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# Workplace Harassment and Anxiety Among Internship Students in Malaysia: The Moderating Role of Gender

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**Abstract:** Workplace harassment poses a significant threat to the psychological well-being of internship students, yet limited evidence exists on whether gender shapes this relationship in Malaysian organizational contexts. This study examined the relationship between workplace harassment and anxiety among internship students in Malaysia and evaluated the moderating role of gender. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 247 internship students from the Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA. Workplace harassment was measured using three dimensions: workplace bullying, abusive supervision, and interpersonal conflict, while anxiety was assessed using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale (GAD-7). Pearson correlation analysis showed that all harassment dimensions were positively and significantly related to anxiety: bullying ($r = .367$, $p < .001$), abusive supervision ($r = .386$, $p < .001$), and interpersonal conflict ($r = .376$, $p < .001$). The composite harassment scores also demonstrated a significant positive association with anxiety ($r = .420$, $p < .001$). Hierarchical moderated regression analysis revealed that workplace harassment significantly predicted anxiety ($b = .621$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .188$). However, the interaction between workplace harassment and gender was non-significant ($b = -.163$, $p = .452$), indicating that gender did not moderate the relationship. The findings suggest that workplace harassment is a substantial predictor of anxiety among interns regardless of gender. Universities and host organizations should implement gender-inclusive anti-harassment policies and psychological support mechanisms to safeguard interns' well-being.

**Keywords:** *Workplace harassment, anxiety, gender moderation, abusive supervision, workplace bullying, interpersonal conflict, interns' well-being*

## 1. Introduction

In this context, internship programs serve to connect academic preparation with professional practice, bridging students and real organizational contexts before their final entry into the job market (Tran & Nguyen, 2021). But those environments are not always friendly. Interns are in a structurally vulnerable position within host organizations: They have none of the employment protections afforded to permanent staff, and their academic grades often rely on evaluations from the same supervisors who might be mistreating them. That mix makes formal grievance reporting feel high-stakes in ways it does not for tenured employees (Lian et al., 2022; Yusoff et al., 2021), and creates conditions under which harassment can persist with minimal institutional accountability.

Workplace harassment refers to a persistent pattern of unfavorable, hostile interpersonal behaviors aimed toward a victim (Ariza-Montes et al., 2020; Giorgi et al., 2020). The construct encompasses several related yet distinctly different forms: systematic unhealthy behavior by peers or supervisors, on the one hand, sustained antagonistic conduct from those in positions of authority (abusive supervision), and the friction of daily negative interactions with coworkers (Mackey et al., 2021; Tepper et al., 2020). Each varies in mechanism, but all have a documented ability to create psychological strain such as anxiety, depression, and burnout.

One of these consequences that we must particularly focus on in the internship context is anxiety. It affects cognitive functioning and career decisions in ways that can endure well beyond the placement period itself (Rajgopal, 2020; Salihu & Shehu, 2022). However, although there is accumulating evidence that student psychological health and occupational stressors are associated with each other, studies on the relationship between harassment and anxiety in internship contexts have been sparse, especially within higher education systems of Southeast Asia (Ahmad et al., 2021; Rahim et al., 2023).

Gender is another dimension of this portrait. Women report experiencing higher levels of hostile workplace behaviors across occupational sectors (McDonald et al., 2021; Munn & Munn, 2020), and some socialization differences contribute to their being more psychologically reactive than men when targeted with such behaviors (Liu et al., 2020). Whether gender moderates the psychological effect of harassment, rather than just how often it occurs, is a separate and less settled empirical question (Nielsen et al., 2020; Spector et al., 2021). Malaysia provides a useful case study for understanding these dynamics. Our country exhibits high power distance in its organizational culture, which limits harassment disclosure and intensifies the hierarchical gap between supervisors and interns (Abdullah et al., 2022; Hamid et al., 2020).

As Malaysia's largest public university, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) has tens of thousands of business students who undergo industrial training every year, making it a sizeable and ecologically valid setting for this type of research. The main contribution of this paper is addressing these two questions: does workplace harassment predict anxiety among business internship students in Malaysia, and does gender moderate that relationship? Both directly influence intern welfare policy, as well as the institutional support structures that universities and host organizations create.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### *Workplace Harassment: An Exploration of Dimensions*

Generally, rather than being regarded as a unidimensional phenomenon, workplace harassment is currently considered a multidimensional construct, in which separate but overlapping forms of interpersonal aggression are given different theoretical and psychometric consideration (Ariza-Montes et al., 2020; Einarsen et al., 2020). This study not only does the former but also operationalizes three of those forms of harassment.

Bullying in the workplace typically describes repeated, systematic negative acts toward another target who finds it difficult to defend himself or herself, usually occurring within contexts of actual or perceived power imbalance (Einarsen et al., 2020; Samnani & Singh, 2021). NAQ-R is a measure of negative acts at the workplace that distinguishes work-related bullying by obstructing tasks and withholding information from person-related bullying in terms of humiliation and social isolation. Evidence from meta-analyses demonstrates a reliable negative relationship between exposure to bullying and psychological distress in organizational settings (Nielsen et al., 2020).

Abusive supervision is defined as subordinates' ongoing evaluations of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors directed at them by supervisors, excluding physical contact (Mackey et al., 2021; Tepper et al., 2020). Its distinction from peer bullying lies in the formal authority behind it: the supervisor oversees evaluations, references, and daily working conditions, leaving targets of this behavior with few legitimate avenues to seek recourse. This problem is acute for internship students, whose grade and post-placement references all rely on the very person who may be mistreating them (Lian et al., 2022). Recent meta-analyses have established abusive supervision as a fairly consistent risk factor for anxiety and emotional exhaustion (Mackey et al., 2021). Interpersonal conflict at work is defined as hostile or antagonistic exchanges between coworkers that lead to chronic relational friction (Kwan et al., 2018; Spector et al., 2021). Quantified here using the Interpersonal Conflict at Work Scale (ICAWS), this kind of behavior is typically less flamboyant than bullying or abusive supervision, but its cumulative impact on psychological well-being has been documented many times over.

### *The Harassment and Anxiety Link through the Lens of Conservation of Resources Theory*

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018) provides a unified explanation for why harassment creates anxiety. This theory posits that humans seek to protect and build resources, broadly defined to encompass psychological safety, self-efficacy, social belonging, and professional standing. Harassment attacks those resources directly. Bullying eats away at one’s sense of self-worth; abusive supervision compromises the safety that characterizes the supervisory relationship and undermines the intern’s feeling of competence therein; an interpersonal conflict leeches away the cooperative social capital that can otherwise help protect against work stress. [When resources are threatened or lost, the resultant strain is experienced as anxiety, as people make their choices under threat of additional loss with diminished capacity to engage (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Lian et al., 2022).

Supplementary occupational research data confirm that sustained resource threat of this type will engender anxiety as an outcome (Giorgi et al., 2020; Kwan et al., 2018). For interns in particular, the picture is a bit more complex than for full-time hires. Interns come in with fewer organizational resources at their disposal, as they lack existing relationships, institutional knowledge, or positional authority. They are also operating within a high-stakes evaluative frame whereby resource losses have academic as well as psychological repercussions (Yusoff et al., 2021; Rahim et al., 2023). Both factors point to sexual harassment potentially affecting interns more, or at least differently, than the existing research on permanent employees would find.

***Gender as a Moderating Variable***

There are two opposing positions that frame the debate over gender and outcomes in harassment cases. According to the vulnerability hypothesis, women react more vigorously to workplace aggression than men do because socialization processes lead them to direct their focus on relational harmony (Liu et al., 2020; McDonald et al., 2021), which implies that interpersonal hostility is particularly threatening toward attacking relational resources that individuals value (Gershon et al, 2008). An alternative view is the differential exposure hypothesis: observed gender differences in harassment outcomes are due to differences between men and women in their overall prevalence or severity of harassment, not their sensitivity to it. Adjust for exposure, and the outcome gap should disappear (Nielsen et al., 2020; Munn & Munn, 2020).

The empirical record does not speak decisively to either position. Some studies find harassment–strain associations are stronger for women (e.g., Liu et al. 2020); however, other studies have reported that effect sizes are statistically equivalent across genders (Nielsen et al. 2020; Spector et al. 2021). Cultural context makes matters more complicated. In high power-distance cultures, such as that of Malaysia, masculinity norms that stigmatize the sharing of emotional states may mute self-reported anxiety among men, thus possibly compressing mere differences in psychological outcomes even when actual reactivity is equivalent (Abdullah et al., 2022; Hamid et al., 2020). This possibility suggests testing the moderation rather than assuming it.

***Hypotheses***

From the review above, four hypotheses were developed:
H1: Workplace bullying has a positive and significant relationship with anxiety among students in internships.
H2: Internship students are significantly and positively associated with anxiety due to abusive supervision.
H3: Internship students' anxiety is positively and significantly associated with interpersonal conflict.
H4: Gender moderates the relationship between composite workplace harassment and anxiety, such that the positive relationship is stronger for female than male interns.

## 3. Methodology

**Research Design and Sample**

A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed, which is appropriate for determining concurrent associations between predictor and outcome variables in a defined population (Sekaran & Bougie, 2022). The subjects in this study were internship students from the Faculty of Business Management at UiTM during the data collection phase. Purposive sampling focused on students who were doing supervised industrial training placements. Listwise deletion of incomplete records resulted in 247 usable responses. The sample was gender-skewed (n = 193, 78.1% female; n = 54, 21.9% male), a pattern consistent with the overall gender composition of Malaysian public university business faculty enrollment (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2023). The mean age of participants was 22.4 years (SD = 1.12). The majority of participants were carrying out placements in the services sector (61.5%), followed by finance and banking (22.3%) and public administration (16.2%). The length of placements ranged from 12 to 24 weeks.

***Measures***

Workplace bullying was measured with the Negative Acts Questionnaire–Revised (NAQ-R; Einarsen et al., 2020), a 22-item instrument scored on a 5-point frequency scale (1 = Never to 5 = Daily). The NAQ-R has shown strong cross-cultural reliability and validity across organizational contexts (Samnani & Singh, 2021). Cronbach's alpha for the current sample was $\alpha = 0.91$. Tepper et al. (2005) were used to measure abusive supervision. The 15-item Abusive Supervision Scale (AS, Tepper, 2000) uses anchors of 0 (I cannot remember him/her ever using this behavior with me) and 4 (He/she uses this behavior very often with me). The scale has well-established criterion validity for employee well-being outcomes (Mackey et al., 2021). Alpha was $\alpha =. 93$.

Using a 5-point scale, the Interpersonal Conflict at Work Scale (ICAWS; Kwan et al., 2018), comprising 4 items, was used to measure interpersonal conflict. In occupational samples, the ICAWS exhibits reasonable reliability and convergent validity with strain measures (Spector et al., 2021). Alpha was α =.82.

Anxiety was assessed using the 7-item Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale (GAD-7; Löwe et al., 2021) on a 4-point scale (0 = Not at all to 3 = Nearly every day). In clinical and general populations, the GAD-7 has good reliability and screening validity (Rutter et al., 2021). Alpha for the current sample was α =. 89. ≥ 10 corresponds to moderate-to-severe anxiety.

A composite workplace harassment score was calculated by standardizing and averaging the scores of the three scales measuring harassment. Gender was coded as a dichotomous variable (0 = male, 1 = female). Items were administered in both Bahasa Malaysia and English, with back-translation procedures conducted to verify semantic equivalence (Sekaran & Bougie, 2022).

***Strategy of Data Analysis***

The analysis was conducted in three phases. Descriptive and Pearson's bivariate correlation statistics were first calculated to profile the sample and test Hypotheses 1 through 3. To test Hypothesis 4, hierarchical moderated regression was conducted following the procedures of Cohen et al. (2003). The composite harassment score was entered at Step 1; the gender variable was added at Step 2; the harassment-by-gender interaction term, calculated using mean-centered variables, was entered at Step 3. A significant $\Delta R^2$ >. 01 with $p < .05$ at Step 3 was chosen as the threshold for moderation. Gender stratification regression analyses were then conducted to explore within-group associations. Harman's single-factor test was employed to assess the common method variance. IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27 was used for all analyses.

## 4. Results

***Preliminary Analyses***

Harman's single-factor test indicated that the largest common factor accounted for 28.7% of total variance, well below the 50% threshold, suggesting common method variance did not critically distort the data (Podsakoff et al., 2020). Skewness and kurtosis values for all harassment subscales and the GAD-7 fell within the ±2.0 range, supporting the use of parametric tests.

***Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis***

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations for all study variables. Mean harassment scores were moderate across all three dimensions. The mean GAD-7 score of 7.14 (SD = 4.23) sits within the mild anxiety range but close to the clinical screening threshold, consistent with evidence of elevated psychological distress among Malaysian university students (Ahmad et al., 2021; Salihu & Shehu, 2022). Hypotheses 1 through 3 were supported: all three harassment dimensions correlated significantly and positively with anxiety. The composite harassment score showed the strongest association ($r = .420$, $p < .001$), supporting the case for aggregating the three dimensions.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 247)**

| Variables | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Workplace Bullying (NAQ-R) | 1.73 | 0.58 | — | | | | |
| 2. Abusive Supervision | 1.82 | 0.64 | .412*** | — | | | |
| 3. Interpersonal Conflict (ICAWS) | 1.79 | 0.61 | .374*** | .453*** | — | | |
| 4. Composite Harassment | 1.78 | 0.55 | .814*** | .821*** | .784*** | — | |
| 5. Anxiety (GAD-7) | 7.14 | 4.23 | .367*** | .386*** | .376*** | .420*** | — |

*** $p < .001$.

***Hierarchical Moderated Regression***

Table 2 presents the hierarchical regression results. At Step 1, composite workplace harassment significantly predicted anxiety and explained 18.8% of its variance ($b = .621$, $SE = .089$, $\beta = .433$, $t = 6.97$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .188$). Adding gender at Step 2 produced a non-significant increment ($b = .318$, $p = .214$, $\Delta R^2 = .006$), indicating that

gender did not account for additional variance in anxiety beyond harassment exposure alone. The harassment-by-gender interaction term at Step 3 was also non-significant (b = −.163, t(243) = −0.753, p = .452, $\Delta R^2$ = .002), providing no support for Hypothesis 4. The total model at Step 3 explained 19.6% of the variance in anxiety. The $\Delta R^2$ of .002 falls well below conventional thresholds for meaningful moderation (Lakens, 2022), and the 95% confidence interval for the interaction coefficient [−0.591, 0.265] included zero throughout, which confirms the null finding.

**Table 2: Hierarchical Moderated Regression: Workplace Harassment Predicting Anxiety (N = 247)**

| Predictor | b | SE | β | t | $R^2$ | $\Delta R^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Step 1 | | | | | | |
| Composite Harassment | .621 | .089 | .433 | 6.97*** | .188*** | .005 |
| Step 2 | | | | | | |
| Composite Harassment | .614 | .090 | .428 | 6.82*** | .194*** | .006 |
| Gender (0=Male, 1=Female) | .318 | .254 | .077 | 1.25 | | |
| Step 3 | | | | | | |
| Composite Harassment | .621 | .091 | .433 | 6.83*** | .196*** | .002 |
| Gender | .309 | .257 | .074 | 1.20 | | |
| Harassment × Gender | −.163 | .217 | −.048 | −0.75 | | |

*Note. *** p < .001. Predictors mean-centered before interaction term computation.*

***Within-Group Stratified Analyses***

Stratified regression analyses confirmed that harassment significantly predicted anxiety within both gender groups: female interns (b = .653, SE = .094, β = .449, t = 6.94, p < .001, $R^2$ = .202) and male interns (b = .489, SE = .175, β = .392, t = 2.79, p = .006, $R^2$ = .154). The unstandardized coefficient was numerically larger for women than for men, but the confidence intervals overlapped substantially (female: [.468, .838]; male: [.143, .835]). Given the non-significant interaction term, this numerical difference should not be interpreted as a meaningful gender effect.

## Discussion

***Workplace Harassment as a Universal Predictor of Intern Anxiety***

The results are clear-cut on the main question: workplace harassment predicts anxiety among Malaysian business students struggling through an internship, and it does so across the board. The other index, the composite harassment index, accounted for 18.8% of variance in GAD-7 scores (a statistically significant and practically meaningful effect size, one which lies within the range observed for samples of permanent employees reported in the meta-analyses conducted by Nielsen et al. (2020), Mackey et al. (2021)). The size of correlations produced by all three harassment dimensions with anxiety was comparable, implying that the anxiety-generating potential of workplace hostility is not unique to any one of the aggression modes.

This pattern can be reasonably explained by COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Lian et al., 2022). Bullying saps self-worth; abusive supervision steals psychological safety within a relationship from which they cannot extricate themselves easily; interpersonal conflict drains the cooperative social resources that would serve as buffers against occupational stress. The fact that these threats work via different mechanisms may account for the composite harassment measure, which includes all three channels, yielding the strongest anxiety correlation (r = 420), where the cumulative burden of resource loss from multiple sources exceeds what any one dimension can capture on its own (Giorgi et al., 2020).

Noteworthy too is the mean GAD-7 score (7.14). This is mild anxiety but near the population-level screening cut-off of 8 (Löwe et al., 2021; Rutter et al., 2021). This is in line with broader evidence of elevated psychological distress among Malaysian university students and young workers (Ahmad et al., 2021; Rahim et al., 2023) and indicates that workplace harassment during placements adds to the burden faced by students before they enter their internships.

***The Nulling Moderation of Gender***

The gender interactions were non-significant (b = −. 163, p =. 452, $\Delta R^2$ =. 002), and the confidence interval for the interaction term did not cross zero by a wide margin. This null finding is theoretically instructive. After

controlling for exposure to harassment directly, gender does not moderate the relationship between harassment and anxiety. Male interns showed a statistically significant harassment-anxiety association (b = .489, p = .006), along with a smaller numerical female coefficient (b = .653) that was not markedly different therefrom. The vulnerability hypothesis, which would expect a meaningfully stronger effect for women, has no support here.

This result fits with a growing line of research indicating that gender-invariant harassment effects are more prevalent than previously thought (Nielsen et al., 2020; Munn & Munn, 2020). A plausible explanation for this phenomenon can be found in Malaysian culture, where male coefficients, although significant, were lower because they controlled for the impact of women. The norms of masculinity in high power-distance societies may have stifled men's self-reporting of their anxiety (Abdullah et al., 2022; Hamid et al., 2020). If anything, that suppression would have operated in the opposite direction, working against finding a strong male association and rendering its presence in this data more striking, not less.

However, the small male subsample (n = 54) does limit the statistical power to detect moderation, leaving open the possibility of a Type II error. Equivalence testing per Lakens (2022) showed that the interaction effect (d = −. 096) was within the bounds of practical equivalence [−. 40, 40], which offers confirmation rather than simply non-confirmation of the null moderation conclusion.

***Limitations for Organizations and Higher Education Institutions***

The gender-invariant finding has no frills take-home message for practice: anti-harassment programs that defend principally female employees will leave male interns, at equivalent psychological risk, unprotected. Commenting on these challenges, we advocate for gender-inclusive terms for intern mental health protection and support from both universities and host organizations (Yusoff et al., 2021; Rahim et al., 2023). For universities and colleges that operate mandatory placement courses, there are several appropriate responses. Pre-placement psycho-education on harassment identification and management, confidential reporting mechanisms not channelled through academic supervisors, and post-placement psychological screenings using measures such as the GAD-7 (Löwe et al., 2021), each address a hole that existing arrangements leave unfilled. Internship partnership agreements with host organizations should include standard conditions requiring demonstrable anti-harassment policies and accessible pathways for mental health referrals (Ahmad et al., 2021).

Abusive supervision within-group regression results suggest supervisory behavior is a particularly high-leverage target for intervention. More structured training programs that focus on hostile communication patterns have shown efficacy in similar settings (Mackey et al., 2021; Tepper et al., 2020), especially when hierarchical organizational norms would otherwise normalize supervisory aggression. Integrating supervisor evaluations with intern satisfaction data would create a new accountability mechanism in Malaysian internship arrangements (Abdullah et al., 2022) that was not available before.

## 5. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations qualify these findings. Due to the cross-sectional nature, causation cannot be determined. The association between harassment and anxiety is theoretically consistent with the view that harassment causes anxiety, but may also be true in principle: people low on baseline or dispositional anxiety are likely to interpret interactions as less hostile (Podsakoff et al., 2020). Longitudinal designs measuring harassment exposure and GAD-7 scores on several occasions throughout the placement period would provide stronger causal evidence and allow examination of whether trajectories differ by gender.

As the sample was predominantly female (78.1%), this limits statistical power for analyses of the male subsample. The male regression coefficient has wider confidence intervals than the female estimate, and the possibility of a Type II error in the moderation test cannot be ruled out. Future studies may strive for gender-balanced recruitment or implement prospective power analyses based on the effect sizes reported here. Reporting equivalence tests together with standard significance tests (Lakens, 2022) would bolster claims of null moderation.

A third limitation is our reliance on self-report measures, although Harman's test results were reassuring regarding common method variance. Future work could also mitigate this concern by supplementing self-reported harassment with supervisor-rated indices of organizational climate or peer-nominated behaviors (Podsakoff et al., 2020). The sample is also drawn from a single faculty member at one institution, and the findings are not generalizable beyond a single discipline, institutional type, or national context. This would effectively address issues of local and culture-bound error, with multi-site replication within Malaysia and comparative designs involving other high power-distance societies, strengthening external validity.

Future studies could also investigate the mechanisms through which harassment leads to anxiety. COR theory implicates processes of resource depletion, in particular lower self-efficacy, diminished organizational belonging, and erosion of supervisory trust, as likely mediators (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Giorgi et al., 2020). Whether supportive factors like peer social support, the quality of mentoring, or predispositions for proactive coping styles would mitigate these indirect harm effects, and whether they may differ between male and female interns, remains an open and practically relevant question.

**Conclusion**

In Malaysia's business internship students, workplace harassment (bullying, abusive supervision, and interpersonal conflict) is a significant predictive factor of their anxiety. Gender does not moderate that relationship at all, as both male and female interns experience the same amount of anxiety elevation per unit exposure to harassment, and the interaction term accounts for a small, non-significant share of variance. The data do not support the supposed assumption that female interns have a disproportionately heavier psychological burden. Framing intern mental health protection as a gender-based concern is not just theoretically unsupported; it leaves a psychologically at-risk male population without adequate institutional response. Anti-harassment policies, accessible psychological support, and accountability mechanisms for supervisory conduct need to be universal rather than targeted to address the harm documented here. The effect sizes are large enough to warrant institutional action. They should not be used to justify leaving half the intern population out of scope.

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