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The Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion in the Relationship between Abusive Supervision and Employee Cyberloafing Behaviour

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Abstract

Cyberloafing has become a common problem in every organization that directly affects organizational productivity. This study is a detailed account of the influence of abusive supervision on cyberloafing. Further, the mediating effect of emotional exhaustion generated due to abusive supervision which motivates employees towards cyberloafing is scrutinized. Data were collected from 150 employees working in Saif Textile Mills Ltd. and Kohat Textile Mills Ltd. through questionnaire. The study sample was drawn using the convenience sampling technique. This study used SPSS 25 and process Hayes (2013) model 4 for data analysis and CFA (AMOS 22) for model fitness. The findings demonstrated that abusive supervision significantly and positively affects cyberloafing and emotional exhaustion mediates this relationship, significantly. Therefore, we concluded that abusive supervision is the main factor causing employees to be exhausted and ultimately move towards cyberloafing. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the managers play a vital role in maintaining the friendly environment of the organization .

Keywords: AMOS, abusive supervision, cyberloafing, emotional exhaustion, SPSS

Introduction

The Internet is now a part of every organization and is required to run its operations smoothly (Baturay & Toker, [2015](#)). The effective use of the Internet has a significant impact on employee and organizational productivity, since it reduces time, cost, and is a better way for interaction with other stakeholders (Lim et al., [2020](#)). The Internet helps employees to perform their jobs efficiently but many employees use it for relaxation during working hours which affects their job roles and responsibilities and results in the wastage of time. Consequently, the organization suffers a lot due to employees' online engagements other than their job roles (Jandaghi et al., [2015](#); Lim et al., [2020](#)).

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Cyberloafing is spending working hours while utilizing the Internet for non-work purposes in an organization. The use of advanced electronic devices has improved the productivity of employees which leads towards the achievement of organizational goals. The study by Zoonen et al. (2014) illustrated that the percentage of employees using different social sites has increased by 84.1%. Another study by Andel et al. (2019) pointed out that employees spend almost two hours per day on social sites and non-work activities. Some studies indicated that cyberloafing has some plus points such as bringing extra knowledge, creating better work-life balance, and enhancing organizational commitment (Moqel et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2020).

Researchers define the term ‘cyberloafing’ as an online activity that employees execute with other job tasks in the workplace that is not associated with their job roles (Koay & Soh, 2018). Cyberloafing is a bad habit and once this habit develops in employees, it is difficult for any organization to restrain them from this negative behaviour (Moody & Siponen, 2013). Employees who spend time on different websites become unassociated with their job roles, which may benefit them but delays their organizational tasks and reduces their organization’s productivity (Koay & Soh, 2018).

This study explains cyberloafing due to abusive supervision with the help of the Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Conservation of Resource Theory (COR). These theories demonstrate that a friendly relationship between the supervisor and the subordinates is important for an organization in the long run (Tepper, 2000). Those employees who are verbally abused by their supervisors become less productive in the workplace and engage in cyberloafing to avoid their respective job roles. COR theory also explains this phenomenon by linking abusive supervision with cyberloafing through emotional exhaustion. According to the COR theory, when an organization gives stress to its employees, it disturbs them mentally and they become exhausted (Hobfoll, 1998).

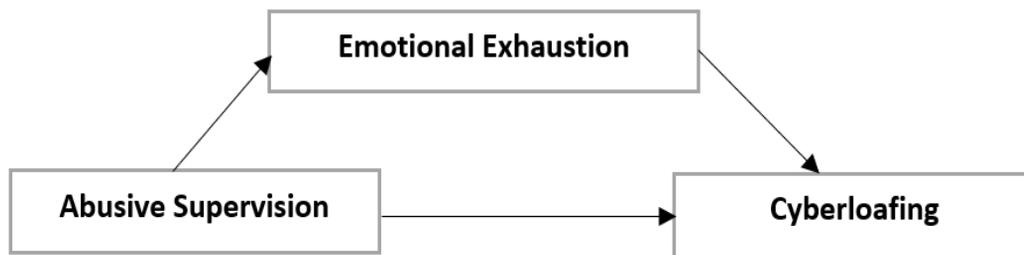
Abusive behaviour is the behaviour that a supervisor exhibits at the workplace during working hours by using harsh and rough language towards the subordinates (Agarwal & Avey, 2020) that makes them emotionally exhausted. It affects their job roles, assignments, family life, and organizational productivity (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). Because of the pressure, employees do not properly concentrate on the job and become demotivated. This results in non-working activities, with employees getting involved in cyberloafing to balance their stress level (Henle & Blanchard, 2008; Aghaz & Sheikh, 2016). These findings are in line with and confirm the previous finding of Koay (2018) that workplace ostracism

reduces the interest of the employees in their jobs, which affects organizational performance and increases emotional exhaustion.

This research work furthers the study of Agarwal and Avey (2020) regarding the outcomes of abusive supervision by examining its effect on cyberloafing in the presence of emotional exhaustion as the mediator. This type of behaviour showed by the supervisor badly affects an employees' job role and performance. We attempted to find the outcomes and based upon the findings, we developed some suggestions for the head of the department and supervisors to create a friendly working environment by professionally handling employees.

Figure 1

Research Framework



Literature Review

Social Exchange Theory (SET)

In management research, SET is the main theory used to explain the relationship among employees, their attitudes and behaviours in the workplace. According to this theory, human beings are bound to react in the way in which they receive a response from others and hence calculate their benefits / loss by assessing the respective situation. This theory is about needs and satisfaction, which illustrates that employees go with their emotions and needs. If employees are treated with respect and dignity, they remain motivated and satisfied. On the contrary, if employees are abused during the working hours it results in demotivation and dissatisfaction and the employees engage in non-working activities. Supervisors play a key role in enhancing the organizational productivity and employee job performance. Appreciations and rewards are helpful to distract the employees from social media and keep them engaged in their tasks (Homans, 1958).

Conservation of Resource Theory (COR)

Hobfoll ([1989](#), [2011](#)) stated that employee satisfaction is important to retain skilful resources for the organization in the long run. Diversification exists in the workplace and different employees work with different attributes, which creates a problem for the employees' mental health and also for organizational productivity. Therefore, the supervisor has to utilize diverse styles in order to help the employees to improve their output. Skilful employees are a vital part of the organization, their loss creates many problems for an organization in various ways. Firstly, the organization loses an experienced person and secondly, it is time consuming for the organization to hire a new employee with the same level of skills and knowledge. So, for the supervisor, it is important to treat employees in a decent way to protect them from losing a skilful resource. When employees are abused they lose their self-esteem and avoid facing supervisors and even office colleagues (Agarwal & Avey, [2020](#)).

Cyberloafing

The Internet enables an organization to work in a smooth and fast way but it also has some disadvantages such as cyberloafing (Askew et al., [2014](#)). Cyberloafing constitutes spending working hours on the Internet, doing personal surfing such as online shopping, chatting with friends on WhatsApp, using Instagram and messenger as well as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, while avoiding official tasks (Koay & Soh, [2018](#)). Every employee in an organization has access to cell phones and tablets (Cinar & Karcioğlu, [2015](#)). Moreover, 4G technology has made it very easy to run the Internet without interruption (Yui, [2021](#)). If we positively use this technology, we may get some positive outcomes such as building social interaction with different people from a different culture or course of life. By making such bonds we can share information and knowledge, yet at the same time there emerges the serious problem of cyberloafing (Agarwal & Avey [2020](#); Yui, [2021](#)).

Further the definition of cyberloafing by Sheikh et al. (2019) states it as spending time in the office and using the Internet for entertainment and non-work-related activities, which are according to Rahimnia and Mazidi ([2003](#)) unwelcome attitudes in the organization for the employer and stakeholders. Organizations have started working to change their internet usage policies in the working environment to reduce such unwelcome activities by employees. This is also purported by Henle and Blanchard ([2008](#)) that there should be proper supervision of internet usage in the organization to limit employees to their job roles, resulting in an automatic decrease in cyberloafing.

Abusive Supervision

Abusive supervision is showing an intolerable behaviour, bullying at the workplace, and torturing employees mentally (Tepper, [2000](#)). This type of behaviour makes an employee exhausted (Martinko et al., [2013](#); Mackey et al., [2017](#); Tepper et al., [2017](#); Zhang et al., [2021](#)). Abusive supervision is considered as a workplace stressor for those employees who deal with negativity on a routine basis. This type of attitude affects work motivation, job satisfaction, workplace spirituality (Barnes et al., [2015](#); Lyu et al., [2016](#)) and organizational citizenship behaviour (Zhang & Liao, [2015](#); Mackey et al., [2017](#)). Focusing on the outcomes, the organization must take this issue seriously about why it happens and what's the reason behind it? Abusive supervision has many consequences besides affecting organizational productivity, such as it affects the personal life of employees and they feel embarrassed in front of their colleagues and other co-workers (Harvey et al., [2007](#)).

Emotional Exhaustion

Wright and Cropanzano ([1998](#)) defined emotional exhaustion as a state of emotional burnout and also as a chronic physical state that arises from excessive stress, non-achievable targets, interference in family and work-life, bullying over a non-issue, and excessive workload. Emotional exhaustion's main reason is the psychological pressure on employees due to which they start exhibiting the feelings of emotional tiredness and physical exhaustion. When one's office life is interfered with, it causes psychological pressure that disturbs not only the affected person but also their family life (Zohar, [1997](#)).

Emotional exhaustion not only affects a person physically but also mentally, causing anxiety and depression. Malsch and Jackson pointed out three factors of burnout, one of them is emotional exhaustion. These factors are interconnected with each other and if one is affected the overall system is affected. Due to emotional exhaustion, the performance and productivity of the exhausted person are affected, causing negative outcomes in their life (Maslach & Jackson, [1981](#); Maslach et al., [1986](#)). The affected person feels worthless and powerless. Emotional exhaustion causes low energy, sleeping problem, thinking problems, and loss of concentration. Ultimately, all these factors become the cause of distraction from the normal routine life. Emotional exhaustion affects everyone in different ways. Each person is affected differently, but some common outcomes include absents from jobs, distraction from goals, low energy, loose temper, and avoidance of social and family circles. Previous findings illustrate that emotionally exhausted employees always think negatively about their jobs roles and current organization. Such

employees waste their time in the office and search for jobs elsewhere to avoid exhaustion (Wright & Cropanzano, [1998](#); Grandey et al., [2004](#)).

Hypothesis Development

Abusive Supervision and Cyberloafing

Previous researches revealed that abusive supervision and cyberloafing are interconnected. Abusive supervision motivates employees to engage in cyberloafing to kill time. According to SET, in an organization productivity and employees' job performance are linked with maintaining a healthy and friendly environment (Burton & Hoobler, [2006](#)).

Abusing someone is a negative act, when a supervisor abuses the employees it causes them to lose their morale and self-esteem (Lyu et al., [2016](#)). In this way, an organization loses its competent resource and its competitors take advantage of this turnover by taking its skilful employees on board. When employees experience this situation, it usually results in dissatisfaction with their job (Mackey et al., [2017](#)). It's proven from the previous findings that abused employees put fewer efforts into the job by engaging themselves in cyberloafing to delay the work and to take revenge from the supervisor (Agarwal & Avey, [2020](#)).

H1. Abusive supervision has a significant positive influence on cyberloafing.

2.6.2 Abusive Supervision and Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is the likely physical and mental reaction of the employees who are degraded at work. An abusive supervisor gives less moral support to the targeted employee, that is why their mutual correspondence and performance is affected negatively. (Lyu et al., [2016](#)). In this way, they don't share important information and avoid facing each other (Feng & Wang, [2019](#)). Abused employees sometimes tolerate the negative attitude of their boss in the hope that a stage may come when they will not be further abused. After experiencing continuous misbehaviour by a supervisor, they confront these attitudes and involve themselves in non-work related activities, sometimes resulting in other job searches. COR theory states that skilful resources should not be lost in any way (Oravec, [2018](#)). Continuous abuse from supervisors results in psychological pressure on employees, reducing their concentration on their job roles and causing low productivity. Organizational productivity is a two-way process. When employees are abused, they feel emotionally exhausted and their work performance starts suffering, which ultimately damages the organization. Past studies gave substantial evidence that abusive supervision hurts the employees' feelings (McAllister et al., [2018](#); Anasori et al., [2020](#)).

H2. Abusive supervision has a significant positive influence on emotional exhaustion.

Emotional Exhaustion and Cyberloafing

According to Oravec (2018), an abusive supervisor affects employees' self-esteem and family life, which ultimately generates emotional exhaustion in employees who use different escaping methods from work to counter an abusive boss. Cyberloafing is one such method used for passing time and to avoid negative thoughts. Therefore, we concluded here that employees who are emotionally drained due to abusive supervision and bullying from the boss are somewhat more involved in cyberloafing in order to handle such stressful situations (Tourigny et al., 2013; Koay, 2018). Thus, we suggest that

H3. Emotional exhaustion has a significant positive influence on cyberloafing

Emotional Exhaustion as a Mediator

Researchers agree on the relationship between emotional exhaustion and abusive supervision, which is more complicated than one would initially anticipate in our study. Researchers are of the view that those organization which lack friendly correspondence and cooperation cause aggressive behaviour among employees (Marcus & Schuler, 2004; Thau & Mitchell, 2000). Tourigny et al. (2013) explained that employees who become emotionally exhausted try to leave the organization and show no motivation in performing official tasks. Emotional exhaustion's main reason is the abusive supervisor who always abuses the target employee, ultimately losing a competent resource. The exhausted employee then moves towards relaxation techniques, such as cyberloafing. It is one of the techniques used by the employees to relax and it involves using different social sites in order to avoid interaction with their supervisor to prevent their self-esteem and health (Wilk & Moynihan, 2005; Lim et al., 2020). Hence, it is hypothesized that

H4. Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and cyberloafing.

Methodology

Methodology is considered as the backbone of the research. For this study, a quantitative research design was used. To conduct this study, a cross-sectional research design with time lag was used to reduce the common method bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003). In the Pakistani context, the same method was adopted by (Javed et al., 2019; Saeed et al., 2017).

Data Collection

Data were collected from 150 employees of Saif Textile Mills Ltd. and Kohat Textile Mills Ltd. through a questionnaire using the convenient sampling technique. Firstly, data were gathered for demographic variables and independent variables to minimize the common method bias as proposed by Podsakoff et al. (2003). Secondly, time data were collected for the dependent variable (cyberloafing) and the mediating variable (emotional exhaustion). In the end, we linked the data of both stages.

Measures

Abusive supervision was measured using five items from (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Sample items are “My supervisor ridicules me” and “My supervisor tells me my thoughts or feelings are stupid.” Respondents were asked to evaluate their perceptions of their supervisors. Lim (2002) seven-item scale was used to measure cyberloafing. The sample item of this scale is “Check my personal information at work” and “Check non-work email at work.” Maslach and Jackson (1981) nine-item scale was used to measure emotional exhaustion. The sample item for this scale is “I feel emotionally drained by my work.” This study used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree.

Results

Demographic Details

Table 1

Demographic Statistics

Gender	Age (Years)	Service (Years)	Education
Male (137)	25-29 (08)	1-5 (23)	FA/FSC (6)
Female (13)	30-34 (89)	6-10 (98)	
Bachelors (23)	35-39 (30)	11-15 (19)	Master (114)
	40 and Above (23)	16 and above (10)	MS/PHIL (7)

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) of Variables

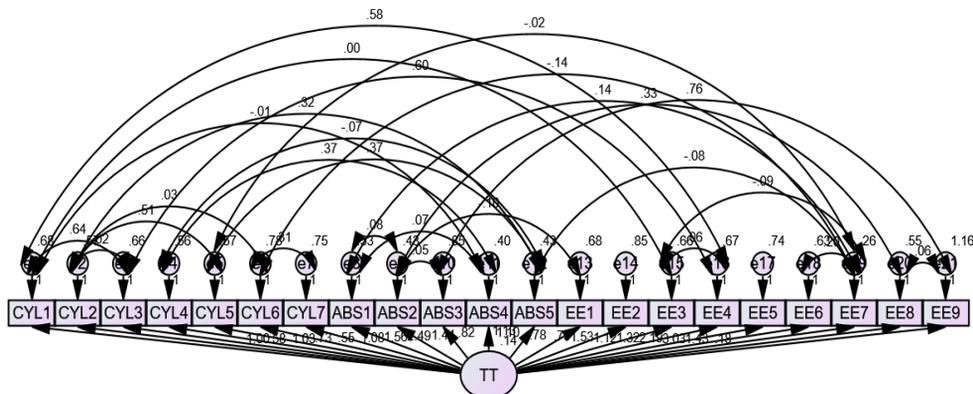
To check model fitness, we ran CFA for the variables and the findings indicated an appropriate overall fit of the data model as seen below (Table 2).

Table 2*CFA OF VARIABLES*

Variables	CMIN/DF	RMR	GFI	GFI	CFI	RMSEA
Abusive Supervision	1.35	.058	.98	.94	.97	.058
Cyberloafing	1.73	.024	.98	.91	.99	.070
Emotional Exhaustion	1.80	.077	.93	.90	.91	.074

One Factor Analysis

Figure 1 shows fit indices about abusive supervision, cyberloafing, and emotional exhaustion. The results revealed that one-factor confirmatory fit indices were good for the overall model. CMIN/DF=2.13, RMR=.083, GFI=.817, AGFI=.73, CFI=.92, RMSEA=.087.

Figure 2*Combined SEM***Mean, Standard Deviation, Reliability and Correlation**

To check the reliability, Cronbach's alpha was tested and the values of all the variables were found greater than 0.70 (see Table III). Correlation analysis was conducted to find out the association between variables as explained by Cohen (1988), with the correlation values spanning .10-.30 as low and .30-.50 as high.

Table 3*Descriptive Statistics*

Variables	Mean	S.D	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.Gender	1.3	.50	-						
2.Education	2.8	.57	-.008	-					
3.Age	2.4	.81	-.047	.010	-				
4.Service	2.1	.73	-.221**	.048	.098	-			
5.Cyberloafing	3.7	.63	.023	-.084	.011	.009	(.82)		
6.Abusive Supervision	3.7	.57	-.005	-.122	.069	-.025	.532**	(.77)	
7.Emotional Exhaustion	3.6	.57	-.040	-.059	.133	.033	.568**	.788**	(.75)

Note. **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Direct Relationship

Abusive supervision, as shown in Table IV, positively correlated with cyberloafing ($\beta=.58$, $t=7.6$ $p < 0.000$), hence the first hypothesis of the current study is significant. Emotional exhaustion positively correlated with abusive supervision ($\beta= 0.51$, $t= 8.39$, $p < 0.000$), thereby confirming the second hypothesis. Likewise, the study's third hypothesis is confirmed by a positive correlation between emotional exhaustion and cyberloafing ($\beta=0.62$, $t=8.39$, $p < 0.000$).

Mediation Analysis

To find out the effect of mediation, we used SPSS macro by (Hayes, [2017](#)) to test the mediation effect between the dependent and independent variables. This method also follows the procedures defined by (Baron & Kenney, [1986](#)). Mediation was analyzed through Hayes Model 4 (Hayes, [2013](#)). Abusive supervision is indirectly correlated with cyberloafing by emotional exhaustion (Effect=0.34, SE=0.10, LLCI=0.1378, and ULCI=0.5557), facilitating the fourth hypothesis of the study that abusive supervision and cyberloafing are mediated by emotional exhaustion (See Table IV).

Table 4*Path Analysis*

Effect of IV on M		Effect of M on DV		Direct effect of IV on DV in Presence of M		Total effect of IV on DV	
B	t	B	t	B	t	B	t
.51***	8.39	.62***	8.39	.34***	4.39	.58***	7.6

Notes. *** $p < 0.001$; (IV: Abusive Supervision, M: Emotional Exhaustion, DV: Cyberloafing)

Discussion

This research found that abusive supervision does have a major effect on cyberloafing. The theory of SET explained that a friendly working environment is possible if both the employee and the employer contribute to build it in the same way. Following abuse, an employee starts getting involved in non-job-related activities to delay the work assignments. Zhou (2016) stated that abusive supervision affects employee performance, ultimately affecting the organization's overall performance. Abusive supervision greatly affects emotional exhaustion, showing that those employees who face the abusive behaviour of the supervisor experience emotional exhaustion and stress, as explained by COR theory that abusive supervision reduces the employees' engagement in the work (Martinko et al., 2013). Abusive supervision is the aggressive attitude of a supervisor that affects the employees' personal life and also their work (Whitman et al., 2014). Moreover, the outcomes of emotional exhaustion come in the form of cyberloafing. This is also confirmed by previous studies (Aghaz & Sheikh, 2016; Koay, 2018) that cyberloafing is an extra non-work activity in which employees engage to relieve their mood after facing abusive behaviour from their boss.

The results of these stressful situations for organizations last for a long time due to abusive supervision. If an organization fails to overcome such a situation, slowly the trust of employees in their job and the organization comes down and they involve themselves in cyberloafing in order to avoid their official duties and abusive supervisor.

Cyberloafing is acknowledged by every organization. Mostly, employees involve themselves in searching non-work related information on the Internet, thus wasting their precious time that directly affects organizational productivity. The results of the current study determined that both companies (Saif Textile Mills Ltd.

and Kohat Textile Mills Ltd.) closed social sites on the office internet due to the excessive amount of time spent on them, which confirms the results of (Andel et al. [2019](#)). Furthermore, cyberloafing is the main source of distraction from the emotionally draining situation, as described by the COR theory. Employees are mentally welcome to participate in those actions that sustain their career.

Conclusion

Based on the hypothesis of this study and the theories of SET and COR, we conclude that there is constructive evidence that abusive supervision developed emotional exhaustion among employees and encouraged them towards cyberloafing in the aforesaid two companies (Agarwal & Avey, [2020](#); Lim et al., [2020](#)). Involving employees in non-work-related activities negatively affects their performance and organizational productivity. The findings of this study also proved that adversarial consequences of abusive supervision matter and it has a strong and significant effect on employees' performance and overall organizational efficiency.

Implications of the Study

In the 21st century, the use of the Internet in an organization is unquestionable, indeed it is used to minimize resources and maximize output. It is used in operational processes to enhance employees' communication and efficacy and to foster their productivity. However, some employees misuse this golden opportunity and start consuming their time by engaging themselves in cyberloafing (Koay, [2018](#)). So, organizations must dig out the factors that motivate employees towards cyberloafing. The results of this study showed that abusive supervision is the main cause behind cyberloafing. When employees are abused, they feel exhausted and involve themselves in those practices that minimize these exhausted movements as stated in SET (Blau, [1964](#)). Thus, to reduce their non-work-related behaviours, managers and supervisors should play an important role to make the work environment friendly. Managers should respect employees' self-esteem, which is primordial in a friendly working environment. Furthermore, organizations must take action and make policies regarding the use of the Internet in the workplace to avoid or minimize cyberloafing and support healthy working attitudes that help them succeed in the long-run (Koay & Soh, [2018](#)).

Limitations and Future Directions

Firstly, data were collected from two companies listed on the stock exchange. The results may be different if data were collected from at least 5-10 listed companies operating in the private sector. Secondly, the sample size was too small to avoid biases in the study. Thirdly, data should be gathered from various types of

organizations instead of those from the textile sector only. Fourthly, this study is quantitative, so further qualitative research might be helpful in revealing hidden the facts in detail. Lastly, moderating variables should be incorporated in the study including job satisfaction, organization citizenship behaviour, organization cynicism, and workplace spirituality.

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