

# THE CULPRIT-FROM EMOTIONAL ABUSE TO EMOTIONAL ASSAULT CAUSED BY DOWNWARD WORKPLACE MOBING

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## ABSTRACT

*In the present study we are interested in mobbing from the target's perspective as a consequence of abusive supervision. It has been established that employees are often the victims of abusive supervision at the workplace but it is surprising and intriguing that no research till date has paid attention to how and when abusive supervision leads to mobbing. We propose a theoretical model exploring why and under what circumstances, abusive supervision leads to mobbing among employees in the banking sector. Based on the affective events theory, we examine the process variable of work stress and two moderation effects of perceived organizational support and external locus of control. With the final sample of 295 banking employees, the study findings demonstrate that perceived organizational support strengthens the positive impact of abusive supervision on work stress. Furthermore, the findings identify that external locus of control exacerbates the impact of work stress on mobbing. The moderated-mediation model tested in this study provides interesting results for organizational practitioners and scholars pertaining to the area of human resource management and organizational behavior.*

**Keywords:** Abusive Supervision, Mobbing, Emotional Abuse, Emotional Assault, Work Stress, Perceived Organizational Support, External Locus of Control.

## INTRODUCTION

Mobbing is an adverse behavior that occurs among individuals and badly affects those (Kara et al., 2018). Continuously putting down an individual, disturbing him, showing that he is a liar and bad conversation about him are a few examples of it (Davenport et al., 2003). Due to mobbing an individual often becomes the target of harmful and disrespectful behavior so it is termed as an insidious form of emotional assault (Yüçetürk & Öke, 2005). According to Leymann and Gustafsson (1996) a negative kind of behavior, among hierarchical supervisors or subordinates and colleagues, whereby an individual concerned is repeatedly degraded and criticized indirectly or directly by one or more individuals for the aim of alienating him or her are the chronic aspects of mobbing. An individual suffers and drop his or her self-confidence too. Usually, the purpose is to eliminate the victim from the organization (Duffy & Sprerry, 2007).

History revealed that in the 1960s the term of mobbing was used firstly for the animals and later on for children that showed the same effects between them. After that, in The 1980s, Leymann construed that the concept of mobbing was found in adults as well (Davenport et al.,

2003). According to Maguire (1999) the term mobbing refers to “*non-bloody war*” in any workplace. So, many studies are presenting the significance and urgency of this behavior.

It has been an intriguing question to many organizational scholars that how employees react to abusive leaders. There is abundant research on abusive supervision identifying the reaction of employees to such abuse (Tepper, 2007; Tu et al., 2018; Valle et al., 2019). But it has been ignored largely by the research studies about what makes employees exhibit mobbing in reaction to abusive supervision. The concept of abusive supervision refers to “*the perception of subordinates about the extent of antagonistic verbal and nonverbal behaviors which supervisors display, excluding physical contact*” (Tepper, 2000). This notion of abusive supervision is in accordance with emotional abuse (Keashly, 1998). Few examples of abusive behaviors include giving a negative comment to employees, humiliating them, lying to them and displaying anger at them (Longobardi et al., 2018). There are also too many negative work outcomes associated e.g. reduced job satisfaction (Tepper et al., 2004), psychological withdrawal of employees (Mawritz et al., 2014), reduce performance at work (Harris et al., 2007) and deviant behaviors at workplace (Thau et al., 2009). So, the frustration caused by abusive supervision among employees at the workplace may lead to mobbing.

This study is the first to introduce mobbing as an outcome of abusive supervision and abusive supervision as a circumstance for mobbing as well as takes the initiative of providing the overall mechanism of how and when abusive supervision leads to mobbing. Thereby, helping and providing an insight to all the practitioners and organizational members to control the devastating impact of mobbing towards organizational productivity and employees’ working relations. Understanding the influence of abusive supervision on mobbing will be of great concern to the organizational scholars who are interested in the studies of organizational behavior, organizational politics, and human resource management.

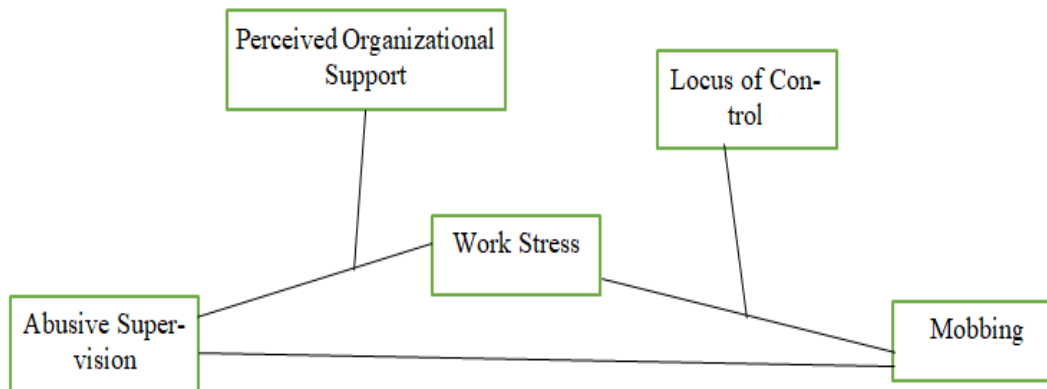
The present study also takes the lead to empirically investigate the proposed mechanism in the banking sector of Pakistan as it is the lifeblood of each economy. According to “*THE NATIONS*” report, Pakistan has 22<sup>nd</sup> rank for the highest rate of mobbing. So the proposed mechanism would be worth examining on employees working in banks.

Further, our first objective of this study is to encroach the past studies to test whether abusive supervision would endeavor destructive effects on banking employees. Second, we anticipate exploring the underpinning process of this direct link by involving work stress as a mediator based on Affective Event theory. Lastly, new condition, i.e. external locus of control and perceived organizational support is incorporated into our theoretical framework to help examine the aspects that may boost the effects of mobbing.

Employing the Affective Event (AET) theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), the current study explained the mediation mechanism between abusive supervision and mobbing by suggesting employee work stress as a mediator. According to Affective Event theory, certain work events and emotions can generate behaviors that are professed as devastating. Abusive supervision is a workplace event that leads to mobbing (Martinko et al., 2013).

So, relating to research objectives, this paper adds to the context of abusive supervision and mobbing behavior simultaneously. It enhances the abusive supervision’s literature by expanding the current consequence and examines how and when abusive supervision exerts influence on mobbing in the banking sector. Further, this research contributes to the literature of proactive behavior of employees. Also, it increases our concern of antecedents by focusing on abusive supervision, a dark aspect within an organization. The investigation of the mediating process (work stress) gives a new vision through which abusive supervision influences mobbing.

Finally, by investigating the moderating effects of (perceived organizational support and external locus of control), this study upgrades current outcomes on moderators by which effects of abusive supervision, work stress, and mobbing could be developed. In the context of Pakistan, no study has ever been conducted showing the importance and factors which are associated with mobbing among employees in the banking sector (Figures 1-5).



**FIGURE 1**  
**HYPOTHESIZED MODEL**

## **THEORETICAL RATIONALE AND HYPOTHESES**

### **Affective Events Theory**

According to Weiss & Cropanzano (1996), AET involves the role of emotions and their judgment in the association between experiences of individuals and their behaviors. Further, the theory explains that certain work events examine an individual's attitude and behaviors. Recent application of AET has focused on particular work behaviors that can be subjected to both attitudinal and affective effects (Wegge et al., 2006). According to Mignonac and Herrbach (2004), "*emotional experiences describe how many work events affect the satisfaction of the job*". Our application of the theory initiates with the effect of abusive supervision (work event) on work stress (emotion) and mobbing (behavior).

### **Abusive Supervision**

Abusive supervision is defined as "*subordinate's anticipations regarding supervisor's involvement in the exhibition of antagonistic verbal and non-verbal behaviors, apart from physical contact*" (Tepper, 2000). Many studies in a row captured great importance on abusive supervision (Lian et al., 2014; Kacmar et al., 2013; Tepper, 2007). Studies on verbal behaviors, like as public deride have been connected with dysfunctional concerns (Burton & Hoobler, 2006; Harris & Cast, 2013; Thau et al., 2009, Tepper, 2000). Studies suggested that subordinates emphasize the negative behavior of their supervisors and observe it as aggressive (Watkins et al., 2019; Tepper, 2007). Perception of abuse is made active in employees with aggressive characteristics (Martinko et al., 2013).

## Abusive Supervision and Work Stress

Stress relates to “*an association that exists between an individual and his/her surrounding environment that is considered to be unstable, that association is perceived as unstable because of the difference between one’s physical and psychological resources and the possible situational demands*”. In 1989, Hobfoll construed that people strive to maintain their resources, like as energy and time, and if such resources are threatened then it leads to stress. Work stress is a concern to the combination of the workplace environment, job culture, and associations that exist in the workplace.

Tedeschi & Norman (1985) argued that abusive supervision pertains to “*shifting a harmful behavior of a person from a primary victim to a secondary victim*”. Twenge and Campbell (2003) have construed that displaced aggression takes place when things go incorrect, traits of the subordinates-supervisor relationship might be an important cause for this aggression. Aryee et al. (2007) explained that when supervisors are discouraged by the conditions of the organization, then their subordinates face abusive supervision. In line with this, subordinates face abusive supervision when their supervisors are frustrated which may cause the emotional response of work stress among them as their necessary work resources are threatened by the emotional abuse. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

*H1: Abusive supervision is positively related to work stress.*

## The Moderating Role of Perceived Organizational Support

Perceived organizational support relates to “*employees’ belief that how much their organization values and cares about their well-being*” (Dai et al., 2019). Lee and Peccei (2007) described that perceived organizational support is high if job crafting opportunities are greater and it facilitates employees in the form of emotional support, greater self-esteem, etc., all these things promote work engagement in employees. It is likewise an important resource as it provides support for workers in extreme conditions (Kraimer et al., 2001). It fulfills socio-emotional needs as well as supports in terms of technology, equipment and physical support.

Past research on perceived organizational support has emphasized its great importance as a moderator (Han et al., 2013; Cheng et al., 2016). Karatepe (2015) stated that perceived organizational support assists employees with better opportunities and resources to achieve their working goals. Further, both Erdogan & Ekici (2004) and Eisenberger et al. (2002) explained that strong POS provides cooperation and communication among employees for mutual support.

Employees’ perception of strong perceived organizational support accompanies a perception of decreased work stress. Based on the AET theory, it is anticipated that if perceived organizational support is low then the relationship between abusive supervision and work stress will be strengthened. So, in this study perceived organization support might play a conditional role in the relationship between abusive supervision and work stress? So that, we hypothesize the following:

*H2 Perceived organizational support moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and work stress such that the relationship is stronger when the perceived organizational support is low rather than high.*

## Work Stress and Mobbing

As discussed earlier, abusive supervision depletes the efficiency of employees and diminishes their capacity to meet their job demands and achieves expectations, which increase employee's work stress (Hackney & Perrewé, 2018). As earlier 1980s, the term mobbing has been used as workplace aggression by organizational researchers (Leymann, 1996). The term mobbing has used by an ethologist to explain attacks by a group of a small number of animals frightening a single greater animal. Leymann (1996) stated a similar kind of behavior at the workplace and used the term mobbing in the 1980's. It is defined as "*a communication which comes under the category of immoral and hostile used by one or more individuals systematically toward single individual*" (Leymann, 1990).

Mobbing is the repetitive behavior of people or groups that deliberately harm others with whom they work. Einarsen (2000) argued that mobbing behavior leads to adverse effects on the victim. Work stress was linked with employees engaging in mobbing (De-Cuyper et al., 2009). So, it is anticipated when supervisors are abusive, work stress among employees will be intensified leading to emotional assault in terms of mobbing. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

*H3: Work stress is positively related to mobbing.*

## The Moderating Role of Locus of Control

Locus of control refers to "*belief of an individual that whether the consequence of an event is under his or her control or not*" (Mueller & Thomas, 2001). Employees with a strong internal locus of control consider their skills, capabilities, and efforts influence the event outcomes while employees with a strong external locus of control are certain that the consequences of the events pertaining to their lives are out of their control (Lefcourt, 2014).

Employees carrying strong internal locus of control have more intrinsic motivation and are more goal-oriented as they believe that they could lead their internal environment and control their results whereas employees with a strong external locus of control are low motivated, more pessimistic and hostile. So, locus of control influences association among work stress and psychological, physical and behavioral outcomes (Spector & O'Connell, 1994). In line with AET employees faced with the workplace event of abusive supervision may undergo high work stress with a strong external locus of control as they are certain that event' outcomes are not under their personal control. Hence, we propose the following:

*H4: External locus of control moderates the relationship between work stress and mobbing.*

## The Mediating Role of Work Stress

Previous studies stated that role ambiguity, role conflict, and work amplification caused the work stress which leads to low satisfaction of job. According to AET employees face certain workplace events, eliciting emotional responses among them that cause behavioral reactions. Abusive supervision plays the role of negative workplace event (Tepper, 2007) that depletes the efficiency of employees and lessens their capability to fulfill their job demands and attain expectations, which increase employee's work stress (Leymann, 1996; Hackney &

Perrewé, 2018; Mackey et al., 2018). We hence contend that with abusive supervision employees may experience work stress which in turn instigates them towards mobbing. Accordingly, the influence of abusive supervision on mobbing should be transferred via work stress. Hence, we propose the following:

*H5: Work stress mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and mobbing.*

## METHODOLOGY

The present study, utilized quantitative method because it is more reliable. The time horizon was cross-sectional because of data collected in one period. The unit of analysis is the individual employee of banks. The target population was non-managerial employees of banks in Lahore, Pakistan. The sampling strategy was non-probability convenience sampling due to time and money constraint. Item-response theory was used to collect sample size. Total 480 questionnaires were disseminated among bank employees out of whom 295 respondents filled back completely and remaining were not useful. The data were analyzed through SPSS v20 and AMOS v23.

### Measures

Respondents provided their responses on 5-point Likert Scales ranging from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree.

### Abusive Supervision

To measure AS a 15-item scale developed by Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) was used in this study. A sample item is “*My Boss tells me my thoughts and feelings are stupid, invading my privacy, mocks me*”. The reliability of this scale was .810.

### Perceived Organizational Support

To measure POS, an 8-item scale developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986), which was reduced by 6 items were used to measure this variable. A sample item is “*My organization cares about my well-being*”. The reliability of this scale was 0.853.

### Work Stress

To measure WS, a 5-item scale developed by Cohen (1986) was used in this study. A sample item is “*My work is stressful, and it requires effort*”. The reliability of this scale was 0.839.

### External Locus of Control

To measure ELOC, a 5-item scale developed by Trice et al. (1987) was used in this study. A sample item is “*I have little control over the things that happen in my life*”. The reliability of this scale was 0.747.

## Mobbing

To measure Mobbing, a 19-item scale developed by (Einarsen & Hoel, 2001) was used to measure this variable. A sample item is “*Raising gossips and rumors about the person*”. The reliability of this scale was .783.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Analysis

Demographical Characteristics	Groups	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	Male	176	59.7
	Female	119	40.3
<b>Qualification</b>	Bachelor	62	21.0
	Masters	138	46.8
	MS/MPhil	83	28.1
	Other	12	4.1
<b>Age</b>	19-24	53	18.0
	25-29	106	35.9
	30-34	68	23.1
	35-39	54	18.3
	40 & above	14	4.7

N= 295, The demographics of the study were based on 295 respondents.

### Correlation Matrix

	Mean	St. deviation	1	2	3	4	5
Work stress	3.7519	0.81982	0.839				
Organizational support	3.6775	0.54586	0.785**	0.853			
Abusive supervision	3.7273	0.83177	0.168**	0.123*	0.81		
External locus control	3.711	0.81347	0.677**	0.798**	0.075	0.747	
Mobbing	3.7563	0.78126	0.608**	0.827**	0.382**	0.758**	0.783

Notes: N= 295.; \*\*p<0.01,\*p= 0.05

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

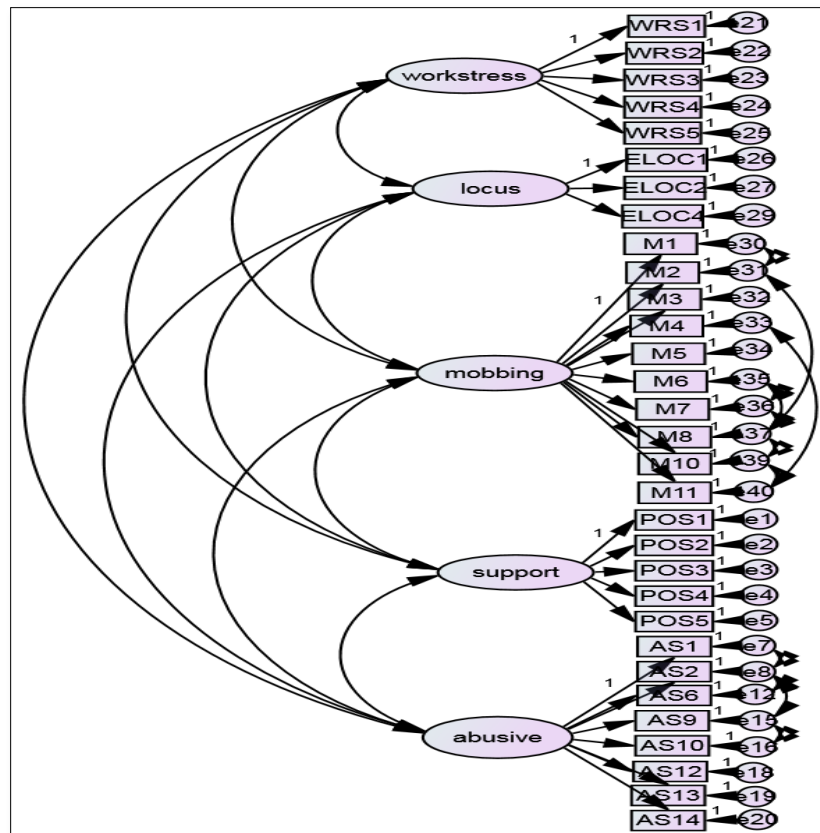
The above Tables 1 & 2 showed that mean value is ranging from 3.67 to 3.75, the standard deviation value is ranging from 0.545 to 0.819, and the reliability of each variable showed diagonally, which is according to a threshold value. According to Nunnally (1994), the

reliability of a variable is good if it is greater than 0.70. Moreover, the correlation matrix explained the relationships among variables.

It demonstrates that abusive supervision is also significantly associated to mobbing with the value of  $r=0.382$  at the level of 0.01. Perceived organizational support is significantly related to abusive supervision with the value of  $r= 0.123$  at the level of 0.05. Perceived organizational support is also highly significantly related external locus of control with the value of  $r= 0.798$  at the level of 0.01 (Tables 3-8).

Further, work stress is strongly related to perceived organizational support with the value of  $r= 0.785$  at the level of 0.01. Work stress is also significantly related to abusive supervision with the value of  $r= 0.168$  at the level of 0.01. Moreover, work stress is strongly related to an external locus of control with the value of  $r= 0.677$  at the level of 0.01. And, work stress is also strongly and significantly related to mobbing behavior with the value of  $r= 0.608$  at the level of 0.01. Moreover, external locus of control is highly significantly related to mobbing with the value of  $r= 0.758$  at the level of 0.01”.

### Confirmatory Factor Analysis



**Figure 2**  
**MEASUREMENT MODEL**



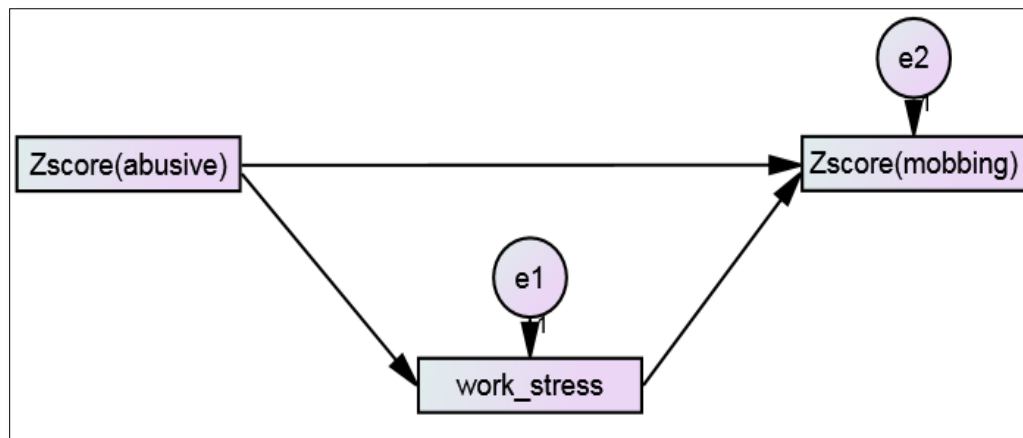
<b>Table 3</b>			
<b>STANDARDIZED REGRESSION WEIGHTS OF THE MODEL</b>			
			<b>Estimate</b>
AS1	<---	Abusive	0.484
AS2	<---	Abusive	0.410
AS6	<---	Abusive	0.420
AS9	<---	Abusive	0.419
AS10	<---	Abusive	0.331
AS12	<---	Abusive	0.622
AS13	<---	Abusive	0.495
AS14	<---	Abusive	0.669
WRS1	<---	Workstress	0.600
WRS2	<---	Workstress	0.510
WRS3	<---	Workstress	0.496
WRS4	<---	Workstress	0.585
WRS5	<---	Workstress	0.721
ELOC1	<---	Locus	0.620
ELOC2	<---	Locus	0.947
ELOC4	<---	Locus	0.741
M1	<---	Mobbing	0.713
M2	<---	Mobbing	0.688
M3	<---	Mobbing	0.763
M4	<---	Mobbing	0.731
M5	<---	Mobbing	0.747
M6	<---	Mobbing	0.401
M7	<---	Mobbing	0.415
M8	<---	Mobbing	0.483
M10	<---	Mobbing	0.456
M11	<---	Mobbing	0.324
POS1	<---	Support	0.695
POS2	<---	Support	0.756
POS3	<---	Support	0.569
POS4	<---	Support	0.580
POS5	<---	Support	0.536

**Note:** The above Table 3 showed that all factor loadings of the items are greater than .3.

Table 4 MODEL FITNESS SUMMARY		
	Model Values	Threshold Values
CMIN/DF	1.283	<3
CFI	0.952	>0.90
GFI	0.898	>0.85 OR >0.90
AGFI	0.877	>0.85
RMSEA	0.031	<0.08
RMR	0.044	<0.05
PCLOSE	1	CLOSER TO 1

Note: N=295, CMIN/DF= degree of freedom, CFI= comparative fit index, GFI= goodness fit index, AGFI= average goodness fit index, RMSEA= root mean square error of approximation, RMR= root mean square residual.

**STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODEL**



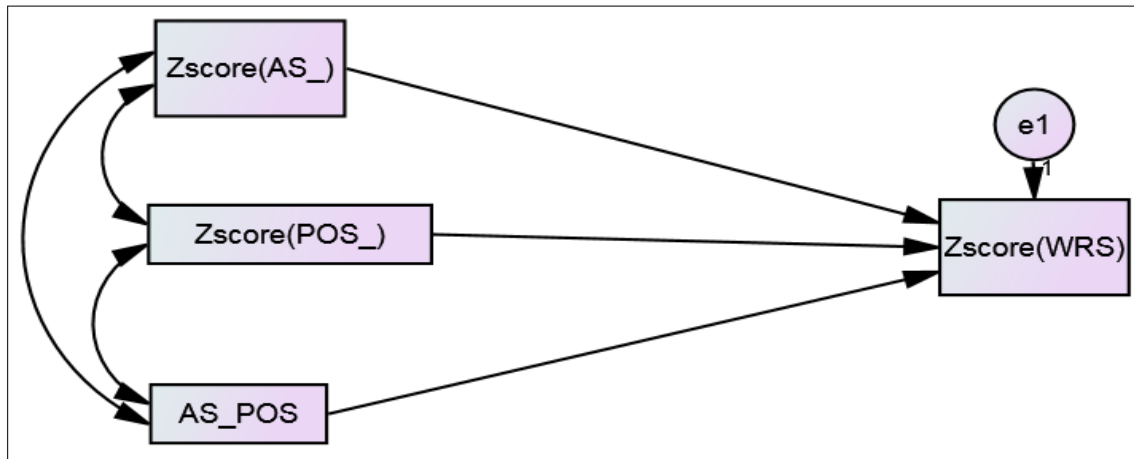
**Figure 3  
THE MEDIATION OF WORK STRESS**

Table 5 REGRESSION RESULTS OF MEDIATION OF WORK STRESS				
Path	Direct Beta without Mediation	Direct Beta with Mediation	Indirect Beta	Result
Abusive supervision-àwork stress-à Mobbing	0.366***	0.366***	0.016(NS)	No Mediation

Note: p< 0.05.

<b>Table 6</b> <b>REGRESSION WEIGHTS OF ABUSIVE SUPERVISION→WORK STRESS→MOBBING</b>				
			<b>Estimate</b>	<b>P</b>
work_stress	<---	Abusive	0.159	***
Zmobbing	<---	work_stress	0.098	0.385
Zmobbing	<---	Abusive	0.366	***

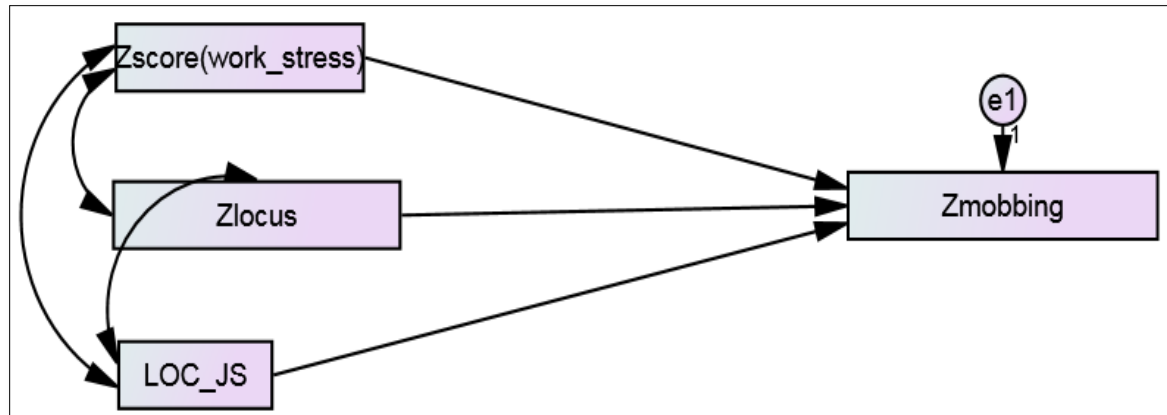
Note:  $p < 0.05$ .



**Figure 4**  
**THE MODERATION OF POS**

<b>Table 7</b> <b>REGRESSION WEIGHTS OF THE MODERATION OF POS</b>				
			<b>Estimate</b>	<b>P</b>
ZWRS	<---	ZAbusive	0.064	0.076
ZWRS	<---	AS_POS	0.060	0.040
ZWRS	<---	ZPOS_	0.773	***

Note:  $p < 0.05$



**Figure 5**  
**THE MODERATION OF LOC**

			<b>Estimate</b>	<b>P</b>
ZMobbing	<---	Zwork_stress	0.110	0.009
ZMobbing	<---	ZELOC_	0.443	***
ZMobbing	<---	LOC_JS	-0.145	***

Note:  $p < 0.05$

## DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis was about a positive relationship between abusive supervision and work stress. According to SEM, the findings showed that abusive supervision is positively and significantly related to work stress with ( $\beta = .159$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) as it was hypothesized. And this result is also consistent with the previous literature, which construed that work stress is significantly and positively related to abusive supervision (Burton et al., 2012). When the workplace situation for the employees is not suitable and they are facing emotional abuse by their supervisors then employees feel stress at their workplace.

The second hypothesis was there is a significant positive relationship between abusive supervision and mobbing. According to Hackney and Perrew (2018), abusive supervision leads to aggressive behaviors. SEM results showed that when abusive supervision occurs at the workplace, the morale of the employees could be decreased, and they explicated mobbing with the value of ( $\beta = .366$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). The third hypothesis was there is a significant positive relationship between work stress and mobbing. Results of SEM indicated that no relationship is found between stress and mobbing with ( $\beta = .098$ ,  $p = .385$ ). But, according to (Attell et al., 2017), there exists a significant relationship between work stress and mobbing.

The findings of this study suggested that job stress might occur due to psychological distress (life distress, economic hardships). The fourth hypothesis was work stress will mediate the relationship between abusive supervision and mobbing. In prior studies, Hackeny and Perrewe (2018) found that when workplace abuse is increased, then the workplace stress of the employees also increases, which leads to emotional assault. And the result of SEM construed that when the abusive supervision takes place at the organization, then many other consequences will occur. Research construed that abusive supervision leads to minor stress, but after some time, it becomes more intensive aggressive behavior by the value of SEM ( $\beta=0.016$ ,  $p = 0.126$ ).

The fifth hypothesis indicates that perceived organizational support would moderate the relationship between abusive supervision and work stress. According to SEM, the findings showed that low perceived organizational support strengthens the positive relationship between abusive supervision and work stress with the value of ( $\beta= 0.060$ ,  $p= 0.040$ ). Consistent with prior work, Shoss et al. (2013) construed that when employees considered that their leaders supported them at the workplace, then their stress level might be decreased and their behavior does not appear aberrant towards their supervisors and also leads to great performance in the organization. The sixth hypothesis was the locus of control will moderate the relationship between job stress and Mobbing. Consistent with the study of (Mulki & Lassk, 2019), external locus of control exacerbates the positive relationship between job stress and mobbing behavior with the value of ( $\beta= 0.145$ ,  $p= 0.001$ ).

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

This research carries abundant strengths in which data were collected from various sources (clerical staff, BDO's, TTO's). Besides, data were collected from various banks of Lahore, Pakistan. Due to this, observed variability and generalizability of the research findings are increased.

Despite numerous strengths, this research study is not without future guidelines and limitations. Because of convenience sampling, data was gathered from bankers of Lahore, Pakistan so that's why it is not generalizable in different contexts. This study could be in multiple contexts in the organizations and could also be an experimental study in the future. The sample size is small. Data is collected only from banks of Lahore, Pakistan. Future research may be replicated in different sectors of Pakistan or around the globe.

### **CONCLUSION**

Employing the affective events theory, the current study examines how and when abusive supervision affects banking employees. We investigated that abusive supervision is positively related to work stress, which in turns leads to mobbing. Further, low perceived organizational support and strong external locus of control exacerbate the relationship between abusive supervision and mobbing. Hopefully, the current study will motivate more researchers to dedicate attention to the influence of abusive supervision in the banking industry.

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