# Indirect effect of workplace bullying on emotional exhaustion through job insecurity among Malaysian workers
## The buffering role of religion

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Although workplace bullying has often been considered a significant source of health-related problems, only a handful of studies have deeply examined this relationship. This paper aims to fill this gap by inspecting the direct as well as indirect relationships between bullying and emotional exhaustion. This study also explores the buffering role of religion between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This correlational paper used the quantitative method of data collection ($N = 102$) from employees in Malaysia and used SmartPLS to analyze the data. To operationalize workplace bullying as the second-order factor, partial least squares was used to estimate the two-stage model through the repeated use of a manifest variable.

**Findings** – The result of the current study showed that workplace bullying has a positive impact on job insecurity as well as emotional exhaustion while also having a positive indirect effect on emotional exhaustion through job insecurity. Moreover, the result of this study reveals that religion has a moderating (buffering) influence on the relationship between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study merely applied self-report measures, thus potentially involving the common method variance problems.

**Practical implications** – Human resource professionals must be aware that employees who are exposed to bullying actions may consider emotional exhaustion and job security needs to be restored among targets. For instance, they need to ensure that no unwanted and illegitimate relocation or alternation of work task has occurred. Furthermore, it is significant to encourage employees to regularly attend religious services because religious involvement could foster mental health, in part by lowering the risk of exposure to stressful life events such as job insecurity.

**Originality/value** – This study could be beneficial for organizations and researchers looking to address emotional exhaustion, security and bullying in a context broader than physical health and may further supplement the discussions around workplace bullying, mental health and religion.

**Keywords** Workplace bullying, Job insecurity, Emotional exhaustion, Religion, Malaysia, Job insecurity, Emotional exhaustion

**Paper type** Research paper

# 1. Introduction

Bullying is increasingly being documented as a serious issue within the working environment (Jaafar *et al.*, 2017). Bullying and harassment are reported to occur on a regular

basis in many work organizations. For example, in Europe, the bullying rate is estimated to be between 5 and 10 per cent among the workforce (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011), while in the USA, researchers have reported that the bullying rate is close to 10 to 14 per cent (Georgakopoulos and Kelly, 2017). Matthiesen and Einarsen (2007) argued that bullying is a universal problem in most organizations, with a prevalence rate between 3 and 4 per cent, thus leading to intense health damage for the victims. Einarsen *et al.* (2011) emphasized that bullying has a global prevalence and is a vital issue that should be taken into consideration by managers across the world.

Workplace bullying is defined as the continual undesirable treatment of an individual by another in the workplace and provides a significant social stressor that has been positively associated with severe health-related complications for the individual (Spagnoli and Balducci, 2017). Glambek *et al.* (2014) argued that many work-related problems such as job insecurity can be considered as consequences of workplace bullying. Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt (1984, p. 438) defined job insecurity as "Perceived powerlessness to maintain the desired continuity in a threatened job situation" and has been identified as a predictor of increased psychological distress and work-related strains (De Witte, 2005). Moreover, emotional exhaustion is one of the more extreme varieties of work-related strain and manifests in employees as a general loss of feelings and concern, trust, interest and spirit (Maslach, 1982). Employees dealing with work-related stressors frequently suffer from emotional exhaustion (Zapf *et al.*, 2001).

This paper contributes to the literature by investigating the mediating role of job insecurity between workplace bullying and emotional exhaustion. Völlink *et al.* (2013) indicated that the effect of daily stressors on individuals who believe that they do not have the power to change the stressful situation might lead to mental illness. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1987) and Völlink *et al.* (2013), the transactional model of stress indicated how powerlessness to change a threatening situation such as job insecurity can mediate the relationship between, on the one hand, a stressful experience such as workplace bullying and, on the other hand, the psychological well-being. The threat of workplace bullying may result in powerlessness and reduced security over the work position, which in turn may negatively affect employee well-being and evoke resource loss (Catalano *et al.*, 1986). De Witte (1999) stated that job insecurity is known as a subjective experience that reflects the individual perception of the situation. Thus, the mediating role of appraisal of the work situation (i.e. job insecurity) in the relationship between work stressor (i.e. workplace bullying) and emotional exhaustion can be understood with reference to the transactional model of stress (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Although previous studies have found that workplace bullying has impacts on individual consequences such as mental health (Ahmad *et al.*, 2017) and job insecurity (Glambek *et al.*, 2014), the study on the indirect effect of workplace bullying through job insecurity on emotional exhaustion has been scarce.

The second contribution of the current study to the literature is to evaluate the moderating (buffering) effect of religion on the relationship between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion. According to Nooney (2005), a stress process approach regards mental illness as the outcome of exposure to stressors and stress process account of religious effects underlines the ability of religion as a buffer against the stressor. Although many of the previous studies have concentrated on the direct relationship between religion and mental health outcomes (Sharma *et al.*, 2017; King *et al.*, 2001; Schnall *et al.*, 2012), Lorenz *et al.* (2019) disputed that further consideration arises from the possible complexity of the relationship between religion and mental illness and specified that religion might have a moderating (buffering) effect on mental health illness such as emotional exhaustion.

Moreover, Nooney (2005) indicated that although there are a number of multidisciplinary research documents on the connection between religious and mental health consequences, yet the causal mechanisms associating them are not well understood. Despite that, Leurent et al. (2013) revealed that religion did not buffer the relationship between severe life events and depression, and a meta-analysis of 147 independent studies established a significant inverse relationship between religion and depressive symptoms (Kasen et al., 2012). Thus, the aim of the current study is to develop this line of work by assessing the buffering role of religion between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion.

Ahmad et al. (2017) stated that there is a lack of research nowadays on workplace bullying in non-western countries. For example, in Malaysia, the International Labor Organization indicates that the workplace bullying phenomena have not reached the agitated level. However, there are increasing concerns in the media about these issues. A newspaper, Utusan Malaysia, dated February 16, 2010, reported the occurrence of workplace bullying, where based on the report, the victimized asserted that:

> I am always overburdened with work, even though my colleagues and I have the same responsibility. They deliberately stacked me with other files, although at the time there are other colleagues that are doing nothing at all. I also have difficulty in applying for leave.

This situation indicates that the bullying behavior does occur in Malaysian organizations. In addition, Jaafar et al. (2017) stated that too little attention is paid on the issue of workplace bullying in Malaysia.

Most of the studies done in Malaysia concentrated on bullying at the school level. For example, they examined the relationship between depression and bullying among adolescents and teenagers (Uba et al., 2010), awareness on bullying (Saibon et al., 2012) and cyber bullying (Noh and Rahman, 2013). Thus, the current study aimed to examine the direct and indirect relationships between workplace bullying and emotional exhaustion, as well as the interactive effect of religion between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion in one model. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature and develops the research hypotheses on workplace bullying, emotional exhaustion and job insecurity, followed by the research method in Section 3. Section 4 presents the analysis and results, and Section 5 presents discussion along with its theoretical and practical implication.

## 2. Literature review and hypothesis development
### 2.1 Workplace bullying and emotional exhaustion
Workplace bullying is the process in which an employee is exposed to frequent negative acts (e.g. at least once a week) for a relatively extended period (e.g. six months) by peers or superiors, against which defense or retaliation is hampered by the acknowledgment of a formal or informal power imbalance (Spagnoli and Balducci, 2017; Einarsen et al., 2011). It also comprises feelings of fatigue, being used up, irritability, frustration and wearing out (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). In other words, employees' emotional resources become depleted, and they no longer feel able to give of themselves at a psychological level. Einarsen et al. (2009) reasoned that workplace bullying comprises work-related physical intimidation and personal bullying. Zapf et al. (1996) emphasized that exposure to bullying is a distressing problem for employees compared to other kinds of work-related stress. Bullying has numerous effects on the targets, manifesting them behaviorally as well as in a number of health problems (Hoel et al., 2002).

Emotional exhaustion may be theorized as the first stage of burnout, and it has been discovered that burning out encompasses a sequential process (Cherniss, 1980). Kanfer and

Kantrowitz (2002) claimed that exhaustion is especially possible when negative emotions need to be managed and controlled to focus on the work task and interact effectively with other employees. Bullying has a lot of negative effects on the victims, influencing their behavior and even manifested into a host of health problems (Hoel *et al.*, 2002). Thus, job stressors such as workplace bullying may increase emotional exhaustion and induce a need for recovery because when confronted with these stressors, employees have to devote extra effort and regulate their emotions to meet the job demands (Zohar *et al.*, 2003). Laschinger *et al.* (2010) argued that the identifying factors leading to emotional exhaustion are necessary to be investigated because of the significance of burnout among workers. Therefore, our first hypothesis is formulated as follows:

*H1.* There is a positive relationship between workplace bullying and emotional exhaustion.

### 2.2 Workplace bullying and job insecurity

Super (1957, p. 13) viewed that security is "one of the dominant needs and one of the principal reasons for working." Maslow (1954) viewed security as a motivator to job preference. These statements illustrate the importance of security in workplace. Regarding to the relationship between workplace bullying and job insecurity, Glambek *et al.* (2014) argued that disposal to workplace bullying behavior may lead victims to perceive the continuity of their job to be threatened and therefore to display a high level of insecurity. Saunders *et al.* (2007) highlighted powerlessness as the core concept of bullying. Moreover, Glambek *et al.* (2014) argued that if the character of the bullying behaviors illustrates a threat to the desired continuity in the job, the target is perhaps unable to overcome the struggle; therefore, the bullying experience enhanced the levels of job insecurity over time. Furthermore, Spagnoli and Balducci (2017) noted that there is a two-way relationship considering workplace bullying and job insecurity and found evidence of a reversed relationship, considering job insecurity as an antecedent of workplace bullying. The above discussion leads to the formulation of our second hypothesis:

*H2.* There is a positive relationship between workplace bullying and job insecurity.

### 2.3 Job insecurity and emotional exhaustion

Roskies and Louis–Guerin (1990) argued that in today's environment of economic and technological changes, job insecurity is acknowledged as a severe condition affecting the workforce. Previous studies have found a significant positive relationship between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion (Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2010). In addition, Li *et al.* (2010) highlighted that job insecurity as a significant source of job stress makes a serious influence on emotional exhaustion, a typical pressure phenomenon. At the same time, employees' job insecurity is greatly enhanced due to the lack of sense of belonging to the organization. Employees who are insecure about their job displayed poorer health while the level of distress rose proportionately with the degree of insecurity (Roskies and Louis-Guerin, 1990).

Kanfer and Kantrowitz (2002) argued that emotional exhaustion is especially possible when negative emotions need to be managed and controlled to focus on the work task and interact effectively with other employees. Moreover, according to Li *et al.* (2010), higher job insecurity will cause more negative emotions that need to be managed by the employee to show the appropriate emotions required in the place of work. In addition, conservation of resources (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) is built on the idea that resource loss triggers further losses.

More specifically, job insecurity presents a threat to existing resources, leading to further loss, for example, in the form of reduced employee well-being. The above discussions lead to the formulation of our third and fourth hypotheses:

*H3.* There is a positive relationship between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion.

*H4.* There is a positive relationship between bullying and emotional exhaustion through job insecurity.

*2.4 The buffering role* of religion between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion
Religion is defined as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things [. . .] that unite into one single moral community [. . .] all those who adhere to them" (Sosis and Alcorta, 2003; p. 265). The moderating (buffering) function of religion on the relationship between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion can be comprehended with reference to the stress process approach (Nooney, 2005). Previous research established an inverse relationship between religion and mental illness (Lorenz *et al.*, 2019). In addition, there is a large consensus among previous researchers that religious effects composed of physical and psychological well-being (Ellison *et al.*, 2001). Moreover, several reviews of the research literature over the years have reported that some aspects of religious involvement are associated with desirable mental health outcomes (Ellison and Levin, 1998). Ellison *et al.* (2001) discussed that religious participation and belief may lead to better mental health by reducing exposure to chronic and acute stressors.

Lorenz *et al.* (2019) in their empirical study found that religion has the buffering role between stressful life events and depression. Idler (1995) argued that religion decreases the effect of stressor in two ways, one of which is by influencing the preliminary appraisals of stressful events, for instance, leading the person to reframe these situations as serious than they might appear, as an occasion for spiritual growth, or as part of a broader celestial program. Religion also affects certain secondary appraisals of stressor such as job insecurity by developing the confidence of persons to successfully deal with hectic situations over the long period. Ellison *et al.* (2001) argued that the aspects of religious involvement may have greater positive effects on mental health among persons who face high levels of stress but with weak or negligible effects among others. In line with this argument, previous studies found that religion can lessen anxiety and depression for persons facing health problems, but not in the context of job stressors and in other domains of life experience (Mattlin *et al.*, 1990). However, Ellison *et al.* (2001) argued that religion also buffers the negative effects of all stressors including job insecurity. Thus, the above discussion leads to the formulation of our fifth hypothesis:

*H5.* Religion has the moderating (buffering) role on the relationship between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion.

Our anticipated relationships between the above factors are depicted in Figure 1.

# 3. Research method
## 3.1 Participants and procedure
A total of 500 sets of questionnaires were distributed to employees of Malaysian public organizations across Peninsular Malaysia because of the highest rate of bullying among other sectors (12 to 14 per cent) (Jaafar *et al.*, 2017). The selected respondents were chosen randomly regardless of age, position, years of experience and type of profession. However, only 102 sets of questionnaires were returned (see the questionnaire in Appendix 1). Hence, the response rate

for this research was only 20.4 per cent. Jaafar *et al.* (2017) mentioned that a small sample size is considered normal in research on workplace bullying due to the sensitive questions asked. In addition, a widely used minimum sample size estimation method in the partial least squares (PLS) method, which was used in the current study, is the ten times rule method (Hair *et al.*, 2011), which builds on the assumption that the sample size should be greater than ten times the largest number of structural paths directed at a particular latent construct in the structural model. Thus, the sample size in this study exceeded the recommended value of the ten times rule method. Moreover, the response rate of this study was not deemed to have an impact on the validity of the result because in another study on bullying (Einarsen and Raknes, 1991), an attempt was made to reach those who did not fill in the questionnaire the first round. When the new information was added and analyzed, it did not significantly affect the results. Furthermore, Willaby *et al.* (2015) argued that in psychology study, a small sample size is required to produce stable estimates with PLS, and a sample size of 100 may be sufficient to provide acceptable power. Thus, we concluded that the low response rate of the current study did not affect the validity of the findings.

### 3.2 Measures
Workplace bullying was measured based on the scale developed by Einarsen and Raknes (1997). This scale, known as the negative acts questionnaire (NAQ), was used to gauge the prevalence of workplace bullying within a range of 18 potential negative behaviors. The NAQ was empirically developed and validated and had been greatly used in many countries. In this research, job insecurity was measured using a five-item scale adopted from Hellgren *et al.* (1999), while a measurement from Firth *et al.* (2004) was used to measure emotional exhaustion. Finally, for religion, the measurement was adopted from Allport (1950). All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, with 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

## 4. Analysis and results
### 4.1 Demographic data
As indicated in Table I, most of the respondents were women (64.7 per cent) followed by men (35.3 per cent). The majority of the respondents were 31-35 years old (40.2 per cent), followed by 26-30 years (37.3 per cent), 36-40 years (14.7 per cent), 41-50 years old (2.9 per cent), 21-25 (2.9 per cent) and 51-60 (2 per cent). Most were Malays (89.2 per cent), followed by Indians (3.9 per cent), others (3.9 per cent) and Chinese (2.9 per cent). Most of the respondents were with 5-10 years working experience (68.6 per cent). This was followed by respondents with 11-16 years working experience (15.7 per cent), respondents with 1-4 years
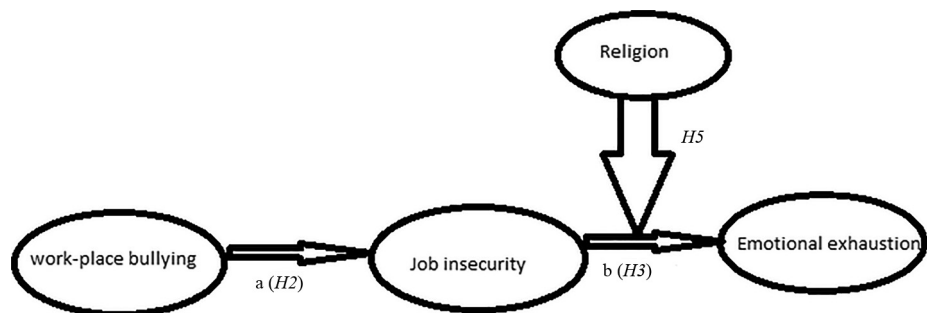


**Figure 1.**
Conceptual work

| Characteristics | Frequency | (%) |
|---|---|---|
| *Gender* | | |
| Male | 36 | 35.3 |
| Female | 66 | 64.7 |
| *Age (years)* | | |
| 21-25 | 3 | 2.9 |
| 26-30 | 38 | 37.3 |
| 31-35 | 41 | 40.2 |
| 36-40 | 15 | 14.7 |
| 41-50 | 3 | 2.9 |
| 51-60 | 2 | 2.0 |
| *Race* | | |
| Malay | 91 | 89.2 |
| Chinese | 3 | 2.9 |
| Indian | 4 | 3.9 |
| Others | 4 | 3.9 |
| *Working experience (years)* | | |
| 1-4 | 9 | 8.8 |
| 5-10 | 70 | 68.6 |
| 11-16 | 16 | 15.7 |
| 17-22 | 4 | 3.9 |
| 23 and above | 3 | 2.9 |

**Table I.**
Profile of the
respondents

working experience (8.8 per cent) and respondents with 17-22 years working experience (3.9 per cent) and those with 23 years and above years working experiences (2.9 per cent).

### 4.2 Hypotheses testing
This study used the PLS method to evaluate the hierarchical model of workplace bullying. PLS is a component-based structural equation modeling (Vinzi *et al.*, 2010) that has been extensively used in management research (Henseler *et al.*, 2009). PLS is able to simultaneously test the structural and measurement models, providing a more complete analysis for inter-relationships (Chin, 2010). PLS analysis is done by considering the composite reliability, average extracted variance, value of $R^2$ and bootstrap for the *t*-values (Henseler *et al.*, 2009). This study regarded workplace bullying as the second-order construct for work-based bullying, physical intimidation bullying and person-related bullying.

### 4.3 Testing the measurement model
To operationalize the second-order factor, PLS can be used to estimate the two-stage model through the repeated use of a manifest variable (Tenenhaus *et al.*, 2005). In the first stage, we used both convergent and discriminant validity for all first-order factors. In the second stage, the scores of the lower-order latent variables were used as manifest variables for a higher-order construct (workplace bullying) (Akter *et al.*, 2011).

The analysis started with an assessment of the first-order measures using both convergent and discriminant validity analyses. The loadings for all reflective items exceeded the recommended value of 0.5. Composite reliability (CR) values (Table II), which showed the degree to which the items indicated the latent construct, ranged from 0.85 to 0.95 and exceeded the recommended value of 0.7. The average variance extracted (AVE) was in the range of 0.5 to 0.8, which exceeded the recommended value of 0.5.

| Construct | Item | Scale type | Loadings | AVEb | CRb |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Job insecurity (JI) | SecD11 | Reflective | 0.75 | 0.65 | 0.85 |
| | SecD12 | | 0.90 | | |
| | SecD13 | | 0.76 | | |
| Emotional exhaustion (Ee) | SecD18 | Reflective | 0.73 | 0.59 | 0.90 |
| | SecD19 | | 0.79 | | |
| | SecD20 | | 0.79 | | |
| | SecD21 | | 0.74 | | |
| | SecD22 | | 0.77 | | |
| | SecD23 | | 0.80 | | |
| Work-based bullying (WBB) | SecB11 | Reflective | 0.73 | 0.59 | 0.91 |
| | SecB12 | | 0.73 | | |
| | SecB2 | | 0.74 | | |
| | SecB3 | | 0.77 | | |
| | SecB4 | | 0.83 | | |
| | SecB6 | | 0.83 | | |
| | SecB9 | | 0.73 | | |
| Physical intimidating bullying (PIB) | SecB28 | Reflective | 0.86 | 0.80 | 0.95 |
| | SecB29 | | 0.91 | | |
| | SecB30 | | 0.90 | | |
| | SecB31 | | 0.86 | | |
| | SecB32 | | 0.93 | | |
| Person-related bullying (PRB) | SecB18 | Reflective | 0.53 | 0.71 | 0.93 |
| | SecB19 | | 0.54 | | |
| | SecB20 | | 0.54 | | |
| | SecB21 | | 0.66 | | |
| | SecB22 | | 0.71 | | |
| | SecB23 | | 0.64 | | |
| Religion (Re) | SecF10 | | 0.66 | 0.50 | 0.90 |
| | SecF14 | | 0.54 | | |
| | SecF1 | | 0.62 | | |
| | SecF4 | | 0.64 | | |
| | SecF5 | | 0.64 | | |
| | SecF6 | | 0.80 | | |
| | SecF7 | | 0.78 | | |
| | SecF8 | | 0.79 | | |
| | SecF9 | | 0.85 | | |

**Table II.**
Factor loading and
reliability for first
order construct

Discriminant validity was conducted by comparing the AVE from each construct with its communal variances shared with other constructs. Table III gives the inter-construct correlations (below the diagonal) and square roots of the AVE (on the diagonal) of the first-order constructs. This table shows that the square root of the AVE for all first-order factors

| Construct | Mean | SD | Emotional exhaustion | Job insecurity | Person-related | Physical | Religion | Work-based |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ee | 3.06 | 0.78 | *0.7694* | | | | | |
| JI | 2.98 | 0.87 | 0.4342 | *0.807* | | | | |
| PRB | 1.77 | 0.85 | 0.2221 | 0.2196 | *0.8399* | | | |
| PIB | 1.42 | 0.72 | 0.1652 | 0.2588 | 0.7237 | *0.8916* | | |
| Re | 3.97 | 0.66 | 0.2564 | 0.0638 | −0.0541 | −0.1981 | *0.7092* | |
| WBB | 2.19 | 0.86 | 0.1812 | 0.0954 | 0.7667 | 0.5866 | −0.0809 | *0.7674* |

**Note:** The italic number is the square root of the AVE for all first-order factors

**Table III.**
Inter construct
correlation for the
first-order construct

was higher than their shared variances. This finding reaffirmed the discriminant validity of the model constructs.

### 4.4 Assessment of low-stage workplace bullying model

This study specified workplace bullying as a second-order hierarchical reflective construct consisting three first-order reflective constructs (work-based bullying, person-related bullying, physical intimidation bullying), which overall represented 18 items. Thus, the degree of explained variance of this hierarchical construct is reflected in its component that is work-based 79 per cent, physical intimidation 72 per cent and person-related 87 per cent. The entire path coefficient from workplace bullying to its components is significant at $p < 0.01$(Table IV). Here, the CR and AVE of workplace bullying are above the cut-off value at 0.96 and 0.54, respectively.

### 4.5 Testing the structural model

*4.5.1 Main model (direct model).* Table V summarizes the structural model produced by PLS analysis. In all analyses, we controlled the work experience, age, gender and race that might influence our predictor and outcome variables. Control variables are the variables which are not the main focus of the study. Basically, including a control variable is to make sure that the effect of antecedents to the dependent variable is not influenced by adding these variables to the model (Mohamad and Chin, 2019). Table V (Model 4) shows that control variables do not have a significant effect on emotional exhaustion; thus, we conclude that the effect of antecedents to the dependent variable is not over- or underestimated. We

| Physical bullying | Person-related bullying | Work-based bullying |
| --- | --- | --- |
| $R^2 = 0.72$ | $R^2 = 0.87$ | $R^2 = 0.79$ |
| $\beta = 0.86$ | $\beta = 0.94$ | $\beta = 0.88$ |
| $p < 0.01$ | $p < 0.01$ | $p < 0.01$ |
| **Notes:** CR = 0.96; AVE = 0.54 | | |

**Table IV.**
Workplace bullying (WPB)

| Path coefficient and $R^2$ | Control variable model, $\beta$ ($p$-value) (Model 1) | Direct effect, $\beta$ ($p$-value) (Model 2) | Mediating effect, $\beta$ ($p$-value) (Model 3) | Mediating and moderating effect, $\beta$ ($p$-value) (Model 4) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Age | −0.110 (0.364) | −0.185 (0.21) | −0.157 (0.19) | −0.151 (0.17) |
| Gender | 0.007 (0.94) | 0.026 (0.85) | 0.044 (0.71) | 0.004 (0.66) |
| Race | 0.068 (0.38) | 0.080 (0.36) | 0.070 (0.40) | 0.061 (0.44) |
| Working experience | 0.048 (0.64) | 0.102 (0.39) | 0.156 (0.17) | 0.106 (0.37) |
| WPB → Ee (*H1*) | | 0.269** (0.00) | 0.129 (0.18) | 0.120 (0.19) |
| WPB → JI (*H2*) | | | 0.255** (0.00) | 0.255** (0.00) |
| JI → Ee (*H3*) | | | 0.395** (0.00) | 0.359** (0.00) |
| WPB → JI → Ee (*H4*) | | | 0.101** (0.02) | 0.092** (0.02) |
| JI * Re → Ee (*H5*) | | | | −0.239** (0.02) |
| Variance explained ($R^2$) | | 0.16 | 0.24 | 0.33 |
| **Notes:** *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$ | | | | |

**Table V.**
Summary of the structural model

calculated the direct effect of workplace bullying on emotional exhaustion (Table V, Model 2) using the bootstrap approach recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008). *H1* was accepted (Fairchild and McQuillin, 2010), that is, workplace bullying (0.269, $p < 0.05$) has a direct effect on emotional exhaustion.

*4.5.2 Indirect effect and buffering (moderating) effect.* Table V (Model 4) as well as Figure 2 present the criteria for indirect effect (Baron and Kenny, 1986) as follows:

- the predictor (workplace bullying) has a significant influence on the mediator (job insecurity) ($\beta = 0.225$, $p < 0.05$) (*H2*);and
- the mediator has a significant influence on the criterion variable (emotional exhaustion) ($\beta = 0.359$, $p < 0.05$) (*H3*).

Now, to establish the mediating model, the indirect effect of a*b (Figure 1) must be significant. The indirect effect of workplace bullying on emotional exhaustion was calculated using the bootstrap approach recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008). The *t*-statistic was applied, which was significant at $p < 0.05$. If the *t*-values exceeds 1.96 ($p < 0.05$), *H4* can be accepted (Fairchild and McQuillin, 2010), that is, bullying has an indirect effect on emotional exhaustion through job insecurity. Table IV shows that the indirect effect of bullying on emotional exhaustion is significant ($\beta = 0.092$, $p < 0.05$); thus, *H4* was accepted.

Table V (Model 4) also presents the interaction effects of religion on the relationship between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion by applying PLS (Chin *et al.*, 2003). The two-stage approach suggested by Hair *et al.* (2014) was used to test the possibility of such effects when all constructs were measured by reflective indicators. In the first stage, the mediated model was estimated without the interaction effect to obtain the score of the latent variable and saved for future analysis in Stage 2. In the second stage, only the latent
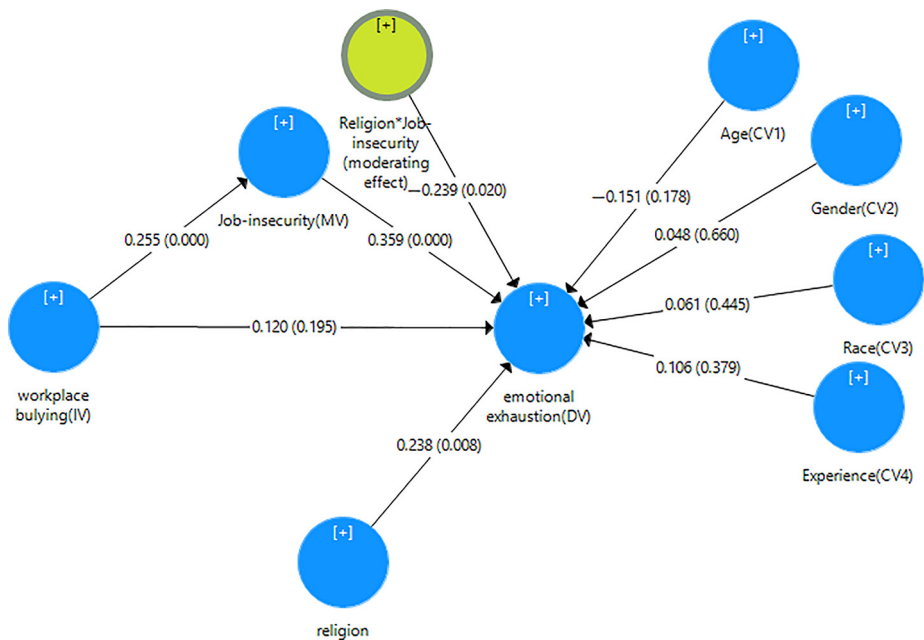


**Figure 2.**
Smart PLS output
(Model 4)

variables scores were included. Job insecurity (predictor) and religion (moderator) were multiplied to create an interaction construct (job insecurity*religion) to predict emotional exhaustion (Hair *et al.*, 2014). The significance of the moderator can be confirmed if the interaction effect is independently significant (Henseler and Fassott, 2010). Table V as well as Figure 2 show that the interaction construct is significant ($\beta = -0.239$, $p < 0.05$); thus, we accepted *H5*.

In addition, because the majority of respondents have the working experience of 5-10 years and the result may be biased against those who are in this group, the respondents were divided into two groups, including 5-10 working experience and others, and multi-group analysis (MGA) has been applied to examine whether there is a significant differences between these groups with respect to the indirect effect of workplace bullying on emotional exhaustion through job insecurity (*H4*) and the moderating effect of religion between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion (*H5*) (Henseler *et al.*, 2009). As indicated in Table VI, there is no significant difference between these groups with respect to *H4* and *H5* because the *p*-value exceeded 0.05. Similarly, most of respondents are 31-35 years old; thus, we have split the data into two groups, comprising 31-35 years old and others. However, the findings of this study do not support a significant difference between these groups. Table VI shows that there is no significant difference with respect to *H4* and *H5* because the *p*-value is greater than 0.05. Thus, we conclude that the result of the structural model is similar for both groups.

## 5. Discussion

Despite the importance of investigating the consequences of workplace bullying in different countries (Zapf and Einarsen, 2011), the body of knowledge has some empirical information on the mediating and moderating frameworks (Sandin *et al.*, 1998), particularly in Malaysia. Thus, neglecting the intervention and interaction effects can lead to oversimplified models of workplace bullying. In line with this, the present study's main results contributed to fill the gap within the body of knowledge by discovering that the relationship between workplace bullying and emotional exhaustion is explained through job insecurity and the interaction effect of religion as a source of social support to weaken the relationship between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion.

The first result of the study revealed that the relationship between workplace bullying and emotional exhaustion is significant. The negative effect of a stressful workplace on mental and emotional health is commonly accepted (Sonnentag *et al.*, 2010). Emotional dissonance can be experienced by the victims of workplace bullying, if they need to exhibit emotions that they do not really feel, which may result in feelings of hypocrisy and can lead to emotional exhaustion.

| Hypotheses | Relationship | *t*-value (31-35 years old vs others) | *p*-value (31-35 years old vs others) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *H4* | WPB → JI → Ee | 0.757 | 0.451 |
| *H5* | JI *Re → Ee | 0.478 | 0.664 |
| Hypotheses | Relationship | *t*-value (5-10 years working experience vs others) | *p*-value (5-10 years working experience vs others) |
| *H4* | WPB → JI → Ee | 1.713 | 0.090 |
| *H5* | JI *Re → Ee | 0.094 | 0.925 |

**Notes:** *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

Table VI.
Summary of MGA

In addition, the current study revealed that workplace bullying has a positive effect on job insecurity. Those who are exposed to workplace bullying suffer from unwanted relocation (Leymann, 1990) and experience rumors spread about them to the extent that their professional reputation is damaged (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). This is in line with the findings by Bordia *et al.* (2006) who argued that job insecurity settled in workplaces with a high rate of gossip and rumors, which are the subset of workplace bullying.

The current study also revealed that job insecurity has a positive effect on emotional exhaustion. This result is consistent with a study by Li *et al.* (2010) who empirically found that job insecurity as a work-related stressor has a complementary effect on emotional exhaustion. In addition, there is a general agreement that employees who face work-related stressors such as job insecurity often suffer from emotional exhaustion (Zapf *et al.*, 2001). Moreover, the study found that job insecurity mediated the relationship between workplace bullying and emotional exhaustion. Workplace bullying, thus, seems to lead to a reduced well-being in terms of increased levels of emotional exhaustion, because the employees exposed to workplace bullying feel that they lack job security over a threatened work situation. This aligns with Völlink *et al.* (2013) who stated that appraised employees exposed to workplace bullying (i.e. a threat; "primary appraisal") will more likely evaluate their resources to deal with bullying threats as insufficient over time ("secondary appraisal"), which leads to mental illness such as emotional exhaustion.

Finally, it was found that religion moderated (buffered) the relationship between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion. This result contributed to the stress process approach (Noony, 2005) which emphasizes the buffering role of religion on daily stressors and mental illness. The negative interaction between job insecurity and religion on emotional exhaustion indicated that with increases in the level of religion among Malaysian workers, job insecurity becomes less important in predicting emotional exhaustion. This result is supported by Ellison *et al.* (2001) and Lorenz *et al.* (2019) who argued that religion buffers the negative effects of all stressors.

## 5.1 Theoretical implications

The first major implication of the finding is the contribution to the transactional theory of stress (Folkman, 1987; Völlink *et al.*, 2013). We found that when victims tend to experience job insecurity and powerlessness to change the situation to deal with workplace bullying, they experience emotional exhaustion. Victims of bullying, however, are probably appraising workplace bullying as less changeable. They may feel that they have no choice but to accept the situation, which would result in powerlessness to change the situation and fear of losing job, which lead to emotional exhaustion. The relationship between appraisals of the work situation (i.e. workplace bullying and job insecurity) and employee functioning (i.e. employee well-being) can be realized according to the transactional theory of stress (Lazarus and Folkman, 1987) and confirms the notion of conservation of resources (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), which stresses the assumption that resource loss leads to additional loss.

The buffering role of religion on the relationship between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion is the influence to the stress process perspective (Noony, 2005). The finding verifies the stress process model which classifies social and psychological resources as critical for coping with stressful life events and chronic stressors. According to Noony (2005), social and psychological resources, such as religion, have a buffering role on the relationship between stressful life events and mental illness, reinforce social networks and support and meliorate self-esteem and adaptive problem-solving efforts. The effects of religion in moderating the effect of job insecurity on emotional exhaustion can be related to

the reappraisal of job insecurity that religion facilitates, such as the belief that events
happen for a reason and can lead to spiritual growth.

*5.2 Practical implications*
Based on the finding that the effects of workplace bullying on emotional exhaustion run
through job insecurity, Malaysian policymakers may want to introduce ways to reduce job
insecurity among Malaysian workers. Human resource professionals should be aware that
employees who are exposed to bullying actions may consider leaving the job. Job security
needs to be restored among the bullying targets. For instance, they need to ensure that no
unwanted and illegitimate relocation or alternation of work task has occurred. Moreover,
victims should not have to fear for the permanence of their job and should be reassured
completely that their job is not threatened. In addition, employees can achieve emotional
support in a variety of ways to counter bullying actions such as affirming statements,
encouragement, sympathy and proximity. These may buffer the indirect effect of workplace
bullying on emotional exhaustion, and the mediating effect of job insecurity will be
significantly reduced.

In addition, this study found that religion buffered the relationship between job
insecurity and emotional exhaustion. According to the current competition in the labor
market, it is difficult to prevent all employees from feeling insecure. Hence, besides
performing actions to reassure employees that they will keep their job, it is significant to
encourage employees to attend religious services regularly to enjoy wider social networks,
higher repeated interplay with associates and more supportive social relations. Because
religious communities dissuade deviance and abet health behavior and ethical conduct,
religious involvement may foster mental health, partly by decreasing the risk of exposure to
many types of stressful events such as job insecurity.

## 6. Limitations and avenues for future research
Firstly, the study merely applied self-report measures, thus potentially involves problems of
the common method variance (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). These are biases that may
influence participants to respond in an absolutely stable manner, or in a manner as to
present themselves in a positive light, rather than being as objective as possible. These
types of response biases may be of relevance in the present study because all variables were
measured from the same source. However, they may also be limited by the fact that a time
lag was used (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986), and that the outcome measured at baseline was
statistically controlled for in the analyses.

Another limitation of this study is its limited albeit sufficient sample size, where it
managed to gather 102 respondents. Future studies should include a larger sample size so
that the findings are more accurately generalized, relative to the world's vast population. In
addition, a majority of the respondents in this study were Muslims. For future studies, data
can be obtained from more employees of different positions and religious beliefs. It would be
interesting to know the different approaches in workplace bullying between Islamic
organizations and non-Islamic organizations.

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## Appendix 1

| Have you committed the following situations in the past six (6) months in your organization? | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Very often |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

Workplace bullying

Work-based bullying

I have given a task/job with unreasonable deadlines or targets to my co-workers.

I ordered my co-workers to do work below than their level of competency.

I have criticized my co-workers' work and efforts persistently.

I exposed my co-workers to unmanageable work.

I humiliated my co-workers regarding their work.

I required my co-workers to carry out tasks that fall outside of their job scope.

I prohibited my co-workers from applying for holidays, sick leave, etc.

Physical intimated bullying

I have shouted or made my co-workers a target of my spontaneous anger.

I have threatened my co-workers with violence, physical abuse or actual abuse.

I have threatened my co-workers to make their life difficult.

I have given unwanted sexual attention to my co-workers.

I have excluded my co-workers from social gathering because of their race or ethnicity.

Person-related bullying

I Ignored/ excluded my co-workers from work groups.

I have given hints/ signals to my co-workers that they should quit their job.

I have ignored or given a hostile reaction to my co-workers when they approached me.

I have made my co-workers a subject of excessive teasing and sarcasm.

I spread gossips and rumors about my co-workers.

I have sent my co-workers insulting messages, telephone calls or emails.

| Please tick (✓) your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements. | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

Job-insecurity

I am worried about having to leave my job before I would like to.

There is a risk that I will have to leave my present job in the years to come.

I feel uneasy about losing my job in the near future.

My future career opportunities in the organization are favorable.

My pay development in this organization is promising.

Emotional exhaustion

I feel emotionally drained from my work.

I feel used up at the end of the workday.

I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.

Working with people all day is really a strain for me.

I feel burned out from my work.

I feel frustrated by my job.

| Please tick (✓) your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements. | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

Religion

I enjoy reading about my religion.

It is important for me to spend time in private thoughts and prayers.

I often have a strong sense of God's presence.

Although I believe in my religion, many other things are important in my life.

My whole approach to life is based on my religion.

I go to my religious place of worship because it helps to me to make friends.

I pray mainly to gain relief and protection.

Prayers are for peace and happiness.

I go to my religious place of worship mainly because I enjoy seeing people I know there.