Workplace Mobbing, Gender Differences, and Depression: Evidence from Internship Students of the Faculty of Business and Management, University Technology MARA in Klang Valley, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Background - Workplace mobbing represents a persistent challenge for early career professionals and is associated with serious psychological consequences. This study investigated whether gender moderates the link between mobbing experiences covering bullying, incivility, and ostracism and depressive symptoms among internship students in Klang Valley. Guided by the Conservation of Resources theory and the Job Demands–Resources model, the research examined how these dynamics differ for men and women.

Participants and Procedure - A cross sectional survey was conducted with 220 undergraduate interns from the Faculty of Business and Management at Universiti Teknologi MARA. Participants, aged 22 to 25, completed the Negative Acts Questionnaire, Workplace Incivility Scale and to capture workplace mobbing and the Beck Depression Inventory to measure depressive symptoms. Data were analyzed using the PROCESS macro, with moderation assessed through regression-based models.

Results - The results showed significant positive correlations between mobbing and depression ($r = .52–.73$, $p < .001$). Gender moderated this relationship across all mobbing forms, with male interns demonstrating stronger depressive responses than females. Ostracism produced the most pronounced gender effect ($B = 2.73$). Supervisors were reported by 80.5% of respondents as the main perpetrators, highlighting the influence of hierarchical structures on interns' mental health.

Conclusions - The findings highlight the vulnerability of interns within supervisory power dynamics and stress the need for gender-sensitive support strategies. Recommendations include strengthening supervisory accountability, reducing stigma, and providing confidential counseling tailored to the distinct needs of internship students.

Keywords: workplace mobbing; gender; depression; internship students; supervisory accountability

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Workplace mobbing, a concept originally drawn from animal behavior studies, was later adapted to organizational settings by Heinz Leymann in 1990. He described it as a series of hostile and repeated actions deliberately aimed at undermining an individual's work performance and social standing in the workplace (Leymann, 1990). Building on this foundation, European researchers have emphasized the role of power

dynamics, characterizing workplace mobbing as persistent negative behaviors often intensified by imbalanced power relationships (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2010).

Modern theories such as the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory and the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model explain how continued exposure to such behaviors can drain an individual's emotional and professional resources. This often leads to psychological strain and reduced work effectiveness (Fauzi et al., 2022).

Research consistently shows that mobbing can severely impact mental health, particularly among interns. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare interns exposed to bullying reported heightened levels of depression due to compromised psychological well-being (Mamani-Benito et al., 2022). Similarly, a study on Malaysian nursing interns found that negative workplace interactions, as measured using the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R), were directly linked to increased depressive symptoms (Mohd Besir et al., 2023). These findings point to a clear and concerning link between mobbing and deteriorating mental health in intern populations, highlighting the urgency for effective interventions.

However, inconsistencies remain in how mobbing is defined and measured, especially in internship contexts. A systematic review revealed that 51% of medical residents faced bullying, while another global study reported an even higher rate of 55.1% among interns from diverse fields (Álvarez Villalobos et al., 2023). These differences often stem from varying definitions and tool ranging from self-reporting methods to structured behavioral assessments like the NAQ-R signaling a pressing need for more standardized and internship-specific measures (Leymann, 1990; Einarsen et al., 2010).

One important area that remains under researched in current research is how gender may influence the link between workplace mobbing and depression, particularly among interns. While studies involving general working populations have shown gender differences, for instance, men often report more severe depressive symptoms following workplace bullying (Jung et al., 2023), nonetheless, there is still a lack of similar findings focused specifically on internship settings. Long term studies from Sweden have highlighted that male victims of mobbing who identify themselves as such tend to experience more pronounced psychological effects, especially depression. This pattern, however, appears to be less evident among women (Nielsen, Notelaers, & Einarsen, 2020). Although prior studies have highlighted the detrimental effects of workplace mobbing, its implications within internship settings remain insufficiently explored. This gap presents a valuable opportunity for further inquiry, particularly in understanding the role of gender in shaping interns' psychological responses to such experiences. Accordingly, the present study investigates whether gender moderates the relationship between workplace mobbing and depressive symptoms among internship students enrolled in the Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA in Klang Valley. Employing a structured quantitative methodology, the study utilizes the Negative Acts Questionnaire to measure mobbing exposure and the General Health Questionnaire to assess mental health outcomes. The findings aim to generate evidence based insights that can inform targeted interventions and enhance institutional support systems for interns encountering adverse workplace conditions.

DEPRESSION

Depression is a pervasive and debilitating mental health condition, affecting an estimated 20% of individuals globally at some point in their lives, and remains a leading contributor to global disability (Osimo et al., 2020). Clinically recognized as major depressive disorder, it is characterized by a persistently low mood, diminished interest or pleasure in daily activities, and a range of cognitive and somatic symptoms. Current global estimates suggest that approximately 280 million individuals are living with depression. The disorder is frequently associated to exposure to trauma, adverse life events, and chronic stress, with gender differences widely documented women are nearly 50% more likely than men to develop depressive symptoms (Nielsen et al, 2024). According to the World Health Organization (2023), nearly 700,000 individuals die by suicide annually, positioning it as the fourth leading cause of death among individuals aged 15 to 29. Beyond its

immediate psychological burden, early-onset depression has long term socio functional implications. Affected youths often encounter challenges in sustaining meaningful employment, report heightened social withdrawal and require greater emotional and structural support. These interpersonal difficulties, compounded by prolonged social isolation, can obstruct the formation of healthy social relationships and further entrench feelings of alienation and loneliness (Thapar et al., 2022). Such findings highlight the urgent need for comprehensive preventive strategies and targeted interventions across developmental stages.

WORKPLACE MOBBING – BULLYING, INCIVILITY AND OSTRACISM

Interns, as emerging professionals, are particularly susceptible to various workplace stressors that lead to mobbing at the workplace such as bullying, incivility, and ostracism, all of which have been shown to contribute significantly to psychological distress, including depression (Alshawush, Hallett, & Bradbury-Jones, 2022). Bullying, characterized by repeated exposure to hostile interpersonal interactions often from supervisors, colleagues, or peers; has emerged as a widespread concern within internship settings (Besir, Abdullah, Saadun, et al., 2023). Workplace incivility, a form of low-intensity deviant behavior that violates norms of mutual respect, may be subtle but is nonetheless harmful, often leaving lasting emotional impacts (Follmer & Follmer, 2021; Carter & Loh, 2017). Ostracism, wherein individuals are deliberately excluded or ignored by coworkers, further exacerbates feelings of isolation and is closely linked to elevated perceptions of threat among those experiencing depressive symptoms (Bas & Sirin, 2023; Büttner & Greifeneder, 2024). These harmful behaviors can become embedded within organizational cultures, particularly when leadership responses are passive or dismissive, allowing toxicity to persist unchallenged (Parker, 2022). Such environments are especially detrimental to interns, who are navigating the transition from academia to professional roles and may lack the coping mechanisms or institutional support accessible to permanent staff (Herber, 2023). The cumulative impact of bullying, incivility, and ostracism on interns highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions and policy frameworks to safeguard their mental health and professional development (Besir, Saadun, Tobi, et al., 2023).

Victims of workplace bullying often endure a wide spectrum of immediate and long-term adverse outcomes. These include deteriorating physical health, heightened susceptibility to anxiety and depression, increased irritability, persistent loneliness, sleep disturbances, and the development of antisocial tendencies. Additional consequences may manifest as impaired academic or professional performance, diminished morale, lack of motivation, psychological distress, substance misuse, suicidal ideation, and in extreme cases, suicide (Ullah, Siddiqui, & Zafar, 2023).

Similarly, exposure to workplace incivility that is a form of low-intensity deviant behavior that violates norms of mutual respect has been consistently linked to negative psychological outcomes. Individuals subjected to such behavior frequently report elevated levels of stress, depression, and anxiety (Carter & Loh, 2017). Evidence further suggests that workplace incivility is a significant predictor of burnout, particularly in high demand professions such as nursing, where emotional labor and interpersonal strain are already substantial. Oyeleye, Hanson, O'Connor, and Dunn (2013) demonstrated that nurses subjected to workplace incivility exhibit elevated stress and burnout levels, both of which are strongly correlated with the onset of depressive symptoms. These findings highlight the profound emotional tool that persistent incivility exerts, fostering feelings of despair and emotional exhaustion.

Similarly, ostracism poses a significant threat to core psychological needs, including belongingness, self worth, autonomy, and a sense of meaningful existence. Individuals who experience social exclusion often endure intense feelings of loss and helplessness, which can precipitate depressive symptomatology (Büttner & Greifeneder, 2024). Furthermore, ostracized individuals frequently develop maladaptive attributional styles, interpreting their exclusion through a negative lens such as blaming personal inadequacies or perceiving hostile intent in others' behaviors. These cognitive patterns exacerbate emotional distress and significantly contribute to the emergence and maintenance of depressive symptoms (Büttner & Greifeneder, 2024).

GENDER AS A MODERATING ROLE

Although workplace mobbing has garnered increasing scholarly attention, there remains a significant gap in quantitative investigations exploring gender-specific differences in mobbing including work-related bullying, work-related incivility and work-related ostracism and its association with depression within university intern populations. Existing large-scale studies predominantly address general workforce samples, leaving the nuanced experiences of interns underexplored, particularly regarding gender as a moderating factor in mental health outcomes (Nielsen et al., 2020; Vidanapathirana et al., 2025). For example, a comprehensive Korean survey encompassing 12,344 employees aged 19 to 65 revealed that workplace bullying correlated with elevated depressive symptomatology across both sexes; however, this association was notably more pronounced among men (Jung et al., 2023). Similarly, longitudinal research from Sweden demonstrated that exposure to adverse workplace behaviors predicted subsequent psychological distress, including depressive symptoms, for both men and women, while the self-identification as a bullying victim was significantly linked to later mental health difficulties predominantly among male participants (Nielsen et al., 2020).

PARTICIPANTS

This study recruited 220 internship students from various bachelor's degree programs within the Faculty of Business and Management at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam Campus. The sample comprised 125 female and 95 male interns, ensuring a balanced representation suitable for analyses exploring gender-related differences. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 25 years, with an overall mean age of 23.35 years (SD = 14.26). When disaggregated by gender, female interns had a mean age of 23.00 years (SD = 12.36), while male interns averaged 24.00 years (SD = 11.61). Most respondents completed their internships within medium-sized private enterprises (40–150 employees), representing 45% of the sample. Additionally, 25% were placed in large private companies employing over 200 individuals, with the remaining 30% engaged in internships at small firms comprising fewer than 40 employees. Regarding academic program distribution, most participants were enrolled in the BA235 program, comprising 63.6% of the total sample. In contrast, enrollment in the BA236 and BA246 programs was comparatively lower, with each accounting for 5.5%, while the remaining 16.4% were drawn from other academic tracks. In terms of financial compensation, 72.7% of interns reported receiving an allowance, whereas 27.3% undertook their internship without monetary support. Collectively, these findings indicate that the typical respondent was female, enrolled in the BA235 program, engaged in a medium sized private sector internship, and received an allowance.

MEASURES AND INSTRUMENTS

To fulfil the objectives of the study and assess the proposed relationships, participants completed a structured set of standardized psychometric instruments administered in a paper-based format. The primary instrument used to assess workplace bullying exposure was the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ), originally developed by Einarsen and Hoel that comprises 23 items, of which 22 specifically capture a range of negative interpersonal behaviors encountered in professional settings. Participants were asked to indicate how frequently they had experienced each behavior using a five-point Likert scale ranging from one (never) to five (daily). The NAQ has consistently exhibited robust psychometric properties across various contexts and demonstrated excellent reliability within the present study. Internal consistency, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, was strong for the overall scale at .93, with subscale reliabilities of .88 and .84 respectively. To measure incivility the Workplace Incivility Scale (Cortina, 2001) was also employed in this study. The Workplace Incivility Scale, developed by Cortina et al. (2001), is a seven-item instrument designed to capture employees' experiences of low-intensity, disrespectful behaviors in the workplace, such as being ignored or subjected to rude remarks, and has demonstrated strong internal consistency with coefficients around 0.89. The Workplace Ostracism Scale (Ferris et al., 2008) was also utilized in the current study. The scale is a ten-item instrument designed to evaluate employees' perceptions of social exclusion within organizational settings, such as being overlooked or ignored by colleagues. The scale has consistently demonstrated excellent psychometric

properties, with internal consistency reliability estimates commonly reported at approximately 0.94 across diverse samples.

To evaluate mental health outcomes among participants, this study utilized the 21-item version of the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI). The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), originally developed by Beck and colleagues in 1961, is one of the most extensively studied self-report tools for evaluating depressive symptoms, particularly among older adults. This 21-item questionnaire uses a multiple-choice format and is based on Guttman scaling principles. The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) has shown strong internal consistency across various studies. Reported reliability coefficients range between 0.73 and 0.92, with an average around 0.86 (Beck, Steer, & Garbin, 1988). Comparable reliability levels have also been observed in the shorter 13-item version (Groth-Marnat, 1990). Specifically, for clinical populations, the BDI has demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86, while in general, non-clinical groups, the reliability stands at approximately 0.81 (Beck et al., 1988), indicating solid consistency in how the tool measures depressive symptoms across different groups.

RESULTS

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 27, incorporating the PROCESS v4.0 macro developed by Hayes (2015). The results begin with an overview of selected survey responses aimed at identifying the typical profile of a workplace tyrant. In response to the question, "Who is the perpetrator of mobbing?", a significant majority of participants (80.5%) identified a supervisor as the source of such behavior whereas 19.5% pointed out to a group of employees. Regarding perceptions of the mobber's age, approximately 68.3% of participants saw no age-related distinction. Those who did identify age groups most pointed to individuals between 30 and 39 years old (24.7%), followed by those 40 years old and above (7%). A similar pattern emerged when analyzing perceptions of the mobber's gender. About 69.4% of respondents reported no notable differences, suggesting that gender was not a determining factor. However, 10.6% of respondents attributed mobbing behavior to men, while 20% chose women.

The analysis proceeded by examining potential gender differences in experiences of mobbing and depression. Independent samples t-tests revealed that male participants reported significantly higher exposure to work-related bullying compared to their female counterparts (t(220) = 1.92, p = .035), work-related incivility (t(220) = 2.62, p = .006) and work-related ostracism (t(220) = 2.54, p = .006). To test the three research hypotheses, Pearson's r correlation analyses were conducted. The results, as presented in Table 1, show a strong relationship between workplace mobbing and depression. Experiences of mobbing such as bullying, incivility and ostracism were found to significantly contribute to depression. These findings support all three initial hypotheses.

Table 1: Workplace Mobbing and Depression

	1.	2.	3.	4.
Workplace mobbing (overall score)				
Work-related bullying and depression	.65***			
Work-related incivility and depression	.70***	.68***		
Work-related ostracism and depression	.66***	.61***	.73***	
Depression	.55***	.59***	.52***	.60***

Note. ***p < .001.

The core focus of the research was to explore whether gender plays a moderating role where it was examined using the PROCESS v4.0 macro developed by Hayes (2015). This approach, which utilizes regression analysis alongside bootstrapping techniques, applied Model 1 for the study. The analysis confirmed that gender significantly moderates the relationship between depression and various forms of workplace mobbing,

including bullying (F(3, 220) = 32.37, p < .001), incivility (F(3, 220) = 29.43, p < .001), and ostracism (F(3, 220) = 24.71, p < .001). Each model demonstrated a good fit, accounting for 24% to 41% of the variance in the symptoms of depression. Notably, gender as a moderating variable enhanced the model fit by an additional 6% to 10% (refer to Table 2).

Table 2: Gender as a moderator of the relationship between workplace mobbing (bullying, incivility and ostracism) and depression

Depression					
	B	SE	95% CI	R2 (ΔR2)	F(3, 220)
Constant	22.44***	0.62	[23.26; 24.82]	.41 (.06)	32.37***
Work-related bullying	2.31***	0.34	[1.83; 2.98]		
Gender	−1.80***	0.55	[−3.17; −0.52]		
Work-related mobbing × gender	0.72***	0.28	[0.32; 1.39]		
Depression					
	B	SE	95% CI	R2 (ΔR2)	F(3, 220)
Constant	27.11***	0.58	[21.51; 23.65]	.28 (.04)	29.43***
Work-related incivility	2.63***	0.28	[2.27; 3.28]		
Gender	−1.73***	0.65	[−3.20; −0.50]		
Work-related incivility × gender	1.57***	0.25	[0.79; 2.31]		
Depression					
	B	SE	95% CI	R2 (ΔR2)	F(3, 220)
Constant	26.89***	0.70	[23.27; 25.52]	.24 (.10)	24.71***
Work-related ostracism	4.11***	0.57	[2.75; 5.40]		
Gender	−1.21	0.72	[−2.53; 0.20]		
Work-related ostracism × gender	2.73***	0.57	[1.51; 3.65]		

Note. ***p < .001.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that supervisors are the primary sources of workplace mobbing among internship students in Klang Valley, with 80.5% of participants identifying them as perpetrators. This outcome mirrors broader evidence showing that line managers are more frequently involved in bullying than peers (Bunce et al., 2024). The dependence of interns on supervisors for evaluations, mentoring, and career progression increases their susceptibility to such behaviors, a pattern also reported among junior doctors in Malaysia (Samsudin et al., 2021). These results point to the pressing need for stronger accountability measures in supervisory roles.

Interestingly, most interns did not associate mobbing with a specific gender (69.4%) or age group (68.3%), suggesting that hostile behavior is perceived as a function of power imbalance rather than demographic characteristics. This aligns with scholarship describing bullying as often hidden under the guise of performance management (Cortina & Areguin, 2021). The neutrality observed also resonates with stereotype activation theory, which emphasizes how authority roles may overshadow demographic differences in interpreting aggression (Triana et al., 2024). In high-dependence contexts such as internships, hierarchical power seems more salient than individual attributes in shaping these perceptions.

The moderation analysis showed that gender significantly influenced the relationship between mobbing and depression. Male interns demonstrated sharper increases in depressive symptoms across bullying, incivility, and ostracism, consistent with Korean findings where men were more adversely affected (Jung et al., 2023).

According to Conservation of Resources theory, mobbing threatens men's valued resources related to competence and status, exacerbating psychological strain (Hobfoll et al., 2018). By contrast, women may mitigate such impacts by drawing on broader social support systems (Nielsen et al., 2020).

Ostracism proved particularly damaging for men, with an interaction coefficient of $B = 2.73$, suggesting exclusion can intensify distress when cultural norms discourage help-seeking (Qiu et al., 2024). However, gender did not significantly influence social functioning outcomes, as both men and women reported similar declines in workplace performance. This may reflect strong performance norms within internships that compel both genders to sustain outward effectiveness despite internal strain (Lipińska-Grobelny, 2024).

Overall, gender accounted for an additional 6%–10% of the variance in depression, emphasizing its role as a moderator. In Malaysia's cultural context, where high power distance and traditional gender norms prevail, male interns may be especially reluctant to acknowledge or disclose distress. These findings call for gender-sensitive interventions, stigma reduction strategies, and targeted supervisory training to help reduce the adverse effects of workplace mobbing.

Practical Implications

The results of this study provide clear direction for higher education institutions, internship providers, and policymakers. Identifying supervisors as the main perpetrators increases the importance of strengthening supervisory accountability. Internship students occupy a vulnerable position where reliance on supervisors for evaluations and professional development creates opportunities for misuse of authority. Institutions should embed structured safeguards such as anonymous feedback systems, supervisor evaluations, and ongoing monitoring of workplace culture. These interventions can minimize hierarchical abuse and create healthier internship environments.

The moderating role of gender further emphasizes the need for targeted, gender-sensitive interventions. Male interns showed stronger depressive responses, particularly in relation to ostracism, reflecting how cultural expectations may prevent men from seeking help. Addressing this requires proactive strategies, including confidential counseling tailored to men, stigma-reduction campaigns, and peer support systems. While interventions should support male vulnerabilities, programs must also remain inclusive of female interns, who continue to experience negative outcomes in both mental health and workplace functioning. For policymakers, the evidence highlights the urgency of incorporating anti-harassment standards into internship policies and ensuring organizations implement practices that foster safe, respectful, and inclusive environments.

Study Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights, certain limitations should be considered. The cross-sectional design restricts the ability to draw conclusions about causality. Although strong associations were found, longitudinal research would be necessary to examine whether depressive outcomes persist beyond the internship period or diminish over time. Additionally, data collection relied on self-report instruments such as the NAQ and BDI, which may introduce bias. Respondents may insufficiently report experiences due to stigma or overstate them due to emotional distress. Incorporating multiple sources of information, such as peer and supervisor assessments, would improve accuracy in future studies.

Another limitation is the sample scope where participants were drawn from a single faculty within Universiti Teknologi MARA, which limits generalizability to other institutions, fields, and regions. The relatively small sample size also restricts the ability to explore more complex subgroup effects. Furthermore, this study examined depression as the primary outcome, leaving other potential consequences of mobbing such as anxiety, burnout, and physical health less explored. Finally, although gender was investigated as a moderator, other contextual factors like organizational climate, coping mechanisms, and social support were not included and should be examined in future studies.

Future Research Directions

Building on the insights and limitations of this study, several directions for future research Future research should build on these findings by employing longitudinal designs to capture the long-term impact of mobbing on mental health outcomes. Tracking interns over extended periods would clarify the temporal sequence between mobbing and depressive symptoms and determine whether effects persist beyond the internship stage. Broadening the scope of outcomes to include anxiety, burnout, physical health, and professional commitment would also provide a more comprehensive understanding of the consequences of mobbing.

Expanding samples across different faculties, institutions, and cultural contexts will be critical for increasing generalizability. Comparative cross-cultural research could shed light on how varying gender norms and organizational cultures influence the mobbing–depression link. Additionally, exploring other moderating or mediating factors such as resilience, coping strategies, and organizational support structures would add depth to the current findings. Finally, employing mixed-methods approaches that combine surveys with qualitative interviews or focus groups could provide richer insights into how interns interpret and respond to mobbing experiences. Such approaches would help design more effective and context-sensitive interventions to protect the mental health of internship students.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes meaningful insights into how workplace mobbing influences depressive symptoms among internship students, with gender serving as a significant moderator in this relationship. The evidence shows that while both male and female interns are negatively impacted by hostile workplace behaviors, men demonstrate a steeper increase in depression, particularly in the context of ostracism. These findings extend prior research by highlighting the unique vulnerabilities of interns who operate in hierarchical and evaluative environments, where supervisors were identified as the dominant perpetrators of mobbing. The results also emphasized that although demographic characteristics of aggressors such as gender or age were not perceived as distinguishing factors by most interns, the victim's gender played a pivotal role in shaping mental health outcomes. By demonstrating that male interns face compounded risks, this research provides critical support for developing gender-sensitive policies and practices. Furthermore, the study highlights the broader cultural context in Malaysia, where traditional gender norms and high-power distance may magnify the reluctance of men to seek support, thereby intensifying the depressive consequences of mobbing. Taken together, the findings highlighted the importance of implementing comprehensive interventions that prioritize supervisory accountability, cultivate respectful organizational cultures, and provide accessible, confidential, and gender-responsive mental health resources for interns. In doing so, institutions and policymakers can help ensure that internships, designed to be platforms for growth and professional learning, do not instead become sources of psychological harm.

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