

Coping with workplace bullying and emotional exhaustion: role of work engagement, loyalty, promotional opportunities and perceived social support

International
Journal of
Conflict
Management

Received 6 February 2025
Revised 30 March 2025
4 May 2025
Accepted 21 May 2025

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate the relationship between workplace bullying and job satisfaction. Using conservation of resources (COR) and Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theories, a conceptual model is developed integrating four crucial constructs: work engagement, loyalty, promotional opportunities and perceived social support. The model explains the workplace bullying-job satisfaction conundrum.

Design/methodology/approach – To test the hypothesized relationships, data were collected from 410 employees working in various sectors – information technology, manufacturing, academic institutions, accounting and audit companies – from different parts of India and analyzed after checking the psychometric properties of the measures, PROCESS macros were used to test the hypothesized relationships.

Findings – The findings supported (i) the negative effect of workplace bullying on emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction, (ii) the mediating role of emotional exhaustion between workplace bullying and job satisfaction and (iii) the negative effect of emotional exhaustion on job satisfaction. The results also supported three-way interaction hypotheses. This study found that perceived social support (first moderator) and promotional opportunities (second moderator) interact with workplace bullying to influence job satisfaction mediated through emotional exhaustion. This research also supported another moderated mediation hypothesis: emotional exhaustion interacting with work engagement (first moderator) and loyalty (second moderator) influencing job satisfaction.



The authors want to thank Professor Richard Posthuma, the Editor-in-Chief and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive suggestions in the earlier versions of the manuscript.

International Journal of Conflict
Management
© Emerald Publishing Limited
1044-4068
DOI 10.1108/IJCM-02-2025-0044

Research limitations/implications – This study helps administrators and policymakers devise actionable strategies to reduce bullying behavior and improve organizational climate, especially in developing countries such as India.

Originality/value – This study is the first to combine two complementary theories [COR and JD-R] in integrating four important constructs that help mitigate the ill effects of workplace bullying. The three-way interactions between (i) workplace bullying, perceived social support (first moderator) and promotional opportunities (second moderator) in influencing job satisfaction mediated through emotional exhaustion, and (ii) emotional exhaustion, work engagement (first moderator), and loyalty (second moderator) influencing job satisfaction, are original contributions. To the best of the authors' knowledge, the conceptual model is the first of its kind that makes a pivotal contribution to the burgeoning literature on workplace bullying.

Keywords Workplace bullying, Emotional exhaustion, Job satisfaction, Work engagement, Promotional opportunities, Loyalty, India

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Workplace bullying has emerged as a significant social problem worldwide and attracted increasing attention from researchers during the last two decades (Bansal and Garg, 2025; Bunce *et al.*, 2024; Einarsen *et al.*, 2009; León-Pérez *et al.*, 2021; Smit and Du Plessis, 2016; Srivastava and Dey, 2020). Workplace bullying refers to repeated negative and intimidating behaviors exhibited by superiors, coworkers and peers (Einarsen *et al.*, 2009; Krishna *et al.*, 2023; Naseer and Khan, 2015; Paul Vincent *et al.*, 2023). The bullying behavior may manifest through excessive workloads, time-pressured deadlines, close monitoring of work by superiors, gossip, insulting comments and practical jokes aimed at insulting individuals (Yahaya *et al.*, 2012). Such negative behavior is directed toward individuals with the intent of humiliating, and often, the victim will be in a vulnerable position to defend against the bullying behavior by others (Livne and Goussinsky, 2018; Rai and Agarwal, 2018).

According to the latest statistics, 75% of employees witnessed workplace bullying behavior (61% of workplace bullies are supervisors, and 33% are coworkers) (Setyanlaw, 2023). Extant research reports adverse effects of bullying behavior: intent to leave (Glambek *et al.*, 2014; Glasø *et al.*, 2010; Houshmand *et al.*, 2012; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006), lower motivation and work engagement (Borah and Jha, 2022; Goodboy *et al.*, 2017) and lower job satisfaction (Carroll and Lauzier, 2014; Giorgi *et al.*, 2016; Glasø *et al.*, 2010; Rodriguez-Munoz *et al.*, 2009).

Another important factor that is associated with workplace bullying is emotional exhaustion, which is a burnout syndrome, where employees feel chronic fatigue and loss of energy (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). According to Maslach and Leiter (2008), emotional exhaustion refers to “the basic individual strain dimension of burnout. It refers to feelings of being overextended and depleted of one’s emotional and physical resources” (p. 498). While excessive workload is one of the primary causes of emotional exhaustion, adverse working conditions and disagreement with coworkers and supervisors add to the feeling of being stressed out (Betoret, 2009; Khani and Mirzaee, 2015). During the post-pandemic period, psychological and emotional demands imposed on individuals (e.g. work-from-home, web-based teaching) escalated emotional exhaustion, causing depletion of energies (Chidambaram *et al.*, 2024; D'Souza *et al.*, 2023; Jayaraman *et al.*, 2023; Shah and Huang, 2021).

While the adverse effects of workplace bullying on job satisfaction and its positive effect on turnover intention and absenteeism have been abundantly documented in the literature (Einarsen *et al.*, 2009; Hauge *et al.*, 2009; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006), little is known about how employees cope with bullying and maintain job satisfaction.

Job satisfaction, the degree to which employees like their jobs (Spector, 1997), is a precursor to productivity and performance. Job satisfaction is an emotional response to the

job by which an employee feels fulfillment of inherent human needs (Locke, 1969). An individual with high job satisfaction enjoys an end-state pleasurable feeling derived from a favorable job evaluation. Extant research reported that loyalty and job satisfaction are positively correlated, as satisfied employees tend to exhibit loyalty toward the organization (Aityan and Gupta, 2012). Loyalty, a generalized emotional attitude toward an organization, develops when an employee finds that their expectations from their job are met.

Over the last two decades, researchers in the field of organizational behavior have emphasized the importance of work engagement in increasing performance, productivity and job satisfaction (Lopez-Zafra *et al.*, 2022; Ruželė *et al.*, 2024; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003). When employees demonstrate vigor, dedication and absorption, their performance is likely to improve. Further, promotional opportunities (e.g. career growth) motivate the employees to show commitment toward work, resulting in increased performance and satisfaction.

When confronted with stressful situations and an uncongenial work environment, employees often seek support from supervisors, coworkers, families and friends (Taylor *et al.*, 2004). Perceived social support helps employees minimize, if not mitigate, the adverse effects of a hostile work environment on employee health, productivity and performance.

1.1 Workplace bullying in the Indian context

Literature review reveals a sizable amount of research on antecedents and consequences of workplace bullying, mainly in the context of Western and European nations (Einarsen and Raknes, 1997; Hurley *et al.*, 2016; Nielsen *et al.*, 2011) and relatively the research is sparse and sporadic in connection to developing countries, with notable exceptions (Rai and Agarwal, 2017; Singh and Srivastava, 2023; Stephen and Sasi, 2017; Soumyaja and Akella, 2024; Sharma and Prasad, 2022). For example, Stephen and Sasi (2017) highlighted the legal strategies to mitigate workplace bullying in Indian organizations. In a recently conducted qualitative study on higher educational institutions in India, Soumyaja and Akella (2024) found that gender, managerialism and culture played a significant role in workplace bullying. In a study on healthcare organizations, researchers highlighted the workplace bullying response mechanism through forgiveness and organizational citizenship behavior (Sharma and Prasad, 2022). Though workplace bullying is a global phenomenon (Gupta *et al.*, 2017; Hurley *et al.*, 2016; Nielsen *et al.*, 2011), some scholars contend that workplace bullying is quite common among women employees (Reddy, 2023). In their study of 835 employees from manufacturing and service organizations in India, Rai and Agarwal (2017) found that workplace bullying has adversely affected work engagement. Tiwari *et al.* (2024) surveyed 200 bank employees in India and found that workplace bullying significantly negatively impacts job satisfaction and positively affects turnover intention. Bansal and Garg (2025) found that workplace bullying was positively associated with both task and relationship conflict and has negative consequences of proactive service orientation in hospitality industry in India. As the work climate of most organizations has undergone phenomenal metamorphosis during and post-pandemic period (Adisa *et al.*, 2023; Chidambaram *et al.*, 2024), a fresh look at workplace bullying and its effect on the job satisfaction of employees is warranted, particularly in the context of a large developing country, India. This study explores the interactions between four variables-work engagement, perceived social support, loyalty and promotional opportunities-influencing the relationship between workplace bullying, emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction. To the best of our knowledge, the relationship between these four variables and workplace bullying in Indian organizations is somewhat fragmented, sporadic and understudied. A question tossed up in the literature is how employees remain committed to organizations despite workplace bullying and escalated emotional exhaustion and are satisfied with their tasks. To address this conundrum, we attempt to explore how the ill effects of workplace bullying are either mitigated

or managed by employees. Following conservation of resources (COR) (Hobfoll, 1989) and Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001), we see the role of four variables: perceived social support, promotional opportunities, work engagement and loyalty, influencing job satisfaction. In organizational behavior and industrial psychology literature, these four variables of performance and satisfaction in isolation have been examined. The interactions between these variables in workplace bullying-emotional exhaustion-job satisfaction relationships have not been examined in the literature. To fill the gap, this study attempts to answer the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1. How does emotional exhaustion mediate the relationship between workplace bullying and job satisfaction?
- RQ2. How do perceived social support (first moderator) and promotional opportunities (second moderator) interact with workplace bullying to influence job satisfaction mediated by emotional exhaustion?
- RQ3. How do work engagement (first moderator) and loyalty (second moderator) interact with emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction?

This study makes five significant contributions to the literature on workplace bullying. First, based on COR and JD-R theories, this study sheds light on the dynamics of workplace bullying and its impact on job satisfaction routed through emotional exhaustion. Second, it advances our understanding of perceived social support and promotional opportunities' critical role in reducing workplace bullying's delirious effect on emotional exhaustion. Perceived social support received by employees will help minimize the adverse effects of supervisors' and co-workers' bullying behavior on job satisfaction. Further, when employees find career growth through promotional opportunities in an organization, they are more likely to ignore bullying and rationalize by continuing to stay with the organization. Third, this study underscores the importance of work engagement in combating the spillover effect of emotional exhaustion on job satisfaction. Following COR and JD-R theories, employees find work engagement as a potential resource to help recover the resources consumed because of emotional exhaustion and concentrate on completing given tasks, resulting in job satisfaction. This study also highlights the importance of loyalty in suppressing the ill effect of emotional exhaustion on job satisfaction. Fourth, the three-way interaction between emotional exhaustion, work engagement and loyalty in influencing job satisfaction found in this study is exciting. Fifth, the conceptual model showing (a) the mediation effect of emotional exhaustion in the relationship between workplace bullying and job satisfaction, (b) the three-way interaction between workplace bullying, perceived social support and promotional opportunities in influencing emotional exhaustion, and (c) the three-way interaction between emotional exhaustion, work engagement and loyalty in influencing job satisfaction, makes a significant contribution to the burgeoning literature on workplace bullying. To sum up, the hypothesized relationships in the present conceptual model (see Figure 1) are the first of its kind to explore, to the best of our knowledge, and widen the theoretical lens of COR and JD-R.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

The theoretical underpinnings for this study come from the COR (Hobfoll, 1989) and JD-R (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014). The basic tenet of COR is that an individual's resources drive the behavior, and individuals deal with coping mechanisms when faced with stressful situations (Hobfoll, 1989). Performing work requires physical and emotional energies, and individuals must safeguard these resources (Ng and Feldman, 2012). Workplace bullying is

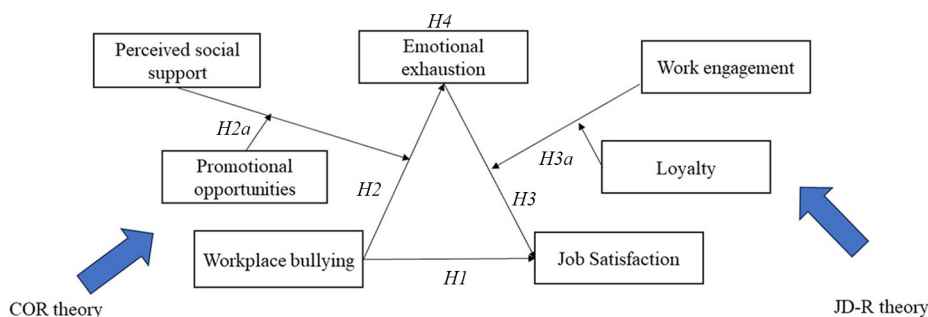


Figure 1. The conceptual model

Source: Authors' own work

stressful, and resources often get drained out (Tuckey and Neall, 2014), so individuals exert effort to conserve available resources (Hobfoll, 2011). Previous studies (Naseer *et al.*, 2016; Rodríguez-Muñoz *et al.*, 2015; Rousseau *et al.*, 2014; Ullah and Ribeiro, 2024) on workplace bullying have used COR in explaining the process of how individuals acquire, preserve and accumulate resources to help them in coping mechanism. Thus, COR provides an overarching framework for dealing with stressful situations (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014).

Another theory that helps in understanding the relationships between the variables in this study is JD-R, according to which individuals seek to use resources to meet job demands (Tummers and Bakker, 2021). The basic proposition of JD-R theory is that individuals use job resources (support, autonomy and feedback) to meet job demands (mental, physical and emotional) (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). High job demands (such as heavy workload and time pressure to complete given tasks) lead to stress, where employees doubt their capacity to complete tasks (Maslach *et al.*, 1996). In this study, employees who experience bullying find work engagement as a job resource that motivates them to perform better (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). When emotional exhaustion leads to lower performance and satisfaction, work engagement (vigor, dedication and absorption) motivates performance. Similarly, employee loyalty can be used as another resource individuals use to nullify the ill effects of emotional exhaustion on performance and job satisfaction.

In sum, as workplace bullying is characterized as a form of stress and burnout, COR is used to explain how resources help in reducing stress (Hobfoll, 2011). However, previous studies used COR and JD-R in explaining the antecedents to workplace bullying (Conway *et al.*, 2021; Demerouti *et al.*, 2001; Holm *et al.*, 2023; Rousseau *et al.*, 2014; Schaufeli and Taris, 2014). In a sharp contrast, we used these theories in explaining the influence on workplace bullying on outcomes [emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction]. We argue that COR helps explain the ways to mitigate or minimize the ill-effects of workplace bullying on emotional exhaustion and JD-R (Bakker *et al.*, 2023) is used to explain how job resources [work engagement and loyalty] help reduce the negative effect of emotional exhaustion on job satisfaction. Therefore, our study extends COR and JD-R in understanding the consequences of workplace bullying on job satisfaction mediated through emotional exhaustion. Thus, this study integrates COR and JD-R in explaining the outcomes of workplace bullying, particularly in the context of a developing nation, India.

Using the COR and JD-R theories, a conceptual model is built to show the relationships between workplace bullying, emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction. The conceptual model is mentioned in Figure 1.

2.1 Hypotheses development

2.1.1 Workplace bullying as a precursor to job satisfaction. A meta-analysis by [Nielsen and Einarsen \(2012\)](#) found several adverse effects of workplace bullying: job satisfaction, absenteeism, turnover intention and mental and physical health. Subsequent researchers have vouched for adverse effects of workplace bullying that include knowledge hiding ([Yao et al., 2020](#)) and, work engagement ([Magee et al., 2017](#)), job insecurity ([Glambek et al., 2014](#)). When employees are ordered to do work below their level of competence, given tasks with unreasonable deadlines and supervisors engage in excessive monitoring, they are more likely to get dissatisfied with their jobs ([Mendiratta and Srivastava, 2023](#)). Sometimes, workplace bullying takes the form of person-related intimidation, finger-pointing and repeated reminders for small mistakes committed, resulting in dissatisfaction ([Einarsen et al., 2009](#)). In a study of 835 employees from various organizations in India, researchers found that workplace bullying was significantly and negatively related to job satisfaction ([Rai and Agarwal, 2018](#)). Consistent with several previous studies ([Bowling and Beehr, 2006](#); [Nielsen and Einarsen, 2012](#); [Rodriguez-Munoz et al., 2009](#)), a recent study conducted on 308 workers in the health sector in Pakistan found that bullying victims showed lower job satisfaction ([Zheng et al., 2024](#)). Based on the above arguments, we offer the following hypothesis:

H1. Workplace bullying is significantly and negatively related to job satisfaction.

2.1.2 Workplace bullying and emotional exhaustion. Prolonged exposure to bullying behaviors – work-related, person-related, physically intimidating- acts as a potential psychological stressor for the employees ([Boudrias et al., 2021](#)). Some of the dysfunctional consequences of workplace bullying are depression ([Ko et al., 2020](#)) and anxiety ([Nauman et al., 2019](#)), resulting in emotional exhaustion. When employees are given tasks beyond their capacity and asked to complete them by unreasonable deadlines, they are emotionally exhausted ([Bakker and Demerouti, 2007](#)). Often, employees spend all their resources to counter workplace bullying, and the depleted resources will increase stress and adversely affect performance and productivity. Following COR theory ([Hobfoll, 1989](#)), workplace bullying results in a significant loss of resources and eventually leads to the deterioration of the psychological health of employees, resulting in high anxiety and depression ([Rodríguez-Muñoz et al., 2015](#); [Tuckey and Neall, 2014](#)). In a study of 350 employees from various organizations in India, researchers found that workplace bullying was positively associated with burnout ([Srivastava and Dey, 2020](#)). Similarly, a study on 303 employees in the automobile sector in Pakistan found that workplace bullying significantly and positively affected job burnout ([Ullah and Ribeiro, 2024](#)). Thus, based on the above arguments, we offer the following hypothesis:

H2. Workplace bullying is significantly and positively related to emotional exhaustion.

2.1.3 Emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction. Emotional exhaustion represents a state where employees feel physical fatigue and a drain of energy ([Lam et al., 2010](#); [Maslach and Jackson, 1981](#); [Moon and Morais, 2022](#)). According to [Wright and Cropanzano \(1998\)](#), emotional exhaustion is caused by depersonalization or dehumanization, in which workers feel burned out. Heavy workloads and challenging deadlines to complete given tasks foster emotional exhaustion ([Koch and Adler, 2018](#)), which negatively affects job satisfaction ([Prajogo, 2019](#)). In a study conducted on Norwegian school principals, researchers found that emotional exhaustion has adversely affected job satisfaction ([Skaalvik, 2023](#)). Based on above, we offer the following hypothesis:

H3. Emotional exhaustion is significantly and negatively related to job satisfaction.

2.1.4 Emotional exhaustion as a mediator. Workplace bullying has a negative connotation whereby employers tend to distribute heavy and challenging work to some targeted employees. As a result, employees who become victims of workplace bullying tend to spend more resources completing given tasks (Moon and Hur, 2011; Rosander and Blomberg, 2019; Yao *et al.*, 2020). When employees run short of resources to cope with the excessive work pressure, they tend to experience emotional exhaustion and job dissatisfaction (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014; Hobfoll, 1989; Jin *et al.*, 2018; Rai and Agarwal, 2017; Scheidler *et al.*, 2019) as earlier scholars documented that depletion of emotional resources triggered by work pressure cause fatigue, which in organizational behavior literature called “emotional exhaustion” (Lam *et al.*, 2010; McDowell *et al.*, 2019).

In this study, we argue that workplace bullying has both a direct negative effect and an indirect effect through emotional exhaustion on job satisfaction. While the direct effect of workplace bullying will be clearly noticeable, employees who run short of emotional resources tend to feel the effect routed through emotional exhaustion (Chen *et al.*, 2019; Xu *et al.*, 2018). In a recent study, Iqbal *et al.* (2025) reported that burnout mediated the relationship between workplace bullying job outcomes. Thus, based on above arguments, we offer the following hypothesis:

- H4.* Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and job satisfaction.

2.1.5 First three-way interaction: perceived social support and promotional opportunities as moderators. Perceived social support refers to the care given by family, friends and significant others (Taylor, 2011; Zimet *et al.*, 1988), which plays a critical role in reducing the experience of stressful situations (Taylor *et al.*, 2004). Some studies found that perceived social support resulted in decreasing depression significantly (Kleiman and Riskind, 2013; Kostak *et al.*, 2019; Santini *et al.*, 2015) and enhancing mental health (Cobo-Rendón *et al.*, 2020).

Following COR (Hobfoll, 2011) and JD-R (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti *et al.*, 2001) theories, employees experience a loss of resources while dealing with recurring and persistent workplace bullying situations and tend to look for factors that will help in resource gain. In this study, we investigate the dynamics of resource gain (perceived social support) and resource loss (coping with workplace bullying) to reduce the deleterious effects of emotional exhaustion. Prior studies (Maidaniuc-Chirila and Treadway, 2016; Naseer *et al.*, 2016; Rousseau *et al.*, 2014; Tuckey and Neall, 2014) have used COR and JD-R theories to explain how employees look for additional resources to compensate for the resource loss to prevent further deterioration of existing resources. According to Bakker and Demerouti (2007), opportunities for personal development and career growth may be a job resource that helps employees counter the consequences of workplace bullying. For example, when a supervisor or coworkers ridicule an employee, employees feel that the power of available opportunities for career growth may dominate the resource loss caused by stress due to bullying behavior by supervisors or coworkers. Thus, in this study, perceived social support and promotional opportunities help combat the cascading ill effect of workplace bullying on emotional exhaustion. When employees face excessive work pressure, unfavorable work climate and emotionally challenging social interactions, job demands trigger burnout and find opportunities for personal development as an intrinsic job resource. Similarly, employees look for perceived social support as another potential job source to compensate for resource loss due to an unfavorable work environment. Based on the above arguments, we contend that these two intrinsic job resources [perceives social support and opportunities

for career growth] help reduce, if not mitigate, the ill-effect of workplace bullying on emotional exhaustion and offer the following exploratory double-moderation hypothesis:

- H2a.* Perceived social support (first moderator) and promotional opportunities (second moderator) moderate the relationship between workplace bullying and job satisfaction mediated by emotional exhaustion. At higher (lower) levels of perceived social support, and higher (lower) levels of promotional opportunities, workplace bullying results in lower (higher) levels of emotional exhaustion.

2.1.6 Second three-way interaction: work engagement and loyalty as moderators. In this study, work engagement and loyalty act as moderators that will reduce the negative impact of emotional exhaustion on job satisfaction. A three-component model of work engagement (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003), consisting of vigor, dedication and absorption, has been a widely researched topic in organizational behavior and industrial psychology. Several studies have documented that work engagement has positive outcomes such as productivity, performance, satisfaction, innovation and work-life balance (Heyns *et al.*, 2021; Lopez-Zafra *et al.*, 2022; Ruželė *et al.*, 2024). For example, in a study on 403 bank employees in Lithuania, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden, researchers found that work engagement was positively associated with task and contextual performance and negatively associated with counter-productive performance (Ruželė *et al.*, 2024). In a recent study conducted on 503 employees in the information technology sector in India, researchers reported that a higher level of employee engagement resulted in increased satisfaction and intention to stay (Uraon and Kumarasamy, 2024).

Employee loyalty refers to the degree to which employees feel attached to the organization and perform assigned tasks efficiently and effectively (McCarthy, 1997). Loyalty plays an important role in taking on additional responsibilities assigned by the supervisors and shows commitment toward achieving goals (Yee *et al.*, 2010). Some researchers contend that job satisfaction is an antecedent to loyalty (Aristana *et al.*, 2022; Dhir *et al.*, 2020; Khuong and Tien, 2013; Turkyilmaz *et al.*, 2011), thus corroborating that loyalty and job satisfaction are highly and positively correlated. Employees with high loyalty tend to identify with the organization and show a high commitment and willingness to stay (Guillon and Cezanne, 2014; Mowday *et al.*, 1982; Solomon, 1992). When an organization exhibits loyalty toward employees, employees are more likely to reciprocate by showing truthfulness, faithfulness and psychological attachment toward the organization (Turkyilmaz *et al.*, 2011).

While emotional exhaustion has a potential adverse effect on job satisfaction, when employees show a higher level of engagement with work, it is more likely that the negative effect will be less intense. Employees showing vigor, dedication and absorption tend to suppress the negative effect of emotional exhaustion on job satisfaction. On the other hand, when work engagement is low, the negative effect of emotional exhaustion on job satisfaction will be intensified. Further, when employees show loyalty toward the organization, they tend to show higher levels of commitment. They are more likely to consider emotional exhaustion at the superficial level so that it does not deter them from achieving satisfaction by completing given tasks. In congruence with the COR theory, when employees try to avoid the loss of resources by finding alternative resources through higher levels of engagement in work and exhibiting loyalty, the negative effect of emotional exhaustion will be diluted. Additional support from JD-R (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti *et al.*, 2001) suggests that job demands (physical, social and organizational aspects) require employees to put a concerted effort into completion. Job demands lead to the depletion of resources, leading to emotional exhaustion (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). To compensate for the depletion of resources, employees tend to invest in procuring resources or

try to find alternative sources such as work engagement and loyalty. In this study, we argue that work engagement and loyalty interact with workplace bullying to influence job satisfaction mediated by emotional exhaustion and offer the following exploratory hypothesis:

H3a. Work engagement (first moderator) and loyalty (second moderator) moderate the relationship between workplace bullying and job satisfaction mediated by emotional exhaustion. At higher (lower) levels of work engagement, and higher (lower) levels of loyalty, emotional exhaustion results in higher (lower) levels of job satisfaction being achieved.

2.1.7 Uniqueness and novelty of the proposed model. Prior literature explored the relationship between workplace bullying, emotional exhaustion, work engagement and perceived social support as independent variables and job satisfaction as dependent variables. However, the present study considers job satisfaction as a function of workplace bullying mediated by emotional exhaustion and moderated by perceived social support and promotional opportunities. Further, work engagement and loyalty are integrated to reduce the deleterious effect of emotional exhaustion on job satisfaction. The three-way interactions between the variables offer novelty to the conceptual model (see [Figure 1](#)), tested primarily in the Indian context.

3. Method

3.1 Sample

This study attempts to explore the relationship between workplace bullying and job satisfaction. Since workplace bullying is common in all industries, we did not focus on one sector. We attempted to gather data from the employees working in information technology (IT), manufacturing, educational institutions and accounting and auditing firms. We also did not focus on one single area. We prepared a survey instrument and distributed the survey through Google Forms. We first contacted known people in our contacts, procured their friends' e-mails and sent surveys to them.

We prepared a cover letter and the survey instrument indicating voluntary participation and asked for consent to participate in the study. We also guaranteed data confidentiality and protected participants' privacy to eliminate social desirability bias. We also informed the respondents that this research is purely for academic purposes and that they have the right to withdraw from participation at any time while completing the surveys.

The non-probability-based convenience and snowball sampling has been used by several researchers in the past ([Al-Hattami, 2021](#); [Baltar and Brunet, 2012](#); [Cobanoglu and Cobanoglu, 2003](#); [Jayaraman et al., 2023](#)). We received data from 410 respondents, and since Google Forms did not allow the participants to skip any questions, all the surveys were completed. The respondents were from various states of India – Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and New Delhi and hence, the sample does not cover one single area of India. To test non-response bias, we compared the first 75 respondents with the last 75 respondents and found no statistical differences between these two groups.

3.2 Demographics

The sample consisted of 410 respondents, out of which 238 (58%) were males and 172 (42%) were females. Other demographic details are presented in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Demographic profile

Category	Profile	Total no.	%
Gender	Male	238	58.0
	Female	172	41.9
Age (in years)	Less than 25	12	2.9
	25–35	170	41.4
	35–45	96	23.4
	45–55	108	26.3
	Above 55	24	5.8
Education	Undergraduate	48	11.7
	Graduate	171	41.7
	Postgraduate	133	32.4
	Professional	58	14.1
Annual income	Less than Rs 1,00,000 (\$1200)	133	32.4
	Rs.100,000 – Rs. 500,000 [\$1200-\$6000]	65	15.8
	Rs. 500,000 – Rs. 1,000,000 [\$6000 - \$12,000]	86	20.9
	Rs.1,000,000 – Rs. 1,500,000 [\$12,000–18,000]	69	16.8
	Above Rs.1,500,000 [\$18,000]	57	13.9
Experience (in years)	Less than 5	106	25.8
	5–10	91	22.1
	10–15	73	17.8
	15–20	93	22.6
	Above 20 years	47	11.4

Source(s): Authors' own work

3.3 Measures

All the constructs were measured on a Likert-type five-point scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). The measures, sources of measures, reliability coefficients, average variance extracted (AVE) estimates are presented in [Table 2](#).

4. Analysis and results

4.1 Measurement model and confirmatory factor analysis

As [Anderson and Gerbing \(1988\)](#) suggested, we performed CFA first to check the measurement model before running the structural model. We used covariance-based structural equation modeling (SEM) with LISREL software and presented the results in [Table 2](#).

As can be observed from [Table 2](#), the factor loadings of all seven constructs were over acceptable levels of 0.70 (ranging between 0.71 and 0.90). Further, the composite reliability (CR) values for all the constructs were well over 0.70, and AVE estimates were above 0.50 values, thus providing evidence of reliability of the constructs ([Hair et al., 2019](#)). The goodness-of-fit statistics of CFA reveal that the seven-factor model fit the data well ($\chi^2/df = 3.21$; Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.059; Root mean square residual (RMR) = 0.048; Standardized RMR = 0.051; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.94; Goodness of fit index (GFI) = 0.89). Since the goodness of fit indices (RMSEA < 0.08; CFI > 0.90; and other indices) vouch for the validity and reliability of the constructs used in this research ([Browne and Cudeck, 1993](#)).

We compared the correlations (see [Table 4](#)) between the variables with the AVE values and found that square root of AVEs values exceeded the correlations between the constructs, thus establishing discriminant validity ([Fornell and Larcker, 1981](#)). For example, correlation

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis

Constructs and the sources of constructs	Alpha	Standardized Loadings (λ_{yi})	Reliability (λ^2_{yi})	Variance ($\text{Var}(\varepsilon_i)$)	Average Variance-Extracted Estimate $\Sigma (\lambda^2_{yi}) / [(\lambda^2_{yi}) + (\text{Var}(\varepsilon_i))]$
<i>Workplace bullying</i> (Einarsen <i>et al.</i> , 2009)	0.93				0.62
Someone withholding information which affects your performance		0.76	0.57	0.43	
Being ordered to do work below your level of competence		0.88	0.78	0.22	
Having your opinions ignored		0.72	0.52	0.48	
Being given tasks with unreasonable deadlines		0.81	0.66	0.34	
Excessive monitoring of your work		0.78	0.61	0.39	
Pressure not to claim something to which by right you are entitled (e.g. sick leave, holiday entitlement, travel expenses)		0.78	0.61	0.39	
Being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with your work		0.74	0.55	0.45	
Intimidating behaviors such as finger-pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving, blocking your way		0.81	0.66	0.34	
<i>Perceived social support</i> (Zimet <i>et al.</i> , 1988)	0.91				0.59
There is a special person who is around when I am in need		0.71	0.50	0.50	
There is a special person with whom I can share my joys and sorrows		0.76	0.58	0.42	
My family really tries to help me		0.79	0.62	0.38	
I get the emotional help and support I need from my family		0.81	0.66	0.34	
I have a special person who is a real source of comfort for me		0.80	0.64	0.36	
My friends really try to help me		0.78	0.61	0.39	
I can count on my friends when things go wrong		0.75	0.56	0.44	
I can talk about my problems with my family		0.73	0.53	0.47	
I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows		0.76	0.58	0.42	
There is a special person in my life who cares about me		0.81	0.66	0.34	
My family is willing to help me make decisions		0.71	0.50	0.50	
I can talk about my problems with my friends		0.77	0.59	0.41	
<i>Work engagement</i> (Schaufeli <i>et al.</i> , 2006)	0.87				0.62
At my work, I feel bursting with energy. (vigor)		0.72	0.52	0.48	

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Constructs and the sources of constructs	Alpha	Standardized Loadings (λ_{yi})	Reliability (λ^2_{yi})	Variance ($\text{Var}(\epsilon_i)$)	Average Variance-Extracted Estimate $\Sigma (\lambda^2_{yi}) / [(\lambda^2_{yi}) + (\text{Var}(\epsilon_i))]$
At my job, I feel strong and vigorous. (vigor)		0.75	0.56	0.44	
When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work (vigor)		0.81	0.66	0.34	
I am enthusiastic about my job. (dedication)		0.83	0.69	0.31	
My job inspires me. (dedication)		0.87	0.76	0.24	
I am proud of the work I do. (dedication)		0.85	0.73	0.27	
I feel happy when I am working intensely. (absorption)		0.75	0.56	0.44	
I am immersed in my work. (absorption)		0.71	0.50	0.50	
Absorption 3: I get carried away when I am working. (Absorption)		0.77	0.60	0.40	
<i>Promotional opportunities</i> (Weng and Hu, 2009; Zhang and Zhang, 2007)	0.95				0.69
There are several promotion opportunities for advancement in my career		0.78	0.61	0.39	
There are frequent promotion opportunities in the organization		0.77	0.60	0.40	
The promotion opportunities in the organization fit my skills and knowledge		0.77	0.60	0.40	
My present job is as per my qualification and experience		0.79	0.63	0.37	
Qualifications (specifications) requirements of the organization to be eligible for promotion are reasonable		0.82	0.67	0.33	
Experiences (specifications) requirement of the organization to be eligible for promotion are reasonable		0.87	0.75	0.25	
My career growth and development needs are being met in the organization		0.88	0.77	0.23	
All job openings in the organization are communicated to all eligible employees		0.88	0.77	0.23	
There are career opportunities oriented toward advancement up the organizational ladder		0.89	0.79	0.21	
<i>Emotional exhaustion</i> (Maslach and Jackson, 1981)	0.95				0.73
I have felt emotionally drained from my work		0.85	0.71	0.29	
I have felt used up at the end of the workday		0.88	0.78	0.22	

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Constructs and the sources of constructs	Alpha	Standardized Loadings (λ_{yi})	Reliability (λ^2_{yi})	Variance ($\text{Var}(\epsilon_i)$)	Average Variance-Extracted Estimate $\Sigma (\lambda^2_{yi}) / [(\lambda^2_{yi}) + (\text{Var}(\epsilon_i))]$
I have felt fatigued when getting up in the morning and having to face another day on		0.88	0.77	0.23	
The job		0.87	0.76	0.24	
I have felt burned out from my work		0.85	0.72	0.28	
I feel frustrated by my job		0.84	0.71	0.29	
I feel I'm working too hard on my job		0.82	0.67	0.33	
<i>Loyalty</i> [Yee <i>et al.</i> , 2010]	0.88				0.66
Never late for work		0.72	0.52	0.48	
Continuing our employment in this company		0.87	0.76	0.24	
Contribute extra effort for the sake of this company		0.83	0.69	0.31	
Become a part of this company		0.93	0.86	0.14	
Turn down other jobs with more pay to stay with this company		0.73	0.53	0.47	
Take any job to keep working for this company		0.76	0.58	0.42	
<i>Job satisfaction</i> (Schriesheim and Tsui, 1980; Brayfield and Rothe, 1951)	0.92				0.72
I am satisfied with my current job		0.84	0.70	0.30	
I am satisfied with my current co-workers		0.84	0.70	0.30	
I am satisfied and feel happy with my current boss		0.86	0.73	0.27	
I am satisfied with my current salary		0.82	0.67	0.33	
Overall, I feel fairly satisfied with my current job		0.90	0.82	0.18	

Source(s): Authors' own work

between workplace bullying and emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.50$) is greater than the square root of AVEs of workplace bullying (0.78) and emotional exhaustion (0.85). Similarly, the correlation between promotional opportunities and work engagement is 0.54 and the square roots of AVE are 0.83 and 0.78 respectively. Since correlations between all variables were less than the square root of their respective AVEs, the data provides support for discriminant validity between the constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

4.2 Descriptive statistics and multicollinearity

To assess multicollinearity, we observed whether the correlations between variables exceeded 0.75 (Tsui *et al.*, 1995). As can be seen in Table 4, the highest correlation was 0.62 (between work engagement and job satisfaction), and the lowest correlation was -0.15 (between emotional exhaustion and perceived social support). Furthermore, all correlations were in the expected direction. For example, correlation between workplace bullying and

emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.50$; $p < 0.01$), workplace bullying and work engagement ($r = -0.19$; $p < 0.01$), and emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction ($r = -0.23$; $p < 0.01$), suggesting that the relationship between these variables were in the expected direction. We performed another statistical check to see the presence of multicollinearity by observing the variance inflation factor (VIF) and found that the VIF values for all the variables were less than 5, suggesting that multicollinearity is not a problem with the data (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

4.3 Common method bias

Some scholars recently reported that Harman's single factor analysis showing that a single factor accounts for less than 50% variance is inadequate to test CMB (Howard *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, we performed single-factor latent variable method by subjecting all the indicators into a single construct and rotating the process each time and found VIF values were less than 3.3, thus indicating that data was not infected by CMV (Kock, 2015; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2024). We also compared various measurement models and found that a single factor yielded poor goodness-of-fit statistics ($\chi^2/df = 3.93$; RMSEA = 0.070; RMR = 0.077; Standardized RMR = 0.064; CFI = 0.70; GFI = 0.74). On the contrary, the seven-factor model yielded better goodness-of-fit statistics (see Table 3).

4.4 Hypotheses testing

Before testing the hypotheses, we did preliminary analysis and found that industry plays a vital role in influencing the study variables. The ANOVA results reveal that industry differences are significant with regard to workplace bullying ($F = 5.406$; $p < 0.001$), emotional exhaustion ($F = 6.824$, $p < 0.001$), loyalty ($F = 13.698$; $p < 0.001$), work engagement ($F = 20.905$; $p < 0.001$), perceived social support ($F = 6.165$; $p < 0.001$), promotional opportunities ($F = 13.417$; $p < 0.001$) and job satisfaction ($F = 12.246$; $p < 0.001$). Therefore, we included "industry" as a control variable so that the industry-effect is teased out and the regression coefficients become unbiased. The structural model was tested using Hayes (2018) PROCESS macros. We used model # 4 for testing $H1-H4$ and presented the results in Tables 5 and 6.

As can be seen from Table 5, the regression coefficient of workplace bullying on job satisfaction was negative and significant ($H1$: $\beta = -0.23$, $t = 9.03$; $p < 0.001$). The results based on 20,000 bootstrap samples show that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (BCCI) was -0.3217 (LLCI) and -0.1335 (ULCI). These results support $H1$ that workplace bullying is negatively associated with job satisfaction.

$H2$ proposes that workplace bullying is positively related to emotional exhaustion. The regression coefficient of workplace bullying on emotional exhaustion was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.56$; $p < 0.001$), thus supporting $H2$.

$H3$ posits that emotional exhaustion is negatively related to job satisfaction. The regression coefficient of emotional exhaustion on job satisfaction was negative and significant ($\beta = -0.16$; $p < 0.01$), thus supporting $H3$.

$H4$ states emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and job satisfaction. The indirect effect (as shown in Table 6) was -0.0891 (Boot se = 0.0327; Boot LLCI = -0.1554 ; Boot ULCI = -0.0267) and since zero was not contained in the Boot LLCI and Boot ULCI, the results support the mediation hypothesis (i.e. $H4$).

The direct effect (-0.1385) and indirect effect (-0.0891) give the total effect (-0.2276). It can be seen from the Table 6 that indirect effect is a product of regression coefficient of workplace bullying emotional exhaustion (0.5608) and regression coefficient of emotional exhaustion on job satisfaction (-0.1589) [$0.5608 \times (-0.1589) = -0.891$]. The indirect effect

Table 3. Comparison of measurement models

Model	Factors	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	$\Delta\chi^2$	RMSEA	RMR	Standardized RMR	CFI	TLI=NNFI	GFI
Null Model		9847.15	990								
Baseline model	Base line seven factor model	3081.34	960	3.21		0.059	0.048	0.051	0.94	0.92	0.89
Model 1	Six factor model: WPB+EE; PO; PSS; WE;LO; and JS	3205.74	966	3.32	124.50*	0.061	0.054	0.053	0.93	0.90	0.88
Model 2	Five factor model: WPB+EE+PO; PSS; WE; LO; and JS	3441.36	971	3.54	360.12*	0.062	0.059	0.057	0.89	0.87	0.86
Model 3	Four factor model: WPB+EE+PO+PSS; WE; LO; and JS	3590.82	975	3.68	509.58*	0.063	0.062	0.056	0.81	0.79	0.75
Model 4	Three factor model: WPB+EE+PO+PSS+ WE; LO; and JS	3747.46	978	3.83	666.22*	0.064	0.063	0.057	0.77	0.74	0.73
Model 5	Two factor model: WPB+EE+PO+PSS+ WE+LO; and JS	3775.59	980	3.85	694.35*	0.062	0.063	0.056	0.74	0.73	0.75
Model 6	One factor model: WPB+EE+PO+PSS+ WE+LO+JS	3851.44	981	3.93	770.20*	0.070	0.077	0.064	0.70	0.67	0.74

Note(s): ** $p < 0.01$; Abbreviations: WPB = workplace bullying; EE= emotional exhaustion; PO = promotional opportunities; PSS = perceived social support; WE = work engagement; LO = loyalty; JS = job satisfaction

Source(s): Authors' own work



Table 4. Correlations, reliability and validity

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Cronbach Alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
1. Workplace bullying	1.99	1.01	<i>0.78</i>							0.93	0.93	0.62
2. Emotional exhaustion	2.59	1.12	0.50**	<i>0.85</i>						0.95	0.95	0.73
3. Perceived Social Support	3.92	0.84	-0.26**	-0.15**	<i>0.77</i>					0.91	0.94	0.59
4. Promotional opportunities	3.62	0.97	-0.095	-0.25**	0.29**	<i>0.83</i>				0.95	0.95	0.69
5. Work engagement	3.78	1.03	-0.18**	-0.18**	0.43**	0.54**	<i>0.78</i>			0.87	0.94	0.62
6. Loyalty	3.47	0.97	-0.025	-0.071	0.19**	0.57**	0.55**	<i>0.81</i>		0.88	0.92	0.66
7. Job satisfaction	3.70	1.00	-0.23**	-0.25**	0.42**	0.64**	0.62**	0.59**	<i>0.85</i>	0.92	0.93	0.72

Note(s): ***p* <0.01; Numbers in diagonals and italics are square root of AVE of the constructs
Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 5. Hypotheses testing [*H1, H2, H3*]

Hypotheses	Relationships	β	Se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	Result
<i>H1</i>	Workplace bullying → Job satisfaction	-0.23	0.048	-4.7551	0.0000	-0.3217	-0.1335	Supported
<i>H2</i>	Workplace bullying → Emotional exhaustion	0.56	0.047	11.7368	0.0000	0.4668	0.6547	Supported
<i>H3</i>	Emotional exhaustion → Job satisfaction	-0.16	0.049	-3.2405	0.0013	-0.2553	-0.0625	Supported

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 6. Results of mediation analysis

Workplace bullying → emotional exhaustion → job satisfaction	Coeff	se	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	Result
Total effect	-0.2276	0.0479	-0.3217	-0.1335	
Direct effect	-0.1385	0.0547	-0.2461	-0.0309	
Indirect effect (<i>H4</i>)	-0.0891	0.0327	-0.1554	-0.0267	Supported

Note(s): *n* = 410; Boot LLCI refers to the lower bound bootstrapping confidence intervals. Boot ULCI refers to the upper bound bootstrapping confidence intervals. Number of bootstrapping samples for this bias corrected bootstrapping confidence intervals are 20,000. The level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output was 0.95. We have four decimal digits for bootstrap results because some values may be very close to zero; Indirect effect = the regression coefficient of workplace bullying on emotional exhaustion (0.5608) multiplied by the regression coefficient of emotional exhaustion on job satisfaction (-0.1589). The indirect effect is (0.5608) × (-0.1589) = -0.0891

Source(s): Authors' own work

of workplace bullying → emotional exhaustion → job satisfaction was significant, thus corroborating support to *H4*.

4.5 Testing *H2a* (three-way interaction between workplace bullying, perceived social support and promotional opportunities)

We used Model # 11 of Hayes (2018) PROCESS macros to check *H2a*. We entered control variables -industry, work engagement and loyalty- as covariates, and perceived social support (first moderator) and promotional opportunities (second moderator) in Model #11 and presented the results in Table 7.

H2a posits that workplace bullying interacts with perceived social support (first moderator) and promotional opportunities (second moderator) impacting job satisfaction mediated through emotional exhaustion. The regression coefficient of three-way interaction term is positive and significant ($\beta_{\text{workplace bullying} \times \text{perceived social support} \times \text{promotional opportunities}} = 0.14$; $p < 0.05$). The bootstrapping result based on 20,000 bootstrap samples shows that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (BCCI) was 0.0613 (LLCI) and 0.2573 (ULCI). The three-way interaction explained additional variation of 18.7% variation in emotional exhaustion, the magnitude is “medium” ($f^2=0.23$) [the effect size f^2 between 0.02 and 0.15 represents “small”; f^2 between 0.15 and 0.35 represent medium effect size, and $f^2 > 0.35$ represents “large effect size” (Cohen, 1988)] and is statistically significant [$R^2 = 0.338$; $F(10,399) = 29.37$; $\Delta R^2 = 0.187$; $\Delta F = 2.94$; $p < 0.05$]. The conditional indirect effect of

Table 7. Testing three-way interaction hypothesis [*H2a*]

Variables	DV= emotional exhaustion					
	Coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	0.8766	2.1309	0.4114	0.6810	-3.3127	5.0659
Industry	0.0065	0.0400	0.1636	0.8701	-0.0721	0.0852
Work engagement	0.0460	0.0614	-0.7490	0.4543	0.0747	0.1666
Loyalty	0.1052	0.0641	1.6412	0.1015	-0.0208	0.2313
Workplace bullying	1.5677	0.8834	1.7746	0.0767	-0.1690	3.3044
Perceived social support	0.8593	0.4718	1.8214	0.0693	-0.0682	1.7867
Promotional opportunities	0.2725	0.6660	0.4091	0.6827	-1.0368	1.5817
Workplace bullying × perceived social support	-0.4094	0.2073	-1.9746	0.0490	-0.8170	-0.0018
Workplace bullying × promotional opportunities	-0.3938	0.2686	-1.4658	0.1435	-0.9219	0.1344
Perceived social support × promotional opportunities	-0.2761	0.1408	-1.9604	0.0506	-0.5529	0.0008
<i>Workplace bullying x perceived social support x promotional opportunities H2a</i>	<i>0.1368</i>	<i>0.0613</i>	<i>2.2324</i>	<i>0.0261</i>	<i>0.0163</i>	<i>0.2573</i>
R ²	0.338					
F	29.37					
df1	10					
df2	399					
p	0.0000					
ΔR ²	0.187					
ΔF	2.94					
p	0.0261					

Source(s): Authors' own work

social support and promotional opportunities and the index of moderated-mediation presented in [Table 8](#) support the moderated moderated-mediation hypothesis: *H2a*.

The visual presentation of three-way interaction is shown in [Figure 2](#).

Panel A ([Figure 2](#)) shows the interaction of workplace bullying and perceived social support on emotional exhaustion when promotional opportunities are low. As can be seen, lower social support combined with low promotional opportunities interacting with workplace bullying results higher emotional exhaustion when compared to higher social support. However, when workplace bullying is high, at both lower and higher levels of social support leads to increase in emotional exhaustion. This implies that social support works well when workplace bullying is low.

When we move to panel B, which shows the interaction effect of workplace bullying and perceived social support when promotional opportunities are high, high level of perceived social support results in lower level of emotional exhaustion compared to low level of perceived social support. The curves are interacting and the change of slopes of curves render support to moderation hypothesis (*H2a*).

4.6 Testing *H3a* (three-way interaction between emotional exhaustion, work engagement and loyalty)

We used Model # 18 of [Hayes \(2018\)](#) PROCESS macros to check *H3a*. We entered control variables -industry, perceived social support, promotional opportunities as covariates, and work engagement (first moderator), and loyalty (second moderator) Model #18 and presented the results in [Table 9](#).

Table 8. Conditional indirect effect of social support and promotional opportunities (checking the moderated moderated-mediation hypothesis: *H2a*)

Social support	Promotional opportunities	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Low	Low	-0.0604	0.0251	-0.1144	-0.0168
Low	Medium	-0.0647	0.0249	-0.1164	-0.0185
Low	High	-0.0689	0.0293	-0.1306	-0.0172
Medium	Low	-0.0541	0.0283	-0.1206	-0.0109
Medium	Medium	-0.0761	0.0299	-0.1397	-0.0217
Medium	High	-0.0982	0.0348	-0.1670	-0.0294
High	Low	-0.0479	0.0371	-0.1394	0.0009
High	Medium	-0.0876	0.0380	-0.1721	-0.0235
High	High	-0.1274	0.0456	-0.2182	-0.0387

Index of moderated moderated-mediation

Index	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
-0.0217	0.0116	-0.0471	-0.0018

Indices of conditional moderated-mediation by perceived social support

Promotional opportunities	Index	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Low	0.0074	0.0168	-0.0313	0.0375
Medium	-0.0137	0.014	-0.0479	0.0069
High	-0.0348	0.019	-0.0792	-0.0050

Source(s): Authors' own work

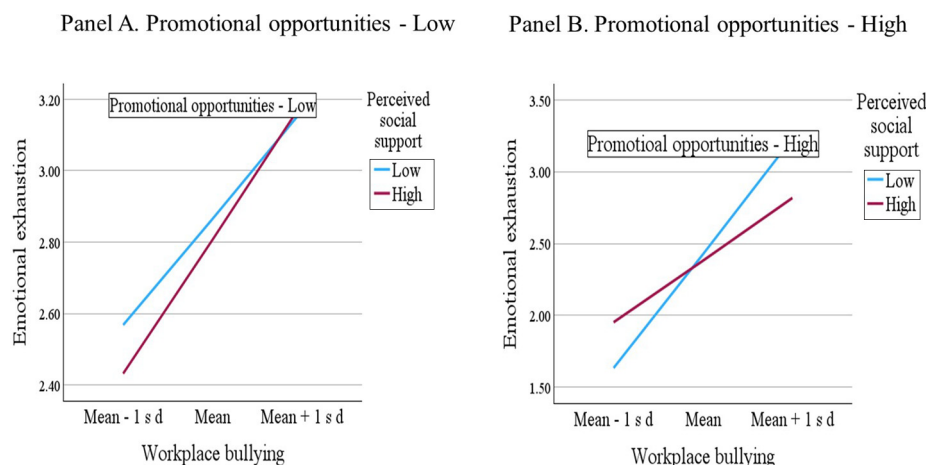


Figure 2. Panel A: The moderating effect of workplace bullying and perceived social support on emotional exhaustion at low level of promotional opportunities. Panel B: The moderating effect of workplace bullying and perceived social support on emotional exhaustion at high level of promotional opportunities

Source: Authors' own work

Table 9. Testing three-way interaction hypothesis [H3a]

Variables	Coeff	se	DV= job satisfaction			
			t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	-3.5799	0.7704	-4.6467	0.0000	-5.0945	-2.0653
Industry	-0.0474	0.0251	-1.8924	0.0592	-0.0967	0.0018
Workplace bullying	-0.5089	0.0989	-5.1479	0.0000	-0.7032	-0.3146
Perceived social support	0.2337	0.0420	5.5671	0.0000	0.1512	0.3162
Promotional opportunities	0.3079	0.0398	7.7375	0.0000	0.2297	0.3862
Emotional exhaustion	-0.3644	0.0664	-5.4915	0.0000	-0.4949	-0.2340
Work engagement	1.9608	0.1824	10.7469	0.0000	1.6021	2.3195
Loyalty	1.7730	0.2629	6.7439	0.0000	1.2561	2.2899
Emotional exhaustion × work engagement	0.0545	0.0603	0.9036	0.3667	-0.0640	0.1730
Emotional exhaustion × loyalty	-0.2507	0.0506	-4.9498	0.0000	-0.3503	-0.1511
Work engagement × loyalty	0.0159	0.0398	0.3994	0.6898	-0.0624	0.0942
<i>Emotional exhaustion x work engagement x loyalty H3a</i>	<i>0.1475</i>	<i>0.0233</i>	<i>6.6476</i>	<i>0.0000</i>	<i>0.1080</i>	<i>0.1986</i>
R-square	0.591					
F	72.53					
df1	10					
df2	399					
p	0.0000					
ΔR^2	0.243					
ΔF	52.29					
p	0.0000					

Source(s): Authors' own work

H3a posits that emotional exhaustion interacting with work engagement (first moderator) and loyalty (second moderator) in influencing job satisfaction. The regression coefficient of three-way interaction term is positive and significant ($\beta_{\text{emotional exhaustion} \times \text{work engagement} \times \text{loyalty}} = 0.15$; $p < 0.001$; Boot LLCI = 0.1080; Boot ULCI = 0.1986), thus supporting H3a. The three-way interaction explained additional variation of 24.3% variation in job satisfaction, the magnitude is “large” ($f^2=0.37$) (Cohen, 1988) and is statistically significant [$R^2 = 0.591$; $F(10,399) = 72.53$; $\Delta R^2 = 0.243$; $\Delta F = 52.29$; $p < 0.001$]. The conditional indirect effect of work engagement and loyalty (Checking the moderated moderated-mediation hypothesis: H3a), and the moderated-mediation was shown in Table 10.

The visual presentation of three-way interaction is shown in Figure 3.

Panel A in Figure 3 shows the interaction effect of emotional exhaustion and work engagement at lower levels of loyalty. As can be seen on Panel A, high work engagement interacting with emotional exhaustion results in higher job satisfaction when compared to lower levels of work engagement. When we move to Panel B, higher levels of loyalty associated with higher levels of work engagement and emotional exhaustion results in increase in job satisfaction when compared to lower levels of work engagement. The differences in slopes of the curves can be clearly visible and render support to H3a.

5. Discussion

Riding on two complementary theories –(COR) and (JD-R)- this study conceptualized a model showing the relationship between workplace bullying and job satisfaction. While workplace bullying and emotional exhaustion are central pieces of COR theory, the resources

Table 10. Conditional indirect effect of work engagement and loyalty (checking the moderated moderated-mediation hypothesis: *H3a*)

Work engagement	Loyalty	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Low	Low	-0.0264	0.0296	-0.0838	0.0337
Low	Medium	-0.0743	0.0357	-0.1365	0.0046
Low	High	-0.1222	0.0595	-0.2279	0.0070
Medium	Low	-0.1744	0.0357	-0.2425	-0.1011
Medium	Medium	-0.1363	0.0261	-0.1863	-0.0839
Medium	High	-0.0981	0.0341	-0.1622	-0.0279
High	Low	-0.3225	0.0547	-0.4265	-0.2091
High	Medium	-0.1982	0.0361	-0.2683	-0.1264
High	High	-0.0739	0.0298	-0.1327	-0.0161

Index of moderated moderated-mediation

Index	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
0.0860	0.0156	0.0537	0.1154

Indices of conditional moderated-mediation by work engagement

Loyalty	Index	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Low	-0.1440	0.0250	-0.1950	-0.0968
Medium	-0.0603	0.0240	-0.1121	-0.0177
High	0.0235	0.0315	-0.0445	0.0790

Source(s): Authors' own work

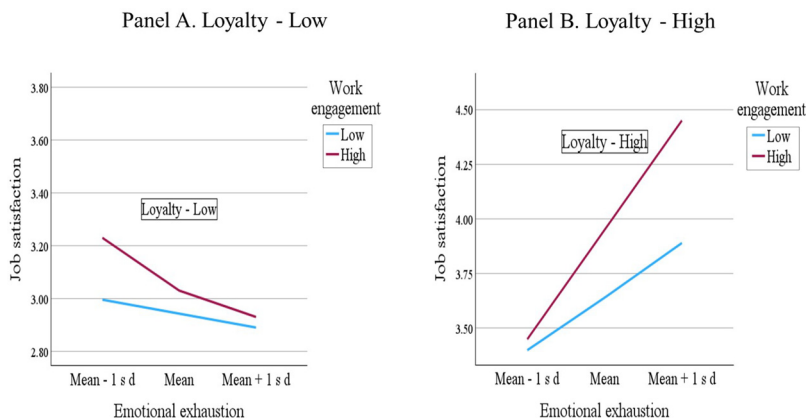


Figure 3. Panel A: The moderating effect of emotional exhaustion and work engagement on job satisfaction at low levels of loyalty. Panel B: The moderating effect of emotional exhaustion and work engagement on job satisfaction at high levels of loyalty

Source: Authors' own work

to combat the adverse effects of emotional exhaustion stem from JD-R through perceived social support and work engagement. Further, opportunities for career growth in organizations and the loyalty of employees are integrated into the dynamics of relationships. Data from 410 respondents from various sectors – information technology, manufacturing,

educational institutions and accounting and auditing companies—was analyzed in India. The results validated the hypothesized relationships conceptualized in the model presented in Figure 1.

First, the findings indicate that workplace bullying is negatively associated with job satisfaction (*H1*), confirming the results from several studies in the literature (Bowling and Beehr, 2006; Nielsen and Einarsen, 2012; Rai and Agarwal, 2018; Rodríguez-Munoz *et al.*, 2009; Zheng *et al.*, 2024). When employees experience bullying by supervisors or/and colleagues/coworkers, employees feel discontented with their jobs. For example, when supervisors repeatedly highlight even small mistakes and ridicule employees in one way or another, it is more likely that the work environment does not fulfill their job expectations and get dissatisfied. Second, workplace bullying is positively and significantly related to emotional exhaustion (*H2*), corroborating the results from other studies (Boudrias *et al.*, 2021; Rodríguez-Muñoz *et al.*, 2015; Tuckey and Neall, 2014; Ullah and Ribeiro, 2024). Following COR theory, workplace bullying depletes psychological and physical energies, causing stressful situations for employees. The bullied victims eventually get exhausted psychologically. Previous scholars documented that bullying erodes job resources, depletes energy and adversely affects self-efficacy and optimism (Tuckey and Neall, 2014). Third, this study found that emotional exhaustion is negatively related to job satisfaction (*H3*), consistent with studies from various scholars (Lam *et al.*, 2010; Maslach and Jackson, 1981; Skaalvik, 2023; Prajogo, 2019). It is evident, as well as well-documented in the literature, that physical strain and psychological stress have spillover effects on anxiety and emotional state of mind, resulting in lower job satisfaction (Steele *et al.*, 2020).

The fourth key finding of this study is that emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and job satisfaction (*H4*). Though previous studies did not explore this mediation effect, the consequences of workplace bullying on job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion vouch for our finding (Chen *et al.*, 2019; Moon and Hur, 2011; Rosander and Blomberg, 2019; Scheidler *et al.*, 2019; Yao *et al.*, 2020; Xu *et al.*, 2018). It is understood that bullied employees feel dissatisfied, and a part of it may be due to psychological and emotional demands to complete given tasks within unreasonable deadlines.

Fifth, this study found support for the multiplicative moderating effect of perceived social support and promotional opportunities in reducing the adverse effect of workplace bullying on emotional exhaustion (*H2a*). Though previous researchers did not investigate this three-way interaction, we take support from the available existing direct effects of both perceived social support and promotional [career growth] opportunities (Kleiman and Riskind, 2013; Kostak *et al.*, 2019; Maidaniuc-Chirila and Treadway, 2016; Naseer *et al.*, 2016; Rousseau *et al.*, 2014; Santini *et al.*, 2015; Tuckey and Neall, 2014). When bullied employees get emotional, instrumental and evaluative support from colleagues, friends, and others (Sarason *et al.*, 1990), the subjective feelings of being supported (Santini *et al.*, 2015) reduce the negative effect of bullying on behavioral outcomes. Further, when employees find promotional opportunities and career growth in organizations, they emphasize bullying by superiors or coworkers less. This is because the importance of promotion overpowers the negative effect of bullying behavior. The perceived social support and promotional opportunities act strongly to reduce or minimize the adverse effects of workplace bullying on job satisfaction.

Sixth, the results from this study supported the double-moderation of work engagement and loyalty in influencing the relationship between emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction (*H3a*). Since this is an exploratory hypothesis, we do not expect any support from the literature. However, extant research supported the positive effect of both work engagement

and loyalty on job satisfaction (Heyns *et al.*, 2021; Lopez-Zafra *et al.*, 2022; Ruželè *et al.*, 2024; Uraon and Kumarasamy, 2024), the interaction hypothesis is both understandable and convincing. Though emotional exhaustion hurts job satisfaction, when people attempt to show vigor, dedication and absorption in their tasks, the negative effect will either be suppressed or diluted on performance and satisfaction. Further, when employees are happy with the organizational policies and care about the employees, they are more likely to show loyalty toward organizations as reciprocation. Work engagement and loyalty reduce the negative relationship between emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction. These results are consistent with the theoretical foundations of both COR and JD-R theories. In summary, the results from this study validated the conceptual model.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

The findings from this research make several significant contributions to the literature on workplace bullying. First, riding on two complementary theories (COR and JD-R), this study bridges the gap by explaining the workplace bullying-emotional exhaustion-job satisfaction relationship by exploring the intervening mechanisms through perceived social support and work engagement. Most of the existing literature focused on workplace bullying and its outcomes but ignored the underlying mechanism of how employees still feel satisfied. However, over 75% of bullying evidence is witnessed in organizations worldwide. Second, following COR, the conceptualization of resource depletion caused by workplace bullying resulting in emotional exhaustion has been validated in this study (Glasø *et al.*, 2010). Third, our findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge by identifying the crucial variables (perceived social support and promotional opportunities) that have the counterintuitive positive effects of workplace bullying on emotional exhaustion.

The study's key contribution is its exploration of the three-way interaction between workplace bullying, perceived social support and promotional opportunities in shaping emotional exhaustion. Fourth, through the lens of JD-R theory, this study identifies work engagement and loyalty as crucial resources that help employees make use of to compensate for the loss of resources due to workplace bullying. In other words, work engagement (first moderator) and loyalty (second moderator) interact with emotional exhaustion to influence job satisfaction and add to the existing literature on workplace bullying. To sum up, this study conducted in the context of a developing country (India) from various sectors (information technology, manufacturing, academic institutions and audit and accounting firms) where workplace bullying is a normal phenomenon expands the existing research by highlighting the resources which help limit the deleterious consequences of workplace bullying.

5.2 Practical implications

Acknowledging that the present-day work environment is contaminated by bullying (from heavy workload to verbal abuse), the findings from this research have several recommendations for administrators, supervisors and policymakers. First, this study reveals that workplace bullying is positively related to emotional exhaustion and negatively related to job satisfaction and emphasizes the need to take steps to minimize bullying (if not eliminate it) by protecting bullied employees. Since our study reported that perceived social support plays a vital role in alleviating the adverse consequences of bullying, organizations need to create a supportive environment. It is suggested that bullying behavior should be closely monitored, and preventive steps should be taken. As workplace bullying has several organizational costs in terms of reduced productivity administrators are recommended to create and maintain a congenial work environment. At the same time, bullied employees

should be given co-worker and supervisory support to see that they are not demotivated and feel emotionally exhausted. Second, as conceptualized in JD-R theory, employees perceive promotional opportunities as a significant resource that will help them relegate the bullied behavior to a lower level, and organizations should elevate the importance of performance for getting promotions that lead to career growth. Third, this study highlights the role of work engagement as a potential intrinsic motivator (as a resource); organizations should create a climate whereby employees are willing to show vigor and dedication and get absorbed in work. Organizations should adopt a zero-tolerance policy to bullying and harassment, as [Lewis and Rayner \(2003\)](#) pointed out nearly two decades back. Organizations must also explain what constitutes bullying behavior ([Richards and Daley, 2003](#)) and tighten the bullying grievance redressal mechanism by severely punishing the bullying workers. As perceived social support plays a vital role, employees are encouraged to maintain sound interpersonal relationships, so coworkers come to their rescue during bullying. The medium effect size ($f^2=0.23$) found in this study indicates that perceived social support and promotional opportunities play an indispensable role in reducing the negative effect of workplace bullying on emotional exhaustion. Further, this study found that work engagement and employee loyalty are crucial in reducing the negative effect of emotional exhaustion on job satisfaction evidenced by large effect size ($f^2=0.37$). These results suggest that organizations need to identify the conditions that increase loyalty (e.g. rewarding superior performance) so that employees acknowledge this and see that the psychological pressure associated with unreasonable deadlines will not discourage them.

As workplace bullying significantly affects the psychological health of individuals, it is necessary to address the societal implications. Bullying in organizations may have a snowballing effect on individuals, so it is important to consider support from families and friends to address the psychosomatic harm associated with workplace bullying. Further, the legal system should efficiently bring the perpetrators to justice to reduce workplace bullying. Apart from organizational measures, the legal system should be robust in providing injured parties to redress their situations. Workplace bullying may have several consequences that include direct costs of litigation, a decrease in morale and employee engagement and an increase in absenteeism, fear and anxiety ([Richardson et al., 2016](#)). Explaining the legal consequences of exhibiting bullying may prevent the perpetrators from repeating such behavior. In essence, there should be an alignment of theory, policy and legal practice about workplace bullying behavior.

The workplace bullying also influences quality of work life. Thus, help from groups in society, families and friends and the legal system plays a vital role in aiding the victims of workplace bullying. Further, workplace bullying has economic costs ([Hogh et al., 2021](#)) in terms of increased healthcare expenditures, and hence, policymakers and stakeholders in society are recommended to take necessary steps to reduce the instances of bullying. The local governments need to strengthen the laws to punish the perpetrators and take care of victims of bullying.

5.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

The findings from this study should be interpreted considering some of the inherent limitations. First, unlike randomized controlled experiments, this is a cross-sectional study, and one needs to be careful in drawing inferences about the cause-and-effect relationships established. Since workplace bullying, emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction are dynamic constructs that evolve over time, cross-sectional designs would not capture the interrelationships effectively. Second, since the data was collected about dependent and independent variables from the same source, the possibility of standard method bias is

expected despite adequate care and statistical tests performed (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2024). Third, social desirability bias, where the respondents attempt to behave like good citizens, cannot be completely ruled out. However, we took care in prefacing and wording the questions and assured the anonymity of the data to reduce social desirability bias, as suggested by other researchers (Latkin *et al.*, 2017). Fourth, the data was collected from developing countries (India) and before generalizing the results to other developing and developed countries, one should exercise caution. Especially in developed countries, bullying redressal mechanisms are robust compared to developing countries, but managerial implications differ. Fifth, a relatively low sample may limit the reliability and validity of the findings, though we used well-established and tested measures.

This study offers several avenues for future research. First, researchers may increase the size of the samples and conduct longitudinal studies to increase the validity and generalizability of the relationship between the variables as conceptualized. Further, instead of snowball sampling, future studies may focus on stratified proportionate sampling to minimize selection bias. Second, researchers may include some other variables: psychological capital, trust between the employees and supervisors, perceived justice, leadership style of supervisors, resilience and voice raised by employees influencing bullying behavior in organizations. Third, researchers may compare cross-country to see if cultural differences explain workplace bullying and outcomes. We suggest that future researchers adopt a multi-wave time-lagged approach to offset the limitations related to a cross-sectional study design (Bansal and Garg, 2025; Holm *et al.*, 2023). This approach enables a more accurate understanding of changes in employee workplace bullying behavior and its outcomes.

5.4 Conclusion

The conceptual model's findings deepen the understanding of the conundrum between workplace bullying and job satisfaction. Drawing from two complementary theories – COR and JD-R- this study extends our understanding of the critical role of perceived social support and work engagement in combating the cascading ill effect of workplace bullying on emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction. This research underscores the importance of employee loyalty toward organizations and promotional opportunities created by organizations in mitigating the adverse effects of workplace bullying on outcomes. This study offers helpful actionable strategies organizations must take to create a climate that promotes social support and suppresses bullying behavior by strengthening organizational justice. While a majority of studies on workplace bullying were focused on the context of Western and European countries, this research focused on the Indian context and added to the limited number of studies available in the South Asian part of the world. While the nuances and significance of work engagement, perceived social support, loyalty and promotional opportunities in alleviating the detrimental effect of workplace bullying are established, future studies may dwell on other factors that were omitted in this study. To conclude, as long as bullying behavior exists, research on workplace bullying remains on the agenda for future research. Researchers and practicing managers constantly wrestle to find measures for minimizing workplace bullying, if not wholly eradicating it.

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