

Workplace Bullying and Job Performance in the Malaysian Public Sector: Examining the Mediating Role of Work Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Following the enactment of the Penal Code (Amendment) Act 2025, psychological harassment has been formally criminalised in Malaysia, highlighting the urgency of understanding its organisational consequences. This study investigates the impact of workplace bullying on job performance among support staff in the Public Works Department (PWD) Sarawak and examines the mediating role of work engagement. Grounded in Public Service Motivation (PSM) theory and the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, data were collected from 504 support personnel using the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R), the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9), and the Individual Work Performance Questionnaire (IWPQ). Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples was employed to test the mediation model. The results indicate that workplace bullying significantly reduces job performance both directly and indirectly through diminished work engagement. The findings suggest that bullying operates as a high-intensity job demand that depletes motivational resources essential for effective public service delivery. These results underscore the importance of integrating legal reform with organisational strategies to strengthen psychological safety and employee engagement in the Malaysian public sector.

INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying has emerged as a critical organisational issue affecting employee well-being, productivity, and institutional effectiveness. Characterised by repeated exposure to negative acts such as intimidation, humiliation, or social exclusion, workplace bullying can create a hostile work environment that undermines employees' psychological and professional functioning (Einarsen et al., 2020). While the phenomenon has been widely examined in private sector organisations, increasing attention has been

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directed toward its prevalence and consequences within the public sector, where hierarchical structures and power asymmetries may intensify vulnerability to mistreatment.

In many public institutions, employees operate within rigid organisational systems where reporting mechanisms and mobility opportunities may be limited. These structural characteristics may inadvertently allow subtle forms of psychological harassment to persist without formal recognition. Recent studies suggest that workplace bullying can contribute to a range of negative outcomes, including reduced job satisfaction, increased turnover intentions, and declining organisational commitment (Nguyen et al., 2019). More critically, bullying may impair employees' ability to maintain the psychological energy and motivation required for effective job performance.

Within the Malaysian context, workplace bullying has gained increasing attention in both organisational and policy discussions. Cultural norms associated with hierarchical authority and respect for seniority may sometimes discourage employees from reporting interpersonal mistreatment, particularly within public service environments (Kwan et al., 2020). As a result, bullying behaviours may remain underreported despite their potential impact on employee well-being and organisational productivity. Understanding how such behaviours influence performance outcomes is therefore essential for strengthening governance and workforce management within the public sector.

Existing literature has established a relationship between workplace bullying and various work-related outcomes; however, the mechanisms through which bullying affects job performance remain less clearly understood. In particular, limited empirical research has examined the mediating role of work engagement in explaining how exposure to workplace bullying translates into diminished performance. Work engagement reflects a positive, work-related psychological state characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2006). When employees experience hostile interpersonal treatment, their psychological attachment to work may weaken, which may subsequently affect their ability to perform effectively.

The present study draws upon the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) framework and Public Service Motivation (PSM) theory to examine this relationship. Within the JD-R framework, workplace bullying can be conceptualised as a job demand that depletes employees' psychological resources, thereby reducing work engagement and performance capacity (Baillien et al., 2011). At the same time, PSM theory suggests that public sector employees are often motivated by intrinsic values, such as a commitment to public service and a sense of moral duty (Ritz et al., 2016). However, adverse organisational environments may weaken the expression of these intrinsic motivations, limiting their ability to translate into sustained work engagement and performance outcomes.

Given these theoretical considerations, further empirical examination is required to understand how workplace bullying influences employee performance within public sector organisations. In particular, examining the mediating role of work engagement may provide deeper insights into the psychological processes through which bullying affects work outcomes.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between workplace bullying and job performance among employees in the Malaysian public sector, with particular attention to the mediating role of work engagement. By examining these relationships, the study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on workplace bullying and public sector management, while offering insights that may inform organisational strategies for fostering healthier and more productive work environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Workplace Bullying in the Malaysian Public Sector

Workplace bullying refers to repeated exposure to negative acts such as intimidation, exclusion, humiliation, or deliberate work obstruction (Einarsen et al., 2020). In public sector organisations, hierarchical authority structures may normalise coercive supervisory behaviours, making bullying less visible yet equally harmful (El Ghaziri et al., 2021).

In high power-distance cultures such as Malaysia (Hofstede, 2011), employees may interpret authoritarian leadership as legitimate managerial control rather than mistreatment. Consequently, underreporting is common, particularly among lower-ranked employees who possess limited structural power (Kwan et al., 2020). This cultural dynamic may partially explain why formal complaints often underestimate actual exposure levels.

The ratification of the Penal Code (Amendment) Act 2025 signals Malaysia's formal recognition of psychological harassment as a criminal offence. However, legislation alone does not automatically transform organisational culture. Empirical evidence remains necessary to determine the operational implications of bullying within public institutions.

Workplace Bullying and Job Performance

Extensive empirical research demonstrates that workplace bullying significantly reduces both task and contextual performance (Sun et al., 2025). Exposure to persistent mistreatment functions as a chronic stressor that impairs cognitive functioning, concentration, and decision-making ability (Ng et al., 2023).

In public sector contexts, performance deterioration carries broader implications beyond organisational efficiency. Public institutions operate under mandates of service delivery, accountability, and ethical governance. Thus, bullying may indirectly compromise service quality and public trust.

Meta-analytic findings indicate that bullied employees exhibit increased emotional exhaustion, disengagement, and counterproductive work behaviours (Asghar & Zulfiqar, 2025; Siddique et al., 2025). These behavioural outcomes suggest that bullying operates not merely as an interpersonal issue but as a systemic productivity risk. Accordingly, the first hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Workplace bullying negatively influences job performance.

Workplace Bullying and Work Engagement

Work engagement is defined as a positive, fulfilling work-related psychological state characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Within the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) framework, engagement is sustained when job resources outweigh job demands.

Bullying represents a severe job demand that consumes emotional and psychological resources (Baillien et al., 2011). Persistent exposure may erode employees' intrinsic motivation and diminish their willingness to invest discretionary effort.

Studies in public sector environments confirm that abusive supervision and bullying significantly reduce engagement levels (Nguyen et al., 2019; Siddique et al., 2025). When employees experience hostility, they may withdraw psychologically as a protective mechanism. Therefore:

H2: Workplace bullying negatively influences work engagement.

Work Engagement as a Mediator: Integrating PSM and JD-R

Public Service Motivation (PSM) theory posits that public employees are driven by intrinsic values such as civic duty and compassion (Ritz et al., 2016). However, motivational resources require supportive organisational climates to translate into performance outcomes.

The JD-R model complements this view by explaining how excessive job demands deplete psychological energy, thereby weakening engagement and subsequent performance (Woods et al., 2018).

Bullying may therefore disrupt the motivational pathway between PSM and performance by undermining engagement. When engagement declines, performance is likely to follow. Accordingly:

H3: Work engagement mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and job performance.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Philosophical Stance

To empirically assess the link between workplace bullying, engagement, and performance, this study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional design. The goal was to validate the application of Public Service Motivation (PSM) Theory within the specific context of the Malaysian public sector. As Teo et al. (2021) point out, a state of 'psychological captivity' can develop when the secure nature of a permanent position serves to bind one to the toxic source rather than protect them.

Population and Sampling

This study focuses on support groups 1 and 2, grades 19 to 38 at the Public Works Department (PWD) Sarawak. This group is a technical and non-technical support team that is the backbone of the department's daily operations. Although they are support groups, they have many responsibilities but no power to make any decisions. According to Bret et al. (2025), the lack of power places this group in a very high-risk position to become victims of workplace bullying. The rigid hierarchy exerts systemic pressure downward, concentrating authoritarian aggression at this level.

Sampling Technique and Constraints

PWD Sarawak is the largest agency in the Sarawak civil service, with a network of operational offices at its headquarters and 12 PWD Divisional offices from Kuching to Limbang. The location of these PWD offices is a significant challenge in this study. Although the Equal Probability of Selection Method (EPSEM) represents statistical optimality, the vast geography of the state makes the purity of this methodology impractical under operational constraints. As a result, the study shifted to an unbalanced stratified random sampling strategy to balance rigour with feasibility. Therefore, to ensure the sampling represents each job grade and service group, the study population was distributed across all PWD Sarawak offices. A total of 504 valid responses surpasses the minimum threshold recommended by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) and offers adequate statistical power for mediation analysis utilising Hayes' PROCESS Macro.

Instrumentation and Operationalisation

The study used three established instruments, all anchored on a 5-point Likert scale.

Workplace Bullying

Exposure to toxicity was quantified via the 22-item Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R) (Einarsen et al., 2009). This instrument measures exposure to bullying behaviours without explicitly using

the term ‘bullying’, thereby reducing denial among victims. The instrument demonstrated robust internal reliability, returning a Cronbach’s alpha of .91.

Work Engagement

Work engagement was mapped using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) (Schaufeli et al., 2006), spanning vigour, dedication, and absorption. Consistent with Field (2018), a single item was discarded due to insufficient factor loading, thereby optimising the scale and achieving a final reliability coefficient of .88.

Job Performance

To assess job performance, it was quantified using the Individual Work Performance Questionnaire (IWPQ) (Koopmans et al., 2016), which, due to its multidimensional lens, transcends basic task metrics to specifically account for contextual contributions and counterproductive behaviours. The scale demonstrated high stability, registering a reliability coefficient of .86

Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Translation Process

Since the original instrument was devised by researchers from Western countries, just translating the words is insufficient. To ensure the accuracy of meaning, this study adopts a rigorous translation procedure based on Brislin (1970). The emphasis is on emotional resonance rather than literal syntax; for example, abstract phrases like ‘hostility’ are translated into local equivalents such as ‘rude’ or ‘uncivilised’ to ensure the instrument accurately reflects the realities of working life in Sarawak.

Data Collection Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Given the cohort’s spatial dispersion, a digital administration channel became a pragmatic necessity to overcome logistical constraints. However, speed was secondary to safety. Given the sensitivity of the topic, the platform was hard-coded for absolute anonymity, logging zero email addresses or digital footprints. The accompanying cover letter made a firm promise: participation was voluntary, and results would be aggregated strictly. This guarantee was non-negotiable. It was the only way to dismantle the ‘fear of reprisal’ that usually keeps victims of workplace toxicity silent.

Data Analysis Strategy

IBM SPSS Version 26 was used to analyse the data and bivariate relationships using Pearson’s correlation. Hayes’ PROCESS Macro (Model 4) was used to test hypotheses. This method was prioritised over the traditional causal steps approach to maximise statistical power; by utilising 5,000 bootstrap resamples, it provides a rigorous test of the indirect effect that remains robust even if the assumption of normality is violated.

FINDINGS

Respondent Demographic Profile

The sample (N = 504) represents a gender-balanced workforce within the Public Works Department (PWD) of Sarawak. The largest age group was 31-40 years (44%). In terms of tenure, 20.6% of respondents reported more than 21 years of service, indicating a relatively experienced employee population. Operationally, 70% of respondents belonged to Support Group 1, reflecting the department’s technical support workforce. Regarding educational background, approximately half of the respondents held a diploma qualification. Regarding income distribution, the majority of respondents (61.1%) reported monthly earnings between RM2,501 and RM4,500.

Prevalence of Bullying

Descriptive analysis indicates that while mean scores for overt verbal and physical aggression were relatively low, 41% of respondents reported experiencing bullying behaviours at least occasionally. This suggests that although severe forms of workplace bullying may be less frequent, lower-intensity forms of psychological mistreatment may still occur within the work environment.

Hypothesis Testing and Mediation Analysis

The hypothesised mediation model was tested using Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples.

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 proposed that workplace bullying negatively influences job performance. The results indicate that workplace bullying has a significant negative direct effect on job performance ($\beta = -0.31$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = -3.88$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-0.47, -0.15]$).

Thus, H₁ is supported, indicating that higher exposure to workplace bullying is associated with lower job performance.

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 proposed that workplace bullying negatively influences work engagement. The results show that workplace bullying significantly predicts work engagement ($\beta = -0.38$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = -5.43$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-0.51, -0.25]$).

Therefore, H₂ is supported, confirming that workplace bullying significantly reduces employee work engagement.

Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 proposed that work engagement mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and job performance. The mediation analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of workplace bullying on job performance through work engagement ($\beta = -0.21$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI $[-0.33, -0.09]$).

Because the bootstrapped confidence interval does not include zero, the mediation effect is statistically significant. Furthermore, the direct effect of workplace bullying on job performance remains significant after accounting for work engagement, indicating partial mediation.

Thus, H₃ is supported. The detailed mediation results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mediation Analysis of Workplace Bullying, Work Engagement, and Job Performance (N = 504)

Pathway	Coefficient (β)	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (LL, UL)
Bullying → Engagement	-0.38	0.07	-5.43	<.001	[-0.51, -0.25]
Engagement → Performance	0.47	0.06	7.83	<.001	[0.35, 0.59]
Bullying → Performance (Direct)	-0.31	0.08	-3.88	<.001	[-0.47, -0.15]
Indirect Effect (a × b)	-0.21	0.06	—	—	[-0.33, -0.09]
Total Effect	-0.52	0.07	-7.43	<.001	[-0.66, -0.38]
R ² (Model)	0.38				

Note: Indirect effect significance was assessed via bootstrapping (5,000 samples). The 95% Confidence Interval (CI) does not include zero, indicating a statistically significant mediation effect.

CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit—bounds within which the true effect is likely to fall with 95% certainty.

Model Summary

As shown in Table 1, workplace bullying demonstrates a significant total effect on job performance ($\beta = -0.52, p < .001$). The overall model explains 38% of the variance in job performance ($R^2 = 0.38$), indicating moderate explanatory power. The calculated effect size ($f^2 = 0.24$) further suggests that workplace bullying, and work engagement jointly contribute meaningfully to explaining variations in job performance.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the relationship between workplace bullying and job performance among support staff in the Malaysian public sector, with work engagement tested as a mediating mechanism. The findings confirm that workplace bullying exerts both direct and indirect effects on job performance.

Consistent with prior meta-analytic evidence (Sun et al., 2025), workplace bullying significantly reduced job performance. This supports the proposition that repeated exposure to negative acts functions as a chronic stressor, impairing concentration, decision-making, and task execution. Within technical and project-oriented agencies such as the Public Works Department, even moderate performance reductions can lead to cumulative operational inefficiencies.

The results further demonstrate that workplace bullying significantly reduces work engagement. This finding aligns with the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) framework, which conceptualises bullying as a high-intensity job demand that depletes psychological resources required to sustain vigour and dedication (Baillien et al., 2011). When engagement declines, employees may withdraw psychologically as a protective response to preserve emotional stability.

Importantly, the mediation analysis confirmed that work engagement partially mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and job performance. This indicates that bullying impairs performance not only through immediate behavioural disruption but also through motivational erosion. The finding provides empirical support for Public Service Motivation (PSM) theory by demonstrating that intrinsic civic orientation alone may not sufficiently buffer employees against sustained hostile work environments. While public servants may enter service with strong prosocial values, adverse organisational climates may weaken the translation of those values into effective performance outcomes.

The partial mediation effect further suggests the presence of additional pathways linking bullying to performance decline, potentially including physiological stress responses or resource deprivation. Future longitudinal research may clarify the temporal dynamics of these mechanisms.

These findings also carry broader labour market relevance. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025), Malaysia's employed workforce exceeds 17 million persons, with the majority engaged as paid employees. Given the scale of formal employment within the public and private sectors, workplace factors that reduce engagement and performance may have aggregate implications for service delivery and organisational productivity. Thus, workplace bullying should be conceptualised not only as an interpersonal issue but also as a structural governance concern.

Beyond organisational efficiency, the findings intersect with Sarawak's Post-Covid-19 Development Strategy 2030 (PCDS 2030), which identifies infrastructure expansion and talent management as strategic enablers of high-income status (Economic Planning Unit Sarawak, 2021). While PCDS 2030 emphasises physical infrastructure growth, sustainable development equally depends on maintaining a resilient and motivated public workforce. The present evidence suggests that unresolved workplace bullying may constrain the effective realisation of these strategic objectives by eroding employee engagement and performance capacity.

Taken together, the results position workplace bullying as a multidimensional organisational risk that affects performance, motivation, and long-term institutional effectiveness. Legal reforms such as the Penal

Code (Amendment) Act 2025 establish an important regulatory framework; however, complementary organisational strategies are required to strengthen psychological safety and sustain performance outcomes.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The empirical findings of this study provide several implications for public sector governance and organisational management.

First, the significant direct effect of workplace bullying on job performance indicates that exposure to negative acts produces measurable operational consequences. Public agencies should therefore treat bullying prevention as a performance management priority rather than solely a disciplinary or human resource matter. Embedding anti-bullying indicators within organisational risk management systems may strengthen accountability and early detection.

Second, the confirmed negative relationship between workplace bullying and work engagement, together with the partial mediation effect, suggests that engagement functions as a critical performance pathway. Within the JD-R framework, bullying operates as a resource-depleting demand. Public institutions should therefore reinforce job resources to counterbalance this demand. Practical interventions may include enhancing task autonomy, improving communication transparency, establishing structured recognition mechanisms, and promoting participatory supervisory practices.

Third, because mediation was partial rather than full, policy responses must operate at multiple levels. Preventive leadership training, confidential reporting channels, psychological safety audits, and periodic climate assessments may reduce both overt and subtle forms of workplace mistreatment. Additionally, incorporating employee engagement metrics into Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for managerial roles may align leadership incentives with workforce wellbeing.

From a regulatory standpoint, the Penal Code (Amendment) Act 2025 signals Malaysia's formal recognition of psychological harassment as a serious offence. However, legal compliance alone may not restore engagement or performance once organisational trust has been weakened. Preventive governance mechanisms and internal cultural reforms are therefore essential complements to statutory enforcement.

At the macro-policy level, public sector workforce stability and productivity contribute to broader national development objectives. As Malaysia's labour force exceeds 17 million employed individuals (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025), maintaining psychologically safe and productive workplaces is aligned with national economic sustainability. In the Sarawak context, PCDS 2030 identifies talent management as a strategic enabler of development. Ensuring supportive organisational climates within public institutions therefore supports not only departmental performance but also long-term development planning.

In sum, workplace bullying should be addressed through integrated governance strategies that combine legal deterrence, organisational accountability, and resource-enhancing interventions. Addressing bullying is not merely a compliance requirement but a strategic investment in public sector resilience, service quality, and sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between workplace bullying and job performance among support staff in the Malaysian public sector, with work engagement tested as a mediating mechanism. The findings provide empirical evidence that workplace bullying significantly reduces job performance both directly and indirectly through diminished work engagement.

The results confirm that bullying functions as a high-intensity job demand that depletes psychological resources essential for sustained motivation and effective task execution. The partial mediation effect indicates that performance decline occurs not only through immediate behavioural disruption but also through the erosion of employee engagement. These findings contribute to the integration of Public Service Motivation (PSM) theory and the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) framework by demonstrating how adverse organisational climates may weaken the translation of intrinsic civic values into measurable performance outcomes.

From an organisational perspective, the findings position workplace bullying as a structural performance risk rather than solely an interpersonal conflict. While the Penal Code (Amendment) Act 2025 provides an important legal deterrent, sustainable institutional effectiveness requires complementary organisational strategies that strengthen psychological safety and leadership accountability.

This study should be interpreted in light of its cross-sectional design, which limits causal inference. Although statistical associations are robust, longitudinal research would provide stronger evidence regarding the temporal dynamics of bullying, engagement, and performance decline. Additionally, reliance on self-reported measures may introduce perceptual bias, despite steps taken to ensure anonymity and reduce common method variance.

Future research may extend this work by employing longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to explore coping mechanisms, organisational culture factors, and additional mediating or moderating variables. Replication across other public agencies would further clarify whether the observed patterns represent a broader institutional phenomenon.

In conclusion, maintaining psychologically safe work environments is essential for sustaining employee engagement and performance within the public sector. Addressing workplace bullying should therefore be viewed as a strategic investment in organisational resilience, service quality, and long-term development capacity.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the conduct, analysis, or publication of this research.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The author is the sole contributor to this paper. She was responsible for the entire research lifecycle, including the conceptual framework, research design, data collection, and statistical analysis using SPSS and process MACRO. The author drafted, revised, and approved the final manuscript for publication.

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