

IMPACT OF CYBERBULLYING ON INTENTION TO QUIT WITH REFERENCE TO FEMALE WORKERS, ESPECIALLY TEAM LEADERS FROM SELECTED GARMENTS IN AMPARA DISTRICT, SRI LANKA

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Abstract

The proliferation of technology has given rise to various forms of bullying, cyberbullying is widely recognized as one of the most harmful types of bullying. It is crucial to emphasize the complex and persistent nature of cyberbullying, especially in professional settings. This study delves the impact of cyberbullying on the intention to quit among female workers, especially team leaders in the selected garments in Ampara district, Sri Lanka, and aims to provide valuable insights and recommendations to combat cyberbullying in specific apparel establishments. The researcher collected qualitative data from eighty-four female team leaders using a random sampling technique. This study provides a significant contribution to the existing knowledge base on cyberbullying, especially within the context of gender dynamics in selected apparel factories.

Among eighty-four respondents, fifty-nine recounted distressing experiences with cyberbullying at least once in their careers, further, cyberbullying affects individuals of all age groups. However, the severity of cyberbullying is notably high among those below the age of thirty-five who are bullied through social media, particularly through WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok. The research area explored in this study has received limited attention and lacks comprehensive studies in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this study not only enhances the interpretation of how cyberbullying affects employees but also enriches academic discourse in this field. Further, this study offers valuable perspectives for developing interventions and policies aimed at eliminating cyberbullying and its adverse effects on employees' intention to quit. This study has certain limitations, data collection was limited to a single designation and institution.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Intention to Quit, Apparel Industry

Introduction

Information technology has undeniably brought the world to our fingertips, making an invaluable contribution to globalization. However, amidst its numerous advantages, there is a need to conduct studies on its negative effects, particularly in the context of cyberbullying. This research provides an opportunity for users to comprehend and address these drawbacks. Digital technology presents substantial advantages for adolescents and enjoys widespread acceptance; however, the pervasive utilization of online technologies has concurrently ushered in heightened vulnerabilities, particularly manifested in the realm of cyberbullying. Recognizing these challenges is essential in fostering a safer online environment and promoting responsible digital interactions.

Workplace cyberbullying is a significant issue that causes harm both at a personal and organizational level, making it a crucial topic for research (Coyne et al., 2017). Cyberbullying is characterized by repetitive negative or hurtful activities facilitated through electronic communication tools. It entails an inherent imbalance of power, where a less powerful individual or group is unjustly targeted (Smith et al., 2008).

Today, cyberbullying has become a widespread problem, affecting diverse demographic groups and posing significant challenges to contemporary organizations. The recent form of harassment has evolved alongside advancements in communication technology (Chatzakou et al., 2019; Khine, 2020). The predominant channels for cyberbullying include mobile phones, instant messaging, email, chat rooms, and social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Yao et al. (2019) also indicated, this form of aggression often revolves around the dissemination of hurtful messages..

As highlighted by Rathnasooriya and Jayatilake (2016), the intention of employee turnover among operational-level staff poses a significant and pressing challenge for managers, particularly in light of the escalating rate of employee turnover within the Sri Lankan apparel industry. Furthermore, there is a notable trend among operational-level employees, specifically "Sewing machine operators" and "Quality controllers," who are increasingly opting to migrate abroad on a daily basis in pursuit of improved job conditions.

The apparel and textile manufacturing sector in Sri Lanka serves as a pivotal and dynamic force propelling the country's economic advancement. Privately owned and operated, the manufacturers within this industry have adeptly seized opportunities in the global market. Going beyond traditional exports and customized designs, they have diversified their offerings to encompass advanced and imaginative solutions through fashion Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) services, cutting-edge research, development, and innovation centers. This strategic and forward-thinking approach has not only elevated the industry's standing but has also solidified Sri Lanka's position as a leader in the international fashion landscape.

The decision to concentrate on the apparel industry in Sri Lanka during the financial crisis was motivated by its pivotal role as a major contributor to the country's economy. This sector plays a

crucial role in generating significant revenue through foreign exchange, making it a strategic focus to navigate and mitigate the economic challenges posed by the crisis. Given its crucial role, understanding the impact of cyberbullying-induced intention to quit within this industry is paramount.

The selection of specific apparel institutions in Ampara is grounded in their well-established reputation as the largest entities in the eastern region. Moreover, these institutions stand out for their commitment to sustainable development initiatives. These efforts include diverse programs aimed at fostering small business development, enhancing the educational achievements of employees, implementing social services initiatives, and organizing cultural programs. By studying the cyberbullying-induced intention to quit within this context, the research aims to shed light on the challenges faced by the apparel industry, contributing valuable insights to address these issues and promote a healthier workplace environment.

The situation has become more alarming as employees from the referred companies have expressed intentions to quit, as indicated in the 2021 annual performance report, that intent to leave has translated into a significantly high employee turnover rate, with company records showing an average turnover rate of 7.9% over the previous three years (2018 to 2020).

Numerous international research endeavors have delved into the realm of cyberbullying within academic contexts. Regrettably, in the Sri Lankan context, a scarcity of prior published investigations on this subject persists, even in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognizing this gap, the researchers embarked on a pioneering study to address this void. Bullying has far-reaching consequences within organizational contexts, contributing to detrimental phenomena. Research indicates that bullying is associated with heightened absenteeism (Devonish, 2013) and increased turnover rates (Coetzee & Van Dyk, 2017) within the workforce. Furthermore, its negative impact extends to decreased productivity and organizational performance, as evidenced by studies such as Yildirim (2009) and Elçi et al. (2014).

The social and ethical implications stemming from cyberbullying have become a focal point of interest for researchers, policymakers, academics, and society at large (Bentley et al., 2020; Ruangnapakul et al., 2019; Khong et al., 2020). While extensive studies have focused on cyberbullying in educational settings, particularly among young individuals (Bentley et al., 2020; Khong et al., 2020), there has been limited attention given to the issue of cyberbullying within the workplace (Ahmed et al., 2020). This gap highlights the importance of research, like the current study, which explores cyberbullying specifically in professional environments. The research contributes to filling this void and sheds light on the complexities of cyberbullying within the workplace context.

The Sri Lankan apparel industry is grappling with a pressing issue of employee turnover, a concern that has persisted since 2015. Surprisingly, no comprehensive study has been conducted in this industry to identify its underlying causes and impacts. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the factors

influencing labor turnover in the selected Sri Lankan apparel industry, considering the possibility of cyberbullying as a contributing factor.

Literature Review

Cyberbullying

According to Gardner, Phillips, and Judah (2016), cyberbullying is characterized by a consistent pattern wherein an individual faces recurrent negative actions from one or more others, creating a challenging environment for the victim to effectively counteract these actions. It is essential to emphasize that a singular occurrence does not meet the criteria for cyberbullying; rather, the behavior must endure over time and exhibit a clear intent to cause harm or distress to the victim. Additionally, the dynamics between the perpetrators (bully or bullies) and the victims are marked by an inherent imbalance of power, underscoring the exploitative nature of such interactions, as emphasized by (Craig & Churchill, 2020). This power imbalance further complicates the victim's ability to protect themselves, making it essential to address both the duration and power dynamics involved in instances of cyberbullying to effectively combat this pervasive issue.

Cyberbullying, regardless of its target audience, represents a contemporary issue that plagues modern societies. This form of bullying has emerged due to advancements in communication technologies, as highlighted by scholarly research (Chatzakou et al., 2019; Khine et al., 2020). Cyberbullying is predominantly facilitated through various digital channels, including mobile phones, instant messaging, email, chat rooms, and popular social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. This form of online aggression involves the distribution of hurtful messages, as noted by Yao et al. (2019). The consequential social and ethical challenges stemming from cyberbullying have garnered significant attention from scholars, policymakers, and academia alike, as evidenced by previous studies (Bentley et al., 2020; Ruangnapakul et al., 2019; Khong et al., 2020). The growing concern underscores the need for comprehensive research and proactive measures to address and mitigate the impact of cyberbullying on individuals and communities.

Especially noteworthy is the rise in the use of technological devices for communication, coupled with widespread internet accessibility (Chun et al., 2020). In the contemporary landscape, social networking platforms have profoundly shaped our daily lives, connecting a significant portion of the global population through platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WeChat, Instagram, and WhatsApp (Ahmed et al., 2020). This widespread connectivity has not only facilitated more effortless engagement but has also, unfortunately, amplified the prevalence of cyberbullying.

After a thorough analysis of the above literature, cyberbullying can be interpreted in this digital age as a wide array of harmful behaviours exhibited through digital and electronic media. These actions may involve the uploading of offensive images and videos, as well as deliberately sending hurtful messages through various electronic messaging platforms. The ease of access to technology and the pervasive nature of digital communication have unfortunately provided ample opportunities for individuals to

engage in such malicious activities, emphasizing the urgency for comprehensive measures to combat cyberbullying and ensure a safer online environment for all users.

Indeed, cyberbullying has emerged as a pressing social issue, affecting both adults in professional settings and young individuals. The digital realm has provided perpetrators with a platform to harass and victimize others, leading to severe consequences for the mental and emotional well-being of those targeted. As a result, addressing the challenges posed by cyberbullying has become imperative in safeguarding the digital experiences and overall mental health of individuals across various age groups and social backgrounds.

Intention to Quit

Indeed, quit intention is a contemporary term used interchangeably with turnover intention. Jung and Kim (2012) described it as an individual's inclination to resign from their current job and actively seek employment opportunities in another organization. In essence, turnover intention represents an individual leaving their current employment soon, as highlighted by Cho et al. (2009). Therefore, "intent to quit" can be understood as the expectation of leaving one's current workplace and the inclination to explore new opportunities elsewhere. This concept captures the psychological mindset of employees contemplating a job change and plays a significant role in organizational research and workforce management strategies.

Indeed, as elucidated by Sopiah and Sangadji (2020), quit intention refers to an employee's desire or wish to transition from one workplace to another. It encompasses various forms of exits, both voluntary, such as resignations and retirements and involuntary, including terminations and dismissals. Turnover, in this context, signifies the departure of employees from their current positions, which then leads to their replacement by new hires. Further, turnover intention can be understood as a psychological inclination or tendency of employees to leave their current organization or position voluntarily. Research, such as that conducted by Zhang, Wang, and Miao (2020), suggests that turnover intention can serve as a reliable predictor of employees' voluntary turnover behavior. In other words, an individual's intent to quit is a powerful indicator of their likelihood to leave the organization willingly.

Turnover intention signifies an employee's aspiration to relocate or leave their current organization in pursuit of a better job opportunity, as noted by Lestari and Margaretha (2021). This intention to leave represents the final stage before an employee departs from the organization, whether it occurs voluntarily through resignation or involuntarily through termination, as indicated by Kakar et al. (2021).

In the contemporary business landscape, employee retention has become a paramount concern for business executives. The challenge of retaining skilled workers has significant implications, including a scarcity of qualified talent, sluggish economic growth, and a persistently high employee turnover rate (Sepahvand & Khodashahri, 2021). Addressing turnover intention and implementing effective retention

strategies are crucial endeavors for organizations aiming to maintain a stable, skilled workforce and foster sustainable growth and success.

The Empirical Study on Cyberbullying and Intention to Quit

Concurrently, the contemporary landscape of information and communication technology has witnessed exponential expansion in social networking services. This technological proliferation has prompted organizations to pivot towards digital business models swiftly, marking a paradigm shift in the corporate landscape (Ng et al., 2022).

The onset of the Covid 19 outbreak has obliged organizations to inevitability transition towards online activities, as highlighted by Khan and Niazi (2021). This transformative shift, while essential for continuity, has inadvertently amplified the incidence of cyberbullying within organizational contexts (Barlett et al., 2021). The resulting digital working environment has posed complex challenges, necessitating proactive measures to mitigate cyberbullying and foster a supportive, respectful workplace atmosphere. Addressing this multifaceted issue is paramount to sustaining a healthy organizational culture amidst the evolving technological and social landscape.

Intent to quit is influenced by a variety of factors, including the alignment between an individual and the organization or the specific role (Hassan et al., 2012), limited career advancement opportunities (Chen et al., 2004), and challenging working conditions (Cottini et al., 2011). However, research suggests that higher-ranking managerial personnel, endowed with significant authority and responsibility, are more prone to engage in cyberbullying compared to their counterparts at other management levels (Baloch, 2020).

The research conducted by Geng et al. (2022) provides compelling evidence of the detrimental impact of cyberbullying on both individuals and organizations. Their findings highlight a range of adverse consequences, including heightened levels of anxiety, depression, stress, and burnout among affected individuals. Moreover, it contributes to elevated levels of absenteeism, heightened turnover intention, and, alarmingly, even suicidal ideation among affected employees.

This negative ripple effect is not limited to individuals alone; it profoundly affects the organizational landscape as well. Instances of cyberbullying create a toxic work environment, leading to reduced individual and team performance, as demonstrated by the research of Coyne et al. (2004). The prevalence of bullying also correlates with increased absenteeism, as evidenced by the work of Kivimaki et al. (2000), and higher turnover intention, as indicated by research conducted by Djurkovic et al. (2004). Furthermore, cyberbullying has been identified as a contributing factor to low job satisfaction and commitment, as highlighted by Bowling and Beehr (2006), and, ultimately, higher actual employee turnover rates, as demonstrated by Rayner's study (1997).

This cascading effect of cyberbullying permeates through the organizational fabric, resulting in significant consequences such as higher turnover rates, decreased productivity, and compromised organizational performance, as emphasized in the studies (Coetzee & van Dyk, 2018). These findings

underscore the urgency for organizations to address and prevent cyberbullying, not only for the well-being of their employees but also in the context of online interactions, it is well-established that cyberbullying, particularly among young individuals, significantly influences the intention to quit, leading to a spectrum of emotional responses including distress, sadness, hurt, anger, frustration, anxiety, and even depression. This empirical understanding emphasizes the critical need for organizations to address cyberbullying as a critical concern within the broader framework of workplace well-being.

Empirical Studies and Findings

Table 01: Consequences of Cyberbullying

Consequences of Cyberbullying	Authors
Low Self-Esteem	López-Meneses et al. (2020)
Reduced Individual and Team Performance	Coyne, Craig, & Smith-Lee Chong (2004)
Higher Loneliness Scores	López-Meneses et al. (2020)
Increased Absenteeism	Kivimaki, Elovainio, & Vahtera (2000)
Low Job Satisfaction and Commitment	Bowling & Beehr (2006)
Higher Actual Employee Turnover	Rayner (1997)
Turnover	Coetzee & van Dy (2017)
Decreased Productivity and Organizational Performance	Yıldırım (2009); Elçi, Erdilek, Alpkın & Şenerd, (2014)
Increased Depressive Symptoms	López-Meneses et al. (2020)
Higher Turnover Intention	Djurkovic, McCormack & Casimir (2004)
Distress, Sadness, Hurt, Anger, Frustration, Anxiety, and Depression	Juvonen & Gross (2008); Ybarra et.al (2006)

Source: Researcher (2023)

In summary, the recognition of cyberbullying's adverse impact on employees' intentions to quit, coupled with the potential escalation of organizational costs, underscores the urgency for proactive measures. Addressing cyberbullying within the workplace not only preserves the mental well-being of employees but also safeguards the organization's financial stability and reputation. As organizations

navigate the complexities of the digital age, a comprehensive approach to preventing and mitigating cyberbullying is imperative to fostering a healthy, respectful, and productive work environment.

Research Methodology

The study aims to assess the impacts of cyberbullying on the intention to quit among female employees within the selected garment industry in the Ampara district, Sri Lanka. For this research, the researcher meticulously chose a sample of 86 female team leaders from a population of 104 within the designated garments in the Ampara district, Sri Lanka. The samples were chosen randomly, and the sample size was decided using the Krejcie and Morgan table. The respondents were provided with a clear understanding of the study's purpose and were asked a set of qualitative questions to gather data. The study seeks to gain insights into how cyberbullying impacts their level of quit intention. The findings of this study contribute valuable insights to prevent cyberbullying consequences.

Results and Discussions

Descriptive Statistics

Among the cohort of eighty-four respondents, all participants identified as female, indicating a homogeneous demographic composition. In terms of marital status, the majority (52 respondents) were unmarried, while 32 respondents reported being married. The age distribution revealed that 73.04% of respondents were under the age of 35, whereas 26.96% were aged 35 and above. In terms of educational qualifications, 38.04% of respondents had completed education at the ordinary level; in comparison, only 49.52% had attained education up to the diploma level. A significant portion (12.44%) of the respondents had qualifications at the advanced level. Regarding work experience, the highest number of respondents (67) had between 1 to 5 years of experience, while 17 respondents reported having less than 1 year of experience.

Discussions

The respondents unanimously highlighted the impact of cyberbullying on their decisions to leave their current jobs or change industries. This phenomenon has been associated with various detrimental outcomes in the workplace, including risen absenteeism (Kivimaki et al., 2000), Higher turnover (Rayner, 1997), turnover (Coetzee & van Dyk, 2017), decreased productivity, and impaired organizational performance (Yıldırım, 2009; Elçi et al., 2014). Furthermore, it has been linked to increased depressive symptoms (López-Meneses et al., 2020), higher turnover intention (Djurkovic et al., 2004), as well as emotional distress such as feelings of sadness, hurt, frustration, anger, anxiety, and depression (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Ybarra, 2006). These findings underscore the serious repercussions of cyberbullying in the workplace, impacting both employees' well-being and organizational dynamics.

Regardless of the scale of cyberbullying, 59 respondents recounted distressing experiences with cyberbullying at least once in their careers, and 28 respondents highlighted experiencing cyberbullying from their supervisors and coworkers in their current jobs. A previous study conducted by Baloch (2020) further supports these observations, indicating that higher-ranking managerial personnel vested with considerable authority and responsibility are inclined to be involved in cyberbullying at lower management levels. These findings emphasize the significant issue of cyberbullying in the workplace, especially when perpetrated by individuals in positions of power, highlighting the need for proactive measures to address and prevent such behavior.

More than 25 respondents expressed their intention to change their current jobs in the near future despite the prevailing financial crisis. These individuals are actively seeking better opportunities due to the work-related stress and low self-esteem they have experienced as a result of cyberbullying in their workplaces. The research conducted by Geng et al. (2022) underlines the severe repercussions of cyberbullying on both individuals and organizations. Their findings reveal a multitude of adverse consequences, including increased levels of anxiety, depression, stress, and burnout among those affected. These findings emphasize the urgent need for workplace interventions and support systems to address the psychological toll of cyberbullying and foster a healthier work environment.

Among the 84 respondents, cyberbullying affects individuals of all age groups. However, the severity of cyberbullying is notably high among female workers below the age of 35 in the garment industry. It is worth mentioning that a study conducted by MAS Fabric Park (2018) revealed that in Sri Lanka, approximately 15% of the workforce is employed in the apparel sector, and approximately 85% of them are female. Despite these statistics, the industry has witnessed a troubling increase in labor turnover, especially among female workers. This trend is attributed to factors like low social recognition and a negative job reputation, as highlighted by Madurawala (2017). These findings underscore the urgent need to address workplace issues and foster a safer and more respectful environment within the garment industry.

All respondents were questioned about the medium and types of cyberbullying they experienced at work and unanimously reported being bullied through social media, particularly Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok. Majority of respondents identified verbal bullying as the predominant type of cyberbullying they faced. This included the spreading of rumors, hurtful comments, sending images, sending animated video clips, sending sticks, posting edited photos, threatening messages, and disclosing true or false personal information. Cyberbullying, irrespective of its target audience, is a pervasive contemporary issue in modern societies. This form of bullying has emerged due to advancements in communication technologies (Chatzakou et al., 2019; Khine et al., 2020). Facilitated primarily through mobile phones, instant messages, email, chat rooms, and social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, cyberbullying involves the dissemination of hurtful messages (Yao et al., 2019).

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study has identified several key factors aimed at minimizing the turnover rate in the apparel industry due to cyberbullying. These factors include enhancing the working environment in terms of workplace safety and culture, ensuring fair compensation through competitive pay and benefits, providing organizational support for employee growth and career development through training and skill advancement, and minimizing work-life stress by fostering positive relationships between employers and employees, often facilitated through direct manager or co-worker interactions.

Based on the research findings, implementing a well-structured employee retention policy, coupled with risk mitigation programs to prevent talent loss, can effectively address the issue of employee turnover resulting from cyberbullying. Collaboration between the executive leadership team and the Human Resource Department is crucial. They should work together to thoroughly assess turnover ratios and retention policies, ensuring they are carefully analyzed and optimized to create a supportive and respectful work environment free from the detrimental effects of cyberbullying.

Indeed, there is a growing concern that cyberbullying behavior could become more prevalent in the workplace. To mitigate this risk, organizations must proactively develop and implement healthy and safety policies that specifically need to address the utilization of social media and digital communication. Additionally, preventive activities aimed at curbing cyberbullying behavior and its detrimental effects are imperative.

Given that this study absorbed on apparel industry in the Sri Lankan context, there is a pressing need for further research in various industries to comprehensively understand cyberbullying behavior in the workplace. Such research should delve into its root causes, consequences, and development of evidence-based intervention. By expanding knowledge in this area, organizations can implement targeted strategies to prevent cyberbullying and promote a healthier, more respectful work environment across diverse sectors.

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