

THE IMPACT OF WORKPLACE BULLYING ON EMPLOYEE TURNOVER INTENTION IN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES OF SINDH: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF ALTERNATIVE JOB OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

The article explores the relationship between workplace bullying and employee turnover intention among the faculty members of private universities in Sindh, Pakistan with specific attention to the mediating effect of alternative job opportunities. The study was cross-sectional and quantitative in nature with primary data being collected through face-to-face surveys. Adopted questionnaires were used to measure workplace bullying, alternative job opportunities and employee turnover intention on a five-point Likert scale. The convenience sampling and snowball technique were used to detect 219 members of the faculty at private universities in Sindh. Data cleaning was done in SPSS version 25 and hypothesis testing done in SmartPLS through partial least squares structural equation modelling. Findings revealed that workplace bullying is positively rated to both turnover intention and alternative job opportunities. In addition to this, the alternative job opportunities indicating partial mediation between workplace bullying and employee turnover intention. To directly prevent bullying, it is recommended that private university administrators should take a zero-tolerance policy, create confidential reporting mechanisms, and create facilitating organizational cultures. In addition, the HR practices should be enhanced to expand the internal career development opportunities, as well as to make the outside job opportunities look less appealing, which will decrease the turnover of the faculty.

INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying has become so prevalent and devastating in the higher education industry across the globe (Reeves et al., 2025). But, its specifics and impact on the Sindh, Pakistan, private university industry is acutely under-studied. The Karachi, Hyderabad,

Sukkur and Jamshoro-based Sindh-based private universities face high performance, top-down administrative structures, and weak regulatory measures in faculty wellbeing. This is not a vacuum of such bullying practices, they cause profound psychological pain, professional commitment is compromised and ultimately

intention to leave the organisation is high. However, in contrast to those in the public sector, workers in a private university are bound by unique labour market dynamics, such as lack of job security, degraded union coverage, and employment at will, making it difficult to develop a connection between being victimized by bullying and turnover intentions (Bettoni & Santos, 2022). This is not an academic game only but an organizational necessity because uncontrolled turnover does not only disrupt the continuum of institutional knowledge but also escalates the cost of recruiting people and further aggravates the quality of education in an already resource-starved private higher education setting (Qureshi et al., 2021).

Workplace bullying refers to a negative exposure that is recurrent, systematic and chronic where the target feels powerless to respond to the more powerful offenders (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010). Employee turnover intention on the other hand is a deliberate and intentional intention to leave the organisation one is in at a certain time and is the final mental process in the mind before actual separation behaviour (Peltokorpi et al., 2023). Both variables are theoretically and practically significant to research because workplace bullying is a chronic work-related stressor that systematically ruins psychological contract of a worker to the employer, the unspoken mutual expectations of respect, fairness, and support (Junejo et al., 2020). The perceived violation of this contract due to bullying increases the antecedents of turnover intention such as exhaustion, reduced organizational commitment, and increased job dissatisfaction which are empirically supported. Furthermore, it has been observed that when faculty retention is directly related to student learning outcomes and research output (as is the case in knowledge-based sectors like academia), the relationship between bullying and turnover has an unequal organizational implication (Junejo et al., 2025). This relationship can be improved through the private universities in Sindh which tend to possess strong departmental culture and, in most cases, do not have formal grievance procedures, which can make bullied employees feel that they have fewer avenues of redressing

their grievances internally and therefore, get their withdrawal process accelerated (Chauhan & Mehra, 2026).

Alternative job opportunities, defined as the subjective perception of the employee regarding the availability, attractiveness, and accessibility of similar or better employment options in the external labour market, are a significant mediating factor in the bullying-turnover relationship (Rabbi et al., 2015). Social Cognitive Theory and the Conservation of Resources theory suggest that workplace bullying leaves the individual drained of their emotional, social, and professional resources, which leads them to feel motivated to stay in their current job because the cost of staying exceeds the benefits they perceive (Junejo et al., 2021). Nevertheless, this depletion of the resource is significantly translated into actual turnover intention, depending on an employee's cognitive appraisal of external alternatives (Zhang et al., 2025). When the bullied employees feel that they have plenty of alternative employment options as they may be vacancies in other private universities, other public colleges or other international academic jobs, they can easily translate their dissatisfaction into explicit turnover intentions since the perceived transition costs (e.g., effort on the application, moving, new social networks) may be bearable in comparison with the psychological relief.

Empirical data on the higher education sector in Sindh indicate alarming trends regarding workplace bullying and employee turnover intention. A survey of five Karachi-based private universities (2022) revealed that about 38% of faculty participants had experienced workplace bullying at least once a week over the past six months, with verbal bullying (52) and professional undervaluing (47) being the most common forms (Laghari et al., 2025). At the same time, turnover intention rates in the Sindh faculty of privately owned universities have been estimated at 28-41 per annum, much higher than the 15-20 per annum rates in public sector universities in the same area (Kamran et al., 2025).

Although the current studies are important in the context of workplace bullying and turnover intention, several gaps remain. To start with, the vast majority of studies have been

conducted in Western corporate or healthcare environments, and little attention has been given to private universities in developing South Asian contexts such as Sindh, Pakistan, where power distance, labour markets, and institutional norms vary significantly. Second, although alternative job opportunities have sometimes been considered a moderator, their role as a mediator between workplace bullying and turnover intention has not been theoretically nor empirically tested. Third, previous Pakistani studies have focused on public universities or on employees in general in the private sector, without considering the specific contractual terms and career limitations that faculty in Sindh private universities face. Lastly, no research has so far suggested or tested a mediated model of how exposure to bullying is associated with converted turnover intention, specifically through the cognitive appraisal of alternative job opportunities. This paper directly fills these gaps by empirically researching the mediating effect of the perceived alternative job opportunities in the workplace bullying-turnover intention relationship among workers of the private university in Sindh.

Literature Review

Workplace bullying

There is an extensive amount of literature which has determined that workplace bullying has a positive relationship with employee turnover intention in most work environments (Ribeiro et al., 2024). Workplace bullying, which is a chronic occupational stressor, is characterised by a series of negative behaviours (verbal abuse, social isolation, excessive task demands, and demeaning professional treatment) that drain employees of their emotional, social, and professional resources. Conservation of Resources theory suggests that the depletion of this resource creates psychological tension and cognitive disengagement, which, in the long run, enhances an employee's conscious desire to leave the organisation. This positive relationship has been consistently supported by empirical studies and meta-analyses, indicating that bullying exposure is a significant predictor of greater turnover intentions both in cross-sectional and prospective designs. In the

Pakistani higher education sector, in particular, a series of studies carried out in the Pakistani private universities and colleges have consistently discovered that faculty members who are victims of workplace bullying express greater intentions to leave their jobs (Niazi & Mace, 2006). The results provide strong evidence for the initial hypothesis that workplace bullying is positively correlated with turnover intention.

On the second hypothesis, the hypothesis that the perceived alternative job opportunities positively correlate with workplace bullying is theoretically supported by Social Cognitive Career Theory and Conservation of Resources theory (Xiang et al., 2023). Although this may seem counterintuitive, workplace bullying may actually encourage employees to scan and analyse the external labour market in order to seek escape options. Constant bullying harms psychological connections to the organisation at hand, eliciting cognitive disengagement and encouraging problem-oriented coping mechanisms like job search behaviours. In need of reclaiming control over their career paths and avoiding further loss of resources, bullied employees are more attentive to vacancies and more positively evaluate the suitability and appeal of other work opportunities. Within the context of Sindh-based private universities, where contractual employment, limited union protections, and informal hiring practices are widespread, bullied faculty members tend to view other universities' job opportunities, thereby improving their subjective evaluation of external job opportunities (Bandija et al., 2024). Therefore, the second hypothesis is that workplace bullying has a positive impact on employees' perceptions of other job opportunities.

H1: Workplace bullying is positively related to turnover intention

H2: Workplace bullying is positively related to alternative job opportunities

The Mediating Role of Alternative Job Opportunities

Perceived job opportunities and employee turnover intention: a well-reported relationship in organisational behaviour. When workers feel there are similar or better job opportunities elsewhere in the external labour market, they

are much more likely to form conscious intentions to quit their current organisation (Bandija et al., 2024). This positive relationship stems from the fact that perceived alternatives lower the perceived costs and risks of voluntary turnover, thereby minimising psychological barriers to resignation. When employees perceive the external job market as promising, they exhibit increased job search behaviours and stronger cognitive intentions to quit, especially when they are already dissatisfied with the existing work environment. Extending this direct relationship, other job opportunities also serve as a mediating factor in the workplace bullying-turnover intention relationship. In particular, workplace bullying leads to a process of cognitive reappraisal, in which employees actively assess the viability and attractiveness of quitting their current organisation (Priya & Sreejith, 2025). This reexamination boosts their view of other employment opportunities because bullied individuals feel the incentive to search the external market to find a way out of a toxic work environment. When alternative opportunities are perceived as plentiful and available, perceptions are converted into higher turnover intentions. This is a mediated pathway in which workplace bullying does not directly relate to turnover intention in a straightforward, linear manner; instead, it operates through cognitive evaluations of alternative opportunities. Workers who feel bullied and who feel that there are fewer external sources can be stuck in working in hostile environments, and workers who feel that there are more alternatives tend to translate their distress about bullying into more explicit leave intentions (Gamian-Wilk et al., 2022). In this way, alternative job opportunities can be considered a partial or complete explanatory mechanism that transmits the impact of workplace bullying to turnover intention, with mediation as the theoretical focus of this study.

H3: Alternative job opportunities are positively related to turnover intention

H4: Alternative job opportunities mediate the relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention

Methodology

The research design used in this study was a quantitative, cross-sectional design based on primary data collected from faculty members at private universities in Sindh, Pakistan (primary data were deemed suitable because they would enable direct measurement of the psychological constructs under investigation). A questionnaire based on established, validated measures was adopted, and all items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to agree strongly) to ensure content validity and comparability with existing studies. The survey was administered face-to-face across several private university campuses (to ensure high response rates and clarify any ambiguous questions as they arose). Participants were identified and recruited using a dual convenience and snowball sampling approach (convenience sampling was explained by the lack of a publicly available, complete faculty directory for all privately owned universities, whereas snowballing enabled reaching hard-to-reach faculty via professional referral, especially in institutions with limited external access) (Valerio et al., 2016). The questionnaire was adopted from previous studies (Razzaghian & Ghani, 2014), (Albalawi et al., 2019). The sample comprised 219 faculty members from different private universities in Sindh (larger than the minimum required for partial least squares structural equation modelling due to the model's complexity). The initial step in screening and cleaning the data was using SPSS version 25, which included processing missing values, identifying univariate outliers, and evaluating normality assumptions (SPSS also had powerful data preprocessing functions before the complex modelling).

Subsequently, hypothesis testing was carried out with the help of SmartPLS software that utilises a partial least squares structural equation modelling, which is appropriate in the context of exploratory mediation analysis of non-normally distributed data. SmartPLS was chosen due to its ability to estimate direct and indirect effects simultaneously in complex mediation models without distributional assumptions (Hair & Alamer, 2022). During data collection and analysis, all participant data remained confidential; no identifiable

information was captured on the questionnaires, and all responses were pooled for analysis (confidentiality was necessary to elicit honest reporting of sensitive workplace bullying experiences and turnover intentions).

Results and Discussion

Reliability and Validity

The measurement model exhibited good reliability and convergent validity of the three constructs (Cheung et al., 2024). In the case of workplace bullying, the loadings ranged from 0.803 to 0.904, and all items met the recommended loading of 0.70, indicating that each item reflected the underlying construct it was intended to measure (Hair et al., 2020). Cronbach's alpha for workplace bullying was 0.911, and the composite reliability was 0.934, both well above the acceptable level of 0.70, indicating high internal consistency. The mean variance extracted (AVE) for workplace bullying was 0.739, which exceeded the minimum of

0.50, indicating convergent validity. To find other employment opportunities, the item loadings ranged from 0.825 to 0.912, all above 0.70, and the Cronbach alpha was 0.842, with a composite reliability of 0.904, which is good. AVE 0.759 exceeded the 0.50 threshold, indicating convergent validity (Hair & Alamer, 2022). Lastly, the item loading for the employee turnover intention was 0.901, 0.915, and 0.909, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.894 and a composite reliability of 0.934, indicating excellent internal consistency. The AVE of turnover intention was 0.825, which is significantly greater than 0.50. Overall, all three variables met the criteria for item loadings, internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability), and convergent validity (AVE), indicating that the measurement model was robust and could be utilised in structural equation modelling. (Refer to Table 1 and Figure 1)

Table 1. Reliability and Validity

Variable	Item coding	Item loading	Cronbach's alpha value	Composite reliability	Average variance extraction
Workplace Bullying	WB1	0.803	0.911	0.934	0.739
	WB2	0.827			
	WB3	0.872			
	WB4	0.904			
	WB5	0.887			
Alternative Job Opportunities	AJO1	0.912	0.842	0.904	0.759
	AJO2	0.825			
	AJO3	0.875			
Employee Turnover Intention	ETI1	0.915	0.894	0.934	0.825
	ETI2	0.901			
	ETI3	0.909			

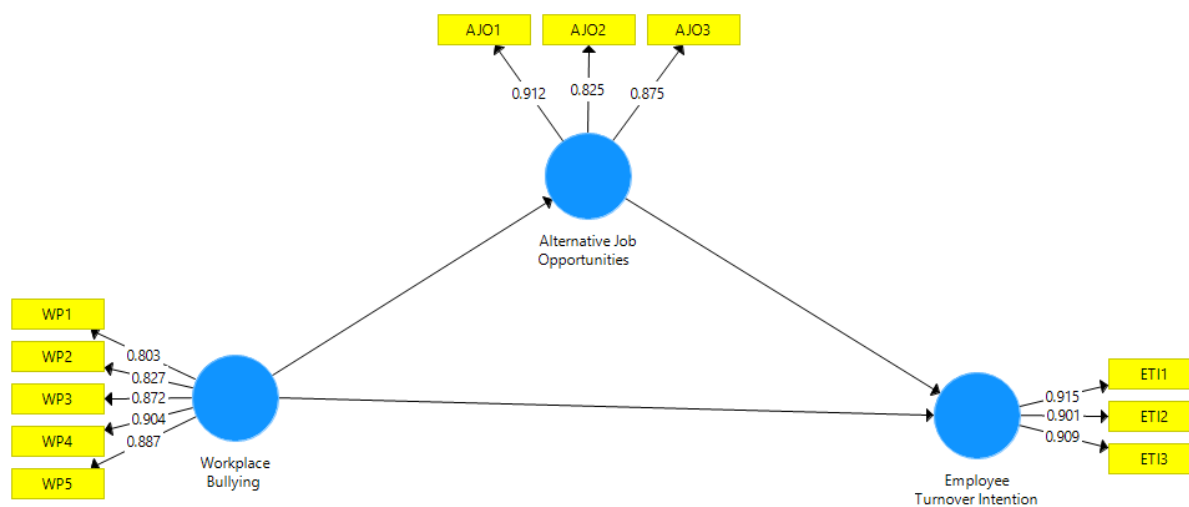


Figure 1. Measurement Model

Hypothesis Testing

The analysis of the structural model provided support for all three direct hypotheses. Employee turnover intention was significantly related to workplace bullying ($r = 0.443$, $t = 7.483$), which validated the hypothesis that greater exposure to workplace bullying is associated with higher turnover intentions. On the same note, workplace bullying showed a significant positive correlation with alternative job opportunities ($r = 0.758$, $t = 29.861$), indicating that bullied employees perceive increased external job opportunities as an escape strategy. Moreover, alternative job opportunities were significantly positively correlated with turnover intention ($r = 0.370$, $t = 5.886$), indicating that the more faculty

members see alternative job opportunities, the more willing they are to leave. In terms of the mediation hypothesis, the indirect relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention via alternative job opportunities was notable ($r = 0.281$, $t = 5.837$). Since the direct relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention remained significant even after controlling for the mediator (0.443 , $p < 0.001$), the mediation is considered partial, not complete. This suggests that other employment opportunities are partly why workplace bullying causes turnover intention, and a significant part of the bullying impact is through other unmeasured factors like psychological distress or disengagement with the organisation. (Refer to Table 2 and Figure 2)

Table 2. Hypotheses Testing

Path Direction (Direct effects)	Beta value	T-value	Remarks
Workplace Bullying -> Employee Turnover Intention	0.443	7.483	Supported
Workplace Bullying -> Alternative Job Opportunities	0.758	29.861	Supported
Alternative Job Opportunities-> Employee Turnover Intention	0.370	5.886	Supported
Path Direction (Indirect effects)	Beta value	T-value	Remarks
Workplace Bullying-> Alternative Job Opportunities -> Employee Turnover Intention	0.281	5.837	Partially mediated effect

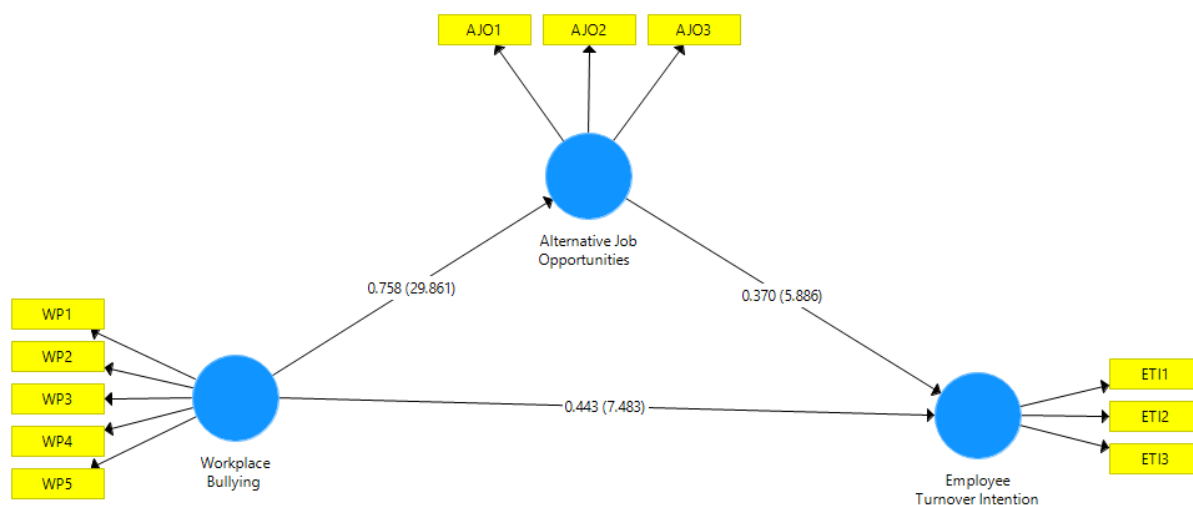


Figure 2: Structural Model

Discussion on Results

All three direct hypotheses have empirical support in the results of the study and demonstrate a partial mediation effect on alternative job opportunities. The positive correlation of workplace bullying and employee turnover intention ($r = 0.443$) is also high and aligned with the theoretical models including the Conservation of Resources theory, which states that bullying will strain the faculty members psychologically, thus provoking withdrawal thoughts in the Sindh private university context. Of interest is that the direct effect is strong implying that workplace bullying is a strong independent predictor of turnover intention even when other job opportunities are available (Sun et al., 2025). Of interest is that workplace bullying has a significant positive correlation with alternative job opportunities (Beta= 0.758), implying that bullied employees are not only passive recipients of bullying, but they are taking an active part in scanning the external labour market as a problem-based coping strategy (Renfro, 2024). This finding builds upon the Social Cognitive Career Theory by demonstrating that, contrary to what the theory suggests, negative work conditions do not decrease perceptions of external alternatives, but in fact, they may increase them. In addition, the relationship between alternative job opportunities and turnover intention is

positive (Beta= 0.370), which confirms the idea that the perceived availability of external alternatives is a cognitive trigger, which changes overall dissatisfaction into specific intentions to leave (Baquero et al., 2025).

The partial mediation effect (indirect = 0.281) is theoretically significant, which implies that alternative job opportunities mediate a part of the bullying-turnover relationship, but not the whole of it (Asghar & Zulfiqar, 2026). This bias implies that workplace bullying affects turnover intention through a variety of parallel mechanisms, including direct psychological stress, decreased organisational commitment, and emotional fatigue, as well as the cognitive mechanism of external opportunity appraisal. Faculty members in the particular case of Sindh-based private universities, where contract work and a weak union presence are the norm, might be motivated to seek external employment due to bullying as a direct cause of exit, and indirectly as a motivator to seek external employment since some members may have family or geographic constraints or a highly specialised academic role with few mobility options (Aydinliyim & Somaya, 2026).

Conclusion and Limitations of the Study

This paper finds that work-related bullying is a major driver of staff turnover intention among faculty members of Sindh-based private universities in Pakistan, and that the alternative

job opportunity serves as a mediator of this relationship. The results highlight that bullied workers not only develop a more direct intention to leave, but also increase their perceptions of external employment options as cognitive escape channels. Pragmatically, the administrators of private universities ought to focus on implementing zero-tolerance policies against bullying, establishing confidential reporting systems, and conducting regular faculty wellbeing checks to curb bullying at its earliest stages. Moreover, human resource policies to control turnover must recognise that employees who feel there are plentiful options are especially susceptible to turnover; thus, creating favourable organisational environments and internal career growth prospects will mitigate the appeal of external options. The partial mediation also presupposes that interventions based solely on changes in perceptions of alternative jobs will not be effective; a direct decrease in bullying behaviours will still be necessary.

This study has limitations, including a cross-sectional design that does not allow causal inferences; self-reported data, which may lead to common-method bias; and convenience and snowball sampling, which may limit the study's applicability to faculty members beyond the 219 surveyed. Future studies should utilise a longitudinal design to determine causality, include objective turnover data, and investigate other mediators like psychological distress, job embeddedness, and coping mechanisms to better explain the mechanism of bullying-turnover in the context of developing countries' higher education.

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