

UNMASKING THE DARK SIDE: UNRAVELING THE DEVASTATING EFFECTS OF PERSON RELATED CYBERBULLYING ON EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR OF SRI LANKA, WITH THE MEDIATING POWER OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

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INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying, a pervasive and urgent issue, poses a significant threat to individuals in the digital age. Perpetrated through online social media platforms, cyberbullying involves non-face-to-face harassment and victimization (Wong-Lo & Bullock, 2011; Miller & Hufstедler, 2009). As a consequence of ongoing technological advancements, cyberbullying has become an inescapable element of internet culture, profoundly affecting individuals' overall well-being. Acts of aggression committed by individuals or groups inflict harm on others through the use of internet technology (Einarsen et al., 2009). One of the alarming aspects of cyberbullying is its ability to harm victims at any time and from anywhere, leveraging the ubiquity of online social media platforms (Hinduja & Patchin, 2021). Consequently, bullying dynamics have shifted from traditional forms to online contexts, amplifying the detrimental effects experienced by victims (Huang et al., 2021). Cyberbullying, a phenomenon characterized by the use of electronic communication to harass, intimidate, or harm individuals, has gained significant attention in recent years. Numerous studies have explored the consequences of cyberbullying and its implications for employee performance, particularly in the context of Sri Lanka. However, there exists a noticeable gap in the literature, as no studies have specifically investigated cyberbullying and its impact on the performance of public sector employees in Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, the majority of research on cyberbullying has been conducted in Western countries, leaving a dearth of knowledge regarding cyberbullying in diverse cultural contexts. This gap is particularly noteworthy considering that cultural differences in attitudes towards bullying and online behavior can significantly influence the prevalence and consequences of cyberbullying (Kim et al., 2015). Moreover, existing research on cyberbullying primarily focuses on school-aged children and adolescents, neglecting the examination of cyberbullying in the workplace (Al-Rahmi et al., 2020; Michelle, 2017; Alsawalqa, 2021; Suanpang et al., 2021; Torres et al., 2019). Torres et al. (2020) discuss how social, verbal, physical and cyberbullying victimization affects academic performance. Here, general strain theory has been used to claim that there is a negative relationship between bullying victimization and academic performance and the researcher has used academic achievement as the dependent variable. Understanding the relationship between cyberbullying and employee performance within this context is crucial for developing effective interventions and fostering a healthy work environment (O'Driscoll, Byrne, & Haque, 2011). By focusing on secondary-level employees in Kandy District Divisional Secretariats, we aim to shed light on the unique experiences of public sector workers in this particular region. Furthermore, contextual factors play a crucial role in the experience of cyberbullying and its impact on performance. Previous

research, such as the work by Karna et al. (2011), has highlighted the significance of factors like work climate, workplace culture, and online community norms in shaping the prevalence and consequences of cyberbullying. Therefore, this study aims to explore the influence of these contextual factors on cyberbullying experiences and their subsequent effect on employee performance.

Considering the factors and gaps identified in previous discussions, the primary objective of this study is to investigate the influence of cyberbullying on the performance of employees in Kandy District Divisional Secretariats. Specifically, this research aims to understand how personal-related cyberbullying impacts employee performance, taking into account the mediating role of psychological distress among secondary-level employees in the public sector. By exploring these relationships within this specific context, this study aims to enhance the existing knowledge base and offer valuable insights to develop effective strategies for mitigating the detrimental effects of cyberbullying in the workplace.

METHODOLOGY

Inductive researchers create a hypothesis after their investigation is complete, and deductive researchers test the theory (Saunders et al., 2000). As a result, the deductive method is used for this study. This study's data were gathered using a self-administration questionnaire (with five Likert Scale), and it was carried out using a survey methodology. Additionally, the Mono approach was used in this research investigation, which only used one quantitative methodology (Azorin & Cameron, 2010). Additionally, the data collection was done at the entrepreneur's discretion, making a person the unit of analysis. Three of the 20 district secretariat offices located in the Kandy district were randomly selected as the population of this study. Accordingly, all the secondary level employees of the 03 organizations selected as the study population of this study have been identified. According to the latest reports from each organization, it has been identified that 343 secondary level employees are working in the selected district secretariats. There were 343 secondary level employees working in the divisional secretariats of Kandy district and 181 were selected as the study sample. Morgan's table (1970) was used to determine the sample size for the study. For data analysis purposes, descriptive statistics, reliability testing, and regression analysis techniques were employed. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the true impact between the variables of cyberbullying, employee performance, and psychological distress, the present study hypothesizes the following.

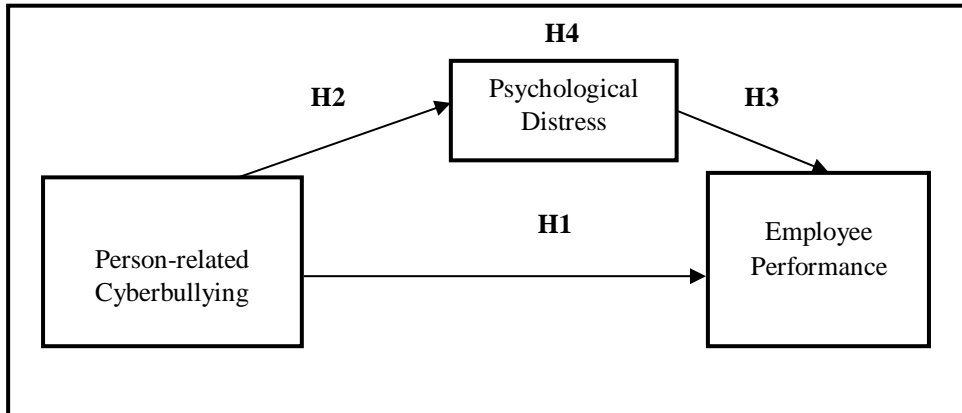
H₁: There is a significant negative impact of person-related cyberbullying on employee performance.

H₂: There is a significant positive impact between person-related cyberbullying and psychological distress.

H₃: There is a significant negative impact between psychological distress and employee performance.

H₄: Psychological distress has a significant and negative mediating effect on the relationship between person-related cyberbullying and employee performance.

The conceptual framework for this study was developed based on relevant literature from previous research, which provided a foundation for the proposed framework.

Figure 1*Conceptual Framework***RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The study examines cyberbullying's impact on employee performance in the public sector in Sri Lanka's Kandy district using regression analysis. Data was analyzed using SPSS 26 and Cronbach's Alpha, with an alpha value range of 0.786 to 0.947.

Table 1*Reliability Analysis of the Study*

Variables	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Person-related Cyberbullying	6	0.947
Psychological Distress	7	0.938
Employee Performance	10	0.972

This section aims to pinpoint the key traits of the research variables using descriptive statistical analysis techniques, such as frequency, minimum, maximum, mean, standard deviation, and variance. The variables' descriptive statistics are shown in Table 2.

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics*

Variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Variance
Person-related	139	1.00	5.00	3.377	1.059	1.122
Psychological Distress	139	1.13	5.00	3.546	0.931	0.867
Employee Performance	139	1.00	4.67	2.650	0.854	0.730

One of the essential ways for building a mathematical model that links the dependent variable to the independent variable using statistical methodology is regression analysis. Simple regression analysis with SPSS was utilized in the current study to examine the hypotheses. Table 3 below displays the results.

Table 3

Model Summary of the Simple Regression Analysis for the PRC and EP, PRC and PD, PD and EP

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error
PRC	0.808 ^a	0.652	0.650	0.505
PRC	0.892 ^a	0.796	0.794	0.422
EP	0.781 ^a	0.610	0.607	0.535

Person-related cyberbullying clarified that employee performance has 65.2% variability as a result, and the basic regression model R squared is 0.652. Person-related cyberbullying clarified that employee performance has 79.6% variability as a result. The basic regression model R squared is 0.796. R is 0.610 squared. As a result, it can be claimed that employee performance accounted for 61% of the difference in cyberbullying.

Table 4

Coefficients of Regression Model

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	β	Std. Error			
1 (Constant)	4.850	0.144		33.730	0.000
PRC	-0.651	0.041	-0.808	-16.026	0.000
1 (Constant)	0.898	0.120		7.471	0.000
PRC	0.784	0.034	0.892	23.086	0.000
1 (Constant)	5.192	0.179		28.948	0.000
PD	-0.716	0.049	-0.781	14.646	0.000

a. Dependent Variable: EP, PD

The coefficient demonstrates that there is a -0.651-unit loss in employee performance for every unit increase in performance. According to the coefficient, there is an increase in psychological anguish of 0.784 units for every unit that psychological distress rises. The coefficient demonstrates that employee performance decreases by -0.716 units for every unit of rising psychological distress.

A postulated casual chain called mediation occurs when one variable influences a second variable, which then influences a third variable.

Table 5

Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects of Person-related Cyberbullying on Employee Performance

Total effect of Person-related Cyberbullying on Employee Performance					
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-0.669	0.042	-15.803	0.000	-0.753	-0.585
Direct effect of Person-related Cyberbullying on Employee Performance					
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-0.457	0.104	-4.359	0.000	-0.664	-0.249
Indirect effect of Person-related Cyberbullying on Employee Performance					
		Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
PD		-0.212	0.093	-0.411	-0.043
Model	: 4				

The aforementioned table demonstrates that the mediator variable's influence of the person-related cyberbullying variable on worker performance is -0.2124. The mediation effect is demonstrated to be very significant and moves in the same direction (negative) as the LLCI (-0.4117) and ULCI (-0.0432) values. This demonstrates how psychological discomfort functions as a mediator between person-related cyberbullying and employee performance.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study's primary goal was to examine the relationship between psychological distress and person-related cyberbullying as well as the performance of secondary level staff members in Divisional Secretariats in the Kandy District, Sri Lanka. A straightforward regression analysis was used to achieve this broad objective. The following type of correlation was found between the independent and dependent variables using simple regression analysis. Additionally, it was demonstrated how the independent variable affected the dependent variable as a mediating factor of psychological distress. Employee performance and person-related cyberbullying had a significant, unfavorable association. Additionally, a link between person-related cyberbullying and psychological distress was found. It has also been demonstrated that psychological distress functions as a mediator between person-related cyberbullying and employee performance. It has a negative effect.

The organization can plan and implement ways to improve employee performance with the help of the study's findings. The employer side must pay close attention because good employee performance is expected by all firms worldwide. The findings of this study suggest that workplace unfavorable incidents like cyberbullying affect employees, which in turn leads to psychological distress as a response to employee performance. Previous literature has already investigated this relationship. Support from management can be beneficial in this regard. To investigate the link between employee performance and support for moderate managerial stress, a moderator may be used. This study offers new perspectives for government practitioners in addition to its theoretical contributions. Employees benefit greatly from our study since they are seen as a key asset for all organizations today and because success and failure largely depend on employee performance. They can manage psychological anguish and sustain working performance by spreading information about government cyberbullying and comprehending the type of harassment they encounter.

Keywords: Employee performance, person-related cyberbullying, psychological distress

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