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The Impact of High-Performance Work Systems on Organizational Performance: The Mediating Role of Workplace Bullying

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Abstract

This study examines the relationships between high-performance work systems (HPWS) and organizational performance, highlighting both positive and negative findings in past research using various mediation methods. Previous studies have emphasized the importance of examining contingent factors—such as strategies, technology, team building, organizational culture, and human resource power—in enhancing the value of HPWS. In today's competitive environment, organizations are seeking to gain a competitive advantage. However, one of the major obstacles facing organizations is workplace bullying. This study aims to investigate the potential impact of workplace bullying on organizational performance by examining whether employees who are exposed to bullying affect the overall organizational outcomes. Specifically, this study introduces workplace bullying as a mediator between organizational performance and HPWS. The variables analyzed include HPWS as the independent variable, organizational performance as the dependent variable, and workplace bullying as the mediator. Data were collected from various sources to provide insights for future researchers and policymakers interested in this area.

Keywords: Organizational Performance, High-Performance Work Systems, Workplace Bullying, Employee Performance.

Introduction

Since 2010, human resource management (HRM) has garnered significant attention from scholars. HRM refers to the upper management of an organization, responsible for recruitment, management, and providing direction for employees. A high-performance work system (HPWS) represents a group of interlinked HR practices, including selection, training, performance appraisal, compensation, and job design, aimed at enhancing employee effectiveness. Employees must possess better skills and greater motivation to contribute meaningfully to the organization's success. Strategic human resource management (SHRM) focuses on attracting, developing, rewarding, and retaining employees to achieve better organizational outcomes. The HR department's goals should align with the overall objectives of the organization, as reflected in HPWS practices, which enhance firm performance by improving employee satisfaction, commitment, work climate, motivation, and psychological empowerment. This alignment leads to competitive benefits and improved performance outcomes. When these HR practices are synchronized, employee productivity increases.

Organizational performance refers to the output of the organization, which is measured against its predetermined goals and objectives. Venkatraman and Ramanujam [1] defined organizational performance as the use of simple output-based financial

indicators to measure the achievement of economic goals. Organizational performance (OP) is widely used as a dependent variable in research, but it remains an under-defined construct.

Workplace bullying, introduced in the early 1990s, is a pervasive issue in organizations of all sizes, from large corporations to smaller settings like coffee shops. It encompasses verbal, physical, social, and psychological abuse or any acts of domination or intimidation that employees may face in the workplace [2]. These actions can lead employees to withdraw or react with aggression, negatively impacting organizational productivity and team dynamics. Several studies [3] have reported both negative and positive results when investigating the link between HPWS and organizational performance using various mediation methods. Previous research has emphasized the need to explore contingent factors, such as updated technology, strategies, organizational culture, team building, and HR power, to enhance the value of HPWS. In the current competitive landscape, organizations strive to gain a competitive edge. However, one of the major obstacles they face is workplace bullying. This study aims to investigate whether employees exposed to workplace bullying negatively impact organizational performance. Specifically, it examines workplace bullying as a mediator between HPWS and organizational performance.

While the link between HPWS and organizational performance is crucial, workplace bullying is a prevalent issue in organizations worldwide. Many organizations experience poor performance due to workplace bullying, which can negatively affect employees. The question arises as to whether workplace bullying serves as a mediator between HPWS and organizational performance. Menard *et al.* [3] found that workplace bullying had a significant negative effect on work engagement. This study seeks to address whether workplace bullying mediates the relationship between HPWS and organizational performance.

Human resources are considered the most valuable assets in any organization. Organizations gain a competitive advantage through their employees. As noted in previous studies [4], workplace bullying adversely affects employees' work engagement and health. This study aims to measure how much workplace bullying impacts organizational performance, particularly in the educational sector in Multan, Pakistan. The educational sector, being highly sensitive, can be affected by workplace bullying among employees. Bullying can be used as a strategy to drive out valuable employees or avoid legal obligations. This study investigates whether workplace bullying acts as a mediator between HPWS and organizational performance.

The research aims to develop and assess a framework that identifies the factors influencing HPWS and organizational performance under the mediating effect of workplace bullying. Given the prevalence of bullying in organizations today, this study focuses on the educational sector to provide insights into overcoming this issue and achieving optimal organizational performance. The central research question is: **Does workplace bullying mediate the relationship between HPWS and organizational performance?**

This research contributes to the existing literature on HPWS, organizational performance, and the mediating role of workplace bullying, an area that has been underexplored in HRM. The study aims to help organizations tackle the negative effects of workplace bullying, which is a common issue in today's workplace environment. By addressing this gap, the research seeks to provide valuable recommendations for organizations looking to improve their performance by minimizing workplace bullying.

Literature Review and Research Proposition Development

High-Performance Work System (HPWS)

The concept of HPWS has its roots in the early 1980s when scholars began to examine the impact of specific HR practices on organizational performance. HPWS encompasses a variety of interrelated HR practices, including recruitment, training, performance management, and compensation systems, designed to enhance employee skills and organizational effectiveness. Initially referred to by different terms such as HC (human capital) work systems and HI (high-involvement) work systems, the concept has evolved to focus on aligning HR practices with organizational goals for competitive advantage [5-7].

SHRM has been an essential framework for understanding HPWS. Wright and McMahan [8] defined SHRM as a strategic alignment of HR activities to achieve the organization's outcomes. A core principle of SHRM is that effective HR practices are directly linked to organizational performance. High-performance HR practices are particularly crucial in competitive environments, where organizations are continuously striving to differentiate themselves from competitors [9].

HPWS has been shown to enhance firm performance by improving employee satisfaction, engagement, and retention, as well as fostering organizational commitment and reducing turnover [10]. For instance, studies in manufacturing and service industries have revealed a positive relationship between HPWS practices and organizational performance, as employees are more engaged and motivated to contribute [11]. Additionally, Arthur's [12] research on steel mini-mills in the U.S. highlighted the positive effects of HPWS on productivity, depending on whether a commitment-based or control-based approach was adopted.

However, not all studies have found uniform results. Some researchers have noted mixed outcomes in regions such as China, where HPWS practices may not always produce the expected positive effects due to contextual and cultural factors [13, 14].

Moreover, some critics argue that HPWS alone may not be sufficient for ensuring organizational success without considering other variables, such as employee human capital and affective commitment [15].

Despite these challenges, the prevailing view is that HPWS, when effectively implemented, can significantly enhance organizational performance by creating an empowered and motivated workforce.

Workplace Bullying as a Mediator

Workplace bullying refers to harmful behaviors such as verbal, physical, psychological, and social abuse in the workplace. The term was introduced in the 1990s and has since been a subject of significant concern due to its negative impact on employees' mental health, work engagement, and overall performance [2]. Bullying behaviors create a toxic work environment, leading to lower morale, disengagement, and increased employee turnover.

In the context of HPWS, workplace bullying presents a potential barrier to achieving optimal outcomes. Despite the positive intentions behind HPWS practices, bullying can undermine the effectiveness of these HR practices by eroding trust, decreasing employee motivation, and increasing stress levels. Employees exposed to bullying are more likely to experience burnout, which diminishes their capacity to perform at high levels [3]. Moreover, workplace bullying can lead to reduced commitment, absenteeism, and lower organizational citizenship behaviors, all of which directly hinder the performance benefits expected from HPWS practices.

Several studies have shown that workplace bullying can negatively affect both individual employees and organizational performance. This issue has received increased attention in recent years, particularly concerning its mediating role in the relationship between HPWS and organizational performance. Bullying may disrupt the mechanisms through which HPWS enhances employee engagement and performance, leading to a decrease in the expected organizational outcomes [4].

Research Proposition Development

Building upon the theoretical background discussed above, this study aims to explore the role of workplace bullying as a mediator in the relationship between HPWS and organizational performance. The central premise is that while HPWS is designed to improve organizational performance by enhancing employee engagement and effectiveness, workplace bullying can impede these efforts by negatively affecting employees' well-being and productivity.

Proposition 1: HPWS has a positive impact on organizational performance, as employees are empowered, engaged, and more committed to their work.

Proposition 2: Workplace bullying negatively affects employee engagement, work motivation, and organizational performance, by creating a toxic work environment that undermines the benefits of HPWS practices.

Proposition 3: Workplace bullying mediates the relationship between HPWS and Organizational Performance, such that the positive effects of HPWS on organizational performance are diminished in the presence of bullying behaviors.

By investigating the mediating role of workplace bullying in the educational sector of Pakistan, this study aims to address a gap in the literature regarding how negative workplace behaviors can interfere with the effectiveness of high-performance HR practices. It is particularly relevant to educational institutions, where employee engagement and performance are critical to overall success.

Through this research, it is expected that the findings will contribute valuable insights into how organizations can mitigate the negative impacts of workplace bullying and maximize the positive outcomes of HPWS practices, leading to improved organizational performance.

Methodology

This conceptual paper employed multiple data collection methods. The initial source involved using the Google search engine to explore terms like "organizational performance" and "workplace bullying." While a large amount of data was gathered, much of it lacked the reliability necessary to back the research.

Subsequently, various articles by different authors were analyzed. It became clear that there was no agreement on a unified definition of HPWS, and instead, a variety of viewpoints were presented.

Additionally, two key books were deemed essential for this conceptual framework: Effective Human Resource Management: A Global Analysis by Edward E. Lawler III and Achieving Excellence in Human Resource Management: An Assessment of Human Resource Functions.

The paper also reviewed a wide range of articles from three respected journals: the International Journal of Human Resource Management, the Academy of Management Journal, and the European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology.

Results and Discussion

Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying emerged as a significant concept in the 1990s to describe recurring, hostile behavior that negatively impacts employees' well-being and productivity [2]. This behavior can be overt or subtle, including verbal abuse, physical threats, social exclusion, or psychological intimidation. While individual incidents of bad behavior may appear isolated or minor, when they become frequent or sustained, they constitute workplace bullying. Workplace bullying can severely affect employees, leading to stress, anxiety, depression, and decreased job satisfaction, which in turn negatively influences organizational performance [16].

In terms of its effects, workplace bullying disrupts the psychological contract between employees and the organization. This psychological contract refers to the unwritten expectations and obligations that employees have towards their employer, such as trust, loyalty, and job satisfaction [17]. When bullying occurs, it undermines these expectations, leading to reduced work engagement, commitment, and loyalty, and can result in higher turnover rates and absenteeism [18]. The organization is also held accountable for the presence of bullying, as it reflects a failure to provide a safe and supportive environment [19].

Research on workplace bullying has shown that the prevalence of bullying varies widely depending on the measurement method and the country in which the study is conducted, with reports ranging from 1% to 55% of employees experiencing bullying [20]. While workplace bullying is recognized globally, cultural differences can influence its manifestation and impact. Thus, organizations need to address this issue effectively and implement policies to mitigate its occurrence.

Organizational Performance

Organizational performance is a multifaceted concept that has been widely studied in the field of HRM and strategic management. It is often defined as the ability of an organization to achieve its goals and objectives, typically measured through various indicators such as profitability, productivity, customer satisfaction, and innovation. However, the term remains somewhat ambiguous, as it encompasses both financial and non-financial aspects of performance [1].

Financial measures of organizational performance, such as return on investment (ROI), sales growth, and profitability, have traditionally been the primary focus of research in the field. However, recent studies highlight the importance of non-financial factors, such as organizational agility, flexibility, and knowledge management, in sustaining competitive advantage [21, 22]. These factors contribute to long-term success by enabling organizations to adapt to changes in the external environment and by fostering continuous innovation and learning [23].

Moreover, organizational performance can be influenced by various HR practices that enhance employee engagement, satisfaction, and retention. Kalleberg and Moody [24] identified 11 variables that affect company performance, including quality of products, market share growth, customer loyalty, and the ability to attract and retain talented personnel. These practices, when aligned with the organization's strategy, contribute to improved productivity and overall performance.

A key factor in organizational performance is the concept of organizational flexibility, which refers to the ability to reconfigure resources in response to changing circumstances. Resource elasticity and coordination elasticity are two forms of organizational flexibility that contribute to sustained competitive advantage [25]. Resource elasticity involves the ability to redirect resources quickly to meet new demands, while coordination elasticity refers to the ability to integrate and deploy resources effectively across the organization. The combination of these forms of flexibility enables organizations to maintain high performance even i.

High-Performance Work System and Organizational Performance

High-performance work systems (HPWS) represent a set of Human Resource practices and activities that aim to enhance employee capabilities, engagement, and output, ultimately improving organizational performance. These systems are designed to foster an environment where employees' skills, confidence, and participation are maximized, turning them into a valuable source of sustainable competitive advantage for the organization [26]. The fundamental objective of HPWS is to enhance employee knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) to achieve organizational goals.

The key features of HPWS include a bundle of HR practices that focus on improving employee performance and motivation through a combination of developmental, participatory, and performance-enhancing initiatives. These practices encourage job satisfaction and organizational commitment by ensuring that employees have the necessary resources, opportunities, and support to perform their tasks effectively. Some examples of HPWS practices are extensive training programs, employee involvement in decision-making, performance-based rewards, and a strong focus on communication and collaboration among employees [27].

HPWS is built on two core processes that contribute to its effectiveness:

1. Enhancing employee capabilities: HPWS provides employees with the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) required to perform their tasks and gives them the motivation and opportunities to apply these capabilities in their work [28].
2. Improving internal communication and collaboration: HPWS also focuses on enhancing the internal social structure within firms, facilitating better communication and collaboration between employees, which leads to a more cohesive and efficient work environment [29].

The combined effect of these two processes is an improvement in job satisfaction, employee engagement, and organizational performance. Employees are more likely to be committed to the organization's goals, resulting in increased motivation to perform and contribute to the achievement of organizational objectives.

However, while HPWS is widely acknowledged for its positive impact on employee motivation and organizational performance, it has faced criticism for being too Universalist. The "best practice" approach of HPWS assumes that the same set of HR practices can be universally applied across all types of organizations and sectors, which may not be the case, particularly in industries that require advanced technological expertise [15]. The suitability of HPWS practices can vary depending on the type of job, the industry, and the specific context in which they are implemented.

Despite these criticisms, HPWS continues to be seen as an effective tool for improving organizational performance, particularly in industries where human capital is a critical asset, such as in technology-driven sectors or knowledge-based industries [30]. The value of HPWS lies in its ability to foster an environment where employees can perform at their best, which in turn, enhances overall organizational outcomes.

Research Proposition (RP1)
A high-performance work system has significant effects on Organizational Performance.

High-Performance Work System and Workplace Bullying
The relationship between HPWS and workplace bullying is an important area of study, as HPWS can influence the overall workplace environment, including the prevalence of negative behaviors such as bullying. HPWS consists of a set of Human Resource practices aimed at enhancing employee capabilities, engagement, and performance [31, 32]. These systems typically focus on practices that improve employees' skills, commitment, and involvement in organizational activities, thereby fostering a productive and supportive work environment [15].

However, the introduction of HPWS may have unintended consequences, such as contributing to workplace bullying. While HPWS is generally designed to improve employee performance and organizational outcomes, it could inadvertently create a competitive or stressful work environment that leads to negative behaviors among employees. For example, when performance expectations are high, employees might resort to harmful behaviors like bullying in an attempt to assert dominance, control, or cope with workplace stress.

Workplace bullying, which involves negative behaviors such as verbal abuse, social exclusion, and degrading actions [2], can be exacerbated in environments where performance pressures and intense competition are prevalent. Studies have shown that workplace bullying leads to job dissatisfaction, decreased commitment, and higher employee turnover [33, 34]. Additionally, bullying negatively impacts employees' psychological well-being and their performance at work.

Thus, it is crucial to explore the impact of HPWS on workplace bullying, as these practices may either mitigate or amplify bullying behaviors depending on how they are implemented and perceived by employees.

Research Proposition (RP2)
HPWS has a significant effect on workplace bullying.

Workplace Bullying and Organizational Performance
Workplace bullying can have a significant detrimental effect on organizational performance. Bullying not only harms the well-being of the individuals involved but also negatively impacts the overall productivity and effectiveness of the organization [35]. Research has shown that employees who experience bullying are more likely to leave their jobs, suffer from burnout, and exhibit lower levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment [33, 34]. As a result, workplace bullying can lead to high turnover rates, increased absenteeism, and a decrease in employee morale.

The dynamics of workplace bullying often involve negative behaviors such as verbal aggression, exclusion, and spreading false rumors, which create a toxic work environment [36]. These actions, when sustained over time, lead to emotional distress, stress, and a decrease in job performance, which in turn impacts organizational outcomes [2]. Furthermore, workplace bullying is a violation of the psychological contract between employers and employees, as it undermines expectations of a safe, respectful, and supportive work environment.

The psychological contract, which includes unwritten expectations regarding work conditions, job security, and respect in the workplace, is broken when bullying occurs. Victims of bullying often experience a breakdown in trust with their employer, which can lead to a decrease in organizational loyalty, job satisfaction, and overall performance. This breach can also damage the reputation of the organization, making it difficult to retain talented employees and maintain high levels of productivity.

Research Proposition (RP3)
Workplace bullying has a significant effect on organizational performance.

The Mediation Effect of Workplace Bullying on High-Performance Work Systems and Organizational Performance

Workplace bullying can have a profound impact on both individuals and organizations, influencing various organizational dynamics. One of the key concerns with workplace bullying is its potential to mediate the relationship between HPWS and organizational performance. HPWS is designed to improve employee performance and organizational outcomes by enhancing employee skills, engagement, and commitment. However, when workplace bullying exists within an organization, it can undermine the positive effects that HPWS typically produces.

Research has shown that workplace bullying can lead to negative outcomes for employees, including stress, low self-esteem, mood swings, social isolation, and psychological illness [37]. These effects can reduce employees' motivation, engagement, and performance. As employees become more demotivated and disengaged due to bullying, their ability to contribute effectively to the organization diminishes. Consequently, this can lead to a decline in organizational performance.

Workplace bullying can also trigger a range of counterproductive behaviors, such as aggression, frustration, and resistance. These behaviors can directly harm the work environment and disrupt organizational performance. When employees are subjected to bullying, they may become less committed to their work, experience higher levels of absenteeism, and display negative interpersonal behaviors [38]. All these negative outcomes not only affect individual job satisfaction and well-being but also hinder the organization's overall performance.

Furthermore, work engagement plays a crucial role in this process. When employees are bullied, their work engagement levels tend to decrease, and as work engagement drops, organizational performance suffers [39]. Work engagement is a critical factor for achieving high performance, and a decrease in engagement due to bullying can lead to reduced productivity, lower job satisfaction, and diminished organizational outcomes.

Thus, workplace bullying may mediate the relationship between HPWS and organizational performance, either weakening the positive effects of HPWS or exacerbating its negative consequences. When bullying is present, it can disrupt the beneficial effects of HPWS and lead to a decline in organizational performance.

Research Proposition (RP4)

Workplace bullying has a mediating role between HPWS and organizational performance.

Conceptual Framework
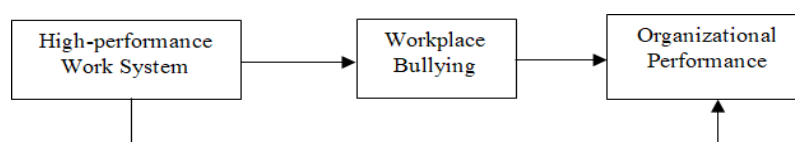
Figure 1. Conceptual framework

This conceptual framework is grounded in social behavior theory, with resource-based theory serving as the foundational support (**Figure 1**).

Discussion

This research explored the role of HPWS in enhancing company performance, focusing on the mediation effects of workplace bullying within organizations. The findings of the study align with existing literature and theoretical frameworks related to HPWS, organizational performance, and workplace bullying. Numerous studies have highlighted the relationship between HPWS and organizational performance [15]. The concept of HPWS remains debated, with different scholars proposing various theoretical, empirical, and practical approaches [40]. HPWS is often seen as an interconnected set of HR practices aimed at improving employees' skills and efforts [32, 41].

Workplace bullying, characterized by frequent and ongoing harmful behaviors like intimidation, stress, and degradation, can severely impact employees' well-being, making it difficult for them to cope with these experiences [42]. Research has demonstrated that workplace bullying negatively affects organizational performance, as it undermines employee morale and reduces productivity [43]. Consistent with these findings, the current study shows that HPWS positively influences organizational performance, while workplace bullying has a detrimental effect. Specifically, educational institutions (E.D.) experiencing workplace bullying suffer negative consequences in terms of organizational performance [16]. The conceptual framework used in this study illustrates the relationships between the independent and dependent variables.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of HPWS and organizational performance, with workplace bullying acting as a mediator in the educational sector. The review of various articles and research papers led to the conclusion that HPWS plays a significant role in enhancing organizational performance. The study found a direct positive relationship between HPWS and organizational performance—an increase in HPWS resulted in improved organizational performance. However, when workplace bullying served as a mediator, it negatively affected organizational performance by lowering employee morale and altering the organizational culture.

Implications of the Study

From a social behavior theory perspective, this study highlights the negative impact of workplace bullying in educational institutions, ranging from small schools to international organizations, both public and private. Previous studies in Europe have shown mixed results due to varying definitions and measurement methods of workplace bullying, as well as differences in cultural contexts [20]. The findings of this research underscore the importance of addressing workplace harassment, as it has a significant impact on organizational performance at all levels. The concept of the psychological contract—unwritten expectations regarding loyalty, commitment, and job satisfaction—plays a crucial role in shaping employee behavior and performance [44]. When employees experience workplace bullying, their psychological contract is breached, negatively affecting their work and overall organizational performance. The study suggests the need for strategies to combat workplace bullying to enhance organizational outcomes and gain a competitive advantage.

Limitations of the Study

First, the study found that differences in cultural contexts and country-specific factors could account for variations in results across different studies [20]. While studies on workplace bullying have yielded similar findings, these results may vary depending on the cultural and geographical context [45, 46].

Second, the study could have examined different theories of HPWS in more detail to better understand the relationship between workplace bullying and organizational performance.

Suggestions for Future Research

1. Future research should explore the dimensions of workplace bullying that affect organizational performance [45, 46].
2. Future studies should compare workplace bullying with financial indicators to better understand its impact on organizational outcomes. Additionally, factors such as family support, coworker behavior, and other organizational features could be examined to assess their influence on performance.
3. Further research should focus on the educational sector in the Punjab region, as this study specifically recommended exploring this area for deeper insights into how workplace bullying impacts performance in educational institutions.

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