Research article

Effect of Workplace Harassment on Organizational Cynicism with the Mediation of Perceived Incivility and the Moderating Role of Perceived Organizational Obstruction

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ABSTRACT

Workplace harassment is the most disliked behavior; it is about entering others' private space. It has dangerous consequences if the organizations do not control it. Perceived Incivility is a low-intensity deviant behavior that tends to apply damaging behavior; it may cause a wide range of mistreatment. This study investigates the effect of workplace harassment on organizational Cynicism in Pakistan, with the mediation of perceived Incivility and the moderating role of perceived organizational obstruction. Based on a sample of research students from various fields and institution types, the analysis supports the hypothesis that workplace harassment is positively related to perceived Incivility and organizational Cynicism.

Furthermore, perceived Incivility is positively related to organizational cynicism and may mediate the relationship between workplace harassment and organizational cynicism. However, contrary to expectations, perceived organizational obstruction appears to weaken rather than strengthen the relationship between perceived Incivility and organizational cynicism. The findings have important implications for understanding the complex interplay between workplace harassment, Incivility, organizational obstruction, and Cynicism and for developing interventions to mitigate the negative impact of harassment on employees and organizations.

1. Introduction

Organizational cynicism is an ancient fact that has been ignored for the last four centuries but has now seized the courtesy of intellectuals. There are many definitions of cynicism by different authors with different meanings. However, it is confirmed that cynicism is something like frustration, bleakness, or feelings of distrust of the employers by employees [1]. This frustrated behavior and unclear responses by employers make employees cynical. When employees feel that their managers take their unjustified advantages and are in an unclear position, managers ask them what they do by themselves [1,2]. This dual face of management leads to cynicism. Each workplace corner has the effects of Cynicism [3].

When employees feel detached and believe there is no morality and transparency at the establishment, and the management has an unjust attitude toward subordinates, then cynicism occurs [4]. Aggressive behavior and negative attitude of workers to their organization is the best form of Cynicism [5]. Organizational cynicism comprises trouble, aloofness, hopelessness about the facility, and the

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organization's sense of deception and injustice [6]. Studies in the USA, Europe, and Asia found that organizational cynicism suddenly rises significantly [7]. Maladministration or mishandling of issues in the organization is the primary cause of organizational cynicism. Change management also affects cynicism. If somebody tries to change something but fails or partially succeeds, it has solid but adverse effects on employees. If they achieve their goals and do not communicate with their employees, employees translate it as a failure and gradually lose trust in upper management, and cynicism is erected. Organizational cynicism is a negative mindset, which one may call pessimism or a blame game. Pessimism never generates itself; people, general authorities, are responsible for each happening. So, if the upper body is not interested in their employees, they will fall into pessimism, which is critical to cynicism. Employees learn cynicism from others in the facility [8].

Managers start bullying and harassing employees, and then workers fall into unhappiness, frustration, and nervousness and become demoralized. Some people respond to it, and some remain in their minds and respond at a specific time. Workplace harassment is one of the factors of counterproductive behavior in an organization [9]. Workplace harassment is a severe problem of the century. Even though there are laws to protect the honor of people in the workplace, a few cases are reported and left unchecked [10]. So, here we will fill the gap of research that harassment leads to cynicism. It is studied with the mediator and moderator variables to exhibit strong results. Incivility in organizations is increasing day by day, and it is hazardous for employees, employers, and organizations as well [11, 12]. In 2010 [13] highlighted the reality that 25 percent of people faced Incivility at work at least once a week in 1998, and just after seven years, its ratio has increased to 37 percent of people who experienced Incivility at work. Employee turnover has strong but harmful effects on the organization, and Incivility is one of the significant sources of employee turnover and other serious consequences. Perceived organizational obstruction is being used as a moderator in this research. A negative social exchange relationship between employees and organizations is a tool of destruction. Employees respond with negative behavior if they are obstructed by supervisors with the association of supervisory abuse [14]. Organizational obstruction causes behaviors that target an organization positively or negatively. A negative social exchange relationship with management can significantly provoke employees' negative behavior towards the organization [14]. Due to the given reasons, we are researching how it is being created and what the effects of organizational cynicism towards the organization can be. We are studying workplace harassment and perceived Incivility and their effects on organizational cynicism. It is well known that harassment has adverse effects on organizations. However, here we are identifying the effects of workplace harassment on organizational cynicism.

The following are the research objectives for the study.

- To examine the relationship between workplace harassment and organizational cynicism among employees in Pakistan.
- To investigate the mediating role of perceived incivility in the relationship between workplace harassment and organizational cynicism.
- To explore the moderating role of perceived organizational obstruction in the relationship between workplace harassment and organizational cynicism.
- To identify the extent to which perceived incivility mediates the relationship between workplace harassment and organizational cynicism.
- To determine the extent to which perceived organizational obstruction moderates the relationship between workplace harassment and organizational cynicism.
- To provide recommendations for organizations in Pakistan to mitigate the negative impact of workplace harassment on employees' perceptions of the organization.

2. Literature review

2.1. Organizational cynicism

Organizational cynicism is an old phenomenon. A Greece philosopher Antisthenes who was a pupil of Socrates gave the concept of cynicism. According to Aristotle, the student of Plato, Antisthenes was interested in contradictions, and cynics believe that people make rules for institutions and governments. They are not wise or more intelligent than us. So, they do not deserve veneration, but Aristotle's ideas were different [15]. Antisthenes was an Athenian resident who went to Cynosarges gymnasium, so his concept was named "cynicism." The cynicism concept was given by Antisthenes in 400 BC. With time, the meanings of cynicism kept changing, and it was considered the broadcasted notion of pooh-poohing of tradition and dominant modes of comportment and attitude [16].

Cynicism transformed the employer-employee relation [17]. Researchers found in their studies that a high ratio of employees is pessimistic about their establishments [18]. When employees feel organizations are distrusted and lose confidence in their facility, cynicism occurs. Other definitions say that cynicism is associated with employee emotions like fury and disenchantment [19]. Having all these concepts, since 1990, organizational cynicism has been under the consideration of researchers, and they are examining cynicism as a factor that affects the behavior, belief, and attitude of employees [20–22].

Cynicism is the variable that rounds about belief and attitude [23] and personality trait [24]. Employees' job loss and downscaling are the reasons for business cynicism [25]. After 2000 extensive and detailed research on cynicism found that cynicism has different dimensions (personal, societal, work, employee, and organizational cynicism). Personal cynicism is about the negative traits of an individual [26]. Societal cynicism is the attitude of distrust toward society [26]. Work cynicism is job exhaustion [27]. Employee cynicism concerns employees' negative attitudes and behavioral outcomes [28]. Organizational cynicism is employees' feeling of distrust and unfairness about the organization. Organizational cynicism is further divided into three dimensions: a) Cognitive Cynicism, b) Affective cynicism c) Behavioral Cynicism [26].

Cognitive cynicism means a lack of honesty, sincerity, or Justice within the organization. Employees start feeling that their organization needs to consider their efforts to accomplish organizational goals. The facility avoids them; they must be interested in the organizational goal or the organization itself [29]. Cognitive cynicism occurs when employees observe that rules are being broken for expedience, and dichotomy, foxiness, and personal interest preference are everyday things in the organization [29]. It outrageously impacts organizational commitment [30]. It is the factor to reduce organizational performance [21].

Affective cynicism is about affection and the sentimental reaction of employees towards the organization and psychological responses like worsening, uneasiness, tautness, and anxiety. Then employees feel dishonor and anger of failure towards their firms [31]. Employees perceive that they are wiser and feel they are intelligent and have more knowledge about things, and then they experience moral outrage, anger, and hatred towards their workplace [26,32]. Behavioral cynicism is the perilous expressions and negative attitudes practiced by employees. It contains sarcastic humor criticism about the organization, unfavorable gestures, negative explanations of attitudes, and a biased pessimistic prediction about the organization's future action [29]. Employees' behavior becomes blistering, harsh, and badmouthing towards their organization.

Furthermore, they do not take an interest in their assigned tasks [33], show poor performance, and become unproductive [34]. Furthermore, cynicism causes job withdrawal or job search behavior, leading to high employee turnover [35]. Cynicism leads to civil disobedience and induces insincerity in people's attitude [36]. Cynicism is due to obstruction and leads to insincere behavior [37].

Cynicism is a distinctive individual trait that exhibits negative sentiments and insights like frustration about human behavior; a negative attitude of employees toward their organizations consists of three components a) cognition (belief: that the organization has no integrity and is distrusted), b) affection (sentimental: negative sentiments about the organization) and c) behavioral (behavior: exhibiting harmful and weary behavior towards organization).

2.2. Workplace harassment

Workplace harassment is highly increasing in organizations since the last decade. It has too many harmful effects on the employees and organization and is the reason for stress and frustration in the workplace. According to Equal Employee Opportunity Commission (EEO, 1980) guidelines, unwelcome sexual advances, wishes for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of sexual nature are known as workplace harassment [38]. Verbal harassment is criticizing, abusing, insulting, and denouncing others [39]b. If an organization accepts or rejects a candidate based on sexual favors or requests is called workplace harassment. It impacts performance and may cause anxiety [38]. Components of workplace harassment are unwanted touching, entering someone's personal space, questioning about their matters, staring, which makes them uncomfortable and offensive jokes with them [40].

Researchers conducted research on a military health system and found that harassment and verbal abuse are common offenders of Incivility [41]. There is a kind of harassment that occurs regularly but is not addressed because there are no laws to prohibit that. In this type of harassment, employees exhibit dishonor behavior toward coworkers and encroach upon the traditions of respect for each other at the workplace [42]. Workplace harassment causes counterproductive behavior, which targets maltreatment of others and the organization [43]. Counterproductive behavior leads to abusive behavior, eccentricity to production, stealing, sabotage, and withdrawal [44]. This deviant behavior in which employees harm others by their words or doings is known as workplace incivility. Behaviors like insulting, roaring, shouting, menacing, or cussing someone in public is known as verbal harassment. Sending a horrid and belittling note, making one's joke because of a deficiency of knowledge or discouragement of his integrity in a group, or shout someone is uncivil behavior [45]. Selective Incivility is more pervasive and insidious than Harassment [46]. Incivility is more subtle and prevalent than harassment, but both are dangerous for organizations [47]. Incivility is more dangerous because harassment can be highlighted and prevented by law, but Incivility is not [48]. Harass can be prevented, but victims may fall into uncivil behavior, and this attitude may spread entirely because people learn from people. So, we can say that workplace verbal harassment is a significant cause of workplace incivility.

Workplace harassment generates negative emotions on the employee end [9]. Workplace harassment negatively correlates with organizational commitment [49] and positively with job withdrawal [9,50]. Further, Sadia found in her study that workplace harassment and workplace bullying cause counterproductive behavior, and this behavioral change causes high damage to the organization. This counterproductive behavior is a volitional behavior towards an organization, harming the organization badly [43]. Suppose workplace harassment occurs and no one takes countermeasures. In that case, targets perceive that the organization itself is responsible for this toxic culture that is prevailing in the organization, further when employers do not act and consider the targets as "pests," then they harm efficiency, organizational name, and their devotion decreased to the end level. They start considering organizations untrustworthy [51]. Workplace harassment causes deteriorating relationships with coworkers [52], and such studies illustrate that harassment harms employees' psychological or physical well-being [38]. As with another social mistreatment, harassment is a cause of Cynicism [53]. Employees are cynical if they face gender-based harassment [54]. Organizational bullying harms the organization with highly deleterious effects. Distrust or integrity loss of organization is one of those consequences of bullying [55]. Workplace harassment causes anxiety, depression, and doubtful feelings in employees. These negative emotions, job withdrawal, frustration, Behavioral changes, counterproductive behavior, and losing trust are the unmistakable symbols of organizational cynicism. So, having these arguments, we propose to hypothesize that harassment may be a significant cause of Cynicism and Incivility.

H1.   *Workplace harassment has a significant positive relationship with Organizational Cynicism.*

H2.   *Workplace harassment has a positive and significant relationship with Perceived Incivility.*

2.3. Perceived incivility

Incivility is characteristically rude, impolite, and ill-mannered & destructive remarks about others [56]. An incivility is an unidentified form of aggression, it is ambiguous about others to harm, and its intensity is low than other aggressions like physical attack, etc. [57]."Workplace incivility is a low-intensity deviant comportment with vague intent to damage the target, in violating structural norms for mutual respect and honor" [56]. Ignoring attitude toward a healthy workplace environment is a reason for failure in attaining organizational objectives [58–60]. Workplace incivility is one of the factors which should be considered to eliminate obstructions in attaining organizational strategic goals. Incivility is something like aberrant behaviors toward colleagues, and it is known as mistreatment that is not liked by a man [61]. Workplace incivility is the term that covers the area of ambiguous intent to harm others, maybe or may not. However, it harms the people's image, which reflects the organization's image. Two sources are considered to cause Incivility; the first one is customers, and the second is coworkers; after having a bad experience with coworkers, the target responds with the wrong attitude at the workplace [57,62]. If an employee experience incivility, it does not matter from which source; he or she responds with cynic [62]. Previous research proved that due to Incivility, organizations pay the cost of poor work quality, less effort to assigned tasks, and mishandling of customers and turnover intention by employees [63]. Employees respond with harsh attitudes in communication, do not take a considerable part in social activities, raise their voices, misuse office materials, and passing of snide remarks observed if they are facing Incivility at the workplace [42].

Incivility may be a violent behavior at the workplace and correlate with behavior deviance in a loop or repetition effect [56]. Incivility is repetitive and has ramifications effects [64]. Relational aggression theory corroborates the effects of Incivility. When an individual uses relationships as a tool to harm others, relational aggression occurs [65]. When it comes to a group, the "Oppressed Group Behavior" theory is applied, which says that a group having low powers or is powerless has unwilling behaviors in the workplace, which frames the attitude of pugnacity by targets of Incivility [66]. These acts cause demotivation, and employees turn from their performance [67]. When a person is targeted by his supervisor or his coworker, he feels that his colleague behaved to him in an uncivil manner, then he also practices Incivility; simple "Tit for Tat," experienced or observed Incivility has a strong outrage impact on employees' behavior or negative emotions [68]. Incivility is a reciprocal phenomenon between employees [56]. It is a negative coil, in which Incivility is the cause of workplace hostility and organizational and relational skirmishes; further research gave foundation to this theory and found that a destructive spiral intensifies the aggression and generates a hostile work environment [69]. Targets of workplace Incivility exhibit negative sentiments by which aggression exist [70]. If a man is treated with uncivil behavior reciprocates with a cynical attitude of exacerbation to the organization [62]. Incivility is a mysterious intention to harm others and contempt of organizational norms, as it is the cause of cynicism, which is the delimitation of horizontal ferocity and is known as aggression [71]. Workplace incivility causes outrage outcomes like high burnout, emotional exhaustion, job withdrawal, and intention to sabotage the norms [72] and reduced performance [73]. All these variables are like organizational Cynicism [74] and create untrustworthy relations due to Incivility. Workplace incivility is a cynicism booster, leading to turnover and burnout-related consequences [35]. When students face Incivility from their instructors due to their uncivil behavior, they fall into cynicism and experience emotional exhaustion, further deviating them from the study [75]. Nasty comments or mocking someone, or making political comments to make someone feel shame, is considered uncivil behavior, and this Incivility directly causes emotional exhaustion and Cynicism [76]. If targets feel that the organization is responsible for uncivil behavior, aggression moves toward the organization, and then employees become cynics. According to the given statements by previous authors, we may hypothesize that Incivility can cause cynicism.

H3. *Perceived Incivility has a significant positive relationship with Organizational Cynicism.*

H4. *Perceived Incivility mediates the relationship between workplace harassment and Organizational Cynicism.*

2.4. Perceived organizational obstruction

Researchers categorized employees' behavior into three parts within the organization; in-role performance, extra-role positive behavior, and extra-role negative behavior (workplace deviance and retaliate behavior) [77]. Employees reciprocate with the same behavior to the source by which they are treated [78]; if they receive favorable treatment from an organization, they perform positive extra-role behavior. Employees who perceive the organization as committed to them perform extra role-positive behavior [79]. Workers repay in the form of positive extra-role behavior to the organization in response to a conducive environment and high satisfaction at the workplace [80]. If treated negatively, they may respond with negative extra-role behavior [81]. Relationship exchange performance study gave the "hindrance network concept," which is explained as an obstruction in task performance based on exchange relationships [82]. Most employees find their coworkers as the hindrance in their task performance; sometimes, there may be other sources of hindrance, maybe the organization itself or its rules or biased behavior with some employees [83]. When an employee's goal is not achieved just because of the organization or organizational context, his reciprocated behavior will be aggressive [84,85]. Perceived organizational obstruction (POO) has been explored in recent studies, examining its influence on job satisfaction and related aspects. study investigate a moderated mediation model involving interactional justice and organizational identification [86]. another research explore the relationship between teachers' perceptions of gender equality and organizational ostracism, considering organizational obstruction [87]. Researchers study the impact of psychological contract breach on behaviors through perceived organizational frustration [88]. Oubibi et al., focus on Chinese teachers during COVID-19, examining mediation effects on career satisfaction. others explore the multilevel impact of job insecurity climate and perceived organizational obstruction on work engagement and job satisfaction [89]. These studies collectively enhance our understanding of how POO affects job-related attitudes and behaviors. Employees never perceive that organizational frustration is a hindrance to their goal attainment [82]. It is a cognitive

organizational obstruction that creates a belief in employees' minds that the organization harms or hinders their goal attainment. According to the social exchange theory, employees respond to the same behavior they receive from the organization in the employer-employee relationship. When a candidate enters the organization to serve the organization with the best skills and knowledge, he expects the organization to care about his feelings, psychology, and health. When a candidate becomes an employee of an organization and is part of an organization's job family, a social relationship is established between the organization and the employee. In the social exchange relationship, psychological contract [90] and perceived organizational support [91] are considered to strengthen the relationship between employer and employee [92].

Organizational obstruction is based on organizational frustration but is not the same as organizational frustration [93]. Sometimes employees focus on their self-interest and harm others, meaning they play politics with their coworkers [94]. When people become successful in the goals for which they are doing politics, they harm others and may be the reason for obstructing the interests or goals of others [93]. When the people targeted by political actors feel that their goal attainment has failed and the causes are their coworkers, they may have wrong perceptions. They may think it is all happening by the agreeableness of the organization [93]. If employees perceive the hindrance due to the organization, then according to the social exchange relationship, they will not trust the organization and perceive it has lost its integrity. The negative actions of the organization, like psychological contract breach [95] and perception of organizational obstruction in employees' heads, cause cynicism which is a negative attitude by the employees towards the organization [96].

"Perceived organizational obstruction is defined as an employee's comprehensive belief that the organization obstructs, hinders or interferes in the accomplishment of employee's goals, objectives and mission and is a detriment to his or her well-being." Organizational obstruction is a perception of employees which leads to a belief that the organization is acting as a hurdle in the way of employees' objectives. If employees feel that practices or principles of the organization need to be better or such practices create hurdles to attaining their goals, organizational obstruction occurs. Social exchange, reciprocity norms, and human-like attitude traits when working collectively then be a reason to generate different types of behavior, one of them being revengeful behavior [97] disobedience at the organization [98], and workplace deviance [99]. According to the social exchange relationship theory of reciprocal attitude, when employees perceive obstruction as adverse treatment and then in harmful reciprocity norms like "eye to eye," suggests that employees will respond negatively when they will have adverse treatment from the organization [78], further, he said they do not need to harm or hinder the organization in its attainment of goals, employees may respond by other means like having the belief that organization has lost its integrity, trust. They may be cynical [3]. Cynical behavior is "badmouthing" [3] about the organization to others [100]; his findings are organizational obstruction can be a reason by which organizational cynicism may increase or decrease. Obstruction is a phenomenon that causes organizational cynicism because of its destructive nature [101]. Cynicism leads to insincere behavior [37]. Obstruction succeeds to laziness, sloth, cynicism, and other low-performance behaviors like slowness, embarrassment, and digressiveness [102]. If obstruction exists in the organization along with Incivility, then obstruction boosts the relation of Incivility with Cynicism. Further, it will be examined, and it is hypothesized below:

H5. *Perceived Organizational Obstruction modifies and strengthens the relationship between P.I. and Organizational Cynicism.*

2.5. Conceptual framework

The theoretical framework for this study presented in Fig. 1 explored the intricate relationship between workplace harassment and organizational cynicism, focusing on the Impact of perceived organizational obstruction as a moderating variable and perceived Incivility as a mediating variable. Drawing upon theories of social exchange, psychological contract, and organizational Justice, the framework posits that employees who experience workplace harassment, the independent variable (IV), may develop heightened levels of organizational cynicism, the dependent variable (DV). The social exchange theory suggests that employees' negative experiences in the workplace may lead to a breakdown in the reciprocal relationship with their organization, fostering cynicism. An understanding of how workplace harassment affects organizational cynicism in Pakistan is based on Social Exchange Theory (SET).
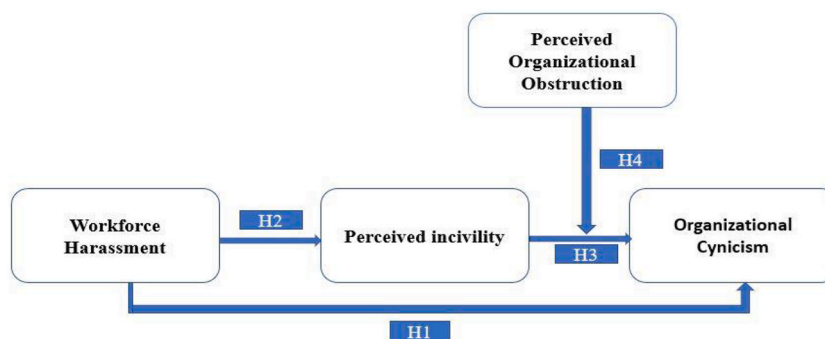

Fig. 1. Theoretical Framework for the Study of Workplace Harassment and its Impact on Organizational Cynicism. The independent variable (IV) is workplace harassment, while the dependent variable (DV) is organizational cynicism. The Moderating Variable (MV) is perceived organizational obstruction, and the Mediating Variable (MV) is perceived Incivility.

According to SET, employees weigh the costs and rewards, and harassment is a major cost that might have unfavorable effects. Cynicism is further fueled by perceived incivility and organizational impediments, which weaken perceptions of justice and trust. It is imperative to consider cultural quirks including power relations and social norms when implementing SET in Pakistan. By incorporating SET, researchers are better able to understand the nuances of workplace cynicism and harassment. This helps organizations create strategies that reduce costs, promote workplace respect, and create strong support networks for dealing with harassment [103, 104].Meanwhile, the psychological contract theory emphasizes that unmet expectations can trigger feelings of betrayal and, subsequently, cynicism. The organizational justice theory adds to the framework by highlighting the importance of perceived fairness in the workplace, which can be severely undermined by harassment. In this context, the moderating variable (MV), perceived organizational obstruction, reflects employees' perception of the organization's role in hindering their progress, which can intensify the Impact of workplace harassment on organizational cynicism. Lastly, the mediating variable (MV), perceived Incivility, captures the subtle and indirect nature of harassment, which can exacerbate employees' cynicism as they navigate the complexities of workplace dynamics.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design and participants

This study employed a quantitative research design using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The rationale for this approach was threefold. First, the quantitative research design allowed for a systematic investigation of the relationships among the variables of interest, providing empirical evidence on workplace harassment and its consequences in the academic setting. This is particularly important as the target population, comprising research students pursuing M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in various educational institutions, represents a group that may be vulnerable to the adverse effects of workplace harassment on their psychological well-being and academic performance. Second, using PLS-SEM facilitated the simultaneous examination of both direct and indirect effects of the independent variable (workplace harassment) on the dependent variable (organizational cynicism) while considering the mediating and moderating roles of perceived Incivility and perceived organizational obstruction, respectively. This advanced statistical technique enabled the researchers to comprehensively understand the complex interplay among the variables, uncovering potential causal mechanisms underlying the observed relationships. Lastly, conducting the study in Pakistan, specifically in Multan and Bahawalpur, allowed for examining the research topic in a unique cultural and organizational context. This contributes to the generalizability of the findings and enhances the understanding of workplace harassment and its consequences across different cultural settings. The insights gained from this study can inform the development of context-specific interventions and policies aimed at reducing the prevalence and Impact of workplace harassment on organizational cynicism in academic institutions in Pakistan and beyond.

3.2. Sampling and data collection

Purposive sampling was used to collect responses. Three hundred questionnaires were distributed, and a response rate of 84.3 % (n = 253) was obtained. Data was collected through hand distribution, mailing questionnaires, and online questionnaire administration under supervisory support, ensuring effective collection and respondents involved in the research.

3.3. Ethics declarations

The ethical approval of the study was taken from the bioethical committee of IBF- Bahauddin Zakariya University vide number aibf-bzu-200021. The verbal informed consents were obtained from all the participants of the study.

3.4. Research instrument

The research instrument employed in this study was a questionnaire comprising 30 questions divided into four sections to address the specific variables of interest: workplace harassment, perceived Incivility, organizational Cynicism, and perceived organizational obstruction. Each section included a varying number of items, with seven items dedicated to workplace harassment, seven for perceived Incivility, 12 for organizational cynicism, and five for perceived organizational obstruction. A 5-point Likert Scale was utilized to collect responses, with options ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). The scales were adapted from previous research on the respective variables to ensure reliability and validity. Specifically, the workplace harassment scale was derived [105], the perceived incivility scale [106], the organizational cynicism scale [107,108], and the perceived organizational obstruction scale [109].

3.5. Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4 software to evaluate the proposed hypotheses and explore the relationships among workplace harassment, perceived Incivility, organizational Cynicism, and perceived organizational obstruction. The PLS-SEM analysis comprised two distinct models: the measurement model and the structural model.

The measurement model was employed to assess the reliability and validity of the research instrument, ensuring the adequacy of

the adopted scales and their corresponding items. This model allowed for evaluating the relationships between the latent variables and their respective indicators and examining convergent and discriminant validity. The structural model, on the other hand, focused on estimating path coefficients and assessing the hypotheses concerning the relationships among the variables of interest. This model facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the mediating role of perceived Incivility and the moderating role of perceived organizational obstruction in the relationship between workplace harassment and organizational cynicism. Using SmartPLS 4 and the application of PLS-SEM, the study provided robust insights into the complex interplay among the variables, ultimately contributing to the existing body of knowledge on workplace harassment and its Impact on organizational cynicism.

4. Results and discussions

Smart PLS is used to analyze the measurement model and structural model. Table 1 shows that most items have a threshold value of 0.7 or above. Factor loading values greater than or equal to 0.70; support correlation better; the items less than 0.40 should be ignored [110]. It is also shown in the picture.

The demographic characteristics of the sample (N = 253), as shown in Table 1, provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants in the study. The sample consists of a relatively balanced representation of both genders, with 53.4 % male and 46.6 % female participants. Most participants fall within the age range of 20–30 years, indicating that the study primarily focuses on the perspectives of younger research students. In terms of education level, the sample includes 66.4 % M.S. students and 33.6 % Ph.D. students, encompassing research students at different stages of their academic careers. The sample also features diverse representation regarding institution type, with 59.7 % of participants coming from government/public educational institutions and 40.3 % from private institutions. This diversity ensures that the study's findings account for potential differences in experiences across various institutional contexts.

Additionally, participants represent a range of academic fields, including Social Sciences (29.6 %), Natural Sciences (26.9 %), Engineering (22.9 %), and Business & Management (20.6 %). This variety in academic disciplines strengthens the generalizability of the study's findings. In summary, the sample's demographic characteristics suggest that the study incorporates a diverse group of research students, enhancing the rigor and relevance of the study. This diversity provides a comprehensive understanding of the effect of workplace harassment on organizational cynicism, considering the mediating role of perceived Incivility and the moderating role of perceived organizational obstruction.

4.1. Measurement model assessment

Table 2 presents factor loadings for various variables, including perceived organizational obstruction (POO), perceived Incivility (P.I.), organizational Cynicism (O.C.), and workplace harassment (W.H.).For organizational cynicism, 12 items (OC1 to OC12) were assessed, with factor loadings ranging from 0.708 (OC11) to 0.986 (OC1). This indicates a strong relationship between these items and the O.C. construct. The highest factor loading was found for OC1 (0.986), while the lowest was for OC11 (0.708).In the case of perceived Incivility, there were seven items (PI1 to PI7) with factor loadings ranging from 0.817 (PI5) to 0.946 (PI1). This demonstrates a strong connection between these items and the P.I. construct. The highest factor loading was observed for PI1 (0.946) and the lowest for PI5 (0.817). Perceived organizational obstruction was assessed through five items (POO1 to POO5). The factor loadings for these items ranged from 0.719 (POO2) to 0.887 (POO5), suggesting a strong relationship between these items and the POO construct. POO5 had the highest factor loading (0.887), while POO2 had the lowest (0.719). Workplace harassment was evaluated using seven

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of the sample (N = 253).

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	135	53.4
Female	118	46.6
Age (Years)		
20–25	98	38.7
26–30	105	41.5
31–35	40	15.8
36–40	10	4
Education Level		
M.S.	168	66.4
Ph.D.	85	33.6
Institution Type		
Government/Public	151	59.7
Private	102	40.3
Field of Study		
Social Sciences	75	29.6
Natural Sciences	68	26.9
Engineering	58	22.9
Business & Management	52	20.6

Note. N = the total number of participants.

Table 2
Factor loadings.

	OC	PI	POO	WH	POO x PI
OC1	0.986				
OC2	0.872				
OC3	0.835				
OC4	0.86				
OC5	0.755				
OC6	0.827				
OC7	0.727				
OC8	0.903				
OC9	0.788				
OC10	0.938				
OC11	0.708				
OC12	0.797				
PI1		0.946			
PI2		0.849			
PI3		0.945			
PI4		0.895			
PI5		0.817			
PI6		0.889			
PI7		0.877			
POO1			0.825		
POO2			0.719		
POO3			0.795		
POO4			0.784		
POO5			0.887		
WH1				0.735	
WH2				0.865	
WH3				0.954	
WH4				0.749	
WH5				0.802	
WH6				0.774	
WH7				0.831	
POO x P.I.					1

Note. POO = perceived organizational obstruction; PI = perceived incivility; OC = organizational cynicism; WH = workplace harassment.
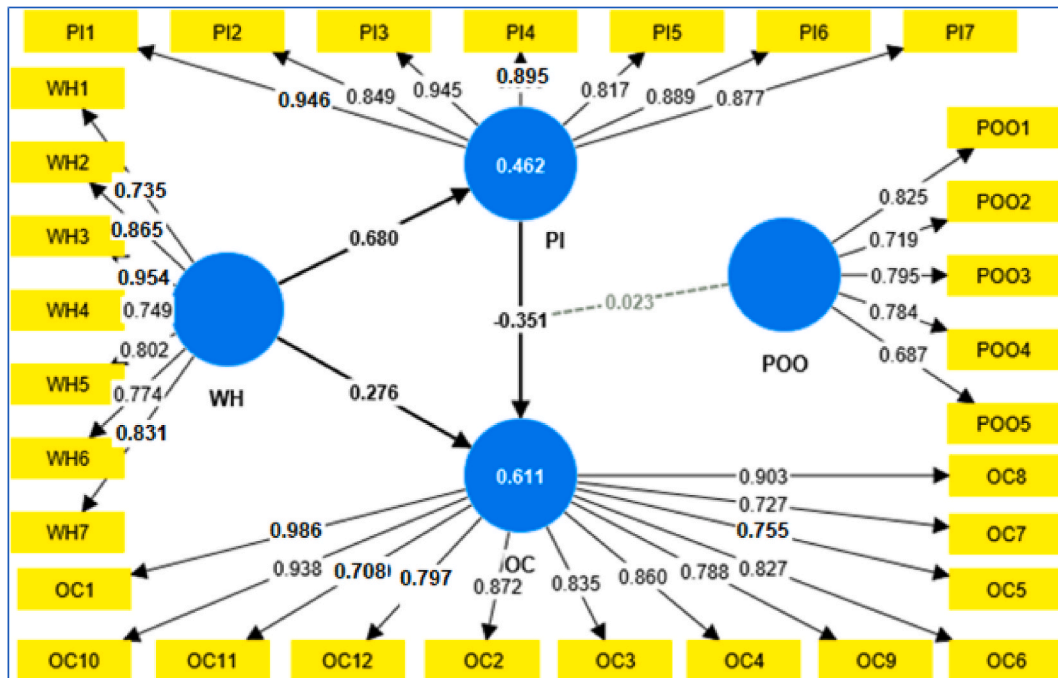

Fig. 2. Measurement model assessment.

items (WH1 to WH7). The factor loadings for these items varied from 0.735 (WH1) to 0.954 (WH3), indicating a strong association between these items and the W.H. construct. The highest factor loading was for WH3 (0.954), and the lowest was for WH1 (0.735). Lastly, the interaction between perceived organizational obstruction and perceived Incivility (POO x P.I.) was represented by a single item with a factor loading of 1, showing a perfect relationship between the item and the interaction construct.

Fig. 2 and Table 3 present the construct reliability and validity measures, which include Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (rho_and rho_c), and average variance extracted (AVE). These measures help assess the internal consistency, reliability, and convergent validity of the constructs in the study (Sarstedt, 2017; Hair, 2017; Sarstedt, 2019). The organizational Cynicism (O.C.) construct shows strong internal consistency, reliability, and convergent validity, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.934, rho_a of 0.956, rho_c of 0.944, and an AVE of 0.593. Similarly, the perceived Incivility (P.I.) construct exhibits high reliability and convergent validity, evidenced by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.903, rho_a of 0.968, rho_c of 0.925, and an AVE of 0.646. The perceived organizational obstruction (POO) construct also demonstrates acceptable reliability and convergent validity with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, rho_a of 0.835, rho_c of 0.875, and an AVE of 0.583. Lastly, the workplace harassment (W.H.) construct has adequate internal consistency, reliability, and convergent validity, although its values are slightly lower than the other constructs. The W.H. construct has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.719, rho_a of 0.769, rho_c of 0.785, and an AVE of 0.571. In conclusion, all four constructs—organizational Cynicism, perceived Incivility, perceived organizational obstruction, and workplace harassment—meet the acceptable thresholds for Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted. This indicates that the measurement model is sufficiently robust regarding internal consistency, reliability, and convergent validity.

The Fornell-Larcker criterion assesses discriminant validity by comparing the average variance extracted (AVE) from each variable to the shared variance. According to Hair (2017), satisfactory results are achieved when the diagonal values are higher than the non-diagonal values in the corresponding columns and rows. Table 4 displays the Fornell-Larcker criterion for discriminant validity, which includes four variables: Organizational Cynicism (O.C.), Perceived Incivility (P.I.), Perceived Organizational Obstruction (POO), and Workplace Harassment (W.H.). In the table, the diagonal values represent the AVE for each variable, while the off-diagonal values indicate the shared variance between the variables. The AVE for O.C. is 0.77, for P.I. is 0.804, for POO is 0.764, and for W.H. is 0.709. These diagonal values are higher than the corresponding off-diagonal values in their respective rows and columns. For example, the shared variance between O.C. and P.I. is 0.133, between O.C. and POO, is 0.738, and between O.C. and W.H. is 0.247. Similarly, the shared variance between P.I. and POO is 0.355, between P.I. and W.H., is 0.68, and between POO and W.H. is 0.242. These results indicate that the Fornell-Larcker criterion is satisfied, as the AVE for each variable (O.C.: 0.77, P.I.: 0.804, POO: 0.764, and W.H.: 0.709) is higher than the shared variance between them (O.C. and P.I.: 0.133, O.C. and POO: 0.738, O.C. and W.H.: 0.247, P.I. and POO: 0.355, P.I. and W.H.: 0.68, and POO and W.H.: 0.242). This suggests that the variables exhibit adequate discriminant validity, meaning that they are distinct from one another and measure different constructs.

The R-squared (R2) values in Table 5 illustrate the explanatory power of the independent variables on the dependent variables of Organizational Cynicism and Perceived Incivility. According to Henseler (2018), R2 values can be classified as weak (0.25), medium (0.50), or firm (0.75) in terms of their predictive accuracy. In the context of this study, the R2 value for Organizational Cynicism is 0.611, which indicates that the independent variables explain 61.1 % of the variance in this dependent variable. This is a moderately predictive solid relationship. On the other hand, the R2 value for Perceived Incivility is 0.462, demonstrating that the independent variables account for 46.2 % of the variance in this dependent variable. This value falls within the medium range of predictive correctness.

Furthermore, Table 5 also presents the adjusted R-square values for both dependent variables. The adjusted R-square value for Organizational Cynicism is 0.499, while for Perceived Incivility, it is 0.430. These adjusted values consider the number of independent variables in the model and provide a more conservative estimate of the explanatory power of the independent variables. In summary, the regression analysis reveals a moderately strong relationship between the independent variables and Organizational cynicism and a medium relationship with Perceived Incivility.

4.2. Structural model assessment

This section assesses the path coefficients, as standardized beta, and their significance level for *t* and *p* statistics to evaluate the proposed hypotheses. These results are obtained by bootstrapping in PLS-SEM. Path coefficients of variables are significant at an error level with a 5 % probability if it falls within the 95 % confidence level [111]. *The P-Value* must be below 0.05, and the *t*-value must be above 1.95 [112].

Fig. 3 above shows that all the hypothesized relationships has been proven. Moreover Table 6 presents the path coefficients for the relationships among the variables of interest, namely Workplace Harassment (W.H.), Perceived Incivility (P.I.), Organizational

Table 3
Construct reliability and validity.

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	The average variance extracted (AVE)
OC	0.934	0.956	0.944	0.593
PI	0.903	0.968	0.925	0.646
POO	0.82	0.835	0.875	0.583
WH	0.719	0.769	0.785	0.571

Note. POO = perceived organizational obstruction; PI = perceived incivility; OC = organizational cynicism; WH = workplace harassment.

Table 4

Fornell-Larcker criterion for discriminant validity.

	OC	PI	POO	WH
Organizational Cynicism (O.C.)	0.77			
Perceived Incivility (P.I.)	0.133	0.804		
Perceived organizational obstruction (POO)	0.738	0.355	0.764	
Workplace harassment (W.H.)	0.247	0.68	0.242	0.709

Table 5

R-square.

	R-square	R-square adjusted
Organizational Cynicism	0.611	0.499
Perceived Incivility	0.462	0.43
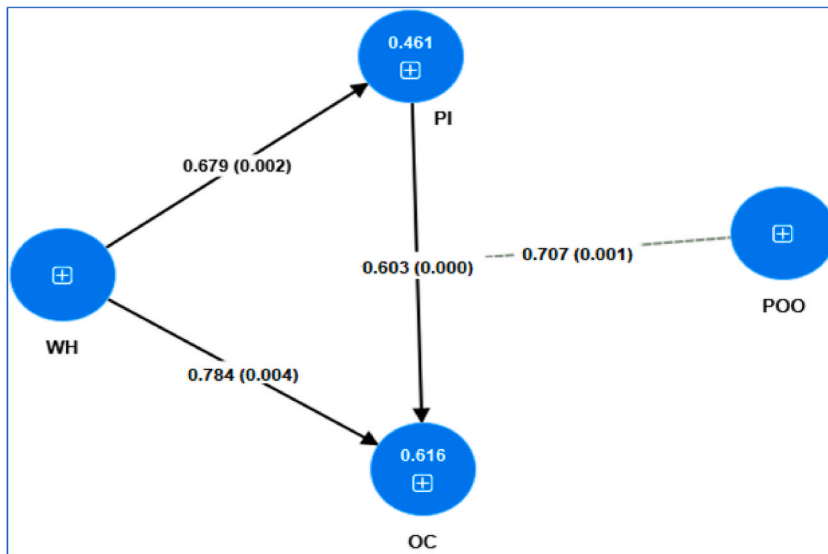
Fig. 3. Structural model assessment output validating the proposed relationships between exogenous and endogenous constructs.

Table 6

Path coefficients.

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
PI - > OC	0.603	0.915	0.249	3.155	0
POO - > OC	0.805	0.808	0.204	3.943	0
WH - > OC	0.784	0.793	0.302	4.766	0.004
WH - > PI	0.679	0.717	0.216	3.146	0.002
POO x P.I. - > OC	0.707	0.908	0.206	3.036	0.001

Note. POO = perceived organizational obstruction; PI = perceived incivility; OC = organizational cynicism; WH = workplace harassment.

Cynicism (O.C.), and Perceived Organizational Obstruction (POO). The table includes the original sample (O), sample mean (M), standard deviation (STDEV), T statistics (|O/STDEV|), and P values for each relationship. The first hypothesis (H1) suggests that Workplace Harassment has a significant positive relationship with Organizational Cynicism. The path coefficient for W.H. - > O.C. is 0.784, with a T statistic of 4.766 and a P value of 0.004, supporting H1. The second hypothesis (H2) posits that Workplace Harassment has a positive and significant relationship with Perceived Incivility. The path coefficient for W.H. - > P.I. is 0.679, with a T statistic of 3.146 and a P value of 0.002, supporting H2. Hypothesis three (H3) states that Perceived Incivility has a significant positive relationship with Organizational Cynicism. The path coefficient for P.I. - > O.C. is 0.603, with a T statistic of 3.155 and a P value of 0, confirming H3. The fourth hypothesis (H4) asserts that Perceived Incivility mediates the relationship between Workplace Harassment and Organizational Cynicism. Although the table does not provide direct evidence for mediation, the significant relationships between W.H. - > P.I (H2). and P.I. - > O.C (H3). suggest that P.I. may indeed mediate the relationship. Lastly, hypothesis five (H5) proposes

that Perceived Organizational Obstruction is a moderator and strengthens the relationship between Perceived Incivility and Organizational Cynicism. The path coefficient for POO x P.I. - > O.C. is 0.707, with a T statistic of 3.036 and a P value of 0.001, providing evidence for the moderating role of POO (Table 6). In summary, the findings from Table 6 support all five hypotheses, indicating that Workplace Harassment is positively related to both Perceived Incivility and Organizational Cynicism and that Perceived Incivility is positively related to Organizational Cynicism. Furthermore, the results suggest that Perceived Incivility may mediate the relationship between Workplace Harassment and Organizational Cynicism and that Perceived Organizational Obstruction strengthens the relationship between Perceived Incivility and Organizational Cynicism.

The country's organizational and cultural fabric resonates with the observed reduction of perceived incivility's (PI) impact on organizational cynicism (OC) by perceived organizational obstruction (POO) in the Pakistani environment. Like many other civilizations, Pakistan accords a great deal of significance to organizational rules and hierarchical structures. In the workplace, cultural subtleties including power relations, social conventions, and the relative importance of job security and family responsibilities can all have an impact on perceived organizational obstruction. In this case, Pakistani-specific elements such as hierarchical systems and authority deference may have shaped the extra layer of organizational impediment. The apparent organizational barrier may have a mitigating effect that is heightened by Pakistan's cultural milieu. For example, if workers feel that they are unable to resolve problems at work, the culture's emphasis on deference to authority could operate as a stronger buffer, lessening the direct negative effect of perceived rudeness on organizational cynicism. Thus, Pakistan's complex mix of workplace dynamics, cultural norms, and organizational climate offers a rich backdrop for comprehending and defending the observed mitigating effect. To summarise, the phenomenon under consideration in the Pakistani context is explained by the complex interaction between cultural variables, organisational dynamics, and the unique obstacles that employees encounter when negotiating workplace issues within this cultural framework.

Table 7 and Fig. 4 below present the results of a moderation analysis examining the relationships between workplace harassment, perceived Incivility, perceived organizational obstruction, and organizational cynicism. According to the hypothesis's, perceived Incivility was expected to be positively related to organizational Cynicism (H3). Furthermore, it was hypothesized that perceived organizational obstruction would strengthen the relationship between perceived Incivility and organizational Cynicism (H5). Table 6 shows the beta coefficients for the moderation analysis. Perceived Incivility has a positive beta coefficient of 0.101, indicating a positive relationship with organizational cynicism, which supports hypothesis H3. The beta coefficient for perceived organizational obstruction is 0.145, which suggests a positive relationship between this variable and organizational cynicism. However, the interaction term between perceived Incivility and perceived organizational obstruction has a negative beta coefficient of −0.089. This result contradicts hypothesis H5, which predicted that perceived organizational obstruction would strengthen the relationship between perceived Incivility and organizational cynicism. Instead, the negative coefficient suggests that perceived organizational obstruction may weaken the relationship between perceived Incivility and organizational cynicism.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the effect of workplace harassment on organizational cynicism, both directly and indirectly, through perceived Incivility. The results confirmed all the hypotheses, showing positive and significant relationships between workplace harassment, perceived Incivility, and organizational cynicism. The findings indicate that workplace harassment can lead to increased uncivil behavior in an organizational environment, which contributes to the development of cynicism among employees. Furthermore, the study revealed that perceived organizational obstruction strengthens the relationship between perceived Incivility and organizational cynicism. The research methodology included the distribution of questionnaires among M.S. and Ph.D. research students across ten different educational institutes in Multan and Bahawalpur cities of Pakistan, with a response rate of 84.3 % (n = 253). The institutions were a mix of public and private educational settings. The results of this study contribute to business literature and highlight the detrimental consequences of workplace harassment on employees and organizations.

Workplace harassment can lead to several negative consequences, such as distrust, loss of integrity, and badmouthing about the workplace [113]. Moreover, organizational obstruction, which managers may use to pressure employees, can also damage the organization by fostering cynical attitudes among employees [114]. Employees who experience Harassment or Incivility at the workplace may deviate from their core tasks due to exhaustion, and their thinking patterns may change.

Cynicism is particularly harmful, as it can lead to civil disobedience and insincerity in employees' attitudes [115]. The results of this study have demonstrated that workplace harassment is a significant cause of Cynicism and Incivility, and that organizational obstruction strengthens the relationship between Incivility and Cynicism. Organizations need to address workplace harassment and its negative consequences to maintain a healthy work environment and prevent the development of cynicism among employees. Although the study provides valuable insights into the relationships between workplace harassment, perceived Incivility, and organizational

Table 7
Moderation analysis.

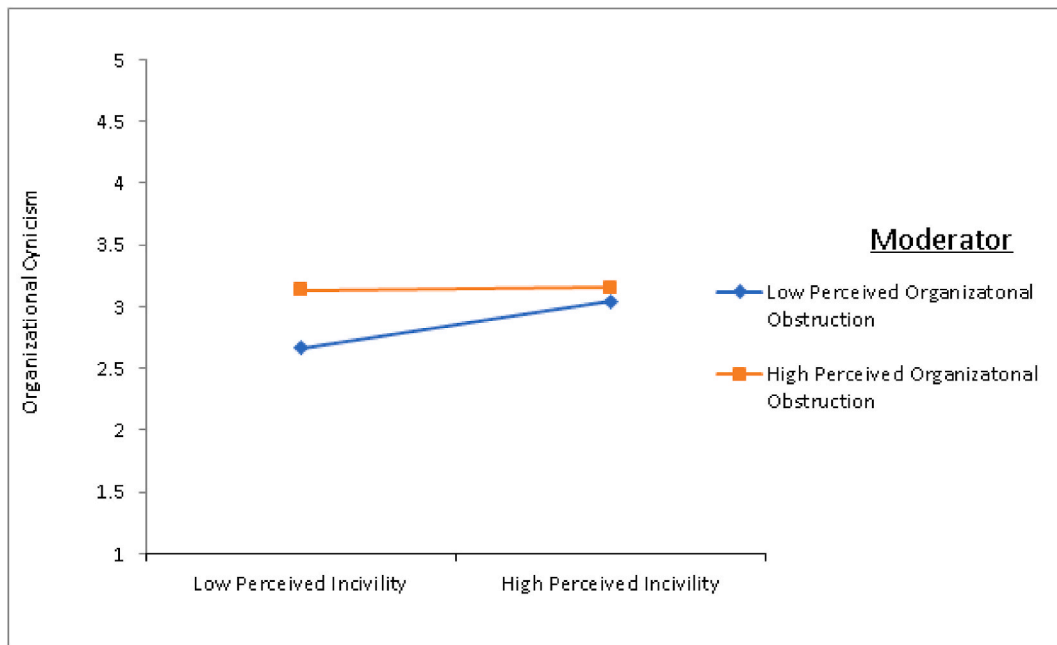| Variables	Beta Coefficients
Perceived Incivility	0.101
Perceived Org. Obstruction	0.145
Perceived Incivility * Perceived Org. Obstruction	−0.089

Note. DV=Organizational Cynicism.

Fig. 4. Moderation output graph.

cynicism, it is not without limitations. The research was conducted in a specific context (educational institutes in Multan and Baha-walpur cities of Pakistan), which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should examine these relationships in different organizational settings and cultural contexts to understand better the factors influencing workplace harassment, Incivility, and Cynicism. Moreover, longitudinal studies would help determine the causal relationships between these variables and the long-term effects of workplace harassment on employee well-being and organizational outcomes.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of addressing workplace harassment and its consequences on employee well-being and organizational outcomes. By understanding the relationships between workplace harassment, perceived Incivility, organizational obstruction, and organizational Cynicism, organizations can develop strategies to prevent harassment, reduce Incivility, and minimize the development of cynicism among employees. This, in turn, will help create a healthier, more productive, and more successful work environment.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides important insights into the impact of workplace harassment, perceived Incivility, and perceived organizational obstruction on organizational cynicism in educational settings in Pakistan. The results highlight the significant role that workplace harassment and perceived Incivility play in contributing to employees' negative perceptions of their organizations. Additionally, the findings suggest that perceived organizational obstruction may moderate the relationship between Incivility and Cynicism in unexpected ways, underscoring the importance of considering the complex interplay between these variables. This study underscores the importance of addressing workplace harassment and Incivility in educational institutions to reduce employees' perceptions of organizational cynicism. Specifically, interventions focused on preventing and addressing workplace harassment and promoting civility in the workplace may be effective in reducing organizational cynicism among employees. Additionally, efforts to address perceived organizational obstruction may be beneficial in mitigating the negative effects of perceived Incivility on employees' perceptions of their organizations. This study contributes to a better understanding of the consequences of workplace harassment and the antecedents of organizational cynicism in educational institutions, providing valuable insights for universities to address these issues. Future research could expand upon these findings by exploring other potential moderators or mediators of the relationship between workplace harassment, perceived Incivility, and organizational cynicism and by examining these relationships in other organizational contexts beyond education.

6.1. Study implications

6.1.1. Theoretical implications

This study fills a gap by exploring the impact of workplace harassment on cynicism through perceived incivility in educational settings. The theoretical framework connects harassment with incivility and subsequently with cynicism, while also examining the moderating effect of perceived organizational obstruction. The findings highlight the destructive nature of harassment and uncivil

behavior, emphasizing the importance of prompt and effective management to maintain a healthy organizational environment.

6.1.2. Practical implications

The practical implications highlight how important it is to deal with perceived rudeness, workplace harassment, and organizational skepticism. In order to develop a positive culture that encourages trust, cooperation, and open communication, organizations should proactively address these concerns. By promoting a more inclusive and equal society, addressing these concerns not only meets social obligations but also increases employee motivation, engagement, and commitment. If harassment and rudeness are not addressed, there could be legal repercussions, a decline in clients, investment, talent, and brand harm.

6.1.3. Social implications

The social implications emphasize the broader societal impact of addressing workplace issues. By addressing harassment, incivility, and cynicism, organizations contribute to a more inclusive, respectful, and equitable society. This aligns with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 5 (Gender Equality). Creating a safe and respectful work environment supports economic growth, reduces inequalities within the workforce, and empowers women and girls, aligning with the global agenda for sustainable development.

Finally, the consequences of the study show how theoretical, practical, and social dimensions are intertwined. Organizations that manage workplace challenges improve internal dynamics and further the larger societal objectives articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals. It becomes clear that creating a work atmosphere that is secure, welcoming, and courteous is essential to promoting sustainable development and guaranteeing a brighter future for everybody.

6.2. Limitations and future research

The current study has several limitations. It focuses on organizational cynicism in the context of Pakistan, which may not generalize to other countries. Moreover, this research does not consider other potential factors contributing to organizational cynicism. Future studies could examine the role of additional variables or investigate organizational cynicism in different sectors, such as public institutions like railways and airlines. Furthermore, the antecedents and consequences of cynicism that should be explored in this study could be investigated to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

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Data availability statement

The data utilized in this study is deemed confidential. Interested parties may request access to the data from the corresponding author, and reasonable efforts will be made to provide access, subject to any applicable confidentiality agreements or ethical considerations.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Chang Zhang: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Muhammad Irfan:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Junaid Iqbal Sial:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used Chat GBT in order to improve English and grammar to improve English quality. After using this tool, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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