Abusive Supervision and Employee Engagement: The Mediating Role of Organizational Identification and the Moderating Role of Mindfulness in the Sri Lankan Public Sector

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Abstract: In Sri Lanka's public sector organizations, where hierarchical authority structures are deeply embedded, supervisory mistreatment can deplete employees' psychological resources and weaken their attachment to the organization, thereby reducing work engagement. Drawing on the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, this study examines abusive supervision as an antecedent of employee work engagement. Specifically, it investigates the mediating role of organizational identification and the moderating role of mindfulness among Sri Lankan public sector employees. Adopting a deductive, quantitative research design, cross-sectional data were collected from 209 employees using self-administered questionnaires and convenience sampling. Hierarchical regression results revealed that abusive supervision significantly negatively predicted work engagement ($\beta = -.52$, $p < .001$). Organizational identification significantly mediated this relationship, as the direct effect of abusive supervision on work engagement decreased from $\beta = -.52$ ($p < .001$) to $\beta = -.23$ ($p < .001$) when the mediator was included ($R^2 = .46$, $F(2,206) = 87.65$, $p < .001$), indicating partial mediation. Furthermore, mindfulness significantly moderated the abusive supervision–work engagement relationship ($\beta = .18$, $p = .001$), with the interaction term explaining an additional 3% of variance ($\Delta R^2 = .03$; overall $R^2 = .51$, $F(3,205) = 70.42$, $p < .001$). The positive interaction suggests that employees with higher mindfulness experience a weaker negative impact of abusive supervision on engagement. These findings highlight the critical role of organizational identification as a social resource and mindfulness as a personal resource in buffering the detrimental effects of abusive supervision in hierarchical public sector contexts. Given the use of convenience sampling within a single national setting, the generalizability of the findings may be limited. Future research should adopt longitudinal and multi-source designs to further examine the resource-based mechanisms linking supervisory mistreatment and employee engagement.

Keywords: *Abusive Supervision, Employee Engagement, Organizational Identification, Mindfulness, Public Sector, Sri Lanka*

Introduction

Abusive supervision is defined as subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors consistently display hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviours, excluding physical contact (Tepper, 2000). Such behaviours undermine employees' fundamental rights to dignity and respect, disrupt ethical workplace norms, and threaten individual safety and well-being (Ünal et al., 2012). Recognized as a significant interpersonal stressor, abusive supervision weakens essential psychological resources such as self-esteem and belongingness (Arshad et al., 2021), resulting in negative outcomes including work disengagement, turnover intentions (Tepper, 2007), psychological distress (Harvey et al., 2007), reduced job performance (Priesemuth et al., 2014), and diminished trust in supervisors (Xiaqi et al., 2012).

Drawing on the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, scholars argue that abusive supervision depletes the resources employees need to function effectively. In response, employees attempt either to preserve their remaining resources (Tepper, 2007; Tepper et al., 2017) or to mobilize them strategically to manage and cope with the abusive experience (Tepper et al., 2011). COR theory categorizes resources into social resources (e.g., workplace friendships and social support), environmental resources (e.g., organizational climate and job clarity), and personal resources (e.g., self-efficacy and psychological ownership) (Arshad, 2022). Although research over the past two decades has extensively examined perceptions of abusive supervision and its consequences (Mackey et al., 2017; Martinko et al., 2013), limited attention has been given to understanding how employees actively utilize these resources to cope with supervisory hostility (Tepper et al., 2017). Apart from recent studies identifying workplace friendships as a mitigating factor (Arshad et al., 2021), empirical investigations in this area are still scarce.

Within the Sri Lankan public sector context, where hierarchical structures, bureaucratic procedures, and power distance are often pronounced, understanding how employees leverage social, environmental, and personal

resources to cope with abusive supervision is particularly important (Nadarajah et al., 2024). Given the substantial organizational and financial costs associated with abusive supervision (Tepper et al., 2006), further research is needed to investigate effective coping mechanisms that can mitigate its detrimental effects in public sector institutions in Sri Lanka.

In the present study, we concentrate on two key personal resources: organizational identification and mindfulness. Specifically, we examine whether organizational identification mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and the critical employee outcome of work engagement within the Sri Lankan public sector. Furthermore, we examine whether mindfulness functions as a moderating personal resource by influencing the relationship between abusive supervision and organizational identification, as well as moderating the indirect effect of abusive supervision on work engagement through organizational identification. The proposed theoretical framework is grounded in the COR theory. Within the context of abusive supervision, we argue that employees' organizational identification, defined as their sense of "who I am" in relation to their organization, is likely to be weakened when supervisors display hostile behaviours (Schuh et al., 2024). Prior research suggests that organizational membership becomes integrated into employees' self-concept, forming part of their identity. Consistent with COR theory, organizational identification can be understood as a valuable personal resource that enhances individuals' positive psychological states and strengthens their connection to the collective (Greco et al., 2022). However, when supervisors, as representatives of the organization, engage in abusive conduct, this resource may be eroded.

Organizational identification has been shown to foster stronger work engagement, enhance employees' sense of belonging and organizational prestige, and reduce uncertainty, particularly during challenging or transitional periods. It also strengthens self-regulatory capacity, enabling employees to better manage stress and maintain positive work attitudes (Weisman et al., 2023). Conversely, when employees who strongly identify with their organization experience supervisory abuse, they may feel personally disrespected, which can damage their identification with the organization. This erosion of identification may generate mistrust and negative emotions, ultimately reducing engagement and increasing psychological strain. Notably, the strength of organizational identification varies among individuals; employees with weaker identification may experience the impact of abusive supervision differently (Caprar et al., 2022). Accordingly, organizational identification is proposed as a central mediating mechanism through which abusive supervision influences employee outcomes in the Sri Lankan public sector.

In addition, mindfulness is conceptualized in this study as a stable personal trait rather than a temporary state. As a personal resource under COR theory, trait mindfulness reflects sustained attention and awareness of present experiences (Chems-Maarif et al., 2025). Employees high in mindfulness are better able to observe negative experiences without excessive emotional reactivity, refrain from internalizing hostility, and respond in a more balanced manner. In situations involving abusive supervision, mindfulness may therefore act as a coping resource that buffers the negative effects of supervisory abuse on organizational identification (Arshad et al., 2025). This study specifically examines whether mindfulness attenuates the detrimental relationship between abusive supervision and organizational identification, thereby protecting employees' psychological and work-related outcomes within the Sri Lankan public sector context.

Research Objectives

- To study the negative influence of abusive supervision on employees' organizational identification in the Sri Lankan public sector.
- To investigate the mediating role of organizational identification in the impact of abusive supervision on employee work engagement in the Sri Lankan public sector.
- To examine whether employee mindfulness moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and organizational identification in the Sri Lankan public sector.
- To assess whether employee mindfulness moderates the indirect effect of abusive supervision on work engagement through organizational identification in the Sri Lankan public sector.

Theoretical framework and Hypotheses development

Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

COR theory provides a robust framework for understanding how employees respond to stressors such as abusive supervision. From a resource-based perspective, the theory proposes that workplace stress arises when individuals experience actual or threatened loss of valued resources. These resources may be material (e.g., financial assets), social (e.g., social support, job security), or personal (e.g., self-esteem, resilience, mindfulness, and identity) (Hobfoll, 1989). The central principle of COR theory is that individuals are motivated to acquire, maintain, and

protect valuable resources. When these resources are threatened or depleted, psychological stress emerges, and continued loss may lead to long-term resource exhaustion (Hobfoll, 1989, 2011). To manage resource loss, individuals typically adopt one of three strategies: (1) investing additional resources to offset the loss, (2) conserving remaining resources to prevent further depletion, or (3) engaging in defensive or counterproductive behaviours to regain a sense of control (Hobfoll, 1998, 2001). Research suggests that employees who perceive threats in the workplace may withhold or conserve their resources as a protective strategy, while others may react negatively in an attempt to restore balance. Conversely, the presence of strong personal or social resources, such as resilience, co-worker support, and mindfulness, can buffer the adverse impact of workplace stressors.

In the context of the Sri Lankan public sector, COR theory offers a meaningful theoretical foundation for examining how abusive supervision undermines employees' personal resources, particularly organizational identification. When supervisors engage in hostile behaviours, employees may experience a threat to their identity and sense of belonging within the organization, leading to reduced work engagement and increased psychological strain. Organizational identification, conceptualized as a valuable personal resource, explains how resource loss translates into negative work-related outcomes. Furthermore, COR theory helps clarify the protective role of mindfulness. As a stable personal resource, mindfulness enables employees to regulate emotional reactions, remain present-focused, and avoid excessive internalization of supervisory hostility. In doing so, mindfulness may buffer the detrimental effects of abusive supervision on organizational identification and subsequent employee outcomes.

Abusive Supervision and Employee Engagement

Abusive supervision is defined as employees' perceptions that their supervisors consistently engage in hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviours, excluding physical contact (Tepper, 2000). Such behaviours may include publicly humiliating employees, ridiculing or belittling them in front of colleagues, behaving rudely, ignoring contributions, or claiming credit for subordinates' work (Tepper, 2000, 2007). Abusive supervision is characterized by several important features: it is based on employees' subjective perceptions; it reflects intentional behaviour by the supervisor; it involves a sustained pattern rather than isolated incidents; and it does not involve physical aggression (Harris et al., 2007). Extensive research has demonstrated that abusive supervision negatively influences a range of employee outcomes. These include decreased organizational citizenship behaviours, lower job performance, avoidance of feedback, counterproductive work behaviours, and even aggression directed toward supervisors. Such findings indicate that supervisory hostility can significantly undermine both individual and organizational effectiveness.

In the present study, conducted within the Sri Lankan public sector, we focus on two key employee outcomes: work engagement and psychological strain. Guided by the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), abusive supervision is conceptualized as a workplace stressor that threatens and depletes employees' valuable resources. When employees perceive ongoing hostility from supervisors, they may attempt to protect their remaining resources by reducing their discretionary effort and emotional investment in their work, which ultimately lowers their level of engagement. Moreover, continuous exposure to abusive behaviours can create emotional exhaustion and psychological pressure, gradually draining employees' mental and emotional resources. According to COR theory, when individuals are unable to replenish or safeguard their resources, prolonged depletion may lead to heightened psychological strain and diminished well-being.

Although prior studies have examined the direct impact of abusive supervision on work engagement, relatively little attention has been given to the underlying mechanisms that explain how and why these outcomes occur. In particular, limited research has explored the mediating role of organizational identification and the buffering effect of mindfulness in shaping employees' responses to abusive supervision. By addressing these gaps, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how personal resources influence employee outcomes in the context of supervisory mistreatment within the Sri Lankan public sector.

Mediating Role of Organizational Identification

Organizational identification refers to the degree to which employees perceive a sense of unity with their organization and view its successes and failures as their own (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). When employees strongly identify with their organization, their personal identity becomes closely aligned with their organizational identity (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Organizational identification develops when the organization fulfils four essential employee needs: reducing uncertainty, fostering belongingness, enhancing self-esteem, and strengthening self-worth (Sillince & Golant, 2018; Zhuang et al., 2020). According to the COR theory (Hobfoll, 2011), these needs represent important personal resources that contribute to employees' psychological stability and positive functioning.

Abusive supervision threatens these fundamental needs and, in turn, weakens employees' identification with their organization. Hostile and coercive supervisory behaviours create ambiguity and insecurity about the future, thereby undermining employees' need for certainty. Public humiliation, ridicule, or intimidation diminishes employees' sense of belonging and connection to the organization. Persistent criticism and disrespect may also lead employees to question their competence and value, eroding their self-esteem and self-worth. Furthermore, when supervisors fail to acknowledge employees' contributions, individuals may feel that their efforts are unappreciated, further damaging their sense of worth within the organization. Over time, such sustained hostility depletes the personal resources that underpin organizational identification.

Leaders are often perceived as representatives of their organization, and their behaviours are interpreted as reflections of organizational values (Baran et al., 2012). Employees frequently personify the organization based on their interactions with supervisors (Kim et al., 2004). Consequently, when leaders engage in abusive behaviour, employees may perceive the mistreatment as indicative of the organization itself. This perception can weaken alignment with organizational values and reduce employees' willingness to support or defend the organization. In contrast, supportive and consistent leadership strengthens employees' needs for certainty, belonging, self-esteem, and self-worth, thereby reinforcing organizational identification.

Accordingly, grounded in COR theory and the preceding theoretical arguments, we propose the following hypothesis:
H1: Abusive supervision negatively influences employees' organizational identification in the Sri Lankan public sector.

Drawing further on COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), exposure to interpersonal stressors such as abusive supervision depletes employees' personal resources. When organizational identification is weakened, employees become more vulnerable to stress and are required to expend additional self-regulatory resources to manage negative emotions. To conserve their remaining resources, employees may reduce their discretionary effort and psychological investment in their work, ultimately lowering their level of engagement. Conversely, employees with strong organizational identification are more dedicated, exert greater effort, and remain engaged even under demanding conditions. A strong sense of identification functions as a valuable resource that reduces stress and encourages voluntary contributions toward organizational goals without excessive self-regulation.

Accordingly, drawing upon the principles of COR theory and the foregoing theoretical discussion, we advance the following hypothesis:
H2: Organizational identification mediates the effect of abusive supervision on employee engagement in the Sri Lankan public sector.

Moderating Role of Employee Mindfulness
Mindfulness, which has its origins in Buddhist practices (Purser & Milillo, 2014), refers to an individual's attention and awareness of the present moment without judgment or automatic reaction (Baer et al., 2006; Brown & Ryan, 2003). Although levels of mindfulness vary across individuals (Brown & Ryan, 2003), regular mindfulness practice has been shown to enhance self-regulation and improve overall functioning (Glomb et al., 2011). Two core cognitive processes characterize mindfulness (Glomb et al., 2011). First, individuals high in mindfulness can detach their sense of self from emotions, thoughts, and experiences, making them less personally reactive. Second, mindfulness reduces automatic and rigid thinking patterns, enabling more reflective and deliberate responses to events (Zheng & Liu, 2017). These processes help individuals maintain awareness of the present and counter dysfunctional thinking patterns.

In workplace settings, mindfulness has been recognized as an important personal resource. It enables employees to manage stress more effectively, interpret challenging situations in less damaging ways, and mobilize their resources to achieve positive organizational outcomes (Haun et al., 2018; McNall et al., 2021). However, mindfulness is not universally protective. Some studies suggest that highly mindful employees may perceive abusive supervision as more salient or unfair, potentially intensifying negative reactions toward supervisors or perceptions of organizational injustice (Walsh & Arnold, 2020; Burton & Barber, 2019). According to COR theory, employees who strongly identify with their organization may experience abusive supervision as a personal threat, which can deplete their organizational identification (Hobfoll, 1989; Deng et al., 2018). Mindfulness can act as a coping resource in this context by allowing employees to detach from habitual negative thought patterns, view stressful situations objectively, and reduce emotional reactivity (Garland et al., 2015; Weintraub et al., 2019). Mindful employees are better able to maintain perspective, separate supervisors' hostile behaviours from the

organization itself, and preserve their organizational identification. In contrast, employees with lower mindfulness are more likely to internalize abusive behaviours, intensifying the negative impact on organizational identification.

Beyond moderating the direct relationship between abusive supervision and organizational identification, mindfulness may also influence the overall mediated relationship between abusive supervision and employee outcomes such as work engagement. Prior research has demonstrated that mindfulness enhances self-regulation, job performance, and job satisfaction while reducing the negative effects of workplace stressors (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Dane & Brummel, 2014; Hülsheger et al., 2013). Conversely, in certain contexts, highly mindful employees may overextend themselves in response to stress, potentially impacting well-being (Walsh & Arnold, 2020). Overall, mindfulness equips employees to approach stressful experiences non-judgmentally, buffer the adverse effects of abusive supervision, and protect their psychological resources. In this study, mindfulness is expected to mitigate the negative effects of abusive supervision on organizational identification and work engagement. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H3a: Employee mindfulness moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and organizational identification, such that the negative relationship is weaker for employees with higher levels of mindfulness in the Sri Lankan public sector.

H3b: Employee mindfulness moderates the indirect effect of abusive supervision on work engagement via organizational identification, such that this mediated relationship is weaker for employees with higher levels of mindfulness in the Sri Lankan public sector.

Conceptual Model

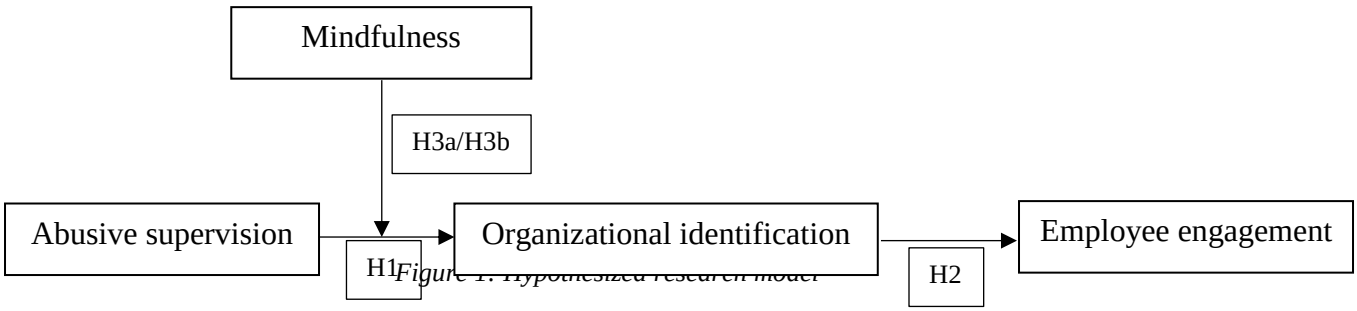


Figure 1. Hypothesized research model

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical framework of this study, depicting organizational identification as a mediator between abusive supervision and employee outcomes, and mindfulness as a moderating resource that mitigates these relationships within the Sri Lankan public sector context.

Methodology

Data Collection Procedure and Sample

The research sample consisted of employees working in the public sector in Sri Lanka. Given the critical role of the public sector in driving the nation's social, political, and economic development, as well as the diverse range of professions it encompasses, including administrative staff, healthcare professionals, educators, and law enforcement personnel, examining the commitment levels of public sector employees is essential.

Data were collected using self-administered questionnaires. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed, of which 209 were returned and deemed usable, yielding a response rate of 52.25%. Convenience sampling was employed to select participants. Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the heads of the respective public sector departments. Each questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter detailing the objectives of the study, and participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

Among the 209 respondents, 56% were male, and approximately 75% were married. Nearly half of the participants (49%) were aged between 30 and 39 years, while 23% were between 21 and 29 years old. Regarding educational qualifications, 35% held postgraduate degrees, and 31% had completed professional courses. In terms of organizational tenure, 61% had more than six years of experience in their current organization, whereas the remaining 39% had less than six years. With respect to job positions, 56% were executives, and 32% held managerial roles.

Measures

All constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Abusive supervision
Abusive supervision was assessed using the 15-item scale developed by Tepper (2000). Sample items include "My boss invades my privacy" and "My boss blames me to save himself/herself from embarrassment." Respondents rated the extent to which these behaviors described their supervisor. The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.95.

Organizational identification
Organizational identification was measured using a six-item scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992). Sample items include "When someone criticizes my organization, it feels like a personal insult" and "My organization's successes are my successes." Participants rated the extent to which they identified with their organization. The scale demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82.

Employee engagement
Employee work engagement was measured using the nine-item scale developed by Schaufeli et al. (2006). Sample items include "I get carried away when I am working" and "I am enthusiastic about my job." The scale demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87.

Mindfulness
Employee mindfulness was measured using the 15-item scale developed by Brown and Ryan (2003). Sample items include "I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the present" and "I do jobs or tasks automatically, without being aware of what I'm doing." The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92.

Control variables
Age, gender, education level, and organizational tenure (measured by the number of years an employee had worked in the organization) were treated as control variables. Gender was coded as 0 for male and 1 for female.

Findings
Reliability Analysis
Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Statistics

Variable	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Abusive Supervision	15	0.912
Organizational Identification	6	0.884
Employee Engagement	9	0.903
Mindfulness	15	0.876

As shown in Table 1, all constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency reliability. According to conventional criteria ($\alpha \geq 0.70$), the Cronbach's alpha values for abusive supervision ($\alpha = 0.912$), organizational identification ($\alpha = 0.884$), work engagement ($\alpha = 0.903$), and mindfulness ($\alpha = 0.876$) indicate excellent reliability. Therefore, the measurement scales used in this study are considered statistically reliable.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations
Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
Abusive Supervision	3.21	0.82	1			
Organizational Identification	3.45	0.76	-0.48**	1		
Work Engagement	3.62	0.71	-0.52**	0.63**	1	
Mindfulness	3.58	0.69	-0.29**	0.41**	0.47**	1

Note: N = 209, $p < 0.01$

Table 2 shows that abusive supervision is significantly and negatively correlated with organizational identification ($r = -0.48$, $p < 0.01$) and work engagement ($r = -0.52$, $p < 0.01$). Organizational identification has a strong positive correlation with work engagement ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$). Mindfulness is positively correlated with work engagement ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$) and negatively correlated with abusive supervision ($r = -0.29$, $p < 0.01$). These findings provide preliminary support for the proposed hypotheses.

Mediation Analysis

Table 3: Regression Analysis

Model	Predictor	β	t	Sig.
Model 1	Abusive Supervision → Work Engagement	-0.52	-9.14	0.000
Model 2	Abusive Supervision → Organizational Identification	-0.48	-8.01	0.000
Model 3	Organizational Identification → Work Engagement	0.54	9.87	0.000
Model 4	Abusive Supervision (with mediator)	-0.23	-4.12	0.000
	Organizational Identification	0.47	8.65	0.000

Model 4 $R^2 = 0.46$, $F(2,206) = 87.65$, $p < 0.001$

The regression results indicate that abusive supervision significantly negatively predicts work engagement ($\beta = -0.52$, $p < 0.001$). Abusive supervision also significantly predicts organizational identification ($\beta = -0.48$, $p < 0.001$). When organizational identification is included in the model, the effect of abusive supervision on work engagement decreases but remains significant ($\beta = -0.23$, $p < 0.001$). This reduction in beta value indicates partial mediation. Therefore, organizational identification significantly mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and work engagement.

Moderation Analysis

Table 4: Regression Analysis

Predictor	β	t	Sig.
Abusive Supervision	-0.39	-7.21	0.000
Mindfulness	0.31	5.88	0.000
Abusive Supervision × Mindfulness	0.18	3.44	0.001

$R^2 = 0.51$

ΔR^2 (Interaction) = 0.03

$F(3,205) = 70.42$, $p < 0.001$

The interaction term between abusive supervision and mindfulness is statistically significant ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = 0.001$), indicating that mindfulness moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and work engagement. The positive interaction coefficient suggests that employees with higher levels of mindfulness experience a weaker negative impact of abusive supervision on work engagement. The increase in R^2 ($\Delta R^2 = 0.03$) confirms the additional explanatory power of the moderation effect.

The results of the hypothesis testing provide strong support for the proposed research model. First, H1 predicted that abusive supervision would negatively affect employee work engagement. The findings confirmed this hypothesis, as abusive supervision was found to have a significant negative impact on work engagement. This suggests that when supervisors display hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, employees in the Sri Lankan public sector are less likely to demonstrate vigor, dedication, and absorption in their work roles.

Second, H2 proposed that organizational identification would mediate the relationship between abusive supervision and work engagement. The mediation analysis revealed that organizational identification significantly mediated the effect of abusive supervision on work engagement. Specifically, abusive supervision reduced employees' sense of belonging and identification with the organization, which in turn lowered their engagement levels. Since the direct effect of abusive supervision remained significant even after including the mediator, the mediation was partial. Therefore, H2 was supported.

Finally, H3 hypothesized that mindfulness would moderate the relationship between abusive supervision and work engagement. The moderation analysis showed that the interaction between abusive supervision and mindfulness was statistically significant. Employees with higher levels of mindfulness were better able to buffer the negative

effects of abusive supervision, maintaining relatively higher levels of work engagement compared to those with lower mindfulness. Accordingly, H3 was supported.

Overall, the findings highlight the critical role of both organizational resources (organizational identification) and personal resources (mindfulness) in mitigating the detrimental effects of abusive supervision in the Sri Lankan public sector context.

Discussion

The present study examined the impact of abusive supervision on employee work engagement in the Sri Lankan public sector, focusing on the mediating role of organizational identification and the moderating role of mindfulness. The findings provide meaningful theoretical and practical contributions to the literature on leadership and employee well-being, particularly within hierarchical public sector institutions.

First, the results confirmed that abusive supervision negatively affects work engagement. This finding aligns with prior research by Tepper, who conceptualized abusive supervision as sustained hostile verbal and non-verbal behavior, excluding physical contact. In line with the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, supervisory mistreatment depletes employees' emotional and psychological resources, reducing their energy, dedication, and involvement in work activities. Within the Sri Lankan public sector, which is characterized by formal hierarchies and power distance, abusive behaviors may be particularly detrimental because employees often have limited alternatives or voice mechanisms.

Second, the study found that organizational identification partially mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and work engagement. This indicates that when employees experience abusive supervision, their sense of belonging and emotional attachment to the organization diminishes, which subsequently lowers their engagement levels. This finding is consistent with social identity theory and the foundational work of Tajfel and Turner, which suggests that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in organizations. When supervisors represent the organization negatively, employees may psychologically distance themselves, weakening their identification and reducing discretionary effort. The partial mediation further suggests that other mechanisms (e.g., emotional exhaustion, psychological safety, or trust) may also explain how abusive supervision influences engagement.

Third, the results demonstrated that mindfulness significantly moderates the negative relationship between abusive supervision and work engagement. Employees with higher levels of mindfulness were better able to buffer the harmful effects of supervisory mistreatment. Mindfulness enables individuals to remain present-focused, regulate emotional reactions, and avoid over-identifying with negative experiences. As a personal resource, mindfulness appears to protect employees from excessive resource depletion, allowing them to maintain higher engagement even under adverse supervisory conditions. This finding strengthens the argument that personal psychological resources play a critical role in sustaining employee well-being in challenging work environments.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the abusive supervision literature in three important ways. First, it extends research into the Sri Lankan public sector context, which remains underexplored in leadership and HRM studies. Second, it integrates both mediating and moderating mechanisms within a single model, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how and when abusive supervision affects work engagement. Third, by combining organizational identification (an organizational-level resource) and mindfulness (a personal-level resource), the study supports the multidimensional application of COR theory in public sector research.

Practical Implications

The findings offer several implications for human resource management in the public sector. Public institutions should prioritize leadership development programs that discourage abusive behaviors and promote ethical and supportive supervision. Mechanisms such as grievance procedures, 360-degree feedback systems, and supervisor training can help reduce toxic leadership practices.

Additionally, strengthening organizational identification through transparent communication, participative decision-making, and recognition programs may enhance employees' emotional attachment to their institutions. Finally, public sector organizations may benefit from introducing mindfulness-based interventions, stress management workshops, and well-being initiatives to build employees' resilience against workplace stressors.

Limitations and Future research directions

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. The use of convenience sampling and cross-sectional data limits causal inferences and generalizability. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to better establish causal relationships. Moreover, qualitative studies may provide deeper insight into how public sector employees experience and interpret abusive supervision in culturally specific contexts.

Future studies may also examine additional mediators (e.g., emotional exhaustion, psychological safety) and moderators (e.g., power distance orientation, perceived organizational support) to further enrich the understanding of supervisory mistreatment in public institutions.

Conclusion

Overall, the study highlights the detrimental impact of abusive supervision on work engagement in the Sri Lankan public sector while emphasizing the protective role of organizational identification and mindfulness. By fostering supportive leadership practices and strengthening both organizational and personal resources, public sector institutions can enhance employee engagement and promote healthier work environments.

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