

# Fear of Retaliation: Workplace Bullying among Malaysian Millennials

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.91200183>

Received: 22 December 2025; Accepted: 30 December 2025; Published: 06 January 2026

## ABSTRACT

Workplace bullying is increasingly recognized as a serious issue that negatively affects employee well-being and organizational functioning. While millennials make up a growing segment of the Malaysian workforce, there is limited research on the specific factors contributing to bullying among this group. This study aims to explore the factors that contribute to workplace bullying. This study used a qualitative approach, specifically a case study design. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with five Malaysian millennial informants from both the public and private sectors who had personally experienced workplace bullying. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal three key factors that contribute to workplace bullying: social, organizational, and economic. Social factors include fear of retaliation and cultural norms of silence. The organizational factors include favoritism and cliques, power abuse, fear of retaliation in reporting bullying, weak enforcement of anti-bullying policies, and abuse of performance reviews and resource deprivation. Lastly, the economic factors include financial dependence and the inability to exit. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the Malaysian context and underscores the need for better interventions to promote safer work environments.

**Keywords**— workplace bullying, Malaysian millennials, fear of retaliation, high power distance, organizational culture

## INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying refers to repeated negative behaviours, including harassment and social exclusion, that harm employees' psychological well-being (Einarsen et al., 2020). Globally, workplace bullying is recognized as a serious psychosocial risk, with studies linking it to stress, reduced job satisfaction, and turnover intention (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Research over the past decade highlights organizational climate, leadership style, and job demands as key factors influencing workplace bullying.

In Malaysia, workplace bullying has been reported across various sectors. Chan et al. (2019) found that nearly 39% of employees experienced bullying, while Awai et al. (2021) identified organizational and job-related factors as significant contributors. However, research on millennial employees remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to examine the factors contributing to workplace bullying among Malaysian millennial employees.

## Statement of the Problem

Workplace bullying is an issue that can negatively affect employees' well-being and work performance. In

Malaysia, previous studies have shown that workplace bullying occurs in many types of organizations. However, most studies focus more on how common bullying is and its effects, rather than on the factors that cause it. At the same time, millennial employees now make up a large share of the workforce and often have different work expectations, communication styles, and attitudes than previous generations. These differences may influence how they experience workplace bullying. Due to the limited research focusing on this group, there is a need to understand better the factors that contribute to workplace bullying among Malaysian millennial employees.

## **Research Objective**

**The study aims to achieve the following objective:**

To explore the factors of workplace bullying experienced by Malaysian millennial employees.

## **Significance of the Research**

This study contributes to the understanding of workplace bullying among Malaysian millennial employees by highlighting the multidimensional factors that shape these experiences. By examining social, cultural, political, economic, and psychological dimensions, the research provides a comprehensive perspective on how bullying is embedded within organizational structures and societal norms. The findings extend existing literature by offering contextually grounded insights into how hierarchy and cultural expectations influence an employee's willingness to report bullying or seek support.

From a practical perspective, these findings are valuable for employers and human resource practitioners because they identify the specific conditions that allow bullying to persist. Understanding issues such as the fear of retaliation and weak policy enforcement can help organizations develop clearer anti-bullying policies and foster ethical leadership. These improvements may lead to safer and more inclusive workplaces that support both employee well-being and overall productivity.

At the policy level, this study highlights gaps in employee protection and suggests that regulatory bodies should strengthen workplace safety frameworks. Academically, the research addresses the limited focus on millennials and provides a foundation for future studies to expand using larger samples or different methods. Overall, this work supports broader efforts to raise awareness and develop prevention strategies to reduce workplace bullying and its harmful consequences.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The Malaysian Millennial Workforce**

Millennial employees, typically defined as those born between 1981 and 1996, currently occupy a growing share of the Malaysian workforce. Research on workplace bullying suggests that demographic characteristics such as age and length of service can influence vulnerability to bullying, with younger and less experienced workers often at greater risk (Rong & Tharbe, 2018). A prevalence study of Malaysian hospital workers found that employees with 10 years or fewer of service were significantly more likely to report experiencing bullying than longer-serving counterparts, suggesting that early-career workers may be more exposed to workplace bullying (Ismail et al., 2024).

Broader international studies suggest millennials often encounter power imbalances, role ambiguity, and limited social capital early in their careers, which may reduce their capacity to defend against or report bullying behaviors (Kwan et al., 2020). Moreover, covert forms of bullying such as exclusion, belittlement of contributions, and undermining of professional competence have been documented among Malaysian emerging adults, suggesting that subtle bullying behaviors impact younger employees who are still establishing credibility and confidence in professional roles (Ismail et al., 2024). These patterns underscore the importance of considering generational and career-stage vulnerabilities when analyzing workplace bullying experiences in Malaysia.

### **Fear of Retaliation and Cultural Norms of Silence**

The fear of retaliation has become a major social factor in how employees deal with workplace bullying. This is

especially true in organizations that have a strict hierarchy and a strong focus on authority. Bullying is common in workplaces where there is a significant power gap, making employees feel they cannot defend themselves or speak out against unfair treatment. In the Malaysian context, a deep respect for seniority and a high level of job dependence can exacerbate these fears. Many employees worry that if they report bullying, they will face negative consequences like losing their jobs, being ignored by colleagues, or seeing their career growth stop. According to Dahl and Knepper (2021), this fear often leads to "psychological silence" because employees feel the risk of speaking up outweighs the protection the company provides.

This fear also changes how witnesses and bystanders behave. It creates a culture of silence where bullying is allowed to continue. People who see bullying often stay quiet because they are afraid of becoming the next target. Unfortunately, by staying silent, they increase their own risk of future bullying (Rosander & Nielsen, 2023). How a company responds also matters; employees are less likely to come forward if they feel the leadership does not care or if the reporting process feels unsafe. Research shows that even if a company has formal rules, they do not work unless managers are genuinely committed to a safe environment (Mayer et al., 2013; Boddy & Boulter, 2025). This is clearly evident in sectors such as healthcare, where the fear of being blamed or facing professional trouble continues to keep people silent (Elsharkawy et al., 2025; Lim et al., 2022).

### **Favoritism and Cliques**

Social, religious, and cultural backgrounds strongly influence workplace behavior in Malaysia, particularly regarding favoritism and clique formation. In collectivist and high power-distance cultures, employees often rely on close social, ethnic, or religious networks for support and security, which can unintentionally lead to preferential treatment and exclusion of non-members (Hofstede et al., 2010). While such groups may enhance cooperation among insiders, employees outside dominant cliques frequently experience marginalization, limited access to opportunities, and relational bullying behaviors such as gossip and social exclusion (Einarsen & Neilsen, 2014; Zapf & Einarsen, 2020).

### **Power Abuse**

Abuse of power further reinforces workplace bullying. Respect for authority and seniority discourages subordinates, particularly younger or junior employees, from challenging unfair treatment or reporting bullying (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Power abuse enables supervisors or influential groups to dominate decision-making, favor in-group members, and silence dissent, allowing bullying behaviours to persist and become normalized within organizational culture (Kwan et al., 2016).

### **Fear of Retaliation in Reporting Bullying**

Unclear legislation and weak organizational policies often discourage employees from speaking up due to fear of retaliation or career consequences (Samnani & Singh, 2016; Branch et al., 2012). In Malaysia, the lack of specific anti-bullying laws and limited enforcement of workplace psychosocial safety policies, combined with cultural norms emphasizing respect for authority, contribute to underreporting (Chan et al., 2019; Awai et al., 2021). Even though millennial employees are more aware of bullying behaviours, they often hesitate to report incidents because of unclear reporting procedures and insufficient organizational support, highlighting the need for stronger policies and protective systems.

### **Weak Enforcement of Anti-Bullying Policies**

Enforcement of workplace bullying policies remains a significant challenge globally. Even when organizations have anti-bullying policies or guidelines, weak implementation and inconsistent enforcement often limit their effectiveness (Einarsen & Nielsen, 2014). In Malaysia, the absence of specific legislation criminalizing workplace bullying, coupled with limited regulatory oversight, means that organizations may not prioritize proper investigation or disciplinary action (Chan et al., 2019; Awai et al., 2021). Studies also indicate that employees, including millennials, perceive enforcement as ineffective, which reduces trust in reporting mechanisms and allows bullying behaviors to persist. This highlights the need for stronger enforcement measures, clear accountability, and organizational commitment to address bullying effectively.

## **Abuse of Performance Review and Resource Deprivation**

Performance reviews are commonly employed as a control mechanism in contemporary business environments. According to Plimmer et al. (2021), when supervisors use their judgement to influence evaluations, "management by metrics" can encourage bullying. Supervisors may "de-legitimise" an employee's work to justify not giving them a raise when assessment results are tied to monetary compensation. As a "gatekeeper" to cash rewards, the boss has a lot of power to force people to do what they want. Vveinhardt and Sroka (2020) examine how bullying can occur when subjective ratings skew outcomes. The results of their study show that performance reviews are often used for "financial sanctioning" rather than for growth in toxic workplaces. Lowering scores on purpose is one-way managers can punish "non-compliant" behaviours, such as wanting a move. In addition to direct feedback manipulation, bullying often includes not giving someone the tools they need to succeed, which costs them money in the long run. Cullinan et al. (2020) look at bullying at work as a form of stress that includes not having access to necessary work resources and "lost opportunities." By making it harder to get to important tools, the supervisor creates a "performance deficit." This fake lack of resources is used as "objective" proof to deny employees bonuses and raises, thereby keeping them in a cycle of economic disadvantage.

### **Financial Dependence and Inability to Exit**

One of the main reasons why bullying keeps happening at work is that the target feels like they cannot get away. Salin and Hoel (2013) stated that workplace bullying is not a one-off event but is exacerbated by corporate factors that create "vulnerability." They say that bullies are more likely to target people who do not have many job options or who depend on others for a lot of their money. In this case, the bully knows that the employee is financially dependent on their current pay, so they are less likely to report the behaviour or quit the company. Salin (2003) stresses that sustained commitment at high levels creates an "enabling structure" for bullying. When "sunk costs" such as car loans, mortgages, or the potential loss of benefits based on seniority are high, people are more willing to put up with misuse. The worker does an unspoken cost-benefit analysis and often decides that the mental pain of being bullied is a "necessary cost" to avoid the terrible economic effects of being unemployed.

Nielsen and Knardahl (2015) refer to the long-term effects of this financial dependence as the "locked-in" situation. This happens when an employee feels financially obligated to stay in a job they consider unfair or stressful. The feeling of "locked-in" not only makes people more tolerant of harassment, but it also makes the harmful health effects of bullying worse, such as making people more tired and less able to do their job. Because it is better for business, removing the "exit" option forces the worker into a state of "learnt helplessness" or strategic silence to protect their annual raises and job security.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Approach and Design**

This study employs a qualitative research approach. The said approach is the most suitable because it enables researchers to explore and analyze the intended problems encountered by the informants (Taylor et al., 2016). This approach enables the researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and issues faced by Malaysians millennials in the context of workplace bullying. This allowed the researchers to gain insight into how the informants interpreted their experience, what meanings they attributed to it, and the impact on their professional and personal lives. Additionally, a case study design was employed to examine the complex, multifaceted situations the informants encountered in their workplace environments.

### **Sample and Sampling Techniques**

This study used purposive sampling to select the informants. Purposive sampling is a nonprobability sampling strategy in which researchers use their own judgment to select participants with the traits required to answer the study question (Etikan et al., 2016). The researchers adopted criterion sampling technique, specifically targeting Malaysian residents in the millennial age bracket with experience in the issue under study, to enable a more detailed and focused investigation of their experiences (Palinkas et al., 2015). The informants were selected based on their ability to provide detailed accounts of the factors contributing to workplace bullying. The sample size was determined using the saturation principle, which ceased data collection once no new themes or insights

emerged (Tarnoki & Puentes, 2019). As a result, the sample for this study comprises five informants (three females and two males) who report experiencing workplace bullying.

TABLE I DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE INFORMANTS

Informants' Demography	Farah	Helmi	Michelle	Zhareef	Suhaiza
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Age	34	33	32	33	37
State of origin	Perak	Johor	Sabah	Melaka	Johor
State of residence	Penang	Johor	Sabah	Johor	Johor
Ethnic group	Malay	Malay	Bumiputera Suluk	Malay	Malay
Religion	Islam	Islam	Islam	Islam	Islam
Level of education	Master's degree	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Diploma
Field of expertise	Management	Engineering	Agriculture	Engineering	Occupational safety and health
Current occupation	Quality assurance senior executive	Assistant engineer	Assistant manager	Assistant engineer	Safety and health officer
Years of service	1 year	10 years	10 years	1 year 6 months	14 years
Occupational sector	Private	Government	Private	Government	Government
Range of income per month	MYR4,850 and below	MYR4,850 and below	MYR4,851 - MYR10,970	MYR4,850 and below	MYR4,851 - MYR10,970

Table I presents the demographic profiles of the five informants, illustrating a diverse cross-section of gender, age, place of origin, place of residence, ethnicity, religion, educational level, field of expertise, current occupation, years of service, occupational sector, and monthly income range. The cohort comprises three female informants (Farah, Michelle, and Suhaiza) and two male informants (Helmi and Zhareef). All informants are in their 30s, with ages ranging from 32 to 37 years. Geographically, the sample represents various regions within Malaysia. Farah (originally from Perak) and Zhareef (originally from Melaka) have migrated to Penang and Johor, respectively, for residency. Conversely, Helmi and Suhaiza remain in their home state of Johor, while Michelle resides in her native state of Sabah. In terms of ethnicity and religion, Michelle identifies as Bumiputera Suluk, while the remaining four informants are Malay; all five informants are Muslims. Educational qualifications among the informants range from a diploma (Suhaiza) to a master's degree (Farah), with the



remaining three holding bachelor's degrees (Helmi, Michelle, and Zhareef). Their professional roles are equally varied: Farah serves as a senior executive in quality assurance within professional management; Helmi and Zhareef are assistant engineers; Michelle is an assistant manager; and Suhaiza is a safety and health officer. The informants' years of service span a broad range, from one year (Farah) to 14 years (Suhaiza). Regarding the occupational sector, the distribution is split between the government (Helmi, Zhareef, and Suhaiza) and the private sector (Farah and Michelle). Financially, the cohort is divided into two different income brackets: three informants (Farah, Helmi, and Zhareef) earn MYR4,850 or less, placing them in the low-income group, while the remaining two (Michelle and Suhaiza) fall within the MYR4,851 to MYR10,970 range, placing them in the middle-income category.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Based on their available time, the informants were free to choose the location, date, and time of the interviews. The interviews were primarily conducted in relaxed settings, offline or online, to create a welcoming atmosphere for open conversation. Before each interview session, the researchers distributed the Information Sheet, Informed Consent Form, and interview protocol to all informants to ensure they fully understood the nature, objectives, and scope of the research. It also helped them develop some topics to discuss during the interviews. They were assured that the information gathered in the field would be kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes and that they could opt out at any time.

The interview protocol focused on workplace bullying and was structured as both closed-ended and open-ended. The demographic information of the informants, such as their gender, age, place of origin, place of residence, ethnicity, religion, level of education, field of expertise, current occupation, years of service, occupational sector, and monthly income range, was primarily collected through closed-ended questions. Meanwhile, the open-ended questions are designed to elicit information that addresses this study's objectives, i.e., to explore factors related to workplace bullying among Malaysian millennial employees. During the interviews, the researchers used audio recorders to capture the essential details the informants shared. However, the audio recorders were only used with the informants' permission. Fortunately, all of the informants agreed to it. The interviews were conducted in English and the informants' native languages to facilitate storytelling and the collection of research findings. Most of the interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

Once data collection was complete, the researchers transcribed all raw audio data into written transcripts. It was done verbatim. As a result, the transcripts of all five informants totaled up to 53 pages. To elucidate the issues under study, thematic analysis was used to systematically analyze the data until themes emerged (Creswell, 2013).

The analysis followed an inductive process. First, the researchers read the transcripts repetitively to achieve data familiarization and to understand the informants' experiences. Second, initial codes were derived directly from the data by identifying meaningful segments of text related to experiences, perceptions, and factors of workplace bullying.

In the third stage, related codes were grouped into preliminary themes, which were reviewed and compared all transcripts to identify recurring patterns. Finally, the themes were defined, resulting in three themes which are social, organizational, and economic factors, as well as its associated sub-themes. It is beneficial for categorizing and linking themes, enabling the researchers to make sense of the data and analyze the informants' workplace bullying-related issues.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

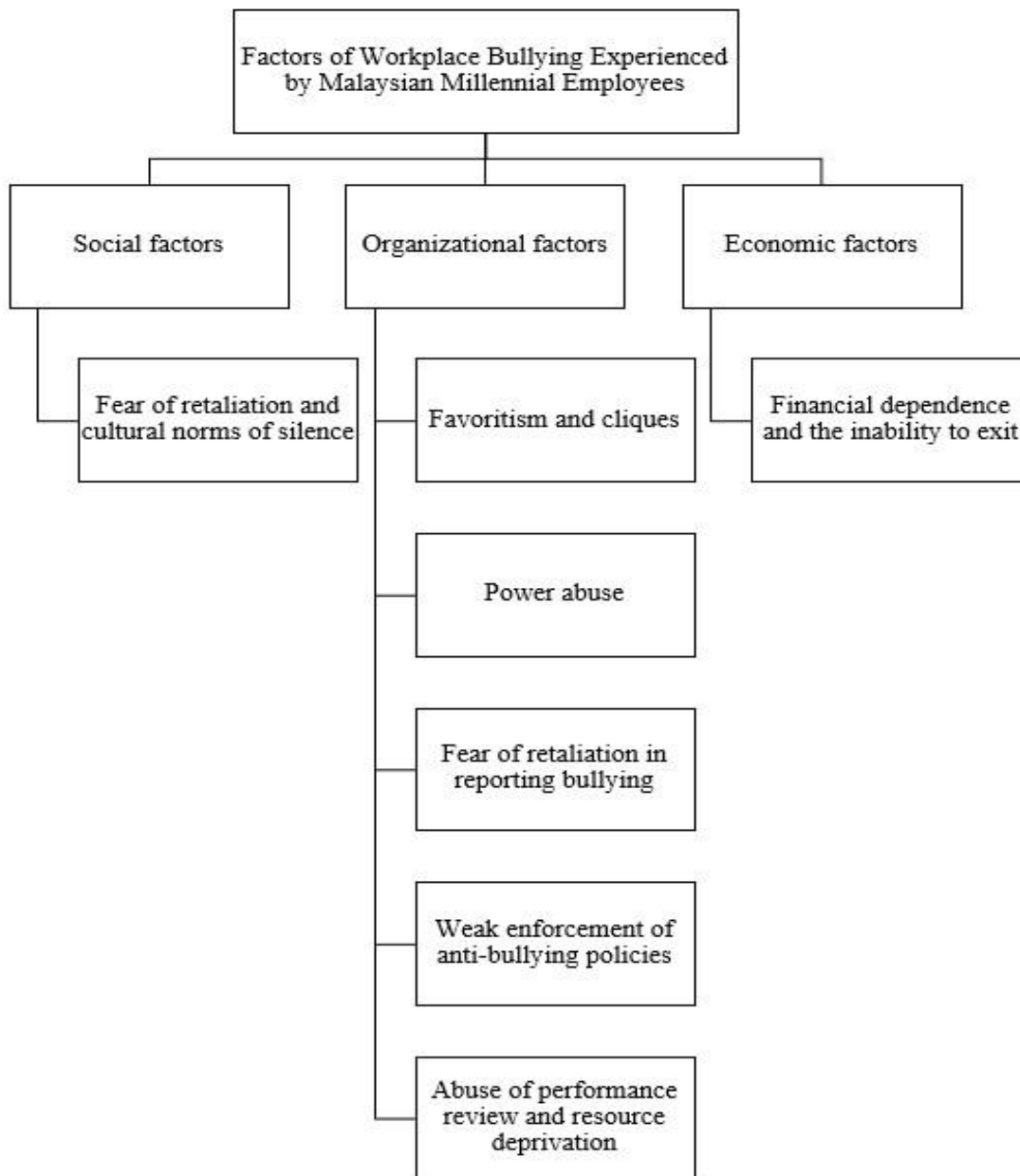


Fig. 1 Factors of workplace bullying experienced by Malaysian millennial employees

Based on Figure 1, this study identified three critical themes regarding the factors associated with workplace bullying experienced by the informants. The three themes are social, organizational, and economic factors. The sub-themes for the social factor are fear of retaliation and cultural norms of silence. The organizational factors include favoritism and cliques, power abuse, fear of retaliation in reporting bullying, weak enforcement of anti-bullying policies, and abuse of performance reviews and resource deprivation. Lastly, the economic factors include financial dependence and the inability to exit further entrench employee in bullying environments by increasing the perceived cost of resistance

Importantly, fear of retaliation operates across all three levels, linking social norms, organizational practices and economic vulnerability. This interconnected structure highlights how workplace bullying persists as a systemic issue embedded within hierarchical, cultural and economic realities.

### Social Factors

The findings show that fear of retaliation and cultural norms of silence are vital social factors that influence workplace bullying to occur. The following paragraphs will discuss those issues in detail.

1) *Fear of retaliation and cultural norms of silence*: The findings show that fear of retaliation is the main reason the informants remain silent about workplace bullying. They experienced workplace bullying in environments with a strict hierarchy, where senior staff wielded significant power over their work, performance reviews, and career growth. They stayed quiet because they were afraid of being called troublemakers, of having their careers end, of being moved to a different department, or of losing future opportunities. These fears were extreme in government offices and large, structured companies. In these places, people felt that reputations spread quickly and believed that complaining about a senior boss would only backfire. As a result, even though they knew the behavior was bullying, they chose to hide their feelings and remain silent to protect themselves.

This fear is also driven by Malaysian cultural values, such as respecting seniority and maintaining workplace peace. The people interviewed described an internal struggle in which they knew the treatment was unfair, but felt they had to follow the norm of respecting authority. Challenging a senior staff member was seen as disrespectful, and reporting bullying was viewed as disturbing the office's peace.

While the existing research has shown that in cultures with a high-power gap, fear of retaliation prevents people from speaking up and allows bullying to persist (Dahl & Knepper, 2021; Rosander & Nielsen, 2023), the present findings extend this understanding by demonstrating how in Malaysia, this fear is more than just a personal feeling. It is a cultural pressure that makes staying silent seem normal, which, unfortunately, leads to more prolonged exposure to bullying and more emotional distress.

### Organizational Factors

The findings show that favoritism and cliques, power abuse, fear of retaliation in reporting bullying, weak enforcement of anti-bullying policies, and abuse of performance reviews and resource deprivation are imperative organizational factors that influence workplace bullying to occur. The following paragraphs will discuss those issues in detail.

**Favoritism and cliques**: The findings indicate that favouritism and the formation of workplace cliques contributed to experiences of workplace bullying by marginalizing employees who were not aligned with dominant groups. An informant, Michelle (pseudonym), aged 32, described how preferential treatment influenced which ideas were acknowledged during workplace discussions. She explained that contributions from employees outside the favored circle were often ignored unless repeated by individuals close to management:

*"During some of the discussions, my input was ignored, but when the same idea was mentioned by those close to the head of the department, it was suddenly accepted."*

This suggests that professional recognition was shaped by social alignment rather than merit, reinforcing exclusionary workplace practices. Similarly, another informant, Helmi (pseudonym), aged 33, highlighted that clique behaviour was closely linked to seniority and group loyalty, with certain employees protected due to their associations. He explained that senior staff often formed influential groups that discouraged others from speaking up:

*"The seniors believed that because they had been there longer, they were automatically superior, and people outside their group were usually ignored."*

These findings demonstrate that favoritism and clique formation functioned as informal power structures that enabled bullying through exclusion, silence, and unequal treatment. This corroborates the findings observed by Hofstede et al. (2010), Einarsen et al. (2020), and Zapf and Einarsen (2020) which highlight that in collectivist and high power-distance cultures, employees often depend on close social, ethnic, or religious networks for support and security, which can foster cooperation among insiders but frequently results in preferential treatment, exclusion of non-members, and relational bullying behaviors such as gossip and social marginalization for those outside dominant cliques. In the accounts of the informants, exclusion from dominant cliques resulted in the marginalization of ideas, unequal access to recognition, and silencing of dissenting voices. In the Malaysian context, such practices are frequently normalized as loyalty or relational harmony. This suggests that favoritism and clique formation may be difficult to challenge because it is embedded within informal social interactions rather than formal organization rules.

**Power abuse**: Power abuse by the management emerged as a key factor enabling workplace bullying. An



informant, Farah (pseudonym), aged 34, shared that the management abused their power to humiliate employees through degrading and racially charged remarks. She recalled an incident involving a senior manager as follows:

*“My boss said, ‘Why do I hire you, pay you, but you think like a Bangla (Bangladeshi)?’ That sentence really lowered my self-confidence.”*

This statement illustrates how power was exercised through verbal abuse and racial stereotyping, which not only undermined the informant’s dignity but also reinforced hierarchical dominance. In addition, Suhaiza (pseudonym), aged 37, emphasized that individuals in higher positions were often shielded from accountability, further entrenching power imbalances. She explained that the subordinates perceived authority figures as high and mighty, which discouraged resistance or reporting:

*“Those in higher positions are superior, and whatever they did was rarely questioned.”*

These findings indicate that power abuse, manifested through hierarchical authority, verbal intimidation, and lack of accountability, played a central role in sustaining workplace bullying. In collectivist and high power-distance cultures characterized by strong respect for authority and seniority, subordinates (especially younger or junior employees) are discouraged from challenging unfair treatment or reporting bullying. At the same time, power abuse by supervisors or influential groups enables them to dominate decision-making, favor in-group members, silence dissent, and normalize bullying behaviors within the organizational culture (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Kwan et al., 2016).

**Fear of retaliation in reporting bullying:** The findings indicate that fear of retaliation in reporting bullying further makes the bullying incident persist in the workplace. Informants expressed fear of retaliation, negative labelling, and damage to career prospects, particularly within hierarchical and government settings. This is reflected in the narratives of Suhaiza (pseudonym), aged 37, when she said:

*“Sometimes I chose to remain silent because I did not want to stir up trouble. I felt insecure because of the hierarchy. I was worried about retaliation or being labelled as a troublemaker. Bullying issues are considered trivial, and if reported to the human resource department, they would be looked at negatively. Due to this, I think the bullying persists.”*

Although previous studies have found that fear of retaliation and organizational culture discourage reporting (Samnani & Singh, 2016; Chan et al., 2019; Awai et al., 2021; Branch et al., 2012), the present findings reveal how this fear intensified within bureaucratic and hierarchical organizational settings. Informants perceived reporting mechanisms as symbolic rather than protective, with human resource departments viewed as aligned with management interests. Although millennial employees are aware of bullying behaviours, perceived risks, and a lack of protection often lead them to remain silent.

The findings also reveal weaknesses in the enforcement of workplace bullying policies. Informants reported **Weak enforcement of anti-bullying policies:** that cases were acknowledged but not thoroughly investigated, with management prioritizing harmony over accountability. An informant, Suhaiza (pseudonym), aged 37, stated that:

*“The bullying matter was acknowledged but not investigated thoroughly. The emphasis seemed to be on maintaining harmony rather than addressing the behavior.”*

She further added:

*“There was no formal investigation. They gave the perpetrator a warning and counselling. The situation improved a little, but not completely.”*

These findings are consistent with prior research showing that weak enforcement and lack of legal backing reduce trust in organizational responses and allow bullying to persist (Einarsen & Nielsen, 2014; Chan et al., 2019; Awai et al., 2021). The present study extends this literature by illustrating how ineffective enforcement further reinforces employees’ reluctance to report bullying incidents. When disciplinary responses are minimal or inconsistent, employees interpret such actions as prioritizing workplace harmony over justice. In this context,

policies function more as symbolic assurances than enforceable safeguards, allowing bullying to persist unchecked.

Abuse of performance reviews and resource deprivation: Another factor contributing to workplace bullying is the use of "financial sanctioning" (Vveinhardt & Sroka, 2020) in organisational processes, such as performance reviews and resource allocation. The informants revealed that performance reviews are likely subjective and are often used as an excuse to avoid awarding employees. Michelle (pseudonym), aged 33, and Farah (pseudonym), aged 34, made it very clear that this was a trick. Michelle's (pseudonym) narratives show that management acts as a "gatekeeper" regarding awards and money. She said:

*"After my immediate boss completed my evaluation, the department head rejected it and asked my boss to lower my grade."*

This aligns with Liefoghe and Mac Davey's (2001) view that bullying is often built into the way businesses operate. They say that "legitimate" management tools, such as performance reviews and close supervision, can be used as weapons to control workers and keep them quiet. By changing the score, the bully makes the punishment seem in line with the rules. In the same way, another informant, Farah (pseudonym), aged 34, talked about how a manager's personal opinion got in the way of objective performance:

*"An employee would not get a bonus if the manager said from the start that he/she did not like him/her. It was clear that I had an effect because I was her "last choice."*

The data also shows that bullying includes deliberate deprivation of resources to create a "performance deficit" (Cullinan et al., 2020). An informant, Zhareef (pseudonym), aged 33, described how this kind of sabotage happens:

*"There were some situations where essential work resources such as data, tools, or procedure information were withheld without a clear reason, creating the impression that I was underperforming."*

Bullies can use an "objective" lack of results to defend economic punishment by making it structurally impossible for people to succeed. This backs up what Zapf and Einarsen (2020) said about how work-related bullying often involves giving the victim impossible dates for tasks or not giving them information to hurt their professional standing.

## Economic Factors

The findings show that financial dependence and inability to exit are important economic factors that influence workplace bullying to occur. The following paragraphs will discuss those issues in detail.

**1) Financial dependence and inability to exit:** Financial dependence is found to be a factor that contributes to workplace bullying occurring. This makes people feel trapped because they think it would be too expensive to leave. Tepper (2000) talks about this in the context of abusive supervision, where workers have to deal with hostility because they cannot find another job. Informants said their main reason for staying in a toxic workplace was to pay their bills. For instance, Michelle (pseudonym), aged 32, talked about her own problems as follows:

*"I tolerated the bullying to maintain my job stability while caring for my critical illness and managing high living and medical expenses by myself."*

This illustrates the concept of "sunk costs" (Salin, 2003), which are the money and time spent on a project that make quitting a job risky. For many, the emotional damage caused by bullying is weighed against the chance of being poor. Another informant, Helmi (pseudonym), aged 33, shared a similar experience by saying:

*"I did not want a disagreement that could have affected my annual raise or confirmation. That is why I have to put up with the bullying."*

In addition, an informant, Zhareef (pseudonym), aged 33, also talked about a state of "strategic silence" in which people put up with rude treatment because they were afraid of losing their jobs:

*"I will choose to remain quiet or avoid speaking out against certain behavior because I am afraid of what will happen to my finances. Because of these worries, I put up with an unfair amount of work and even rude treatment."*

These findings align with what Lutgen-Sandvik (2006) calls the "nightmare" phase of workplace bullying, when targets feel like they cannot quit because they are afraid of losing their jobs, which makes them lose their voice. This supports Leymann's (1996) important idea that the workplace can become a battlefield where economic survival is used as a weapon to force people to endure rather than fight back. However, this study further shows that among Malaysian millennials, economic vulnerability intersects with cultural expectations of endurance and responsibility, intensifying tolerance of mistreatment. Rather than passive acceptance, the informants' silence reflects a calculated response to financial insecurity.

## CONCLUSION

This study has provided valuable insights into the factors contributing to workplace bullying among Malaysian millennial employees through a qualitative case study approach. The findings reveal that bullying persists due to a complex interplay of social, organizational, and economic factors. Socially, deep-rooted cultural norms of respecting seniority and maintaining harmony, combined with fear of retaliation, create a pervasive culture of silence that discourages reporting. Organizationally, issues such as power abuse, favoritism and cliques, weak enforcement of anti-bullying policies, and the misuse of performance reviews and resource allocation serve as structural enablers of bullying. Economically, financial dependence and the perceived high cost of leaving trap many employees in toxic environments, forcing them to endure mistreatment for the sake of job security. These findings underscore that workplace bullying in Malaysia is not merely an individual or interpersonal issue, but a systemic problem deeply embedded in cultural, hierarchical, and economic realities. Ultimately, creating safer and more equitable workplaces for Malaysian millennials requires collective action from employers, policymakers, and society to dismantle the barriers that sustain bullying and empower employees to speak up without fear. Only then can organizations harness the full potential of this generation and foster healthier work environments.

## RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that organizations implement clear anti-bullying policies and establish effective human resource support systems to protect employees and address complaints. Leadership training for managers should emphasize ethical conduct, conflict resolution, and emotional intelligence to prevent favoritism and abusive behavior. Employees should also be empowered through awareness programs on workplace rights, coping strategies, and documentation practices for bullying incidents. Regular monitoring, feedback mechanisms, and open communication channels are essential to ensure a safe and inclusive workplace culture.

## Limitation

This study is based on a small qualitative sample, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The demographic composition of the informants was not fully balanced across gender, geographical background, and ethnicity, which may have influenced the perspectives captured. As such, the findings may not represent the experiences of all employees across different demographic and organizational contexts in Malaysia. However, the objective of this research was not to generalize across populations but to gain in-depth contextually grounded insights into the factors contributing to workplace bullying among Malaysian millennial employees. Nevertheless, future research may benefit from a more diverse and balanced sample to enhance representativeness.

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