

Workplace bullying and task performance: A study on salespeople in retail industry

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CHRONICLE

ABSTRACT

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Occupational stress has been known as a major cause of safety and health issues among salespeople in retail organizations. Despite this, numerous studies have indicated the importance of factors and outcomes of occupational stress in several occupations, a knowledge gap on occupational stress remains a hot topic of interest for academics and practitioners. This study aims to examine the workplace bullying as a factor and task performance as the outcome of occupational stress among salespeople in the retail industry in Malaysia. Questionnaires were distributed to salespeople in the large-scale retail organization. Data from 222 salespeople suggest that workplace bullying was positively related to occupational stress and in turn, it affects employee performance. These findings contribute to understanding how workplace bullying affects the occupational stress and how stress may affect the performance of salespeople. Implications were presented for employers and employees who should be viewed with caution, in turn, to reduce the occupational stress at the workplace.

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1. Introduction

Prevalence rates show millions of working Malaysians are suffering from mild levels of occupational stress (Man, 2010). Occupational stress has been increasingly recognized by academic researchers as the key factor that may influence employee performance. Man (2010) reported World Health Organization has indicated that many Malaysian admitted they were stressful. Some Malaysians reported they had stress (344,196 people in 2007 and 400,227 people in 2008). Further, Kumar (2013) reported one of the research carried out by Henderson which showed 70 percent of employees in Malaysia reported stress related illness due to economic fragility. Besides, workplace bullying is another global issue in organizations (Hallberg, 2007; Nielsen et al., 2010) which can lead to occupational stress problem among employees. Unfortunately, the issue of workplace bullying is facing difficulties particularly with its measurement due to lack of data and reported statistics in Malaysia, therefore limiting an understanding of how this factor is impacting on the Malaysian working population. Professor Dr. Marhani Midin, from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Medical Centre, reported that employees who have been bullied at the workplace would feel pressured as well as unhappy with their workplace and may have an effect on their productivity and quality of work in the organization (The Star Online, 5 May 2016).

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She added that the Malaysian working culture is quite worrying because most of the accomplishment is largely measured by competition with other employees which could eventually result in victimization among employees. We also see that the poor or even non-existent system for dealing with workplace bullying in Malaysia can increase the risk that one or more employees to feel stressed in the workplace. Occupational stress is not uncommon when the employees are exposed to workplace bullying.

More studies have been carried out during the last decade to investigate occupational stress. For example, studies found that level of occupational stress differ dramatically among employees due to some workplace factors such as workload, support, resources, control, recognition, person resiliency and compensation (Pagon et al., 2011; Prayogo et al., 2017). These studies argued that occupational stress is related to the negative impact on the well-being of employees in the organization. Employees with a high level of occupational stress are affecting their job performance, in turn, affecting the productivity of the organization. We focus on employee performance, not only because of their prevalence and importance on the organizations but also because the explanation of the workplace bullying-occupational stress-job performance relationship is lacking in the retail industry. Therefore, with the present paper, we aim to advance this line of research by investigating the influence of workplace bullying on occupational stress and how the effects of occupational stress may impact on employee performance in the context of the retail industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Occupational Stress

Occupational stress has been recognized as a major element which influences on individual's well-being. Besides, occupational stress is a global issue that is on the rise. In 2013, approximately 70 percent of individuals reported experiencing stress in Malaysia (Kumar, 2013). Quick and Henderson (2016) also mentioned that occupational stress is not a critical state that can be cured by treatment. Occupational stress could be considered as the second common well-being issues which is related to work in the workplace (Greiner, 2008). Occupational stress is anything concerning the working environment that causes individual perceived stress (Rohany, 2003). Occupational stress is comprised with the job characteristics that may influence the strains reaction for an individual. Also, most of the sources of occupational stress can be found in the workplace compared to other factors which are related to employee's family and social environment. Edwards (1992) indicated that occupational stress on sales jobs could emerge with the reason of imbalance of salespeople's appropriate job expectations. For instance, Langerak (2001) revealed that salespeople who work at the retail organizations must deal with many customers who have different expectations.

Occupational stress can directly affect the employee's performance, in turn, leads to decrease productivity in the organization. For example, Bryner (2006) indicated that employee who is living with occupational stress could decrease the productivity, decreased participation, and decreased retention in the organization. In other words, low productivity will lead to less profits for the organizations and can create a negative image of the organization on the current market. Furthermore, Nelson and Quick (2013) indicated that stress up to a certain level increases performance, and beyond that level, any further increase in stress weakens performance of the organization. This lends support to Milot (2012) who mentioned that employees who suffer from a high level of occupational stress lead to poor performance. Hence, the present study intends to examine workplace bullying as a factor and task performance as the outcome of occupational stress.

2.2 Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying is a long-lasting appearance, and it has been recognized as fundamental problem until the late of the 20th century (Yeh & Wang, 2014). We define workplace bullying as a continuous

mistreatment of one employee by another employee(s) at the workplace. Based on the research carried out by WBI (2010), workplace bullying has caused employee's physical and psychological health, negative of mood, low morale, and legal problems. Thus, workplace bullying may conduct an inadequate organizational climate leading to the employees' feeling stressful in the organizations. Besides, Cowie (2002) and Iftikhar and Qureshi (2014) pointed out that organizational climate can contribute to the incidence of workplace bullying. For example, imbalance of power in the workplace might lead to workplace bullying. Also, Agervold and Mikkelsen (2004) stated that uninteresting and unchallenging of work may arise the frustration among employees although there has been challenged on bullying (Qureshi et al., 2015; Qureshi et al., 2014). Zapf (1999) also mentioned that poor working environments might increase the risks of interpersonal conflict in turn of bullying in the workplace. When the employer does not provide a safe workplace and the employees start to fear for their well-being of such awful treatment of the target was feasible. This can show that workplace bullying could lead the bullied individuals to have difficulty for decision making, lack of concentration on the job, and being less productive in the workplace (Loh et al., 2010). In line with these arguments, this prompt to the first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Workplace bullying is positively related to occupational stress.

2.3 Task Performance

According to Faulkner and Patiar (1997) work environment might be the primary source of occupational stress for employees considering the measure of time spent and the way that monetary security and career accomplishment are liable to job performance. Porter and Lawler (1968) indicated that there are three types of performance evaluation. Firstly, the purpose of productivity conceivable outcomes, which is spending more than the provided time frame for the sales and the advancement of a bunch of recruit's reportage to the manager. The second kind of performance holds valuations of an individual by a vital individual compared with the individual whose performance is measured. The last performance measures are regarding self-appraisal as well as self-ratings. The previous study found that extreme occupational stress could be considered as a dysfunctional and diminishing commitment as well as efficiency in the organization (Montgomery et al., 1996). Besides, the study accomplished by Siu (2003) is likewise consistent with the finding which found that occupational stress wastes time as well as vitality that an employee dedicates diffusing with the stressor, controlling emphasis on the task and thus disturbing their performance in an organization. In another word, an employee can perform well with interesting work, good working environment, and to feel valued, whereas, stressful comes with a boring situation, poor physical working conditions and meet the deadlines could affect directly on employee's job performance. Hence, occupational stress could affect lower employee performance in the organization. Our second hypothesis follows these arguments:

Hypothesis 2: Occupational stress is negatively related to task performance.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

Occupational stress, workplace bullying, and task performance were modeled as a formative construct. In the formative indicators model, the latent construct is acquired from its parts. According to MacKenzie et al. (2005), each of the indicator contributes as unique to the conceptual domain of the latent construct, thus, dropping a formative indicator is not a mandatory from a measurement model because it could cause more damaging than the reflective indicator model. Hence, there are no any indicators dropped from the measurement model even though some of the indicators shown an insignificance effect on indicator loading or weights. Fig. 1 presented the research model in the study.

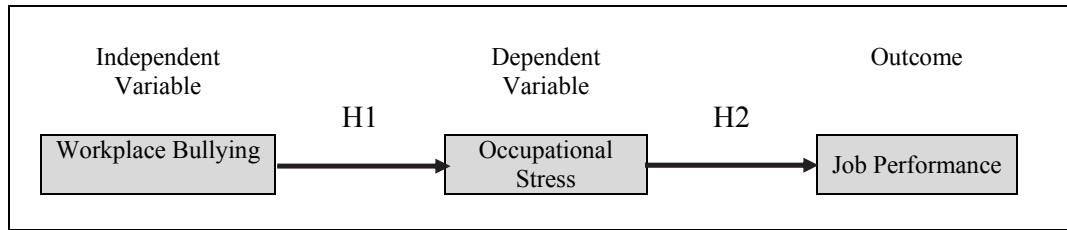


Fig. 1. Research Model

3.2 Procedure and Participants

Data were collected from 6 large-scale retail organizations in Malaysia. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed to the salespeople working in the retail organizations. Respondents are given a briefing letter with explaining the purpose of the study, convincing confidentiality, and providing contact details of the researchers. The handoff, as well as the pick-up method was utilized because this method has been appeared to create a higher response rate instead of mail survey method (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). Completed questionnaires were returned to the researchers within two days after the questionnaire was distributed to the salespeople. Of these 350 questionnaires distributed, a total 245 questionnaires were returned, generating an excellent response rate of 70.0%. However, only 222 questionnaires were usable and provided a final response rate of 63.4%. As shown in Table 1, the average respondents in our final sample were women (57.7%, N=222), with age ranging 21-25 years (mean = 3.54, S.D. = 2.2 years). All of them worked full-time; with the organization tenure ranging 1-5 years (mean = 2.5, S.D. = 1.5 years) and 67.1% held the highest qualification with SPM.

Table 1
Respondents' Profile

Demographic Variable	Category	(N = 222)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	94	42.3
	Female	128	57.7
Age	< 20 years old	38	17.1
	21 - 25 years old	59	26.6
	26 - 30 years old	35	15.8
	31 - 35 years old	21	9.5
	36 - 40 years old	16	7.2
	41 - 45 years old	23	10.4
	46 - 50 years old	16	7.2
	51 - 55 years old	14	6.3
Race	Malays	126	56.8
	Chinese	69	31.1
	Indian	22	9.9
	Others	5	2.3
Tenure with Present Organization	< 1 years	60	27.0
	1 - 5 years	77	34.7
	6 - 10 years	38	17.1
	11 - 15 years	15	6.8
	16 - 20 years	20	9.0
	21 - 25 years	10	4.5
	26 - 30 years	1	0.5
	> 30 years	1	0.5
	46 - 50 years old	16	7.2
	51 - 55 years old	14	6.3
Highest Academic Qualification	Primary	6	2.7
	Diploma	32	14.4
	SPM	149	67.1
	STPM	25	11.3
	Degree	9	4.1
	Masters	0	0.0
	PhD	1	0.5

3.3 Measures

Occupational stress, the dependent variable, was measured using five items from the scale developed by Crank et al. (1995). The sample item is: 'When I am at work I often feel tense or uptight.' Respondents rate their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly agree; 5=strongly disagree). The Cronbach' Alpha value reported was $\alpha = 0.82$.

Workplace bullying, the independent variable, was measured using 22 items from Negative Act Question-Revised (NAQ-R) which developed by (Einarsen et al., 2009). The example of an item is 'I get hints or signal from others that I should quit my job.' Finally, previous research was reported an overall reliability value with $\alpha = 0.90$.

Job performance. The measurement for job performance consisted of seven-items referring to the task performance developed by Williams and Anderson (1991). All the items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale with ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The example of an item is 'Adequately complete assigned duties.' The Cronbach' Alpha for task performance is 0.91.

5. Data Analysis and Results

Partial least squares (PLS) were employed in the present study. Before examining the hypotheses of the study, the measuring instrument was accessed using PLS regression. To access the formative construct, collinearity issue was tested through the variance inflation factor (VIF), with the values inferior to 5 (see Table 2). Chin (1998) recommended an assessment of the structural model in PLS which is determination coefficients R^2 . As stated at in Table 4, the R^2 of the endogenous variable sufficient passed the minimum level of 10%(Falk & Miller, 1992). Also, the indicator Q^2 was obtained using blindfolding which was greater than 0 (see Table 3), and it guaranteed the model is predictive relevance (Chin, 1998). After assessing the measuring instrument, the relationship among construct was analyzed using path coefficient and the significance. In addition, structural paths in the structural model were evaluated to ascertain the significance of the path coefficients. Path coefficients and t values were examined to obtain the significance of the structural oath in the research model. Through the data analysis, the PLS algorithm as well as bootstrapping were examined for testing the research hypotheses. Moreover, bootstrapping was run based on 5000 resamples on the formative measurement model as suggested by Hair Jr et al. (2016).

To ascertain the path coefficient as well as t values, 5000 resamples were run as bootstrapping in the present study. The only one hypothesized relationships in the research model are supported (see Table 4). Workplace bullying ($\beta: 0.529; p < 0.05$) was found to have a positive relationship with occupational stress (*Hypothesis 1*). Although the relationship between occupational stress and task performance was significant, *Hypothesis 2* ($\beta: 0.382; p < 0.05$) was not supported. This is because the direction of the relationship was positive, which was opposite of what has been hypothesized in the present study.

Table 2

Tolerance and VIF Values for Independent and Outcomes Variables

Variables	Tolerance Values	VIF Values
Workplace Bullying	0.671	1.490
Task Performance	0.832	1.203

Table 3

Cross-Validated Redundancy for the Endogenous Variable

Endogenous Variable	Q^2 (Cross-Validate Redundancy)
Occupational Stress	0.196

Table 4
Results of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Standard	Standard Er-	t Value	R ²	Decision
H1	WB → OS	0.5299	0.1984	2.6716*	0.2808	Supported
H2	OS → TP	0.3826	0.2171	1.7626*	0.1464	Not Supported

* $p < 0.05$

6. Discussion and Implications

The present research was designed to examine the relationship between workplace bullying, occupational stress, and task performance among salespeople in the retail industry. Further, to gain insight into why many employees were admitted stressful in the workplace, we examined the factor and outcome of occupational stress in the present research.

Regarding the factor of occupational stress which is workplace bullying has shown that there is a positive relationship between occupational stress and workplace bullying, thus, Hypothesis 1 (H1) was well supported. This suggests that workplace bullying can lead to occupational stress. The present study lends support to Einarsen et al. (1994) which reveal that workplace bullying is most frequent in the workplace with a negative and stressful working environment in turn may lead to occupational stress among employees. Hoobler (2010) found that workplace bullying was positively related to occupational stress. In other words, the target of workplace bullying who feel lack of resources to protect themselves, in turn, leading to consequences of workplace bullying likely more damaging on well-being and performance.

Based on the finding of the present research, Hypothesis (H2) was not supported. Instead of negative relationship, we found that there was a positive relationship between occupational stress and task performance. This finding indicates that salesperson who has a high level of occupational stress could improve their performance in the retail industry. This finding speaks to the importance of the local context and setting in determining the relationship between occupational stress and task performance. The result also implies that retail industry setting has a different corporate culture: the salespeople are always working in the stressful environment and they are always given a sales target/goal. The nature of the retail industry is always very dynamic and competitive. Employees are expected to perform and handle stressful situation “*without cracking under pressure*”. Employees who are working in the retail industry may not surprise with this type of the job nature because they know that to expect and this may result in better performance. This is consistent with the findings of Wong et al. (2001) who suggested that a competitive internal environment leads to stress could motivate the employees to improve the performance of the organization. They mentioned that competition among an organization’s salesperson in stimulated by concentrating on the accomplishment of sales targets and it would relate to monetary rewards, in turn, to improve the employee performance in the organization. Hence, our analysis in this setting suggests that when salespeople experience stress, they are more likely to perform better. Another possible reason to explain this interesting finding is over three-quarter of the respondents in the present study are relatively young, and they are Generation Y (not more than 40 year old). Young employees have more cognitive resources to cope with work stress. Compared to older counterparts (employees who are older than 40 years old), young employees are more impervious to occupational stress, partly because they may not perceive the situation as stressful and thus could handle their stress which in turn leads to better job performance. Hence, we believe that the attribute of the respondents explain a fraction of this phenomenon. Our study provides evidence that occupational stress can and does affect employee performance in a positive way. Most of the studies (Alamer et al., 2015; Alkubaisi, 2015; Siu, 2003) reported that occupational stress may impact employee performance negatively. Moreover, the factors and outcomes of occupational stress are very important to salespeople in the retail industry in Malaysia. The present research aims to provide several implications for practitioners as well as academicians. The implication serves as providing to the body of knowledge and as a suggestion to the retail industry. First, the literature of occupational stress was expanded through this

research which conducted among salespeople within the retail industry context in a non-Western country. Specifically, occupational stress is an important concept in the work domain which is better comprehended from the perspective of salespeople in this industry.

Other than the theoretical contributions, the findings of the present study likewise give important recommendations to practitioners in the human resource profession. This is an important reminder to the human resource managers to become more knowledgeable about occupational stress, risk factors of occupational stress and its effects. This is because that the occupational stress has become an important determinant of the productivity of the organizations and it is important to reduce the occupational stress among employees by applying right human resource policies in the organizations. The human resource manager is encouraged to organize the stress management programs for their employees because it can help to decrease the level of occupational stress among employee by increasing their work conditions and maintain good health or behaviors. Moreover, human resource manager must assure the working environment is free of bullying practices by assuring that sufficient and equitable HR system is in the workplace. For instance, the use of organizational support and anti-bullying policies are suggested practice in the organization. Thus, it can warrant such practices are restraint and the assistance of free avenues for bullied employees to voice injustices in the workplace.

Aside from the theoretical and practical implications, the present research has contributed methodologically which is a usage of PLS-SEM. This research is among few occupational stress studies which have utilized SEM-PLS. Undeniably, employ SEM in the research not just gives approaches to examine the relationship in the hypothesized model yet additionally represents the measurement errors in the scales that measure the theoretical builds in the model. Through the inspection of the measurement model, the measurements employed in the present research have shown valid and reliable. This also indicates that the used of the measurement model could be applicable within the Malaysia context. Thus, the important of these research findings would contribute to the more useful literature in expanding the existing body of knowledge.

7. Limitations and Future Research

First, the limitations of this study are the sample used in the current study only represents retail industry. These findings may not be generalized to other setting. We recognize that retail setting may differ from other organizations. For example, the nature if this industry is competitive and stress is common and which may make stress more common and strengthen its effect on the task performance of the salespeople. Thus, future researchers should seek to empirically testing the model using other context. Another limitation relates to the fact that we do not examine the potential dyadic relationship between workplace bullying and occupational stress. For instance, Einarsen (2000) found that an employee whom frustration with a stressful work can lead to an aggressive behavior. It could be the nature of rivalry among the salespeople may lead to more cases of workplace bullying. The current empirical setting provided very limited opportunity to explore the dyadic relationship between workplace bullying and occupational stress. This dark side of rivalry may present possibilities for future research to address the potential dyadic relationships between workplace bullying and occupational stress. Given these findings, we believe that our results are still noteworthy.

There are few worthwhile avenues for future research on workplace bullying and occupational stress. The present study suggests to introduce a potential moderator such as perceived organizational support, person-environment fit and other potential moderators in reducing the occupational stress among employees in the organization. For example, being aware organizational support as documented in the occupational stress, it will be an interesting attempt to uncover whether there are a mediation or moderation effects in occupational stress among salespeople and how this impact on the outcomes variables under the study. Moreover, the present research suggests that the future research should examine and

enhance the proposed research model to propel the knowledge concerning the factors that related to occupational stress context and behaviors among employees in the organizations.

In conclusion, this study is expected to provide hope to retail organizations to successfully to identify the risk factor and outcomes caused by occupational stress. Workplace bullying is associated with occupational stress which is consistent with the expectations based on the previous study. Also, occupational stress can improve the task performance among employees in the organization, and it is consistent with the previous research. Future research is needed to expand upon this work by introducing mediation or moderation effects to reducing the occupational stress among employees in the organization.

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Appendix

Items in the Occupational Stress Scale

1	A lot of time, my job makes me very frustrated or angry.
2	I am usually under a lot of pressure when I am at work.
3	When I am at work I often feel tense or uptight.
4	I am usually calm and at ease when I am working. (-)
5	There are many aspects of my job that make me upset.

Note. Adopted from (Crank et al., 1995) (-) item reversed in scoring

Items in the Workplace Bullying Scale

1	I face threats of violence or physical abuse.
2	In my organization, people having intimidating behavior (e.g.: finger pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving, etc.).
3	I am being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger.
4	Someone withholding information which influences my performance.
5	I am being ordered to work below my ability level.
6	I am being ignored when giving opinions or views.
7	I am being given tasks with unreasonable deadline.
8	I am being excessive monitoring on work.
9	I feel pressure to claim something to which by right I am entitled (e.g. sick leave, holiday, entitlement, travel expenses).
10	I am being exposed to an unmanageable workload.
11	I am being humiliated or ridiculed regarding my work.
12	My key areas of responsibilities have been removed.
13	Spreading of gossips and rumors about me.
14	I am being ignored or excluded.
15	Hostile and offending comments are made about my personality, habits, background or private life.
16	I get hints or signal from others that I should quit my job.
17	I keep repeated reminders of mistakes or error on the job.
18	I am facing a hostile reaction when I approach people.
19	Persistent criticism of my work and effort.
20	Practical jokes carried out by people I do not get along with.
21	Allegations are being made against me.
22	I am being teased.

Note. Adapted from (Staal Einarsen et al., 2009)

Items in the Job Performance Scale

1	Adequately complete assigned duties.
2	Fulfill responsibilities specified in the job description.
3	Perform tasks that are expected of me.
4	Meet formal performance requirements of the job.
5	Engage in activities that will directly affect my performance evaluation.
6	Neglect aspects of the job I obliged to perform. (-)
7	Fail to perform essential duties. (-)

Note. Adapted from (Williams & Anderson, 1991) (-) items reversed in scoring



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