Stop! I am Shaking: Workplace Aggression and Anxiety among Interns in Klang Valley

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Abstract: Internships have become crucial to help students make them stand out while at the same time providing training and work experience for the students. However, the issue of workplace aggression among internship students is increasing and is worrying many parties as it is a prevalent matter that internship students can be subjected to mistreatment in the workplace. Drawing from the Job Demand-Resource model and Conservation of Resources theory, this paper sought to identify the relationship between independent variables such as workplace bullying, interpersonal conflict, abusive supervision and anxiety among interns from the Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam campus who underwent internship in Klang Valley. An online questionnaire was distributed to the interns, and 128 completed sets were responded to. The results found that there were positive correlations between workplace bullying, abusive supervision and interpersonal conflict on anxiety among the interns. The findings suggest that aggression in the workplace correlates with psychological disorders as it can cause the interns to experience psychological strain such as anxiety. In general, the research aims to contribute to a better understanding of workplace aggression and anxiety to mitigate these conundrums and foster a positive and supportive atmosphere for internship students. Furthermore, both organizations and interns need to have the knowledge and skills to prevent them from experiencing psychological illnesses. The implications of the study will be further discussed in the paper.

Keywords: *Bullying, abusive supervision, interpersonal conflict, anxiety.*

1. Introduction and Background

Aggression is a worldwide issue that could affect an individual's psychology and physiology. According to Yosep et al. (2022), various types of aggression include verbal, psychological, physical and sexual abuse. The common type of aggression is verbal aggression which is defined as a series of words that are intended to inflict intense humiliation-denigration-fear on others such as verbal insults, threats and undermining (Cao et al. 2022). Aggression in the workplace correlates with psychological disorders as it can cause an individual to feel depression, anxiety, low self-confidence, distress and disappointment (Alfandari et al., 2022) and this notorious social behavior could yield professional consequences for instance, absenteeism, poor work quality, and turnover (Geoffrion et al., 2023). Workplace aggression can be expressed into workplace bullying, abusive supervision and interpersonal conflict as this phenomenon is an ongoing or recurrent abuse of power that takes place through human interaction, undermines the dignity of the relationship, and impairs effective workforce management (Ahmad, 2022). Basharat et al. (2019) found that the victims of workplace aggression who experienced distress from the mistreatment tended to exhibit aggression which can be reflected as an undermining behavior. Shdaifat et al. (2020) believe that aggression in the workplace yields a negative impact on not only the quality of work it also productivity, and job satisfaction and this leads to stress and anxiety. According to Gülüm and Jordi (2023), this is because conflicts in the workplace are inevitable and could occur from misunderstanding, clash of opinions and interests and when the conflict is unsolved, it may lead to workplace aggression.

Numerous studies have reported that this malicious behavior is thought to occur at a rate of between 5% to 10% in Europe while America has a rate of 10% to 14% of bullying (Jalali, 2020) and bullying is everywhere from school to the workplace (Mohammed & Ahmed, 2022). In addition, a study reveals that workplace bullying as an occupational and psychological stressor has many implications on employees' satisfaction which means it goes to affects the interns' entire sense of well-being such as anxiety (Nauman, Malik & Jalil, 2019). Anxiety is an emotion characterized by worried thoughts, tense feelings, and physical changes such as increased blood pressure whereas people with anxiety disorders usually have recurring worries or disturbing

thoughts (Szlenk-Czyczerska & Włodarczyk, 2023). Even though anxiety may have positive impacts, however, excessive anxiety can lead to nervousness, boredom, and sullenness; severe anxiety can even cause learning challenges and affect physical and psychological health (Yi et al., 2022). When anxiety levels are too high, intern students may experience melancholy, burnout syndrome, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other psychological health problems (Yi et al., 2022).

2. Literature Review

General statistics about workplace aggression state that a 2019 survey found that about 94% of U.S. workers have been bullied at least once at work, up from 75%. Of the 94% of workers who claimed to have been bullied at work, 51.1% of them said the bullying was perpetrated by a boss or manager (Goh, 2023). After extensive research, about 83% of U.S. workers experience work-related stress, with 25% saying their workplace aggression is the number one stressor in life that can affect their physical and psychological health (Goh, 2023). It is imperative to have an understanding of the issue of workplace aggression so this will aid in the development of interventions and policies targeted to reduce this social behavior problem. The issue of bullying among internship students is increasing and is worrying many parties. According to Fauzi et al. (2022), although various guidelines, warnings and advice are gathered through the mass media, the solution to this social problem is still inconclusive. Many new hires who are bullied in their workplace are already a cultural and habitual practice; nevertheless, this has a serious effect on their psychological morbidity such as anxiety (Shahril et al., 2023). Anxiety is recognized as a negative emotion because of unsettling feelings inside and is accompanied by caution, complaining, nervousness and concern (Liu et al., 2019). Besides, another study stated that anxiety can be seen with the symptoms of a subjective feeling of distress and concomitant difficulties with sleep, concentration, and social or vocational functioning (Almokhtar et al., 2019). Sahin and Erdogan (2022) also note that signs of anxiety such as fear, depression, anger, guilt and perceptions of grief and loss, were the common signs of anxiety.

Workplace Bullying and Anxiety: Bullying has been defined as unwanted aggressive behavior performed by peers involving actual or the perception of a possible power imbalance repeated over time (Holmgren et al., 2022). According to Holmgren et al. (2022), the four subtypes are verbal, physical bullying, relational bullying and property damage. Firstly, verbal bullying includes aggressive communication such as teasing, name-calling and threats. Secondly, physical bullying refers to acts of physical aggression such as hitting and kicking. Thirdly, relational bullying includes actions aimed at isolating the victim. Finally, property damage includes actions designed to harm the victim, such as taking goods and refusing to give them back or destroying the victim's property. Workplace bullying is an exhausting experience that consumes physical and mental resources (Sprigg, 2019). It eventually leads to severe exhaustion of self-control resources and failure of that self-control, as well as mental health difficulties (Saridi et al., 2019). Therefore, it is hypothesized that:
H1: There is a significant relationship between workplace bullying and anxiety.

Abusive Supervision and Anxiety: Gatti et al. (2019) have defined abusive supervision as "a subordinate's perception of the extent to which supervisors engage in persistent verbal and nonverbal displays of hostility behavior does not include physical contact." In contrast, abused workers exhibit even more negative or harmful behavior such as turnover intentions, unproductive work behavior and malpractice (Mamani et al., 2022). When looking at the workplace, the role of the supervisor plays an important role to improve or reduce employee effort towards task achievement. According to the conservation of resources (COR) theory, research attempts to investigate the relationship between abusive supervision and counterproductive work behavior (Zubair et al., 2019). Then, the results of the study show that abusive supervision is increasing and subordinates experience urgent emotional exhaustion. In addition, the involvement of internal employees also results in unproductive work behavior. This stress will increase when there are many work demands from an abusive supervisor. According to Ali et al. (2022), employees including interns who are abused by their leaders are negatively affected at work and in their personal lives and eventually become less committed to the organization, and may even leave their jobs. This also greatly contributes to the intern's psychological strain such as anxiety. Therefore, the following hypothesis suggests that:
H2: There is a significant relationship between abusive supervision and anxiety.

Interpersonal Conflict and Anxiety: Interpersonal conflict is a source of job stress that has an impact on

organizational outcomes. Workplace conflict can be categorized into task conflict and relationship conflict. Khan et al. (2019) define task conflict as a conflict that focuses on task-related activities such as procedures and policies while relationship conflict focuses on personal issues like a clash of personalities, different styles opinions and political preferences. The conflict will interfere with work performance and reduce work satisfaction while in some cases it will lead to anxiety, absenteeism and depression (Pitafi et al., 2020). Along with organizational outcomes, interpersonal conflict can hurt employee attitudes and behaviors (Hunter et al., 2022). Interpersonal conflict can cause stress among interns and this leads to anxiety. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H3: There is a significant relationship between interpersonal conflict and anxiety.

3. Research Methodology

A cross-sectional research design was used to examine the association between workplace bullying, abusive supervision, interpersonal conflict and anxiety among interns. Data were collected through online questionnaires that were personally emailed to the respective interns who were undergoing internships in Klang Valley. A total of 128 sets of the questionnaire were responded to, recording a return rate of 100%. The questionnaire was adapted from the established questionnaire and the items were modified to align with the research questions of the present study. The items in the questionnaire were adapted from the Malaysian Workplace Bullying Index (MWPBI), abusive supervision scale, workplace interpersonal conflict scale (WICS) and general anxiety disorder (GAD-7). The questionnaire consisted of 38 questions that were related to the study and divided into five sections. Section A involved the demographic information of the respondents, including their gender, age, degree programs, types of company and marital status. Sections B, C and D consisted of questions related to the independent variables that were workplace bullying, abusive supervision and interpersonal conflict. Finally, section E consisted of questions regarding the dependent variable which was anxiety. The questionnaire utilized closed-ended questions with a fixed range of possible answers using a 4-point Likert scale with the following values: 1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often, and 4 = very often to measure all variables. The items were modified to get the required responses that would answer the research questions. The collected data were analyzed using statistical software, i.e., SPSS Version 26. The study used both descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (a simple linear regression analysis).

4. Results

This section presents sets of results relating to the profile of respondents, and descriptive statistics such as means score, for workplace bullying, abusive supervision, interpersonal conflict, and anxiety. This section also shows the correlation, reliability and regression analyses.

Profile of Respondents: Table 1 displays a summary of the characteristics of the total sample of interns who participated in this study.

Table 1: Demographic Information

VARIABLE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
GENDER		
Males	15	11.7%
Females	113	88.3%
Total	**128**	**100%**
AGE		
21-23	40	31.3%
24-26	85	66.4%
>27	3	2.3%
Total	**128**	**100%**
DEGREE PROGRAM		
Office Systems Management	3	2.3%
Entrepreneurship	2	1.6%
Customer Service Management	1	0.8%

Health Administration	63	49.2%
Event Management	1	0.8%
Marketing	1	0.8%
Insurance	1	0.8%
Finance	8	6.3%
Human Resource Management	8	6.3%
Operations Management	10	7.8%
International Business	27	21.1%
Islamic Banking	1	0.8%
Business Economic	2	1.6%
Total	**128**	**100%**
TYPE OF INTERNSHIP PLACEMENT		
Government	37	28.9%
Semi-Government	24	18.8%
Local-Owned Private Company	44	34.4%
Foreign-Owned Private	8	6.3%
Others	15	11.7%
Total	**128**	**100%**
MARITAL STATUS		
Single	117	91.4%
Married	11	8.6%
Total	**128**	**100%**

A total of 128 respondents were involved in the study which reported that about 11.7% or 15 of the respondents were male and 88.3.7% or 113 of the respondents were female. Regarding the participants' age, 85 respondents, or 66.4% of them, were between 24 and 26 years old; 40 (31.3%) of them were between 21 and 23 years old and 3 (2.3%) of the respondents were 27 years old and above. Regarding the respondents' degree program, 63 (49.2%) of them were from Bachelor of Health Administration; 27 (21.1%) of the respondents were from Bachelor of International Business; 10 (7/8%) of them were from Bachelor of Operations Management; 8 (6.3%) of the interns were Bachelor of Finance and Bachelor of Human Resource Management respectively and about 3 (2.3%) of them were from Bachelor of Office Systems Management. About 44 (34.4%) of the respondents underwent an internship at local-owned private companies; 37 (28.9%) of the respondents went to government offices for their internship placement and only 8 (6.3%) of the interns went to foreign-owned private companies. It was found that about 117 (91.4%) of the respondents were unmarried and 11 (8.6%) of the interns were married.

Descriptive Statistics: Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics for workplace aggression and anxiety among interns in Klang Valley. These provide the average mean scores of the independent variables including workplace bullying, abusive supervision, interpersonal conflict and anxiety as the dependent variable.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

	Descriptive Statistics		
Variable	**Factor Name**	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**
WB	Workplace Bullying	2.5234	0.82907
AS	Abusive Supervision	2.1304	0.62249
IC	Interpersonal Conflict	1.0445	0.73580
ANX	Anxiety	2.0212	0.86945

The mean scores ranging from 2.5234, 2.1304, 1.0445 and 2.0212 were obtained from workplace bullying, abusive supervision, interpersonal conflict and anxiety. These results indicate that respondents sometimes experienced workplace aggression while undergoing their internship.

Reliability and Correlation: Table 3 shows the reliability and correlation results of workplace bullying, abusive supervision, interpersonal conflict and anxiety.

Table 3: Reliability and Correlation

No	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1	Workplace Bullying	2.5234	0.82907	(.882)			
2	Abusive Supervision	2.1304	0.62249	.484**	(.957)		
3	Interpersonal Conflict	1.0445	0.73580	.470**	.794**	(.896)	
4	Anxiety	2.0212	0.86945	.182*	.371**	.418**	(.933)

(*$p<0.05$; **$p<0.001$)

Table 3 demonstrates the results of reliability analysis that indicate that all items are reliable to measure the intended variables; workplace bullying (α=.88), abusive supervision (α=.96), interpersonal conflict (α=.9), anxiety (α=.93). The results of the correlation analysis show that all independent variables are significantly correlated with each other, indicating a convergent validity. The highest correlation (r=.794; p<.001) is found between interpersonal conflict and abusive supervision, while the lowest correlation (r=.470; p<.001) is found between workplace bullying and interpersonal conflict. All independent variables are significantly correlated with the dependent variable, signifying concurrent validity. The lowest correlation is between workplace bullying and anxiety (r=.182; p<.005) and the highest correlation is between interpersonal conflict and anxiety (r=.418; p<.001).

Regression Analysis: Table 4 shows the regression analysis of workplace aggression and anxiety.

Table 4: Regression Analysis of Workplace Aggression and Anxiety

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.424ª	.180	.160	.679	.180	9.045	3	124	.000

Table 4 demonstrates the model summary of the relationship between workplace aggression including workplace bullying, abusive supervision, interpersonal conflict and anxiety among interns in Klang Valley. The value of Significant F Change is less than 0.05, hence the model is significant. The table shows that the value of R^2 is .18 implying that all independent variables which are workplace bullying, abusive supervision and interpersonal conflict explain 18% of the variance in the dependent variable. The remaining 82% are contributed by other variables which are not covered in this study. Besides that, the table states that the F value of 9.045 is more than 1.00 which indicates that the model of analysis is fixed.

Discussion: Pearson correlation analysis was used to determine the relationship between workplace bullying and anxiety. The result shows a positive with a low relationship between both variables. Hence, H1 (there is a relationship between workplace bullying and anxiety) is supported. According to Pan et al. (2022), workplace bullying is a significant predictor of mental health issues, such as anxiety. This means that individuals who experience workplace bullying are more likely to report higher levels of anxiety compared to those who do not experience such ill-treatment. Nielsen (2022) stated that the cases of workplace bullying need to be explored in a sustained and systematic way because all organizations have a responsibility to protect their employees including interns from the psychological harassment of a workplace bully. Management should establish and communicate clear policies and procedures that explicitly address workplace bullying and harassment to employees. They need to ensure that all employees are aware of these policies and know how to report incidents confidentially and without fear of retaliation.

The findings from the correlation between abusive supervision and anxiety revealed a positive with a moderately significant relationship between both variables. Therefore, this suggests that H2 (there is a relationship between abusive supervision and anxiety) is supported. According to Sannes et al. (2021), abusive supervision was positively related to employee anxiety, which, in the long run, negatively affected their job performance and overall job satisfaction. When employees such as interns are subjected to abusive supervision, they experience higher levels of anxiety. The malicious behavior exhibited by supervisors or peers can cause stress, fear, and uncertainty about their work environment and job security (Salem et al.,

2023). This is also compatible with a study conducted by Xi et al. (2022) where they studies confirmed that feeling anxious is the outcome of abusive leaders. A previous study by Pyc et al. (2017) also found that abusive supervision was associated with higher levels of employee stress, which could lead to increased anxiety. This stress, in turn, can cause affected interns to experience increased levels of anxiety in their daily lives.

Pearson correlation was also used to determine the relationship between interpersonal conflict and anxiety. The results revealed a positive significance with a moderate relationship between both variables. Consequently, H3 (there is a relationship between interpersonal conflict and anxiety) is supported. According to Zahlquist et al. (2023), interpersonal conflict is associated with substantial negative outcomes such as anxiety for employees including interns. When interns have disagreements with their potential coworkers or superiors, their job satisfaction suffers and this can lead to feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about one's future. This finding is compatible with a study undertaken by Malivoire and Koerner (2022) reported that interpersonal conflict with co-workers has a positive relationship with anxiety. A positive relationship means that as the level of interpersonal conflict with co-workers increases, so does the level of anxiety experienced by the individuals involved in those conflicts.

5. Managerial Implications and Recommendations

The aim of the research is expected to enrich the extant literature stream by integrating the unique aspects of workplace aggression such as bullying, abusive supervisors and interpersonal conflict outcome variable; anxiety. The present study is also expected to contribute to existing knowledge on the prevalence and consequences of workplace aggression and be used as a reference or guideline to design interventions in reducing or mitigating workplace violence and its outcomes such as anxiety, especially among internship students. There are a few suggestions about dealing with workplace aggression that involves interns. Firstly, management should be able to tackle the level of stress experienced by the current staff via the improvement of their job satisfaction encompassing reasonable compensation, practical work policies, and flexible work conditions and encourage employee interactions in staff meetings (Kollerová et al., 2023). Besides that, organizations should design training programs related to managing anxiety, stress and conflict. Furthermore, the organization should emphasize training their staff in resolving conflicts to minimize the effects of interpersonal conflicts. Employers should organize training for all employees as well as internship students that aim to increase their effective communication skills, empathy and techniques for problem-solving.

The employees may be better equipped to handle conflicts constructively and prevent the situation from escalating (Quiun, 2023). Furthermore, management should promote open communication among employees by encouraging employees to express their concerns and emotions in a safe and non-judgmental environment. Supervisors should acknowledge the causes of the conflicts and develop several strategies to combat the issues such as developing informal interaction to encourage the employees to communicate and get to know each other (Lekalakala et al., 2023). Finally, the company should develop a feasible reporting system that allows and encourages victims to lodge reports related to workplace aggression. Employees must have clear channels to report instances of abusive supervision or mistreatment. Employees will feel safer and supported when raising concerns and it assures them that retaliation will not be tolerated. Besides, management must investigate and address complaints made by employees seriously and conduct thorough investigations based on the lodged complaints. They must address the issues as soon as possible and take appropriate action, which could include coaching or disciplinary measures.

Conclusion: As denoted throughout, workplace aggression has been shown to significantly damage victims' mental health in a plethora of ways including internship students. Internship is an imperative learning cycle for students and should be made conducive to improving critical skills especially when they are in the real workforce. Nonetheless, workplace toxicity such as aggression that includes workplace bullying, abusive supervision and interpersonal conflict not only hinders their ability to grasp the important aspects of tasks but also leads to serious psychological illness, for instance, anxiety. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the relationship between workplace aggression (workplace bullying, abusive supervision, interpersonal conflict) and anxiety among internship students of UiTM Puncak Alam from the Faculty of Business and Management. It can be concluded there was a positive relationship between workplace bullying, abusive supervision,

interpersonal conflict, and anxiety among the internship students. To understand this, it is imperative to turn to the Job-Demand Resource Model and Conservation of Theory which explains why negative outcome such as anxiety is faced by the internship when such predictors exist. Considering the results of the research, there is an urgent need to develop and implement prevention and reporting mechanisms to mitigate workplace aggression. Finally, it is viewed as necessary for the faculties and organizations to strengthen the internship students' soft skills such as conflict negotiation and communication skills.

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