Standing in My Way Nine to Five : Investigating Bullying Behaviours Prevalent Among IT Professionals in India

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Abstract

In modern workplaces, competition between employees is a significant determinant of career progress. Hence, employees are likely to engage in a range of negative behaviors to outperform each other. The present exploratory study attempted to identify specific bullying behaviors prevalent in the Information Technology (IT) sector and explained bullying from a sociocultural perspective. A questionnaire survey was conducted among 222 IT professionals to explore workplace bullying prevalence and examine underlying workplace bullying behaviors. Based on the responses to the Negative Acts Questionnaire-R, it emerged that 44.13% of the respondents had experienced some form of bullying at their workplace, and 19.8% reported moderate to severe levels of bullying. Exploratory factor analysis identified four types of bullying behavior : Attacking Self-Esteem, Work Surveillance, Threatening Situations, and Obstructing Competence. The results revealed that Obstructing Competence and Attacking Self-Esteem were the most prevalent types of bullying behaviors among IT professionals in India. The findings of the study were discussed from a sociocultural perspective within the context of working norms of the IT sector in India. The implications for managing negative acts in the IT sector were also discussed.

Keywords : Workplace bullying, IT professionals, attacking self-esteem

JEL Classification Codes : D23, O15, M12, M10, M14

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Every employee has the right to feel contented and comfortable at work. Accordingly, organizations must promote a culture of dignity and respect for employees and provide them with excellent growth opportunities. However, these goals take a back seat in an intensely competitive workplace, so much so that the workplace is rendered a battleground. Such an environment gives rise to a range of undesirable behaviors and outcomes. Though bullying is commonly observed in the context of children and is associated with the school playground, it is not limited to childhood and prevails across all ages. In today's nine-to-five work-life scenario, there are various damaging forms of workplace behavior in which bullying is prevalent. Workplace bullying includes a broad range of negative behaviors such as a threat to an individual's reputation by name-calling, isolating individuals by withholding needed information, overburdening with work by giving impossible targets, and destabilizing employees by giving meaningless assignments (Jacobson et al., 2013). Researchers have shown

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that workplace bullying affects the victim's physical and psychological health in terms of increased psychological problems, stress, aggressiveness, and other physical health issues (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012).

Workplace bullying can be seen as a cultural phenomenon (Giorgi et al., 2015) where culture influences its prevalence, perception of sources and victims, and responses towards bullying incidents (Escartín et al., 2011). Therefore, the generalization based on data from Western nations to the rest of the world is questionable (Armstrong-Romero, 2016). Though studies have indicated that bullying dynamics differ across cultures (Escartín et al., 2011), there exists a research gap in this area (Armstrong-Romero, 2016). A country like India, which has a distinct cultural composition and is experiencing an intense transformation in terms of organizational rules, cultural norms, and values would necessitate a re-validation of prevalent bullying theories as well as exploration of new ones.

The prevalence of bullying across professions has been studied considerably in different countries (Einarsen et al., 2009). However, types of workplace bullying behaviors have not been addressed in research. Further, no study is available on the sector-wise differentiation of bullying behaviors. An archive of sector-specific bullying behaviors can create awareness of the phenomenon and help managers recognize bullying patterns through timely intervention to mitigate these (Rai & Agarwal, 2017).

In our study, an attempt has been made to address this gap by determining the different bullying behaviors prevalent in the IT sector in India. The study exercises a new approach that looks beyond the prevalence rate of bullying. Further, the results are explained from sociocultural norms and beliefs prevalent in the Indian context. Implications of the findings in managing bullying, especially in the context of the IT sector in India, are discussed. We first present a brief overview of the IT sector in India.

Information Technology (IT) Sector in India

The IT sector contributes to 8% of the GDP in India with US$ 135 billion in exports and provides employment to an estimated 4 million direct and 12 million indirect people (Jalote & Natarajan, 2019). The work in the IT sector is organized around project teams. Working in a team offers an indirect yet consequential system of control, for example, by causing peer pressure to impose deadlines or to persuade team members to work for long hours. The team-based IT organizations also have increased competition and conflicts, e.g., individual members in a team are evaluated based on overall team performance. Intra-team competition can potentially withhold support or important information by some team members from other team members to gain recognition and receive full credit in the race for promotions. Team-based systems in IT work through peer surveillance, and an employee's work is regularly monitored, which increases the employee's stress levels (Babu et al., 2013).

IT professionals are observed to have a higher level of occupational stress (Kala et al., 2017) due to huge demands, heavy workloads, stiff deadlines, and time constraints (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). Due to role ambiguity, role boundary, and responsibility, occupational stress can affect employee intention to leave the organization (Rai & Tripathi, 2017). Studies have reported low job satisfaction and less organizational commitment amongst the IT workforce primarily due to unmanageable deadlines, huge workload, and long working hours (Lacity et al., 2008). These challenges create a high level of stress resulting in a threat to employees' psychological, physical, and emotional well-being. A stressful work environment can increase levels of bullying at work (Van den Broeck et al., 2011). Marcello (2010) reported that the studies on bullying are rare in the IT sector, and only scant information is available on experiences of the targets, the prevalence of bullying, bullying behavior types, and the consequences and antecedents of bullying. Though the IT sector is an important pillar of the Indian economy, it has been largely ignored in studies on workplace bullying despite being characterized by high growth rates, challenging deadlines, and intense competition.

Review of Literature

Workplace bullying as a subject was first discussed in a book titled *The Harassed Worker* (Brodsky, 1976). However, the first reference to bullying is found in the writings of Heinz Leymann (Einarsen et al., 2011). The following is the definition of workplace bullying proposed by Einarsen et al. (2011, p.15) :

> Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process, it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g., weekly) and over a period of time (e.g., about six months).

Prevalence of Workplace Bullying

Research on bullying is constrained due to the reluctance of organizations to acknowledge its prevalence. Studies conducted across different countries have confirmed bullying as a common occurrence, though with varying degrees. The prevalence of workplace bullying ranged from less than 10% in Scandinavian countries (Einarsen et al., 2011) to 55% in the context of Indian organizations. However, studies conducted in India are mostly limited to select industries, e.g., BPOs, manufacturing, and banking (D'Cruz, 2013 ; Rai & Agarwal, 2017). Globally, 15% of the workers were found at the receiving end of systematic bullying behavior, and 11% saw themselves as the victims of bullying (Zapf et al., 2011).

The varying levels of workplace bullying in different countries can be explained by a country's work culture. Bullying is more acceptable in 'high-performance orientation' like the Anglo group of countries (England, US, and Australia) and in Confucian Asian countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, which have a strong 'power distance' among employees. Eastern European countries show the highest levels of acceptability of bullying due to low 'humane orientation' and strong 'power distance.' On the other hand, Latin American countries with a 'humane orientation' culture, that is, humane treatment of the employees, show resistance towards bullying (Bozionelos, 2013). Similarly, the Indian sociocultural perspective can be a fertile spot for bullying based on its social values, hierarchical perspective, an inclination for personalized relationships, affective reciprocity, group embeddedness, and duty and obligation over hedonism (Rai & Agarwal, 2017).

Types of Bullying Behavior

Bullying behavior varies from subtle to directly recognizable (Parzefall & Salin, 2010). Einarsen et al. (2009) suggested three dimensions of bullying-related behavior : work-related, person-related, and physically intimidating bullying. Work-related bullying tends to make the work-life difficult for targets or victims through unreasonable deadlines; person-related bullying refers to ignoring, gossiping, and baseless criticism ; and physically intimidating bullying includes intimidation and shouting. A study in Australia, India, and Turkey confirmed that verbal abuse, that is, shouting, confronting, and yelling were prominent bullying acts (D'Cruz et al., 2016). Similarly, 59 Indian call centre participants described their work environment as oppressive (D'Cruz, 2013).

Nielsen et al. (2009) described that being asked to work below competence, information being withheld, and opinions being ignored were the most common prevailing bullying behaviors. Simons et al. (2011) pointed out that unmanageable workload and not being included were the most frequent negative behaviors faced by healthcare employees. Similarly, 1,733 New Zealand-based respondents (O'Driscoll et al., 2011) identified that withholding information, unmanageable workload, and not being included were the most prevalent bullying behaviors. Another study (Iglesias & De Bengoa Vallejo, 2012) showed that being asked to work below

competence, giving impossible targets, ignoring opinions, and withholding information were the most frequent bullying behaviors.

Based on a study on 835 Indian managers, Rai and Agarwal (2017) reported three different dimensions of bullying: work-related bullying, person-related bullying, and favoritism. Work-related behaviors comprised negative behaviors associated with a task, power abuse, and professional degradation. Person-related behaviors had acts such as downgrading or insulting and devaluing the target. Likewise, prevalent behaviors with regard to favoritism were differential treatment, wrongful favor, being supportive to specific employees, and elevated privileges due to connection with seniors. A recent study on an Indian steel manufacturing organization revealed that being ignored, withholding information, unrealistic targets, criticism, being monitored, and shouted at were the most prevalent bullying behaviors (Kar & Tripathy, 2021).

Based on the literature, it can be argued that despite a considerable number of studies being available on the prevalence of bullying, there is still a noticeable lack of research in sector-specific bullying behaviors (Rai & Agarwal, 2017). It can be challenging for HR professionals to deal with bullying or make policies because every sector is different apart from its working style and functioning. Hence, the bullying issues and behaviors are also different and specific to each sector. Bullying is more prevalent in certain industries, sectors, and work environments (Rai & Agarwal, 2017). There is no panacea to deal with all types of bullying behaviors. Accordingly, developing a knowledge base of different bullying behaviors necessitates its high priority. Therefore, in line with the above literature and the gaps identified in the current state of research on workplace bullying, the present study has been conducted with the following objectives :

(1) To assess the prevalence rate of workplace bullying in the Indian IT sector.

(2) To identify different bullying behaviors prevalent in the Indian IT sector.

Methodology

The present study follows an exploratory research design. The study was conducted among select IT firms located in the National Capital Region (NCR[1]) of India. Out of the 10 IT firms approached, three gave consent to participate in the study. Data were collected between December 2019 and April 2020 through offline and online modes (www.SurveyMonkeycom). Respondents were assured of response confidentiality. Of the 300 questionnaires that were distributed, 222 completed questionnaires were received, resulting in an overall response rate of 74%.

Sample Description

Convenience and purposive sampling approaches were followed for data collection. The respondents were full-time IT professionals working in their present organizations for at least one year. The total sample size was 222 ($N = 222$). Of the respondents, 42.8% were in the age range of 22–27 years, and 42.3% were in the age range of 27–35 years. Of the total sample, 72.07% ($N=160$) were males, and 27.5% ($N=61$) were females. With regard to marital status, 55% of the respondents were unmarried, while 44.6% were married. Of the respondents, 68.9% were working in their current organization for less than 3 years; 54.05% were from the private sector, while the remaining were from public sector firms; 10.8% were at senior management level, and 26.1%, 17.6%, and 43.2% were at entry, junior, and middle management levels, respectively (Table 1).

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[1] It includes Delhi NCT region and districts from neighbouring states, that is, Haryana, UP, and Rajasthan (NCR Planning Board, 2017).

Table 1. *Description of Sample Characteristics (N = 222)*

Variables		*N*	Percentage
Age	22–27 years	95	42.8
	27–35 years	94	42.3
	35–45 years	30	13.5
	45 years and above	2	1.4
Gender	Male	160	72.1
	Female	61	27.5
Tenure in the Current	Less than 3 years	153	68.9
Organization	3 – 8 years	56	25.7
	More than 8 years	12	5.4
Marital Status	Married	99	44.6
	Unmarried	122	55
Public/Private Ownership	Public	99	45.95
	Private	122	54.05
Management Level	Entry level	39	26.1
	Junior level	58	17.6
	Middle level	96	43.2
	Senior/Top level	24	10.8
Enterprise Type	Foreign MNC	37	16.7
	Foreign/Indian MNC	102	46
	Domestic	81	36.5

Questionnaire Used

The Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R) was used to measure the prevalence of workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 2009). The questionnaire consisted of 22 items, with each item referring to a certain negative act. The respondents were required to respond in terms of the frequency with which they believed they had been subjected to various negative behaviors in the workplace in the past year. In the original questionnaire, the response categories for the items were: 'Never,' 'Now and then,' 'Monthly,' 'Weekly,' and 'Daily' on a 5-point scale (1–5). The response categories were modified to 'Never,' 'Now and Then,' 'Occasionally,' and 'Often' on a 4-point scale, where 1 = *Never*, 2 = *Now and Then*, 3 = *Occasionally*, and 4 = *Often*. Response category 'Often' was considered a substitute for 'daily' and 'weekly' frequencies. The reliability of the scale, using Cronbach's alpha, was found to be 0.927.

Tools Used for Data Analysis

MS-Excel, SPSS version 21, and R studio v1.1.456 were used to analyze the data. Descriptive analysis was used to identify the prevalence rate, the most prevalent, and the least prevalent negative acts. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was applied to identify the specific bullying behaviors prevalent among IT professionals.

Analysis and Results

Prevalence of Workplace Bullying

The operational criterion by Leymann (1996) was modified according to the scale and time frame used for the study, that is, respondents were labeled as targets if they had experienced at least one negative act from NAQ-R 'Often' in the past one year. The terms 'targets' and 'victims' have been used interchangeably in the study. Accordingly, 44.14% of respondents were found to have experienced workplace bullying. The most prevalent bullying acts were 'Being ignored or excluded,' 'Being ordered to do work below your level of

Table 2. *Percentage of Employees (N = 222) Experiencing Negative Acts of NAQ-R*

Item No.	Item	Never	Now and Then	Occasionally	Often
6	Being ignored or excluded.	40.09	27.48	17.57	14.86
3	Being ordered to do work below your level of competence.	40.09	26.58	19.82	13.06
2	Being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with your work.	46.85	25.23	16.67	11.26
4	Having key areas of responsibility removed or replaced with more trivial or unpleasant tasks.	38.74	31.53	18.47	11.26
7	Insulting and offensive remarks being made about your attitudes or private life.	54.95	20.27	13.96	10.81
1	Someone withholding information that affects your performance.	39.19	28.38	22.07	10.36
5	Spreading of gossip and rumors about you.	52.25	25.23	13.51	9.01
16	Being given tasks with unreasonable deadlines.	50.09	23.87	17.12	8.11
18	Excessive monitoring of your work.	63.96	19.37	9.46	7.21
10	Hints or signals from others that you should quit your job.	74.32	13.96	5.41	6.81
14	Having your opinions ignored.	59.91	23.42	9.91	6.76
12	Being ignored or facing a hostile reaction when you approach.	70.72	17.12	5.41	6.31
13	Persistent criticism of your errors or mistakes.	73.42	15.32	4.95	6.31
8	Being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger.	70.72	15.32	8.11	5.86
21	Being exposed to an unmanageable workload.	58.56	22.97	13.06	5.41
9	Intimidating behaviors such as finger-pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving, blocking your way.	72.52	17.57	4.95	4.95
11	Repeated reminders of your errors or mistakes.	63.51	22.97	8.56	4.95
17	Having allegations made against you.	77.48	14.41	4.05	4.05
15	Practical jokes carried out by people you don't get along with.	72.07	17.12	7.21	3.6
19	Pressure not to claim something to which by right you are entitled (e.g., sick leave, holiday entitlement, travel expenses).	69.37	21.62	5.41	3.6
20	Being the subject of excessive teasing and sarcasm.	77.03	13.51	5.86	3.6
22	Threats of violence or physical abuse, or actual abuse.	88.29	9.46	0.9	1.35
	Overall Prevalence Rate				**44.14**

competence,' 'Being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with your work,' and 'Having key areas of responsibilities removed or replaced with more trivial or unpleasant tasks.' Similarly, the least prevalent bullying acts were 'Being the subject of excessive teasing or sarcasm,' 'Pressure not to claim something to which by right you are entitled (e.g., sick leave, holiday entitlement, travel expenses),' and 'Practical jokes carried out by people you don't get along with' (Table 2).

Of the total respondents, 93.69% reported having experienced some bullying act in the last one year ; 18.47% reported to have experienced bullying now and then; and 75.22% faced at least one bullying act, either 'Occasionally' or 'Often.' Only 6.31% respondents reported to have never experienced bullying in any form (Table 3).

Exposure to various severity levels of bullying was calculated using Björkqvist et al.'s (1992) coding method with a minor modification. The present study used 1 – 4 code instead of the original 0–3 code for the response categories since responses were captured on a scale of 1 *(never)* to 4 *(often)*. The averages of all NAQ-R questionnaire items' responses were calculated for each respondent and then mapped to the appropriate severity level of exposure for the respondent. Of the respondents, 16.22% were found to have faced a moderate level of bullying, and 3.6% were afflicted with severe levels of bullying (Table 4).

Table 3. *Frequency of Bullying Experience (N = 222)*

Frequency of Bullying Acts' Exposure	Percentage of Respondents
Never	6.31
Now and Then	18.47
Occasionally	31.08
Often	44.14

Table 4. *Percentage of Respondents Experiencing Different Severity Levels of Bullying (N = 222)*

Level of Severity of Bullying	Percentage of Respondents
1–1.5 (No bullying)	53.15
1.5–2 (Mild bullying)	27.03
2–3 (Moderate bullying)	16.22
3–4 (Severe bullying)	3.6

Types of Workplace Bullying Behaviours

Exploratory factor analysis was applied to explore the dimensions of workplace bullying, and before that, data was validated for its suitability for factor analysis. Multi-collinearity analysis was conducted to rule out any redundancy among questionnaire items, that is, one item being explained by another item. The questionnaire items had weak to moderate correlations (i.e., < 0.6 ; Akoglu, 2018), implying the possibility of variables having moderate correlations to be grouped as one dimension. Moreover, the lack of a strong correlation between items confirmed the absence of redundancy. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure for response data was 0.903, indicating the adequacy of sample data (Glen, 2016). Similarly, the *p*-value for Bartlett's test of sphericity came out to be near zero value (~ 0.000), indicating that the redundancy among questionnaire items was statistically significant (Rakotomalala, 2013) for our survey data. Further, communalities for questionnaire items were found to be greater than 0.5, which indicated that the items referred to an underlying construct.

Table 5. *Dimensions, Their Items with Factor Loading, Mean, Standard Deviation, Communality*

Dimension	Item No.	Mean	Std. Deviation	Communality	Factor Loading
Attacking Self-Esteem	2	1.92	1.04	0.553	0.512
	5	1.79	0.99	0.584	0.697
	6	2.07	1.08	0.616	0.74
	7	1.81	1.04	0.647	0.765
	8	1.49	0.88	0.566	0.573
	9	1.42	0.8	0.431	0.485
	14	1.64	0.92	0.622	0.527
Work Surveillance	10	1.44	0.86	0.683	0.57
	11	1.55	0.85	0.726	0.827
	12	1.47	0.86	0.557	0.578
	13	1.44	0.85	0.769	0.835
	15	1.42	0.78	0.491	0.451
	18	1.6	0.93	0.6	0.572
Threatening Situations	16	1.82	0.99	0.521	0.478
	17	1.35	0.74	0.55	0.582
	19	1.43	0.76	0.52	0.594
	20	1.36	0.75	0.629	0.66
	21	1.65	0.9	0.537	0.571
	22	1.15	0.48	0.678	0.819
Obstructing Competence	1	2.04	1.01	0.587	0.739
	3	2.06	1.06	0.63	0.67
	4	2.02	1.01	0.543	0.482

After applying EFA, four dimensions were identified, and these are shown in Table 5, along with their associated negative acts and factor loadings. The negative acts for each dimension were analyzed to find the underlying behavior. Accordingly, the dimensions are named 'Attacking Self-Esteem,' 'Work Surveillance,' 'Threatening Situations,' and 'Obstructing Competence.' 'Attacking Self-Esteem' comprises of negative acts that deal with ignoring, excluding, downgrading, and belittling the target, and downplaying the target's existence. 'Work Surveillance' is related to negative acts dealing with excessive monitoring and criticism of the victim's work. 'Threatening Situations' consists of bullying acts that make the victim's day-to-day work-life very challenging and

Table 6. *Mean, Standard Deviation, and Cronbach's Alpha of Bullying Behaviours*

Dimensions	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
Attacking Self-Esteem	1.73	0.70	0.85
Work Surveillance	1.48	0.65	0.86
Threatening Situations	1.46	0.57	0.82
Obstructing Competence	2.04	0.80	0.66

threatening. 'Obstructing Competence' dimension focuses on preventing targets from showcasing their full potential at work.

Test for Internal Consistency Within Items of Given Bullying Behaviours

Cronbach's alpha was calculated for bullying behaviors obtained from EFA to check for internal reliability for their respective items. For 'Attacking Self-Esteem,' 'Work Surveillance,' and ' Threatening Situations,' it is greater than 0.8, indicating good internal consistency, and for 'Obstructing Competence,' the value is 0.66 (Table 6).

Relative Prevalence of Bullying Behaviours

Four corresponding variables are obtained by taking average values of the respective dimension's constituent items. The descriptive statistics of these variables (Table 6) provide the cue for their relative prevalence. 'Obstructing Competence' ($\mu = 2.04$, $\sigma = 0.8$) is found to be most prevalent and 'Attacking Self-Esteem' ($\mu = 1.73$, $\sigma = 0.70$) is relatively less prevalent. 'Work Surveillance' ($\mu = 1.48$, $\sigma = 0.65$) and 'Threatening Situations' ($\mu = 1.46$, $\sigma = 0.57$) are found to be the least prevalent behaviours.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study confirms that bullying is prevalent within the IT sector in India and 44.14% of the employees reported experiencing it in some form. These findings suggest that the prevalence of bullying in the IT sector matches with other sectors where the prevalence rate of bullying was between 42% and 55% (D'Cruz, 2013 ; Rai & Agarwal, 2017). Thus, the present study supports the notion that bullying in India is more prevalent than in other countries, e.g., Scandinavian countries where it is less than 10% (Einarsen et al., 2011) and the UK with the prevalence rate of 27.6% (Rayner, 2009). However, bullying rates are at par with the USA (46.8%, Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007).

Some interesting trends about bullying behaviors among IT professionals in India are reported in the present research. The relative prevalence of the four bullying behaviors differs, with 'Obstructing Competence' being the most prevalent at IT workplaces. 'Attacking Self-Esteem' is only moderately prevalent ; whereas, 'Work Surveillance' and 'Threatening Situations' appear to have limited presence among IT professionals. The underlying negative acts of 'Obstructing Competence' indicate that the bully's objective is to ensure that the targets are not able to attain their full potential. Such intentions of bullying can be achieved either by allocating below-capability tasks to the targets, or by replacing their impactful assignments with trivial deliverables, or not providing them, in the first place, with the necessary information needed to perform their duties efficiently. Likewise, 'Attacking Self-Esteem' is another prevailing behavior that makes targets realize that they hold little value to the organization. This behavior includes ignoring the person, ridiculing or humiliating the target's work, spreading false rumors, and shouting at and finger-pointing publicly at the workplace. While 'Obstructing Competence' can be considered a work-related bullying behavior, 'Attacking Self-Esteem' can be regarded as personal. Moreover, the other two relatively less prevalent bullying behaviors, 'Work Surveillance' and 'Threatening Situations,' are work-related. They are targeted towards excessive surveillance of work and making work–life difficult through their respective bullying acts.

Table 5 shows that bullying acts that are more inclined towards physical intimidation or violent disposition are comparatively less prevalent in IT workplaces. These findings align with the results obtained by Einarsen et al. (2009), who reported that work-related bullying behaviors were more prominent than physical intimidation.

As found in the present study, the high prevalence of bullying in the Indian IT sector is not surprising.

However, it is significant from a sociocultural perspective because Indian society is relationship-oriented. Relational orientation is based on personalized and identity-based communications where own (*apne*) and other (*paraye*) dichotomy performs a vital role (Kakar & Kakar, 2007 ; Sinha, 2009). The Indian society is grouped into different castes, religions, and ethnicities. As a result, people in India have originated in-groups (*apne*) for the members of the same family, caste, religion, or ethnicity. Similarly, out-groups (*paraye*) are other people who are not part of the in-groups (Sinha, 2009). These associations are powerful, and usually, important positions are allotted to in-group members (Kakar & Kakar, 2007). Issues like nepotism and favoritism remain associated with in-groups, and members associated with an in-group receive all the privileges of being part of that group. Contrarily, the out-group representatives face discrimination. Personalized connections and interchanges, identity-based communications with related ingroup – outgroup associations affect work-life (Kakar & Kakar, 2007 ; Sinha, 2009). The group context is usually ignored even though organizations generally comprise formal groups with allocated tasks and duties (e.g., project teams). However, there are informal groups based on group similarities (e.g., gender, occupation, religion, region, kinship, and ethnic background).

The IT sector typically has team-based functioning, e.g., development teams, support teams, testing teams, maintenance teams, quality teams, and disaster recovery teams (Sudhakar, 2010). Workgroups with high task conflict and low communication openness are more vulnerable to workplace bullying (Arenas et al., 2015). The present study highlights the high prevalence of workplace bullying in the Indian IT sector. The specific bullying behaviors found in the research for this sector will help HR personnel making effective policies particular to issues prevalent in this sector, instead of having generic guidelines. The study also encourages countries with a high prevalence rate to interpret bullying from their cultural perspectives.

Implications

Managerial Implications

The present study reports a high prevalence of bullying, which means that bullying is real and not a one-off phenomenon. It is a wake-up call for organizations to recognize the issue and manage it to avoid its consequences. Managers are required to motivate employees to fulfill organizational goals (Sanjeev, 2017). When organizations concentrate on employee well-being and demonstrate support, it prevents them from being involved in disorder and unrest (Biswas & Chakraborty, 2019).

The study highlights specific bullying behaviors prevalent at IT workplaces, e.g., blocking victims from realizing their true potential, degrading one's self-respect, or being subjected to an unmanageable or unpleasant workload driven by a personal vendetta. HR and management should make policies, train team leaders, and sensitize them to recognize such behaviors. Counseling or listening posts, where bullied employees can talk about their experiences, can be a good starting point to handle such cases. There should be a company-wide communication that such behavior is unacceptable or is not promoted in the organization.

Theoretical Implications

The present study strengthens the notion that the prevalence rate of bullying is high in India. It further interprets this through the sociocultural perspective of India. The four bullying behaviors detailed in our study, 'Attacking Self-Esteem,' 'Work Surveillance,' 'Threatening Situations,' and 'Obstructing Competence' are unacceptable and negative in the Indian context. Though bullying is a universal phenomenon, different bullying behaviors may vary on a continuum of acceptability – unacceptability across different cultures. Including the cultural viewpoint to understand bullying could provide a better outlook of the phenomena and be especially useful for explaining not

only why certain countries have a higher prevalence of bullying compared to others but also why certain types of bullying behaviors may be viewed as toxic in one culture but accepted as a norm in another.

Limitations of the Study and the Way Forward

The present study used single-source data, that is, it collected survey data from victims only. Allowing data from different sources would help capture the phenomena more thoroughly. The study was conducted among IT professionals in Delhi - NCR. A similar study could be conducted in a wider geographical area of India and other sectors for better generalization of the findings.

A qualitative analysis should be an apparent follow-up to dive deep into the specific bullying behaviors found in the present study. Since the present study is exploratory in nature, future studies can develop hypotheses to validate these bullying behaviors and see whether the same could be generalized to other sectors in India. Another important extension of the present study would be to explore how different demographic attributes of victims, such as age and gender, affect exposure to bullying behaviors. The study provides future researchers with a starting point for examining bullying as an essential facet of organizational life, sometimes blatant but often subtle, preventing its identification.

Authors' Contribution

Vaishali Trivedi and Dr. (Prof.) Tanuja Agarwala conceived the idea and planned the empirical design of the study. Subsequently, Vaishali Trivedi extracted relevant literature and worked on the study framework under the supervision of Dr. Tanuja Agarwala. Later, Vaishali Trivedi collected the data, analyzed it using R and SPSS, and worked on the manuscript. Dr. Tanuja Agarwala reviewed the results and the manuscript draft, made changes, and suggested modifications.

Conflict of Interest

The authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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