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## Does hostile environment encourages abusive supervision and deviant work behaviours: a mediation approach

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**Abstract:** This study aims to examine the role of hostile climate in initiating abusive supervision and the mediating role of abusive supervision between the relationship of perceived hostile climate and workplace deviance. A cross-sectional study design was employed to collect the data from the 358 respondents in manufacturing SMEs in Pakistan. Results of the study revealed that perceived hostile climate is significantly related to abusive supervision and workplace deviance. Abusive supervision is significantly related to workplace deviance and it mediates the relationship between perceived hostile climate and workplace deviance. The findings of the current study give insight to the academicians and managers on the prevalence of abuse in the workplace. Further, limitations and future recommendations are given in this study. To the best of our knowledge, this study is one of its own kinds no such study has been conducted before.

**Keywords:** abusive supervision; hostile work environment; workplace deviance; mistreatment; stress and coping.

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enterprises (SMEs), and management of international operations, including corporate entrepreneurship, and survival strategies in both multinational enterprises and, small and medium enterprises.

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## 1 Introduction

The interest in investigating abusive supervision and its impact on organisations has been increased in the past two decade (Tepper, 2000; Tepper et al., 2011). These investigations focused on physical aggression and overt types of inappropriate working behaviours by the supervisors, such as assault on the workforce, sexual harassment, bullying in the workplace, and aggression (Alexander, 2011). In a nutshell, even though extent of research on abusive supervision had been conducted but still it is prevalent in the organisations. The recent researches highlighted that the issue of workplace abuse is continuously increasing (Hussain et al., 2020; Khaleel et al., 2017; Pan, 2019; Rice et al., 2021). It is a rational assumption that a safe and stable working environment is essential where workers should protect their rights, have freedom of thought and expression, and their autonomy and self-respect are maintained. In their report, Chaudhry et al. (2017) identified that abuse at work is a global alert problem and may have negative consequences for organisations, such as low self-esteem, deviant behaviours and high absenteeism. Abuse by supervisors, especially verbal abuse, is a distressing problem and a significant contributor to dissatisfaction and high turnover among employees worldwide. Although there is tons of literature and research on abusive supervision, still within the workplace mistreatment literature it is a sensitive and serious debate. Abusive supervision has been defined as “subordinate’s perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviour, excluding physical contact” [Tepper, (2007), p.178]. Investigating abuse in the supervision is significant for a variety of reasons such as Tepper (2007) argued that around 14% of employees face abusive supervision (from their employers, ridicule or injury) due to the organisational environment (hostile environment). This affects not only the individual’s well-being, but also their productivity.

Research has shown that as a result of abusive supervision, subordinates engage in reciprocal misconduct towards organisation. Such misconduct results in to supervisor-directed deviations. In his original research on abusive supervision, Tepper (2000) found that individuals who view their supervisors are abusive, they are more likely to leave the organisation or tend to involve in immoral activities within the organisation. Studies showed that subordinates who considered their supervisor to be violent, had lower work and life satisfaction (Khan, 2015; Mawritz et al., 2014). These researches have (Greenbaum et al., 2017; Kiewitz et al., 2016; Wisse and Sleebos, 2016) either reported the antecedents or outcomes of abusive supervision. Mawritz et al. (2014) studied the concept of hostile work environment with the moderation approach but they neglected the direct role of hostile work environment on abusive supervision and directly tested the moderating roles of conscientiousness. The current work contributes in the theory by directly examining the role of perceived hostile climate on the abusive supervision. Therefore, this study examined the role of hostile climate in initiating abusive supervision and the mediating role of abusive supervision between the relationship of perceived hostile climate and workplace deviance. Based on the

transactional theory of stress and coping this study develops the framework that links hostile climate with workplace deviance through abusive supervision.

## **2 Theory and hypothesis development**

Cognitive and emotional responses are transactional in Folkman's model, by which he means neither environmental nor individual factors are solely involved in stressful transactions (Folkman et al., 1986). It can be argued that assessment of stressful transactions is guided by the existence of a certain set of both individual and environmental factors and is made by a certain kind of appraiser, which has their own distinct psychological abilities. As a result, coping behaviours are developed; coping means thinking and behaving in ways that are relevant to individual's own well-being.

According to the transactional theory of stress and coping, individuals show a response to external events by managing their feelings with coping strategies (Burke and Belcourt, 1974). Prior studies have established an association between abusive supervision and emotional behaviours. Researchers have observed that organisational policies, activities, and processes can profoundly affect the work environment. Their studies have shown that employee responses to their surroundings affect their efficiency (Erturk and Ziblim, 2020; Yang et al., 2014). In line, it can be argued that individual's emotional actions represent patterns of human activity as well as behavioural tendencies, with their findings affecting the relationships that are formed in an affective environment. In such scenario when employees are jealous and envious towards other employees this affective environment is considered as hostile climate. Further, Social learning theory states that people learn from the actions of others, and tries to adopt their behaviour to the best of their ability. According to this, behaviour is affected by context; thus, supervisors adopt patterns that fit in with their surroundings. SLT claims that people learn by observing and imitating the habits of their role models (Greenbaum et al., 2017). People base their expectations of appropriate behaviour on the conditions, seeing the outcomes they desire and imitating those that they consider to have power. Unusually abusive supervision and hostile environments, such as violations of authority, make more workers resign than any other causes. These theories offer evidence for the connection between hostility in the environment and violence on the other. Mawritz et al. (2014) contend that hostile environment encourages supervisors to abuse their power. Therefore, it can be anticipated that abusive supervision is potentially signalled by environmental risks. Hence, this study hypothesises that:

H1 Perceived hostile climate encourages supervisors to adopt abusive supervision.

When the climate of an organisation is characterised by envy, distrust, and sometimes by aggression, then it encourages hostile behaviour by its members. For example, relationships between abuse supervision and workplace deviant behaviour have proven to get worse in extremely hostile climates by displaying unsupportive behaviour (Mawritz et al., 2012). When employees see hostility in their work environments, they learn that abusive behaviours are socially acceptable. Thus, such hostile behaviours encourage them to involve in deviant behaviours. Therefore, this study hypothesises that:

H2 Perceived hostile climate encourages deviant behaviours by the employees.

In previous studies, victims have been found to cope with workplace stressors such as abusive supervision (Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007) with negative actions and behaviours. These actions are encompassed by the concept of workplace deviance, which is described as the intention is to damage the business (Bennett and Robinson, 2000) which in return causes emotional relief such as deviant actions, theft from the organisation, taking long breaks and coming to work late. Mawritz et al. (2014) linked emotional coping with perceived deviance in their research. They further extend their model by linking stressors to coping behaviours. Therefore, it can be hypothesising that:

H3 Abusive supervision is the predictor of workplace deviance.

Perceived organisational hostility is considered to be an immediate environmental stressor, although it is a major source of perceived distal stress for those who experience it. In other words, employees must deal with the distal problems through dealing with the proximal problems of aggressive supervisors (Wang et al., 2020). Theorist (Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus and Folkman, 1987) claims that individuals use to cope with stressors by their evaluations of the stressors themselves and it starts with determining if the stressor poses a challenge to personal growth (i.e., promotes personal growth). Hackney and Perrewé (2018) found that when employees observed insulting and derogatory treatment stymieing to be a threat to their success. Similarly, a hostile climate can foster a perception that co-workers are continually discrediting their success. Under such conditions, employees use defence mechanisms to manage these hostile workplace conditions. Stress researchers recommend coping behaviour that takes into account in such specific problem, when they believe that they can reduce their stress (Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus and Folkman, 1987). Experiential evidences above show that individuals psychologically detach themselves from stressful situations as a way of managing stressors. To this end, employees may deal with stress caused by perceived hostile and abusive work environments by involving in deviant behaviours. For instance, such employees are known to concentrate on non-work matters, skip work, cyber loaf, and socialise in their personal time in order to cope with their stressful work environments. While these types of deviant actions are less noticeable, their consequences include losing one's job or being penalised, they are far more prevalent than obvious deviant behaviour (Tepper, 2000; Tepper et al., 2011). In this manner, we expect that organisational deviance is one of the way that employees use to deal with abusive supervision in hostile working climate. Therefore, this study hypothesises that:

H4 Deviant behaviour is the coping behaviour of abusive supervision due to perceived hostile climate.

### **3 Methods**

In this research, survey method is considered as a principal way to evaluate relations between variables. The data was collected from the 358 manufacturing SMEs in Pakistan. The representatives of local enterprises in the sample framework list have been sent an email requesting permission for the research survey to be conducted on their employees. With the approval of the representatives, the questionnaires were sent the front-line staff. As previous studies reported, 51% of response rate in SMEs in Pakistan (Maulla-Bakhsh and Raziq, 2018). Therefore, a sufficient number of questionnaires were sent to achieve

at least sample size greater than 119. Respondents were requested to fill in the questionnaire within 14 days. Internet surveys were not being used in this study to avoid sampling problems; some members of the population may not have had Internet access. Questionnaires were mailed back to the researcher upon completion.

Initially on the basis of gender, male participants were 86.6%. However, female respondents were accounted for 13.4% of the total respondents. The next question of the demographic profile discusses the age of the respondents it was observed through the data collected that majority of the respondents were 18 to 25 years old accounted for 44.3% of the total respondents followed by 31 to 35 years old which were accounted for 23.7% of the total respondent. The least of the responses were collected from 36 and about years old which were accounted for 13.8% of the total respondents. The next question was education based on the data collected it was found that the majority of the respondents were matriculation. However, 21.3% were diploma holder, 20.6% were graduates and least were intermediate accounting for 10.3%. Based on the marital status of the respondents it was found that 206 respondents were married and 152 respondents were unmarried. The next question was income of the respondents, based on the data collected it was found that majority of the respondents were able to earn 251 to 500 USD per month however the least of the respondents make less than 100 USD. Based on the experience of the respondent majority of the respondent had 1 to 5 years of experience followed by 16 and above years of experience and Least were one years of experience. Based on the position in the industry the respondents of this study were front liners workers.

## **4 Measurements**

### *4.1 Hostile work environment*

Acts of aggression and negative attitude as well as perceptions of moral disengagement are prevalent in the workplace, create distressing working conditions. When these incidents become the norm in an organisation, it is known as a hostile climate (Mawritz et al., 2014). In order to measure perceived hostile climate this study has adopted scale from Mawritz et al. (2014). All the items will be measured on five point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strong agree.

### *4.2 Abusive supervision*

Tepper (2000) says that the amount to which employees in organisation feel that their supervisors are involve in aggressive behaviour with them, which can be both verbal and non-verbal, and it excludes physical aggression. Hence, the instrument was adopted from Tepper (2000).

### *4.3 Employee organisational deviance*

Robinson and Bennett (1995) defined workplace deviance as 'voluntary behaviour that violates significant organisational norms and in doing so threatens the well-being of an organisation, its members, or both'. The scale is a Likert-type scale with a five-point

format ranging from never to daily. The measurement was adopted from Robinson and Bennett (1995).

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Measurement model

Convergent validity focused on the extent to which two measures correlate. If validity of indicators is being tested using factor loading, it is important to also examine the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (Hair et al., 2012a). Observations that have been extracted for constructs are all higher than or equal to the threshold suggested as 0.5 (Hair et al., 2012b). Consequently, this research concluded that the entire AVE meets the recommended cut-off. It has been found that the correlation coefficients found in this study ranged from 0.84 to 0.93, as a composite reliability, from where we initially concluded that convergent validity was established. Table 1 shows the summary of the convergent validity.

**Table 1** Summary of convergent validity

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Construct</i>	<i>Loading</i>	<i>Cronbach's alpha</i>	<i>CR</i>	<i>AVE</i>
Abusive supervision	AS1	0.811	0.918	0.934	0.671
	AS2	0.837			
	AS3	0.857			
	AS4	0.735			
	AS5	0.832			
	AS6	0.824			
	AS7	0.831			
Perceived hostile climate	HC1	0.849	0.857	0.894	0.587
	HC2	0.687			
	HC3	0.833			
	HC4	0.715			
	HC5	0.662			
	HC6	0.829			
Workplace deviance	WD1	0.802	0.810	0.887	0.725
	WD2	0.881			
	WD3	0.869			

In the research work by Henseler (2017), new discriminant validity criteria's were proposed. Through use of simulation studies, authors concluded that in relation to Fornell and Larcker (criterion), HTMT is accurate than previously believed. Therefore, HTMT can be used to measure discriminant validity more accurately in the current study (Khaleel et al., 2017). If the HTMT construct value is less than 0.90, then discriminant validity has been proved. The values for HTMT were less than 0.90.

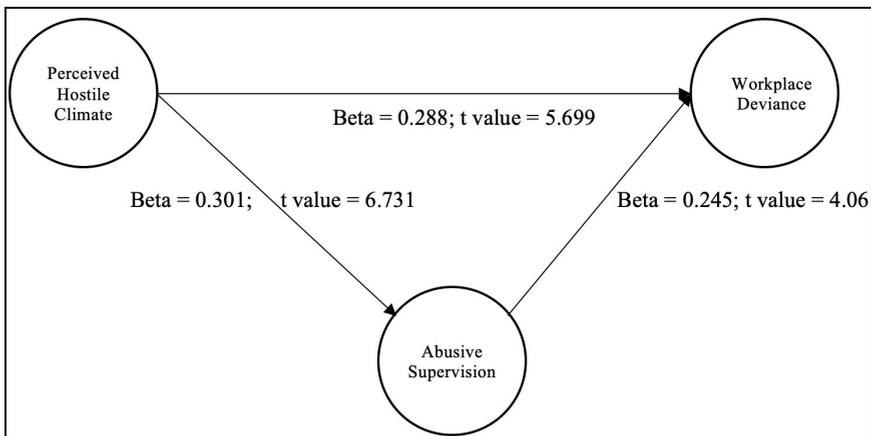
5.2 Structural model

The path coefficient of the hypothesised relationships in the proposed structural model and their respective standard errors are obtained by running PLS algorithm followed by bootstrapping procedure (with 1,000 samples and 151 cases) in Smart PLS (version 3.0) as it provides all direct and indirect paths coefficients ( $\beta$ ) along with their respective  $p$  and  $T$  values as well confidence intervals (Hair et al., 2012b; Henseler, 2017). The first hypothesis of the study was perceived hostile climate and it's a relationship with abusive supervision it was found that perceived hostile climate is significantly related to abusive supervision as beta value was 0.301 and that  $t$ -value was 6.371 similarly the  $P$  value of the hypothesis tested was  $< 0.00$  which is highly significant. The next hypothesis of the study was perceived hostile climate and it's a relationship with workplace deviance, it was found that perceived hostile climate is significantly related to workplace deviance as beta value was 0.245 and that  $t$ -value was 4.066 similarly the  $P$  value of the hypothesis tested was  $< 0.00$  which is highly significant. The third hypothesis of the study was abusive supervision and it's a relationship with workplace deviance it was found that abusive supervision is significantly related to workplace deviance as beta value was 0.288 and that  $t$ -value was 5.65 similarly the  $P$  value of the hypothesis tested was  $< 0.00$  which is highly significant. Table 2 and Figure 1 shows the findings of the structural model.

**Table 2** Direct effect

Hypothesis	Path	Beta	Standard error	T values	P values	Decision
H1	PHC → AS	0.301	0.045	6.731	0.000	Accepted
H2	PHC → WD	0.245	0.060	4.066	0.000	Accepted
H3	AS → WD	0.288	0.051	5.699	0.000	Accepted

**Figure 1** Structural model of the study



**Table 3** Mediation result

Hypothesis	Path	Beta	Standard error	T values	P values	Decision
H1	PHC → AS → WD	0.208	0.068	3.05	0.000	Accepted

Lastly, the mediating role of abusive supervision between the relationship of perceived hostile climate and workplace deviance was examined the findings shows that abusive supervision is a significant mediator as beta value was 0.208 and that *t*-value was 3.05 similarly the *P* value of the hypothesis tested was  $< 0.00$  which is highly significant. Table 3 shows the findings of the structural model.

## 6 Discussion

The main objectives of the study were to empirically examine the role of perceived hostile climate on abusive supervision and the coping behaviours of perceived hostile climate and abusive supervision in the form of workplace deviance. Firstly, this study assessed the relationship between perceived hostile climate and abusive supervision. The finding of the study showed that perceived hostile climate has a positive relationship with abusive supervision. The results were in line with the prior researches such as Mawritz et al. (2014) concluded that perceived hostile environments are responsible for promoting violent actions by indicating that violence is permissible to superiors, and facilitating the transfers of aggression from supervisors to subordinates. Hostile environments are a form of affective environment that catches and occurs when members feel envious, untruthful and aggressive against their colleagues. In this study, hostile climate is measured with the tool that is composition of jealous, abusive, manipulative and satirise environment. The results show that such an environment has direct impact on the abusive behaviours of the supervisors. In other terms, it can be elaborated that supervisor's abusive behaviour is the product of hostile environment. For example, supervisors who feel that they are maltreated or that the organisation has fallen short of its commitments often appear to be aggressive. This aggression result in the abusive or mal behaviour with the subordinates. In an ideal situation, employees are collectively part of the organisations either they are supervisors of the managers or frontline employees. Their affiliation with their organisation is similar to each other. When the organisational environment is hostile or there are problems with in the organisational climate. It is the responsibility of the supervisor or head of the department to eliminate all the aversive situations. However, the results from this study show that perceived hostile climate highlights the abusive behaviour of the supervisors. For employees, however, it is anticipated that perceived organisational hostility is a distal environmental stressor partially transmitted through the abusive actions of their colleagues. That is, employees must deal with the distal effects of perceived hostile climates by coping with the proximal effects of abusive supervisors. As those individuals who are already disturbed by their colleagues are easy targets for the abusive supervision.

The results also showed that the majority of the respondents are less educated and are at the lower level in the industries. Their immediate bosses are the managers or owners of the industries. They have to face direct pressure from their bosses to achieve the targets and outcomes for their respective companies. When they are failed to achieve the targets or unable to cope with the organisational hostility they become easy predator for their immediate bosses. In comparison, their own behaviour as a supervisor becomes negative which results in to extending the distal effect towards their own subordinates.

Further the current research concluded that abusive behaviours put negative impact on employee coping strategies'. Previously studies have identified the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance behaviour. All studies concluded

that abusive supervision is directly related to workplace deviance behaviour by employees. This study also indicates that employees who perceive that they are being harmed by their supervisor, gives negative reactions to their higher authorities and ultimately results in to workplace deviance. The results show that abusive supervision not only directly affects the employee mentality but also distract employees from their main task and involve in the deviate behaviours by targeting other individuals. This indicates that, supervisory behaviour is not only associated to harm respective individual, (deviant behaviour) but also create 'collateral' damage to others in the workplace (aggression). In terms of mediating role of abusive supervision, the perceived hostile climate in the organisations triggers supervisors to adopt abusive behaviours and when the abusive supervision level ranges from low to moderate and increases, employees tend to practice deviant behaviours within the organisation. The results of this study are consistent with the past researches, such as Nasurdin et al. (2005) found that effects of the organisational stressors on job outcomes of the employees. A recent meta-analysis study revealed that being a bullying person is linked with a negative trait of personality (Mitsopoulou and Giovazolias, 2015). However, Siddique (2018) examined the relation of abuse and Group cohesion in different public sector organisations of Pakistan. Her study revealed that abuse in the organisation tends to increase the negative behaviours in the organisations.

### *6.1 Theoretical contribution*

This work adds to the literature on abusive supervision, indicating that environmental factors and individual differences cannot simply provide an overview of negativity that prevails in the workplace. Rather, individual, organisational and environmental factors contribute together. The findings from the present study show that environmental (hostile work environment) factors and individual factors (deviant behaviours) collectively provides cues for the inappropriate behaviours (mistreatment) at workplace. Then, through continuous aversive experiences supervisors may view abusive behaviour as an acceptable leadership tactic. Therefore, this study has expanded the knowledge on the process of prevalence of mistreatment by adding all contributing factors from the organisations.

The results showed that a hostile environment in organisation gives rise to workforce mistreatment, which motivates supervisors to participate in abuse. If injustice occurs in the organisational environment, the negative act cannot be controlled. Policies, legislation and regulations against maltreatment must be implemented, as mistreatment incidents cannot be controlled without the liability and punishment of the organisational management sector. Therefore, it is recommended to the organisations to develop an environment where employee can vestal blow against the mistreatment he or she is receiving

Lastly, this study is one of its own kind in examining the antecedents and outcomes of abusive supervision in SMEs in Pakistan. SMEs' have a critical role in raising the economy of any country. But, in context of Pakistan, SMEs' are being ignored in academic researches particularly in human resource management. SMEs' in Pakistan are exclusively on the top of the list suffering from abuse. Due to the scarce and minute researches in this context, reasons behind the prevalence of workplace mistreatment were unknown. This study has highlighted the contextual individual and organisational factors that contribute to the workplace mistreatment in the SME sector in Pakistan.

## 7 Limitations and future recommendations

The present study was carefully developed and designed to fulfil the proposed objectives but similar to other researches, this research also carries some flaws that can be covered in the next studies conducted in the similar area. Initially this study was conducted in the context of Pakistan, to generalise the findings from this research, it is much need to recapitulate this framework in the other settings particularly in developed countries and developing countries as suggested in the problem statement that China and India are also among the top countries where workers are facing mistreatment issue.

Secondly, this study employed a cross-sectional design. All the data was collected within the limited period through survey questionnaires. To obtain the valid findings, the conclusions related to the predictor variables hostile climate would be further supported by a longitudinal study. Voltmer et al. (2021) supports the fact that longitudinal study involving a long period of data collection to examine the perceptions and behaviours of individuals over time is more effective. This methodology could enhance better understanding of the most consistent predictors of workplace abuse in SME sector in Pakistan.

Lastly, there are several other factors that could contribute to the abusive supervision at workplace. Due to the scope of the study, the current research only examined the workplace environment (hostile climate) as the antecedent of workplace abuse. It is recommended to test other factors that could contribute to the abuse in the workplace.

## 8 Conclusions

This study is one of its kinds to have extensively examined the current situation of abusive supervision, its causes and its consequences. The results of this study have revealed that hostile work environment with the supervisor plays significant role in predicting deviant behaviours. The aversive situation does not stop here, it is more influenced when individual with neurotic personality face such events; they react more powerfully in coping mistreatment. To overcome, the supervisory abuse, trainings policies and monitoring is needed on the emergency bases.

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