

UNMASKING VULNERABILITY: EXPLORING WORKPLACE BULLYING AND ITS DEMOGRAPHIC RISK FACTORS AMONG CHINESE FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES

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Abstract

Focusing on frontline employees in Jiangxi Province, China, this study aimed to assess the exposure levels of workplace bullying and the associated risk factors. Utilizing purposive sampling, the study gathered data from 337 individuals with a minimum of six months of work experience across the healthcare, education, banking, and catering sectors. The collected data were subjected to descriptive analysis and multivariate logistic regression. Based on the obtained results, 14.84% of total respondents reported to be exposed to workplace bullying, predominantly by supervisors. Key demographic variables like education level and marital status were found to significantly influence the likelihood of frontline employees experiencing workplace bullying. This study presented empirical evidence to guide the development of targeted interventions on workplace bullying, particularly for vulnerable frontline workers. By identifying critical risk demographic factors, the research enhances comprehension of workplace dynamics in high-pressure settings and provides actionable recommendations for organizational policymakers to improve employee well-being and foster supportive work environments.

Keywords: Workplace Bullying; Exposure Level; Frontline Employees; Risk Factors.

1. INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying refers to hostile or negative behaviors, such as harassment, offense, and social exclusion, that individuals or groups experience continuously and repeatedly in a work environment (Einarsen et al., 2011). Victims of bullying often struggle to defend themselves. Frontline employees, especially of those with direct interactions with customers, such as employees in food service, healthcare, hospitality, and retail sectors, often encounter such phenomenon (Ariza-Montes et al., 2017; Goh et al., 2022; Monique Gomez & Quintos, 2023). These frontline employees are highly vulnerable to bullying due to the demands and complaints these employees have to deal with, putting them under such intense pressure (Chi et al., 2018; Robot et al., 2021).

Workplace bullying is regarded as a critical public health concern globally. The negative influence of workplace bullying on the mental and physical well-being, as well as work performance of employees have gained growing research interest (Boudrias et al., 2021). For instance, Mokhtar et al. (2018) surveyed frontline employees in Malaysia and found that 80.0% of them experienced negative behaviors, with 15% of them reported to experience bullying on a weekly basis. In another similar study, Rakhy and Ambily (2022) reported that 66.7% of retail store salespeople indicated their

encounter with abusive supervisors. These prior studies highlighted the prevalence of workplace bullying and its significant implications.

Workplace bullying significantly erodes employees' work engagement (Rai & Agarwal, 2017; Einarsen et al., 2018) and job satisfaction (Ng et al., 2022), resulting in lower level of productivity and higher rates of absenteeism (Nielsen et al., 2016) and turnover (Favaro et al., 2021; Al Muharraq et al., 2022). Besides that, workplace bullying and critical mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and stress, are significantly associated (Machado et al., 2021). Even after the behavior is put to a stop, the negative consequences of workplace bullying persist, which may result in worsening physical health (Lever et al., 2019). Therefore, it has become increasingly pivotal to prevent this critical public health concern.

Addressing the global emphasis on workplace bullying, this phenomenon of workplace bullying in China has also gained immense attention. Ng and Chan (2021) reported that the annual incidence of workplace bullying in Hong Kong was 39.1%, with a lifetime prevalence of 58.9%. According to Zhang (2021), broader national surveys revealed that 33.0% of Chinese employees experienced discrimination or victimization at the workplace over the past five years. Meanwhile, Lu et al. (2022) reported that the incidence rate of workplace bullying among nurses in Shandong Province, China during the COVID-19 pandemic was 30.6%.

Prior studies highlighted the severity of workplace bullying in China. However, workplace bullying experienced by frontline employees has remained critically underexplored. Frontline employees have direct interactions with customers and need to withstand the intense pressure at work, putting them at higher risk for workplace bullying. Zang et al. (2021) underscored the prevalence of abusive supervision in

China's service sector, particularly within the hospitality sector. About 13% of the participants in Zhang's (2021) study reported experiencing bullying and physical or psychological violence.

The frequency of these incidents appeared to be strongly correlated with the cultural frameworks. In China, the characteristics of high-power distance, collectivism, and respect to authority (Hofstede, 1984) may shape the occurrence and experience of workplace bullying (Shao & Skarlicki, 2014). Ahmad et al. (2017) noted the lack of studies on workplace bullying within the non-Western contexts, highlighting the need for localized data to enrich research insights. Thus, the current study assessed the exposure levels of workplace bullying and the associated risk factors among frontline employees in Jiangxi Province, China. This study intended to present valuable localized guidance for the prevention and management of workplace bullying.

2. METHODS

2.1 Population and Sampling

This study targeted frontline employees with at least six consecutive months of work experience in the healthcare, education, banking, and catering sectors in Jiangxi Province, China. This requirement of minimum six months of work experience was determined based on the definition of workplace bullying, which was associated with the recurrent exposure to negative behaviors over time, typically occurring on a weekly basis and persisting for more than six months (Einarsen et al., 2011). Applying this

criterion ensured the representativeness of the study's sample in representing frontline employees' prolonged experiences with workplace bullying.

The survey was conducted via an online platform (www.wjx.cn) during the spring of 2024. This study employed the social network sharing approach to enhance the sample diversity and reach. All respondents were first briefed on the purpose and design of the study. They were also informed on their voluntary participation in the survey, and that all information and responses provided in the survey would be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. Respondents' informed consent was also acquired.

For accuracy and validity purposes, two screening questions were included at the start of the survey: (1) Screening Question 1: "Are you a frontline employee?"; (2) Screening Question 2: "How long have you worked at your current organization?". A response of "no" or "less than 6 months" to these two questions resulted in automatic disqualification from the survey.

At the end of the survey, this study successfully gathered a total of 512 questionnaire sets. However, 175 questionnaire sets were deemed invalid. Thus, only 337 valid questionnaire sets were retained, resulting in a response rate of 65.82%. This study obtained ethical approval from the National University of Malaysia, which ensured the study's compliance and safeguarding of the respondents' rights throughout the inquiry process.

2.2 Measures

Based on a comprehensive review of literature (e.g., Awai et al., 2021; Nor et al., 2021), this study identified the following demographic factors that potentially influence workplace bullying: (1) gender; (2) age; (3) education level; (4) tenure; (5) marital status. Besides that, this study measured workplace bullying as the dependent variable using Einarsen et al.'s (2009) Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R). This instrument consisted of 22 items, which represented three categories of bullying behavior: (1) person-related bullying (e.g., social exclusion and persistent criticism); (2) work-related bullying (e.g., excessive monitoring of work); (3) physical intimidation (e.g., threats or aggressive actions). This instrument employed a five-point Likert scale, with the endpoints of "never" (1) and "daily" (5), to assess the frequency of bullying behavior.

As for this study, the NAQ-R was subjected to the backtranslation technique (Brislin, 1980), specifically from English to Chinese, in order to adapt the scale for the Chinese cultural context. The results of Cronbach's alpha coefficient (0.968) indicated the robust internal consistency reliability of the developed instrument for this study, confirming the scale's reliability in measuring workplace bullying.

2.3 Statistical Analysis

All collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS. Descriptive analysis was first performed to obtain the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of frequencies and percentages. The study then proceeded to multivariate logistic regression to assess the predictive effects of the potential factors on different categories of bullying behavior by calculating the odds ratios (OR) along with 95% confidence intervals (CIs).

3. RESULTS

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Overall, the majority of the respondents were women (75.37%) and of the range of between 18 and 34 years old (81.90%). Besides that, most of the respondents possessed either an associate degree (43.32%) or a bachelor's degree or higher (51.93%). About 34.12% of the total respondents reported to be in their current role for six months to one year. Last but not least, 61.72% of the total respondents reported to be unmarried. The demographic profile of respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Characteristics	Category	n (%)
Gender	Male	83 (24.63)
	Female	254 (75.37)
Age (years)	18–34	276 (81.90)
	35–54	59 (17.51)
	≥ 55	2 (0.59)
Education Level	High school or lower	16 (4.75)
	Associate degree	146 (43.32)
	Bachelor's degree or higher	175 (51.93)
Tenure	6 months ≤ Tenure < 1 years	115 (34.12)
	1 ≤ Tenure < 3 years	85 (25.22)
	3 ≤ Tenure < 5 years	42 (12.46)
	≥ 5 years	95 (28.19)
Marital Status	Married	129 (38.28)
	Unmarried	208 (61.72)

3.2 Exposure Levels of Workplace Bullying

The concept of workplace bullying involves a continuous or persistent exposure to negative behaviors (Leymann, 1996). A single incident does not imply a case of bullying. Einarsen et al. (2011) described bullying as a case of negative behavior that takes place on a regular basis (e.g., weekly) and persistent for a significant duration of time (e.g., months).

Based on the definition and interpretation of bullying, the following categories were considered to distinguish cases of workplace bullying among the respondents in this study: (1) unexposed case; (2) mistreated case; (3) bully victim. **Unexposed case** represented respondents who have not been exposed to any negative behaviors in the past six months. Meanwhile, **mistreated case** indicated respondents who have been exposed to negative behaviors occasionally or monthly over the past six months. Lastly, **bully victim case** referred to respondents who have been exposed to negative behaviors daily or weekly.

Based on the tabulated results in Table 2, the majority of the respondents (59.05%) reported to have experienced negative behaviors occasionally or monthly, which was followed by those who reported to have no exposure to any negative behaviors in the past six months (26.11%). The remaining 14.84% of the total respondents in this study, who reported to have experienced negative behaviors daily or weekly, were identified as bully victims.

Table 2: Exposure Levels of Workplace Bullying

Category	Frequency (n = 337)	Percentage (%)
Unexposed	88	26.11
Mistreated	199	59.05
Bully victim	50	14.84
Total	337	100

3.3 Sources of Workplace Negative Behaviors

This study specifically assessed mistreated and bully victim cases. Mistreated and bully victims' insights on the sources of workplace negative behaviors were assessed.

Supervisors, coworkers, and clients or customers were identified as the key sources of workplace negative behaviors.

Referring to the results in Table 3, supervisors (39.46%) were identified as the primary source of workplace negative behaviors, which was followed by coworkers (32.97%) and clients or customers (27.57%).

These results indicated that supervisors as the leading source of workplace bullying, followed by coworkers and lastly, clients or customers.

Table 3: Sources of Workplace Negative Behaviors

Sources of Workplace Negative Behaviors	Frequency (n = 249)	Percentage (%)
Supervisors	146	39.46
Coworkers	122	32.97
Clients or customers	102	27.57
Total	370	100

Note: Respondents were allowed to make multiple selections.

3.4 Characteristics of High-Risk Groups for Workplace Negative Behaviors

Firstly, this study found no significant difference in gender when it comes to the exposure levels of workplace bullying ($\chi^2 = 2.290, p = 0.318$).

Secondly, although the age group of 18 to 34 years dominated the sample, the obtained results also showed no significant difference in age when it comes to the exposure levels of workplace bullying ($\chi^2 = 6.828, p = 0.145$).

Thirdly, the results demonstrated the significant relationship between education level and the exposure levels of workplace bullying ($\chi^2 = 17.213, p = 0.002$). In the unexposed case, most of the respondents possessed an associate degree (54.55%), followed by those with a bachelor's degree or higher (36.36%) and lastly, those who attained high school education or below (9.09%).

In comparison, the proportions of respondents with a bachelor's degree or higher in this study were higher for mistreated (56.28%) and bully victim (62.00%) cases.

Besides that, tenure ($\chi^2 = 9.846, p = 0.131$) and marital status ($\chi^2 = 3.917, p = 0.141$) were found to exhibit no significant differences in regard to the exposure levels of workplace bullying. These results are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Characteristics of Respondents by Workplace Negative Behaviors

Characteristics	Workplace Negative Behaviors			χ^2	<i>p</i>
	Unexposed	Mistreated	Bully Victim		
Gender				2.290	0.318
Male	18 (20.45%)	49 (24.62%)	16 (32.00%)		
Female	70 (79.55%)	150 (75.38%)	34 (68.00%)		
Age (years)				6.828	0.145
18–34	78 (88.64%)	156 (78.39%)	42 (84.00%)		
35–54	10 (11.36%)	42 (21.11%)	7 (14.00%)		
≥ 55	0 (0.00%)	1 (0.50%)	1 (2.00%)		
Education Level				17.213	0.002**
High school or lower	8 (9.09%)	8 (4.02%)	0 (0.00%)		
Associate degree	48 (54.55%)	79 (39.70%)	19 (38.00%)		
Bachelor's degree or higher	32 (36.36%)	112 (56.28%)	31 (62.00%)		
Tenure				9.846	0.131
6 months ≤ Tenure < 1 years	32 (36.36%)	65 (32.66%)	18 (36.00%)		
1 ≤ Tenure < 3 years	28 (31.82%)	46 (23.12%)	11 (22.00%)		
3 ≤ Tenure < 5 years	12 (13.64%)	21 (10.55%)	9 (18.00%)		
≥ 5 years	16 (18.18%)	67 (33.67%)	12 (24.00%)		
Marital Status				3.917	0.141
Married	34 (38.64%)	82 (41.21%)	13 (26.00%)		
Unmarried	54 (61.36%)	117 (58.79%)	37 (74.00%)		

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

3.5 Associated Risk Factors for Workplace Bullying and Negative Behaviors

This study performed multivariate logistic regression to assess the associated risk factors for workplace bullying and negative behaviors. Gender, age, education level, tenure, and marital status were measured as independent variables, whereas the classification of workplace negative behaviors served as the dependent variable, with the unexposed group as the reference point.

Based on the obtained results, education level was found to significantly increase the exposure to negative behaviors (OR = 1.922, 95% CI: 1.223–3.021, $p = 0.005$) when it comes to distinguishing the “unexposed” and “mistreated” cases. In particular, a higher education level nearly doubled the risk of frontline employees experiencing negative behaviors.

The results also identified education level (OR = 2.668, 95% CI: 1.352–5.265, $p = 0.005$) and marital status (OR = 3.982, 95% CI: 1.278–12.412, $p = 0.017$) as significant risk factors for workplace bullying. In comparison to the unexposed case, frontline employees with a higher education level had a 2.668-fold increase in the risk of being

bullied at the workplace. Meanwhile, married frontline employees were almost four times more susceptible to workplace bullying than their unmarried counterparts.

Table 5: Logistic Regression of Risk Factors for Workplace Bullying and Negative Behaviors

	Mistreated			Bully Victim		
	β	p	OR (95% CI)	β	p	OR (95%CI)
Intercept	-2.939	0.038	0.053 (0.003–0.848)	-6.894	0.001	0.001 (0.000–0.070)
Gender	0.049	0.883	1.050 (0.547–2.014)	-0.092	0.830	0.912 (0.392–2.120)
Age	0.852	0.052	2.344 (0.994–5.526)	1.214	0.057	3.368 (0.965–11.750)
Education Level	0.653	0.005	1.922 (1.223–3.021)	0.981	0.005	2.668 (1.352–5.265)
Tenure	0.158	0.260	1.171 (0.890–1.540)	0.164	0.399	1.178 (0.805–1.724)
Marital Status	0.469	0.191	1.599 (0.792–3.229)	1.382	0.017	3.982 (1.278–12.412)

4. DISCUSSION

Bullying is a widespread issue affecting both students (Sabramani et al., 2021) and working adults (Yang & Zhou, 2021), and it has been extensively examined across diverse cultural contexts. Various individual, organizational, and environmental factors influence the multifaceted phenomenon of workplace bullying (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010). Despite the extensive studies on the influence of sociodemographic factors on workplace bullying, there have been inconclusive findings across diverse cultural and industrial contexts. Focusing on frontline employees in Jiangxi Province, China, the current study empirically explored workplace bullying and the associated risk factors.

Based on a sample of 337 respondents, only 26.11% of the total respondents experienced no exposure to negative workplace behaviors over the past six months. However, the other 59.05% reported experiencing negative workplace behaviors monthly, and the remaining 14.84% encountered such behaviors daily or weekly. These results indicated that the significant majority of these frontline employees encountered workplace bullying to a certain degree, which aligned with Nielsen's results on 15% of employees worldwide experiencing workplace bullying (Nielsen et al., 2010; Nielsen & Einarsen 2018). The observed cases of workplace bullying in the current study were considerably lower than the reported figures from Hong Kong, which documented an annual incidence of 39.1% and a lifetime incidence of 58.9% (Ng & Chan, 2021). This may be attributed to the differences in methodological approaches, time frames, and industrial contexts.

The observed bullying prevalence rate in the current study supported Mokhtar et al.'s (2018) findings on 15% of frontline employees experiencing workplace bullying within the Malaysian context. This observation reaffirmed the prevalence of workplace bullying among frontline employees. Additionally, Yang and Zhou (2021) reported a workplace bullying incidence of 15.8% in Harbin, China, which was found to be in line with the current study's results. This pattern suggested the presence of shared characteristics of workplace bullying in specific regions of China. Additionally, the cultural backgrounds of China and Malaysia, which emphasize hierarchy and authority (high power distance), likely contribute to similarities in organizational dynamics and

workplace bullying levels. However, it is challenging to perform a comprehensive comparison of the prevalence rates of workplace bullying due to the lack of studies on workplace bullying among frontline employees in China. Expanding the sample coverage can yield more thorough data on workplace bullying.

The obtained results in this study further revealed the increased risk of exposure to workplace bullying among frontline employees with a higher education level. Ng and Chan (2021) also reported similar findings. The study identified a higher education level as a significant risk factor for bullying incidents. In a highly competitive workplace, frontline employees with a higher education level (e.g., associate degree or bachelor's degree or higher) tend to be at a higher risk of experiencing bullying due to their exceptional performance and the perceived threat they pose at work. They may be unjustly treated at the workplace as their supervisors or coworkers may feel envy or resent them for their advanced professional skills and higher levels of self-expectations. Moreover, frontline employees with a higher education level are driven by heightened workplace expectations and pressures, resulting in them displaying higher levels of autonomy or competitiveness. This renders them to be less favorable targets within organizational structures.

This study also empirically proved married frontline employees' higher susceptibility to being bullied at the workplace, as compared to unmarried frontline employees. Ismail et al. (2024) and Yang and Zhou (2021) shared similar findings as well. Married frontline employees have to tolerate more intricate role pressures, as they are required to balance their professional duties and familial obligations. Having this dual-role may result in higher levels of stress and fatigue at the workplace, which potentially draw out negative behaviors from their supervisors or coworkers, making these married frontline employees targets of workplace bullying. Meanwhile, unmarried frontline employees tend to have the flexibility and less familial obligations, resulting in comparatively lower levels of stress and fatigue at the workplace. As a result, they are less susceptible to workplace bullying. Furthermore, marital stress among married employees may negatively affect their physical health through neuroimmune pathways. This effect may reduce their productivity, focus, and interpersonal interactions at work (Ismail et al., 2024; Shrout, 2021). As a result, these factors increase their vulnerability to workplace bullying.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Focusing on several key occupational groups involving frontline employees in Jiangxi Province, China, this study underscored the exposure levels of workplace bullying and the associated risk factors. However, this study encountered several limitations.

Firstly, this study's limited purposively selected sample of frontline employees in the healthcare, education, banking, and catering sectors in Jiangxi Province limited the generalizability of this study's findings. Therefore, it is recommended for future research to expand the sample scope to include a wider array of industries and geographic regions for improved external validity of the findings.

Secondly, this study depended on the self-report measure. Respondents were required to recall their experiences of any negative workplace behaviors over the past six months. This approach may be affected by memory bias or social desirability effects. In order to mitigate these potential biases, it is recommended for future research to

employ a multifaceted approach for data collection, including assessments from supervisors or coworkers and direct observational methods.

Thirdly, this study employed a cross-sectional design, which did not capture the temporal dynamics of workplace bullying and rendered the elucidation of causal relationships challenging. Therefore, it is recommended for future research to consider a longitudinal design to monitor personal experiences with workplace bullying at the individual level across various temporal intervals, thus facilitating the identification of causal links and their enduring implications.

Last but not least, this study primarily focused on demographic factors and excluded other potential factors. Therefore, it is recommended for future research to control for a broader spectrum of potential confounders, including job performance and interpersonal relationships, while also investigating other risk determinants, such as organizational climate and support (Hngoi et al., 2023). With that, the complexities surrounding workplace bullying can be comprehensively explored, and a more robust theoretical foundation can be developed to formulate effective intervention strategies on workplace bullying.

6. CONCLUSION

This study elucidated the exposure level of workplace bullying among frontline employees in Jiangxi Province, China. This study presented empirical evidence on the higher risk of exposure to workplace bullying among highly educated and married frontline employees. To effectively diminish workplace bullying and enhance employee productivity, organizational leaders and policymakers must recognize these vulnerabilities and implement practical measures to safeguard and support those who are married or possess higher educational qualifications.

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