

Workplace Bullying and Workplace Deviance among Managerial Employees in ABC (Pvt) Ltd: The Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion

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Abstract

Workplace bullying is a critical organisational issue that adversely affects employee well-being and organisational effectiveness. Despite growing scholarly interest, limited research has examined its impact on workplace deviance among managerial employees in Sri Lanka's logistics sector. This study investigates the effect of workplace bullying on workplace deviance and examines the mediating role of emotional exhaustion among managerial employees at ABC (Pvt) Ltd. Guided by Conservation of Resources Theory, Affective Events Theory, and Social Exchange Theory, the study adopted a positivist philosophy, deductive approach, and quantitative research design. Data were collected from 151 managerial employees using a structured questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation, regression, and mediation analysis in SPSS. The findings revealed that workplace bullying significantly and positively influences both workplace deviance and emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion was also found to significantly predict workplace deviance and partially mediate the relationship between workplace bullying and workplace deviance. These findings indicate that workplace bullying contributes to deviant workplace behaviours both directly and indirectly through emotional strain. The study extends existing organisational behaviour literature by validating established theories within a non-Western logistics context. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of anti-bullying policies, supportive leadership, and employee well-being initiatives to minimise workplace deviance and enhance organisational sustainability.

Keywords: *Emotional Exhaustion, Logistics Sector, Managerial Employees, Workplace Bullying, Workplace Deviance*

Introduction

Workplace bullying has emerged as a significant organisational challenge that threatens employee well-being, workplace relationships, and organisational performance. It is generally defined as repeated and persistent exposure to negative acts such as intimidation, verbal abuse, social exclusion, humiliation, and work-related harassment directed toward an individual who finds it difficult to defend themselves (Einarsen et al., 2009). Recent studies indicate that workplace bullying remains a prevalent phenomenon across industries worldwide, generating substantial psychological, behavioural, and organisational consequences (Farley et al., 2023). As organisations increasingly operate in highly competitive and demanding environments, understanding the consequences of workplace bullying has become a critical concern for both researchers and practitioners.

Among the adverse outcomes associated with workplace bullying, workplace deviance has received considerable attention in organisational behaviour literature. Workplace deviance refers to voluntary behaviours that violate significant organisational norms and threaten the well-being of an organisation and its members (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Such behaviours may include absenteeism, reduced work effort, intentional inefficiency, interpersonal aggression, sabotage, and other counterproductive work behaviours. Previous studies suggest that employees who experience unfair treatment or hostile workplace interactions are more likely to engage in deviant behaviours as a form of retaliation or coping response (Wu et al., 2022; Kim & Koo, 2021). Consequently,

workplace bullying can undermine organisational effectiveness not only through its direct impact on employees but also by fostering behaviours that damage organisational functioning.

Although substantial research has examined workplace bullying among frontline and general employees, relatively limited attention has been devoted to managerial-level employees, particularly in developing-country contexts. Managers operate in highly demanding environments characterised by performance pressures, complex decision-making responsibilities, and extensive interpersonal interactions, making them vulnerable to bullying from supervisors, peers, and subordinates (Björklund et al., 2019; Rehan et al., 2021). This issue is particularly relevant within the logistics sector, where intense competition, strict deadlines, and operational uncertainties create conditions that may intensify workplace stress and interpersonal conflicts. Despite these realities, empirical evidence regarding the nexus between workplace bullying, emotional exhaustion, and workplace deviance among managerial employees remains scarce. A systematic literature review conducted for this study identified only a limited number of studies examining these relationships within sector-specific managerial contexts.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the impact of workplace bullying on workplace deviance among managerial employees in ABC (Pvt) Ltd and examines the mediating role of emotional exhaustion. Drawing upon Social Exchange Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, and Affective Events Theory, this study contributes to the organisational behaviour literature by providing empirical evidence from the Sri Lankan logistics sector and enhancing understanding of the psychological processes through which workplace bullying influences deviant workplace behaviour.

Research Problem

Practical Gap

Workplace bullying has become a critical organisational issue that adversely affects employee well-being, job performance, and organisational effectiveness across industries. Workplace bullying refers to repeated exposure to negative acts, such as verbal abuse, intimidation, humiliation, social exclusion, and persistent criticism, directed toward an individual who is unable to defend themselves (Einarsen et al., 2009). Recent studies have highlighted that workplace bullying contributes to numerous adverse outcomes, including psychological distress, burnout, reduced job satisfaction, absenteeism, turnover intentions, and counterproductive work behaviours (Farley et al., 2023; Hoel et al., 2020). Although organisations increasingly recognise the importance of maintaining psychologically safe workplaces, bullying remains prevalent, particularly in high-pressure industries characterised by intense workloads, strict deadlines, and hierarchical structures.

The logistics sector represents one such environment where employees frequently encounter demanding operational conditions, time-sensitive tasks, and complex interpersonal interactions. Managerial employees in logistics organisations are particularly vulnerable because they occupy positions that require balancing strategic objectives, operational responsibilities, and employee management simultaneously. Preliminary observations conducted within ABC (Pvt) Ltd indicated the existence of workplace bullying concerns among managerial-level employees. The initial investigation revealed that 30 out of 50 respondents acknowledged experiencing or observing workplace bullying behaviours. However, many incidents remained unreported due to fear of retaliation, organisational stigma, and concerns regarding career progression. Such conditions may create emotionally draining work environments that encourage undesirable behavioural responses, including workplace deviance. Consequently, organisations may experience reduced productivity, damaged workplace relationships, increased employee dissatisfaction, and weakened organisational performance. Despite these practical concerns, limited evidence exists on how workplace bullying influences workplace deviance among managerial employees in Sri Lanka's logistics sector, highlighting a significant practical gap that warrants further investigation.

Empirical Gap

The empirical literature provides substantial evidence regarding the adverse effects of workplace bullying on employee outcomes. Previous studies have established positive relationships between workplace bullying and emotional exhaustion (Kwan et al., 2020; Lyu & Li, 2022; Raziq et al., 2021), while other studies have

demonstrated associations between workplace bullying and workplace deviance or counterproductive work behaviours (Kim & Koo, 2021; Wu et al., 2022). Similarly, emotional exhaustion has been identified as a significant predictor of various negative workplace outcomes, including reduced engagement, lower performance, and increased deviant behaviour (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

However, the available empirical findings remain fragmented. Most existing studies have been conducted in Western countries and concentrated on general employee populations rather than managerial employees. Furthermore, a systematic literature review conducted for the present study identified 48 studies examining bullying, emotional exhaustion, and workplace behaviour; however, fewer than three specifically investigated these relationships among managerial employees in sector-specific contexts, such as logistics. Therefore, empirical evidence regarding the bullying–emotional exhaustion–deviance nexus among managerial employees in developing economies remains scarce. Moreover, limited research has examined emotional exhaustion as a mediating mechanism explaining how workplace bullying translates into workplace deviance within South Asian organisational contexts. Consequently, there is insufficient empirical evidence to determine whether findings reported in Western settings can be generalised to Sri Lankan logistics organisations.

Theoretical Gap

Several theoretical perspectives explain the relationship between workplace bullying and employee behaviour. Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory suggests that individuals strive to obtain, maintain, and protect valuable resources, and workplace bullying threatens these resources, resulting in emotional exhaustion and stress (Hobfoll, 1989, 2018). Affective Events Theory (AET) proposes that negative workplace experiences generate emotional reactions that subsequently influence employee attitudes and behaviours (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Similarly, Social Exchange Theory (SET) argues that employees who perceive unfair treatment may reciprocate through negative attitudes and retaliatory behaviours, including workplace deviance (Blau, 1964).

Although these theories independently explain aspects of workplace bullying and its consequences, limited studies have integrated COR Theory, AET, and SET to explain the complete process through which workplace bullying influences workplace deviance via emotional exhaustion. Existing theoretical models predominantly focus on frontline employees and often overlook managerial employees whose experiences differ due to unique authority structures, role expectations, and exposure to bullying from superiors, peers, and subordinates (Björklund et al., 2019; Rehan et al., 2021). Furthermore, the applicability of these predominantly Western-developed theories within non-Western and developing-country contexts remains underexplored. Therefore, a theoretical gap exists in integrating and validating these frameworks to explain workplace bullying, emotional exhaustion, and workplace deviance among managerial employees in the Sri Lankan logistics sector.

Problem Statement

Despite increasing recognition of workplace bullying as a significant organisational issue, limited research has examined its impact on workplace deviance among managerial employees in the Sri Lankan logistics sector. Existing studies largely focus on general employees in Western contexts, offering limited insights into managerial settings. Moreover, the mediating role of emotional exhaustion remains underexplored. Therefore, this study investigates the relationship between workplace bullying and workplace deviance, with emotional exhaustion as a mediator, among managerial employees in ABC (Pvt) Ltd.

Main Research Objective

- To examine the impact of workplace bullying on workplace deviance among managerial employees in ABC (Pvt) Ltd, with the mediating role of emotional exhaustion.

Specific Research Objectives

- To examine the impact of workplace bullying on workplace deviance among managerial employees in ABC (Pvt) Ltd.

- To investigate the impact of workplace bullying on emotional exhaustion among managerial employees in ABC (Pvt) Ltd.
- To examine the impact of emotional exhaustion on workplace deviance among managerial employees in ABC (Pvt) Ltd.
- To assess the mediating role of emotional exhaustion in the relationship between workplace bullying and workplace deviance among managerial employees in ABC (Pvt) Ltd.

Literature Review

Workplace bullying has become a major concern in contemporary organisations due to its detrimental impact on employee well-being, workplace relationships, and organisational effectiveness. Workplace bullying refers to repeated exposure to negative acts, such as intimidation, humiliation, social exclusion, verbal abuse, and persistent criticism, directed toward an employee who is unable to defend himself or herself (Einarsen et al., 2009). Unlike isolated interpersonal conflicts, workplace bullying is characterised by persistence, power imbalance, and psychological harm (Einarsen et al., 2020). Recent studies have shown that workplace bullying remains prevalent across industries and is associated with numerous negative outcomes, including stress, burnout, reduced job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and counterproductive workplace behaviours (Farley et al., 2023; Hoel et al., 2020). In high-pressure sectors such as logistics, where employees operate under strict deadlines and demanding performance expectations, exposure to bullying behaviours may be particularly damaging.

One of the most critical consequences of workplace bullying is workplace deviance. Workplace deviance refers to voluntary behaviour that violates significant organisational norms and threatens the organisation's well-being or that of its members (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Deviant behaviours may include absenteeism, withholding effort, interpersonal aggression, sabotage, and intentional violations of organisational rules. Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that employees who perceive unfair treatment are likely to reciprocate negatively through deviant behaviours. Consistent with this perspective, empirical studies have reported a positive relationship between workplace bullying and workplace deviance, indicating that bullied employees often engage in retaliatory or counterproductive behaviours as a response to perceived mistreatment (Kim & Koo, 2021; Wu et al., 2022). Within managerial settings, such behaviours can have severe implications for organisational performance, decision-making quality, and employee morale.

Emotional exhaustion has been identified as a crucial psychological consequence of workplace bullying and a potential mechanism through which bullying influences employee behaviour. Emotional exhaustion represents the core dimension of burnout and refers to a state of emotional depletion, fatigue, and reduced psychological capacity resulting from prolonged exposure to workplace stressors (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Conservation of Resources Theory argues that individuals strive to preserve valuable resources, and when workplace bullying continuously depletes these resources, employees experience emotional exhaustion (Hobfoll, 1989, 2018). Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that workplace bullying significantly increases emotional exhaustion among employees (Kwan et al., 2020; Lyu & Li, 2022; Raziq et al., 2021). In demanding work environments, emotionally exhausted employees often experience reduced resilience, impaired self-regulation, and diminished capacity to cope with organisational challenges.

Research further suggests that emotional exhaustion contributes significantly to workplace deviance. According to Affective Events Theory, negative workplace experiences generate adverse emotional reactions that influence subsequent workplace behaviours (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Employees experiencing emotional exhaustion may become frustrated, disengaged, and less committed to organisational goals, thereby increasing the likelihood of deviant behaviours (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). Empirical evidence supports this relationship, indicating that emotionally exhausted employees are more likely to engage in behaviours that violate organisational norms and undermine workplace effectiveness (Wu et al., 2022).

A systematic literature review conducted for the present study followed PRISMA guidelines and identified 48 studies examining workplace bullying, emotional exhaustion, and workplace behaviour. The review revealed three

dominant themes: workplace bullying factors, workplace deviance factors, and emotional exhaustion factors. However, fewer than three studies specifically investigated these relationships among managerial employees in sector-specific contexts such as logistics, highlighting a significant empirical gap. Therefore, the current study addresses this gap by examining the direct effect of workplace bullying on workplace deviance and the mediating role of emotional exhaustion among managerial employees in ABC (Pvt) Ltd. By integrating Social Exchange Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, and Affective Events Theory, the study provides a comprehensive explanation of how workplace bullying influences deviant workplace behaviour through emotional exhaustion within the Sri Lankan logistics sector.

Hypotheses Development

Workplace Bullying and Workplace Deviance

Workplace bullying refers to repeated exposure to negative acts such as intimidation, humiliation, verbal abuse, social exclusion, and unfair criticism (Einarsen et al., 2009). Such experiences create a hostile work environment that undermines employees' psychological well-being and perceptions of fairness. According to Social Exchange Theory (SET), employees who perceive mistreatment are likely to reciprocate through negative behaviours (Blau, 1964). Workplace deviance refers to voluntary behaviours that violate organisational norms and threaten the well-being of the organisation or its members (Robinson & Bennett, 1995).

Previous studies have consistently reported a positive relationship between workplace bullying and workplace deviance, suggesting that employees subjected to bullying are more likely to engage in retaliatory or counterproductive behaviours (Kim & Koo, 2021; Wu et al., 2022). Prolonged exposure to bullying can reduce organisational commitment and encourage behaviours that undermine organisational effectiveness (Nielsen et al., 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Workplace bullying has a significant positive effect on workplace deviance.

Workplace Bullying and Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is the core dimension of burnout, a state of emotional depletion and fatigue resulting from prolonged exposure to workplace stressors (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory suggests that individuals strive to preserve valuable resources, and when these resources are threatened or depleted, emotional exhaustion occurs (Hobfoll, 1989, 2018).

Workplace bullying acts as a significant resource-draining stressor because victims continuously expend emotional energy to cope with hostile interactions. Consequently, employees may experience emotional exhaustion and psychological strain. Empirical studies have consistently found that workplace bullying significantly increases emotional exhaustion (Kwan et al., 2020; Lyu & Li, 2022; Raziq et al., 2021; Saidhamad, 2021). Furthermore, Farley et al. (2023) identified emotional strain as one of the most common outcomes of workplace bullying. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Workplace bullying has a significant positive effect on emotional exhaustion.

Emotional Exhaustion and Workplace Deviance

Emotional exhaustion significantly influences employee attitudes and behaviours. According to Affective Events Theory (AET), negative workplace experiences generate emotional reactions that subsequently shape workplace behaviours (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Employees experiencing emotional exhaustion often suffer from frustration, reduced self-control, and diminished organisational attachment, increasing their tendency to engage in deviant behaviours.

Research suggests that emotionally exhausted employees are more likely to display absenteeism, withdrawal, interpersonal conflict, and other counterproductive workplace behaviours (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). Similarly, Wu et al. (2022) found that emotional exhaustion significantly predicts workplace deviance, while Kwan et al.

(2020) reported that emotionally exhausted individuals are more likely to engage in behaviours that harm organisational effectiveness. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Emotional exhaustion has a significant positive effect on workplace deviance.

Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion

The relationship between workplace bullying and workplace deviance may be explained through emotional exhaustion. According to COR Theory, workplace bullying depletes employees' emotional resources, resulting in emotional exhaustion (Hobfoll, 1989, 2018). Affective Events Theory further suggests that this emotional state influences subsequent workplace behaviours (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Meanwhile, Social Exchange Theory proposes that employees may respond to perceived mistreatment through retaliatory behaviours (Blau, 1964).

Empirical evidence supports this mediating mechanism. Wu et al. (2022) found that emotional exhaustion partially mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and workplace deviance. Similar findings were reported by Kwan et al. (2020) and Lyu and Li (2022). Furthermore, the systematic literature review conducted for this study identified emotional exhaustion as one of the most frequently examined mediators linking workplace bullying and adverse behavioural outcomes. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

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

According to the developed hypotheses, the conceptual framework of the study is as follows:

Conceptual Framework

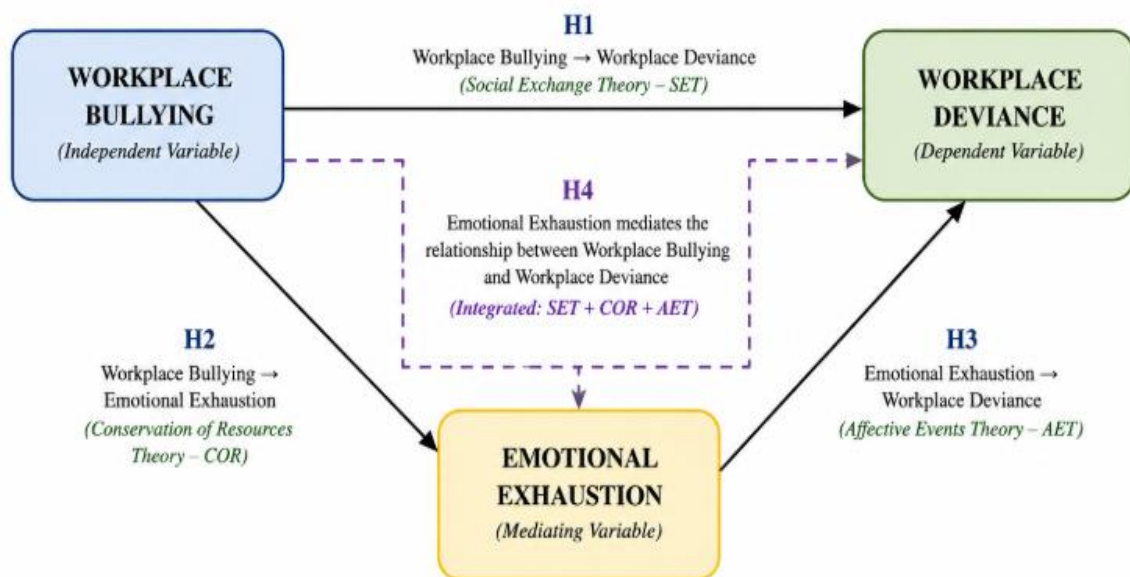


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research methodology to examine the impact of workplace bullying on workplace deviance and the mediating role of emotional exhaustion among managerial employees in ABC (Pvt) Ltd. The research design was guided by Saunders et al.'s Research Onion framework.

The study was based on a positivist research philosophy and adopted a deductive approach, in which hypotheses derived from Social Exchange Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, and Affective Events Theory were

empirically tested. A survey strategy and cross-sectional research design were employed to collect data at a single point in time and examine the relationships among the study variables.

The target population comprised 205 managerial-level employees at ABC (Pvt) Ltd, a logistics company in Sri Lanka. According to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size table, a minimum sample of 135 respondents was required. Questionnaires were distributed electronically to 175 managerial employees, and 151 valid responses were received, representing an 88% response rate. A convenience sampling technique was used due to accessibility and participant availability.

Data were collected using a self-administered online questionnaire comprising demographic questions and validated measurement scales. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Workplace Bullying was measured using six items adapted from Einarsen et al. (2009); Workplace Deviance, using seven items adapted from Bennett and Robinson (2000); and Emotional Exhaustion, using twelve items from established burnout scales.

A pretest and pilot study were conducted to ensure instrument quality. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, with all constructs exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Construct validity was examined using KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. Data were analysed using SPSS 27, including descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and mediation analysis. Ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation, were maintained throughout the study.

Findings and Results

This section presents the study's findings based on data collected from 151 managerial employees of ABC (Pvt) Ltd. The analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27 and included descriptive statistics, reliability and validity testing, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and mediation analysis. The results are presented in accordance with the study objectives and hypotheses.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

A total of 151 valid responses were received, representing an 88% response rate. Of the respondents, 60.9% were male, and 39.1% were female. The majority of participants (40.4%) were aged 25-29 years, followed by 30.5% aged 20-24 years and 22.5% aged 30-34 years. Regarding departmental representation, 51% were employed in operational functions, while the remainder represented Human Resources and Administration, Marketing, Finance, Data Science and Solutions, Central System Support, and other departments. In terms of service period, 54.3% had worked between one and three years, 25.8% had less than one year of service, and 15.2% had between four and six years of service. These results indicate that the sample adequately represented managerial employees across different age groups, departments, and service periods within the organisation.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the study variables.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Skewness
Workplace Bullying	151	2.70	1.395	0.545
Workplace Deviance	151	2.09	0.851	0.675
Emotional Exhaustion	151	2.03	0.909	0.865

Source: Survey Data (2026)

The results indicate a moderate level of workplace bullying ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.395$), while workplace deviance ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 0.851$) and emotional exhaustion ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 0.909$) were reported at relatively low levels. The skewness values fell within acceptable ranges, indicating approximate normality of the data distribution.

Reliability and Validity Analysis

Construct Validity

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were conducted to assess construct validity.

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett's Test Results

Variable	KMO	Bartlett's Sig.
Workplace Bullying	0.855	0.000
Workplace Deviance	0.625	0.000
Emotional Exhaustion	0.813	0.000

Source: Survey Data (2026)

All KMO values exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.60, and Bartlett's tests were significant ($p < .001$), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis and supporting construct validity.

Reliability Analysis

Table 3: Reliability Statistics

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
Workplace Bullying	0.803	6
Workplace Deviance	0.730	7
Emotional Exhaustion	0.818	12

Source: Survey Data (2026)

All Cronbach's Alpha values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency and reliability of the measurement scales.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the study variables.

Table 4: Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3
1. Workplace Bullying	1		
2. Workplace Deviance	.515**	1	
3. Emotional Exhaustion	.455**	.545**	1

Note. $p < .01$. Source: Survey Data (2026)

The results revealed a significant positive relationship between workplace bullying and workplace deviance ($r = .515$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher levels of bullying were associated with greater workplace deviance. Workplace bullying also showed a significant positive relationship with emotional exhaustion ($r = .455$, $p < .01$). Similarly, emotional exhaustion was positively associated with workplace deviance ($r = .545$, $p < .01$). These findings provide preliminary support for the proposed hypotheses.

Hypothesis Testing

Testing H1

H1: Workplace bullying has a significant positive effect on workplace deviance.

Table 5: Regression Results for H1

Variable	β	t	p
Workplace Bullying	0.515	13.555	0.001
Model Statistics Value			
R	0.515		
R ²	0.265		
Adjusted R ²	0.260		
F	53.706		
Sig. F	0.001		

Source: Survey Data (2026)

The results indicate that workplace bullying significantly and positively influences workplace deviance ($\beta = 0.515$, $p < .001$). Workplace bullying explained 26.5% of the variance in workplace deviance. Therefore, H1 was accepted.

Testing H2

H2: Workplace bullying has a significant positive effect on emotional exhaustion.

Table 6: Regression Results for H2

Variable	β	t	p
Workplace Bullying	0.455	16.081	0.001
Model Statistics Value			
R	0.455		
R ²	0.207		
Adjusted R ²	0.207		
F	38.839		
Sig. F	0.001		

Source: Survey Data (2026)

The findings demonstrate that workplace bullying significantly predicts emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.455$, $p < .001$). Workplace bullying accounted for 20.7% of the variance in emotional exhaustion. Thus, H2 was accepted.

Testing H3

H3: Emotional exhaustion has a significant positive effect on workplace deviance.

Table 7: Regression Results for H3

Variable	β	t	p
Emotional Exhaustion	0.545	36.099	0.001
Model Statistics Value			
R	0.545		
R ²	0.297		
Adjusted R ²	0.297		
F	62.917		
Sig. F	0.001		

Source: Survey Data (2026)

The results indicate that emotional exhaustion significantly and positively affects workplace deviance ($\beta = 0.545$, $p < .001$). Emotional exhaustion explained 29.7% of the variance in workplace deviance. Therefore, H3 was accepted.

Mediation Analysis

Testing H4

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

Table 8: Mediation Analysis Results

Path	β	SE	t	p
Workplace Bullying → Emotional Exhaustion (Path A)	-0.3699	0.0594	-6.2321	0.000
Emotional Exhaustion → Workplace Deviance (Path B)	-0.3488	0.0643	-5.4216	0.000
Total Effect (Path C)	0.3727	0.0509	7.3285	0.000
Direct Effect (Path C')	0.2437	0.0523	4.6565	0.000

Source: Survey Data (2026)

The mediation analysis revealed that workplace bullying significantly influenced emotional exhaustion, and emotional exhaustion significantly influenced workplace deviance. Furthermore, the direct effect of workplace bullying on workplace deviance remained significant after including emotional exhaustion in the model. Since both the indirect and direct effects were significant, emotional exhaustion was found to mediate the relationship between workplace bullying and workplace deviance partially.

These findings suggest that workplace bullying contributes to workplace deviance both directly and indirectly through emotional exhaustion. Consequently, emotional exhaustion serves as an important psychological mechanism explaining how workplace bullying translates into deviant workplace behaviours. Therefore, H4 was accepted.

Overall, the findings support all four hypotheses and demonstrate that workplace bullying significantly increases workplace deviance among managerial employees, both directly and indirectly through emotional exhaustion. These results provide empirical support for Social Exchange Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, and Affective Events Theory within the Sri Lankan logistics sector.

Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Table 9: Summary of Hypotheses Results

Hypothesis	Decision
H1: Workplace Bullying → Workplace Deviance	Accepted
H2: Workplace Bullying → Emotional Exhaustion	Accepted
H3: Emotional Exhaustion → Workplace Deviance	Accepted
H4: Emotional Exhaustion mediates the relationship between Workplace Bullying and Workplace Deviance	Accepted (Partial Mediation)

Source: Survey Data (2026)

Discussion

The present study examined the relationships among workplace bullying, emotional exhaustion, and workplace deviance among managerial employees at ABC (Pvt) Ltd. The findings revealed that workplace bullying significantly and positively influences workplace deviance; workplace bullying significantly increases emotional exhaustion; emotional exhaustion positively predicts workplace deviance; and emotional exhaustion partially mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and workplace deviance. These findings provide empirical support for Social Exchange Theory (SET), Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, and Affective Events Theory (AET).

First, the study found a significant positive relationship between workplace bullying and workplace deviance. This finding is consistent with previous studies by Kim and Koo (2021) and Wu et al. (2022), who reported that employees exposed to bullying are more likely to engage in counterproductive and retaliatory workplace behaviours. Similarly, Nielsen et al. (2020) argued that persistent bullying reduces organisational commitment and encourages deviant behaviours. The findings support SET, suggesting that employees reciprocate perceived mistreatment through behaviours that violate organisational norms. However, some studies have reported that bullied employees may respond through withdrawal behaviours or turnover intentions rather than deviance, suggesting that organisational culture and coping mechanisms may influence behavioural responses (Hoel et al., 2020).

Second, workplace bullying was found to have a significant positive effect on emotional exhaustion. This result aligns with the findings of Kwan et al. (2020), Raziq et al. (2021), Lyu and Li (2022), and Farley et al. (2023), who identified workplace bullying as a major antecedent of emotional strain and burnout. Consistent with COR Theory, repeated exposure to bullying depletes employees' emotional resources, resulting in exhaustion. Nevertheless, some studies suggest that employees with high resilience, psychological capital, or organisational support may experience lower levels of exhaustion despite exposure to bullying, indicating the potential buffering role of personal and organisational resources (Bakker & de Vries, 2021).

Third, emotional exhaustion significantly predicted workplace deviance. This finding supports earlier research by Wu et al. (2022), Kwan et al. (2020), and Bakker and de Vries (2021), who found that emotionally exhausted employees are more likely to engage in absenteeism, withdrawal, and counterproductive workplace behaviours. In contrast, a limited number of studies suggest that emotionally exhausted employees may disengage psychologically rather than engage in deviance, highlighting the importance of contextual factors such as leadership style and organisational climate.

Finally, emotional exhaustion was found to mediate the relationship between workplace bullying and workplace deviance partially. This finding is consistent with the mediation results reported by Wu et al. (2022), Kwan et al. (2020), and Lyu and Li (2022). The partial mediation suggests that workplace bullying affects workplace deviance both directly and indirectly through emotional exhaustion. Therefore, the findings confirm the integrated applicability of SET, COR Theory, and AET in explaining the psychological and behavioural consequences of workplace bullying among managerial employees in the Sri Lankan logistics sector.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

This study makes several important theoretical contributions to the literature on workplace behaviour, employee well-being, and organisational psychology. First, it extends the understanding of workplace bullying by examining its impact on workplace deviance through the mediating role of emotional exhaustion among managerial employees. This population has received relatively limited attention in prior research. Most existing studies have focused on frontline employees and Western organisational settings. In contrast, this study provides evidence from managerial employees in a Sri Lankan logistics organisation, thereby expanding the contextual applicability of workplace bullying literature.

Second, the study contributes to theory development by integrating Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964), Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2018), and Affective Events Theory (AET) (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) within a single conceptual framework. The findings demonstrate that workplace bullying depletes employees' emotional resources, resulting in emotional exhaustion, which subsequently encourages workplace deviance. The significant partial mediation effect of emotional exhaustion confirms the relevance of psychological mechanisms in explaining how workplace bullying translates into behavioural outcomes. This finding supports previous studies by Wu et al. (2022), Kwan et al. (2020), and Lyu and Li (2022) while extending their applicability to a non-Western managerial context.

Furthermore, the study strengthens the empirical validity of these theoretical perspectives by demonstrating that workplace deviance is not merely a direct reaction to workplace mistreatment but also a consequence of emotional resource depletion and negative emotional experiences. Consequently, the findings contribute to the broader organisational behaviour literature by providing a more comprehensive explanation of the psychological and behavioural consequences of workplace bullying.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for organisations seeking to promote employee well-being and reduce workplace deviance. The significant positive relationship between workplace bullying and workplace deviance indicates that organisations should treat workplace bullying as a strategic organisational risk rather than merely an interpersonal issue. Failure to address bullying behaviours may contribute to reduced productivity, interpersonal conflicts, absenteeism, and other counterproductive workplace behaviours that negatively affect organisational performance.

The study further reveals that workplace bullying significantly contributes to emotional exhaustion, which in turn increases workplace deviance. Therefore, organisations should implement preventive measures to reduce employee emotional strain. Human resource departments should establish clear anti-bullying policies, confidential reporting mechanisms, grievance-handling procedures, and awareness programmes to foster a psychologically safe workplace. Consistent with recommendations by Farley et al. (2023), organisations should also strengthen supportive leadership practices and cultivate respectful workplace cultures.

Additionally, managers should be trained to identify early signs of workplace bullying and emotional exhaustion. Employee assistance programmes, counselling services, resilience-building initiatives, stress-management workshops, and well-being interventions may help employees cope more effectively with workplace challenges. Given that emotional exhaustion partially mediates the bullying–deviance relationship, interventions targeting employee psychological well-being may significantly reduce the occurrence of workplace deviance. These initiatives can ultimately improve employee engagement, strengthen organisational commitment, and contribute to long-term sustainability in the logistics sector and beyond.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study contributes valuable insights to the literature, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted within a single organisation, namely ABC (Pvt) Ltd, operating in the Sri Lankan logistics sector. While the organisation provided an appropriate context for investigating workplace bullying, emotional exhaustion, and workplace deviance, the findings may not be generalizable to other industries, organisations, or cultural contexts. Organisational characteristics, leadership styles, and workplace cultures may differ considerably across settings, potentially influencing the observed relationships.

Second, the study employed a cross-sectional research design, collecting data at a single point in time. Although significant relationships were identified, causal inferences cannot be established with complete certainty. Workplace bullying, emotional exhaustion, and workplace deviance may evolve, and a cross-sectional approach cannot fully capture these dynamic relationships.

Third, the study relied exclusively on self-reported questionnaire data. Despite assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, respondents may have been influenced by social desirability bias, common method bias, or perceptual errors when reporting sensitive experiences such as workplace bullying and deviant behaviour. Consequently, the findings may not fully reflect actual workplace conditions.

Fourth, emotional exhaustion was examined as the sole mediating variable. Other psychological and organisational mechanisms, such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment, psychological safety, resilience, emotional intelligence, and perceived organisational support, were not included. These factors may also play important roles in explaining the relationship between workplace bullying and workplace deviance.

Finally, the study focused exclusively on managerial employees. While this population is important and under-researched, the findings may not apply to non-managerial employees whose workplace experiences and behavioural responses may differ significantly. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalising the findings beyond the study population.

Directions for Future Research

The limitations of the present study provide several opportunities for future research. First, future studies should examine the proposed relationships across multiple organisations and industries, including manufacturing, banking, healthcare, education, and public-sector institutions. Multi-organisational studies would enhance the generalizability of findings and facilitate comparisons across diverse organisational environments.

Second, researchers are encouraged to adopt longitudinal research designs to understand better the causal relationships among workplace bullying, emotional exhaustion, and workplace deviance. Longitudinal studies would provide insights into how workplace bullying develops over time and how emotional exhaustion influences subsequent behavioural outcomes.

Third, future research should incorporate additional mediating and moderating variables. Potential mediators include job satisfaction, psychological distress, burnout dimensions, organisational commitment, and work engagement. Moderating variables such as resilience, emotional intelligence, leadership style, organisational justice, psychological safety, and perceived organisational support could help explain why some employees respond differently to workplace bullying.

Furthermore, future studies may adopt mixed-method or qualitative approaches to gain deeper insights into employees' lived experiences of workplace bullying and emotional exhaustion. Interviews and focus groups could provide rich contextual information that cannot be captured solely through survey methods.

Finally, cross-cultural studies involving different countries and regions would be valuable in examining whether the relationships identified in this study are culturally universal or context-specific. Such research would further validate the applicability of Social Exchange Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, and Affective Events Theory across diverse organisational and cultural settings.

Conclusion

Workplace bullying has emerged as a significant organisational challenge that adversely affects employee well-being and organisational effectiveness. This study examined the impact of workplace bullying on workplace deviance among managerial employees in ABC (Pvt) Ltd and investigated the mediating role of emotional exhaustion. The findings revealed that workplace bullying significantly and positively influences workplace deviance and emotional exhaustion, while emotional exhaustion significantly predicts workplace deviance. Furthermore, emotional exhaustion was found to mediate the relationship between workplace bullying and workplace deviance partially, indicating that bullying contributes to deviant workplace behaviours both directly and indirectly through emotional strain.

The findings provide empirical support for Social Exchange Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, and Affective Events Theory by demonstrating how workplace bullying depletes emotional resources and shapes employee behaviour. The study contributes to the organisational behaviour literature by extending existing theoretical perspectives to a non-Western logistics context and highlighting the importance of managerial employees as a distinct research population.

From a practical perspective, the findings emphasise the need for organisations to establish effective anti-bullying policies, promote supportive leadership, and implement employee well-being initiatives. Addressing workplace bullying and emotional exhaustion is essential to minimise workplace deviance, enhance employee well-being, improve organisational performance, and ensure long-term organisational sustainability.

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