve their resources (Baka, 2023). This study offers novel contribution which deepens the silence behaviour understanding in the telecommunication sector.

A key contribution in this research is the integration of CAPS and COR into one framework. This dual theoretical model responds and call for more integrated approach in organizational behaviour to explain complex workplace behaviours (Ng & Feldman, 2022; Wu et al., 2024). By linking these viewpoints, this study provides a comprehensive explanation of employee silence, showing that it is a resource conservation tactic and cognitive and affective response. Moreover, this study adds to the body of literature by filling contextual gap. Majority of the researches on workplace bullying and employee silence were done in western countries, with the little focus on

developing countries. However, this study extends the applicability of above said two theories in high power distance countries where hierarchy is visible in organizational culture. Addition to that, psychological distress plays a critical role in employee silence behaviour. To cap it all, this study advances the understanding by providing new research path to a novel, contextually grounded explanation of how and why bullying lead to silence, which in turn offering a meaningful contribution to both theory and future researches.

Practical Implications

The present study shows that bullying greatly increases silence of employees by both directly and indirectly through psychological distress. This actually offers substantial practical implications to leaders, HR managers, and policy makers. It pinpoints that bullying not merely an interpersonal issue, it is an organizational issue that leads an employee to stop communication and keep quiet employees. Therefore, organizations must adopt dual focus intervention strategy which address both external and internal behavior that the employees face. Therefore, organizations should tone up anti bullying policies by making sure they are defined clearly, communicated well, and enforced strictly among the employees. A zero tolerance approach to bullying at workplace must be implemented with strong reporting procedure including confidential channels that allow employees to report incidents without the fear of retaliation. As per prior studies of Al Shaikh et al. (2025) and Kim and Beehr (2022) employees remain keep quiet due to unfavorable outcomes. Therefore, organizations must guarantee transparency in resolving and handling complaints and penalties to stop concurrences.

The findings underscore the importance of psychological distress which is a core of human priority that changes bullying into

silence. Therefore, organizations should implement employee wellbeing programme such as counseling, stress management programmes and employee assistance programmes. Employees' mental health assessments should be done to prevent them from further deterioration of their psychological resources. This in-lines with conservation of resource theory that suggests the employees who feel resource loss are more likely to adopt silence to preserve remaining emotions (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Halbesleben et al., 2021).

Every organization should focus on having a safer environment psychologically where each individual feels comfortable in sharing ideas without fear of humiliation. Managers must enthusiastically promote open way of communication and responding to feedback constructive way to stay away from punitive actions. Managers play a critical role in preventing bullying behaviour at the workplace by introducing leadership training programmes on emotional intelligence, and ethical leadership. Because recent studies highlighted that employee silence largely caused by subpar leaderships (Liu et al., 2023; Zhang & Farh, 2024).

This study highlights the critical reason for addressing the cultural and organizational structural barriers which lead to silence behaviour specifically in high power distance context like Sri Lanka. In developing countries, hierarchical structures are rigid which discourage employees to voice out. Therefore, organizations should reduce barriers in hierarchy by having flat structures and encouraging participative decision making styles to make sure each employees voice is heard at all levels. According to Kim and Beehr (2022) power distance influences silence behavior ensuring interventions are essentials for long term. In addition to that organizations should do adjustments in

workload and create peer support systems. Moreover, they have to address the causes and consequences of bullying to reduce employee silence and promote more productive work environment.

Limitations and Recommendations

The present study also has limitations that we need to acknowledge. The study is cross sectional in design that limit the multi wave research designs, hence the future studies should focus on longitudinal studies with the same concepts to understand the relationship level and how it changes over time. Then the data gathered in this study was from self-reported questionnaire which leads to common method bias when assessing the sensitivity. Future studies can focus on dyed base of gathering data from supervisor as well to reduce common method bias about bullying level and distress level. The study focuses on one mediator, however other mediator variables such as emotional exhaustion, psychological safety can be used as mediators for the future study. Moreover, the sample derived from a specific sector, future studies can focus on various

industries, other cultural contexts to make the results generalize and robust.

Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of employee bullying on employee silence through the mediating role of psychological distress. The findings revealed that employee bullying increases silence of employees by both directly and indirectly with the mediation. It suggests that employees who are subjected to bullying are more likely to experience emotional strain which leads to remain silent at work. Here, psychological distress works as a key mechanism joining negative workplace experience and behavioral consequences. It offers thorough understanding of CAPS and COR theory by stating cognitive affective process with resource depletion. Moreover, by providing findings from a developing nation in South Asian context it extends the existing literature. Finally, it is vital to foster healthier environment in workplace can reduce the employees being quiet which leads to employee wellbeing.

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