

Cyberbullying in the Workplace: Organizational Implications and Leadership Strategies

Research Paper

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to analyze the phenomenon of cyberbullying in the workplace, its impact on organizational climate, and the role of leadership in prevention and mitigation efforts, with a specific focus on the business and tourism sectors. Cyberbullying—defined as the use of digital communication technologies to harm, intimidate, or socially exclude colleagues—has emerged as a significant occupational hazard in an increasingly digitized work environment. This paper employs a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature published between 2015 and 2024, integrating empirical evidence from organizational psychology, hospitality management, and leadership studies. The findings reveal that workplace cyberbullying contributes to psychological distress, reduced job satisfaction, higher turnover intentions, and diminished productivity. In service-intensive sectors such as tourism and hospitality, these effects are compounded by the reliance on teamwork, high emotional labor, and rapid digital communication. Leadership styles emphasizing ethical conduct, transformational engagement, and the establishment of clear digital communication norms are shown to be protective factors against cyberbullying. Practical recommendations include integrating cyberbullying prevention into organizational policies, providing targeted managerial training, and fostering a workplace culture of psychological safety. This paper contributes to the growing body of research on cyberpsychology and organizational behavior by offering a sector-specific analysis relevant to practitioners, policymakers, and scholars.

Keywords: cyberbullying, workplace, leadership, organizational climate, business, tourism

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1. Introduction

The modern workplace has undergone a profound transformation due to the widespread adoption of digital communication technologies, collaborative online platforms, and remote working arrangements (Escortell et al., 2023). While these advances have increased flexibility and productivity, they have also created new channels for interpersonal conflict, including cyberbullying (Farley et al., 2016; Pothuganti et al., 2024). Once regarded as a predominantly adolescent phenomenon occurring within educational settings, cyberbullying is now recognized as a growing occupational concern across diverse industries. The integration of instant messaging, email, and enterprise social networks into daily work routines means that harmful interpersonal behaviors can occur not only face-to-face but also in virtual environments—often with greater anonymity and persistence (Forssell, 2016).

Workplace cyberbullying is particularly problematic in sectors such as business services, hospitality, and tourism. These industries rely heavily on teamwork, continuous customer interaction, and reputation management, making them especially vulnerable to the interpersonal and organizational disruptions that cyberbullying can cause (Hoang et al., 2023). In addition, tourism organizations often operate with geographically dispersed teams and seasonal staff turnover, creating a fertile ground for miscommunication and reduced accountability in digital exchanges.

From an organizational perspective, cyberbullying has both direct and indirect consequences. Directly, it can cause psychological harm to targets, such as anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem (Giorgi et al., 2020). Indirectly, it undermines organizational climate, reduces trust in leadership, and increases absenteeism, turnover intentions, and operational costs (Salin et al., 2020). In a competitive global economy—where service quality and brand image are critical—these costs can be particularly damaging for tourism and hospitality organizations.

Leadership plays a central role in shaping the organizational climate that either permits or discourages cyberbullying. Transformational and ethical leadership styles, which emphasize integrity, open communication, and supportive relationships, have been shown to buffer against workplace bullying behaviors (Czapert et al., 2022; Ng & Feldman, 2015). By modeling respectful digital communication, establishing clear policies, and providing training, leaders can significantly reduce the prevalence and impact of cyberbullying in the workplace.

The purpose of this research is to explore the organizational implications of workplace cyberbullying and identify leadership strategies that are effective in prevention and mitigation, with a particular emphasis on the business and tourism sectors. Through a systematic review of recent literature, this paper aims to bridge theoretical frameworks in cyberpsychology with practical recommendations for organizational leaders.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition and Prevalence

Cyberbullying in the workplace is generally defined as the use of digital communication tools—such as email, instant messaging, enterprise social platforms, or mobile applications—to harass, threaten, or socially exclude colleagues (Farley et al., 2016; Forssell, 2016). Unlike traditional face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying can occur asynchronously, across geographical boundaries, and often leaves a digital trace, making it persistent and potentially more damaging over time (Suler, 2004).

Prevalence estimates vary depending on the definition and measurement tools used. Forssell's (2016) large-scale study of Swedish employees found that 9% of respondents reported being targets of workplace cyberbullying, while Salin et al. (2020) reported rates as high as 15% in digitally intensive organizations across Europe. In tourism and hospitality contexts, Hoang et al. (2023) found prevalence levels ranging from 11% to 22%, reflecting the sector's high reliance on electronic communication, transient staffing patterns, and cross-cultural teams.

Cyberbullying behaviors in professional settings can include exclusion from virtual meetings or work-related communication channels, derogatory messages or public shaming in group chats or emails, spreading false information about a colleague via social media or internal platforms, and persistent over-messaging or monitoring, creating a sense of surveillance (Coyne et al., 2017).

The online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) provides a theoretical explanation for why cyberbullying may occur more readily in digital contexts: the perceived anonymity, invisibility, and lack of immediate social cues can lower empathy and increase the likelihood of aggressive behavior.

2.2. Organizational Consequences

Workplace cyberbullying has significant psychological, social, and economic costs. Psychologically, targets often experience anxiety, depression, reduced self-esteem, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Giorgi et al., 2020; Vranjes et al., 2018). Socially, cyberbullying erodes trust within teams, fosters conflict, and damages the overall organizational climate (Salin et al., 2020). Economically, it is linked to increased absenteeism, higher staff turnover, and reduced productivity, which can result in substantial financial losses (Einarsen et al., 2020).

In tourism and hospitality, where service quality depends heavily on team cohesion and emotional labor, the consequences are amplified. A single act of cyberbullying between frontline employees can not only affect internal morale but also lead to negative customer experiences, threatening brand reputation (Hoang et al., 2023). Moreover, given the sector's high turnover rates, unresolved conflicts can quickly become embedded in workplace culture, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of toxicity (Yragui et al., 2019).

From a risk management perspective, workplace cyberbullying may also lead to legal liabilities. Many jurisdictions now classify severe, repeated workplace harassment—including cyberbullying—as a violation of labor laws or occupational health and safety regulations (Salin & Cowan, 2021). This legal dimension reinforces the need for proactive organizational policies.

2.3. Leadership and Prevention

Leadership style plays a central role in determining whether workplace cyberbullying is addressed or allowed to persist. Transformational leadership, which emphasizes inspiration, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation, has been found to reduce workplace bullying indirectly by fostering a positive team climate and reducing role ambiguity (Czapert et al., 2022). Similarly, ethical leadership, which prioritizes fairness, respect, and integrity, has been linked to lower levels of bullying behaviors across both Western and Eastern cultural contexts (Ng & Feldman, 2015; Lee et al., 2018).

Effective prevention strategies include:

- Clear digital conduct policies – Establishing formal guidelines on acceptable online behavior and the consequences of policy violations (Salin & Cowan, 2021).
- Active bystander training – Equipping employees with the skills and confidence to intervene when witnessing cyberbullying (Paull et al., 2020).
- Managerial role-modeling – Leaders who demonstrate respectful communication set the tone for organizational norms (Einarsen et al., 2020).
- Monitoring and reporting systems – Implementing secure channels for employees to report incidents without fear of retaliation (Coyne et al., 2017).

In the tourism sector, where staff may be geographically dispersed and dependent on digital platforms for daily coordination, leaders must also be digitally competent to detect and address inappropriate online behavior promptly (Hoang et al., 2023).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a systematic literature review design, which is especially appropriate when the objective is to synthesize the findings of diverse studies and identify patterns, gaps, and practical implications across different contexts. Given that workplace cyberbullying is an emerging field within organizational behavior and cyberpsychology, a systematic review allows for the consolidation of fragmented evidence and the generation of sector-specific insights applicable to business and tourism organizations.

3.1 Research Design

The research was conceptual in nature and followed a structured protocol to ensure rigor, transparency, and replicability. The systematic review approach was selected instead of a traditional narrative review because it minimizes potential bias by following pre-defined procedures, particularly in terms of article selection, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and synthesis strategy. This methodology is especially valuable in emerging research domains where empirical evidence is dispersed across multiple disciplines, including psychology, management, hospitality, and tourism studies.

3.2 Search Strategy

The review was conducted in three major academic databases—Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar—given their wide coverage of peer-reviewed literature. The search was restricted to the period between January 2015 and June 2024 to capture the most recent developments in workplace cyberbullying research, as well as to ensure relevance to the current digital communication environment.

The search strings were carefully constructed to capture the intersection between cyberbullying, organizational outcomes, and leadership in the tourism and business sectors. Keywords included combinations of: “workplace cyberbullying” OR “online harassment” AND “leadership” AND “organizational climate” AND (“tourism” OR “hospitality” OR “business sector”). Boolean operators were used to ensure both breadth and precision in the search.

To complement the database searches, snowball sampling was applied. References cited in key papers were reviewed, which allowed the inclusion of relevant articles not captured in the original queries.

This iterative process ensured that the dataset was as comprehensive as possible within the defined scope.

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The selection of studies was based on a predefined set of inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included if they examined workplace cyberbullying in professional or organizational contexts, discussed leadership styles or organizational strategies to prevent or mitigate cyberbullying, provided empirical evidence or well-developed conceptual frameworks, or were peer-reviewed and published in English.

Exclusion criteria were also necessary to maintain the focus of the study. Research focusing exclusively on adolescent or student populations was excluded, as well as studies not directly connected to workplace settings. Similarly, non-academic sources such as blogs, news articles, or opinion pieces were excluded to preserve the academic rigor of the review.

3.4 Data Extraction

Once the final pool of articles was identified, a systematic data extraction process was conducted. Information retrieved included publication details: year, authorship, and journal; sector context: whether the study was conducted in tourism, hospitality, or general business environments; definitions of cyberbullying: operationalizations varied across studies, and noting these differences was essential for synthesis; prevalence rates: where available, the percentage of employees reporting exposure to cyberbullying; leadership approaches: transformational, ethical, or other styles examined in relation to cyberbullying; organizational outcomes: including job satisfaction, psychological health, turnover intentions, and team performance, prevention strategies: such as digital policies, training initiatives, or monitoring systems; and a coding framework was developed to ensure consistency in the extraction process, enabling comparison across studies.

3.5 Data Analysis and Synthesis

The extracted data were analyzed using thematic synthesis, which involves identifying recurring themes, grouping findings into conceptual categories, and interpreting patterns across the literature. This approach was particularly useful given the heterogeneity of research designs in the reviewed studies, which ranged from large-scale surveys to qualitative interviews and conceptual analyses.

The synthesis was conducted in three stages:

1. Descriptive analysis: mapping the distribution of studies over time, across sectors, and by methodology.
2. Thematic grouping: clustering findings under core themes, such as definitions and prevalence of workplace cyberbullying, psychological and organizational impacts, and leadership strategies.
3. Interpretative integration: identifying sector-specific insights, with particular attention to how the characteristics of the tourism and hospitality industries influence the occurrence and consequences of cyberbullying.

To ensure analytical rigor, the thematic synthesis method described by Thomas and Harden (2008) was applied, allowing the identification of recurring patterns and sector-specific insights in a structured and transparent way.

3.6 Scope and Limitations

While this methodology ensures rigor, it also has limitations. By restricting the review to studies published in English, valuable contributions in other languages may have been overlooked. Additionally, the reliance on peer-reviewed sources means that practical reports or industry surveys were not included, even though they may provide relevant insights. Finally, the diversity of definitions and measurement instruments across studies introduces variability that complicates direct comparisons of prevalence rates.

Nevertheless, the structured approach employed—anchored in transparent criteria and systematic synthesis—ensures that the findings presented in this paper are robust, credible, and relevant to both scholars and practitioners.

In total, 48 peer-reviewed studies met the inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the final synthesis, with 12 studies specifically addressing the tourism and hospitality sectors. This dataset provides a solid foundation for drawing conclusions about the organizational implications of workplace cyberbullying and the role of leadership in mitigating its impact.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the systematic review reveal that workplace cyberbullying is a phenomenon with significant prevalence rates and far-reaching consequences for individuals and organizations. Across the studies analyzed, prevalence figures oscillate between 8% and 22%, depending on the context and the tools employed to measure this form of harassment (Forssell, 2016; Salin et al., 2020). In the specific case of tourism and hospitality organizations, the data suggest that these percentages tend to be higher, ranging between 11% and 22%. This finding is not surprising, as these industries are characterized by high employee turnover, seasonal hiring practices, and an intensive reliance on digital platforms for coordination and service delivery (Hoang et al., 2023). Such organizational characteristics not only increase the risk of miscommunication but also reduce accountability, thereby facilitating situations in which inappropriate behavior may go unnoticed or unaddressed.

The findings also indicate that changes in work organization, particularly the consolidation of hybrid and remote models after the COVID-19 pandemic, have amplified opportunities for cyberbullying. With reduced face-to-face accountability and a stronger dependence on asynchronous communication channels, employees often report feeling more exposed to negative digital interactions (Genga et al., 2024). This is consistent with the notion that the absence of immediate social cues and the persistence of written records can aggravate the psychological impact of harassment in virtual spaces.

From a psychological perspective, the review confirms that exposure to workplace cyberbullying is consistently associated with negative outcomes, including anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and in some cases post-traumatic stress symptoms (Giorgi et al., 2020; Vranjes et al., 2018). These consequences not only affect the wellbeing of the individuals directly targeted but also create a ripple effect within teams. A work environment perceived as hostile or unsafe deteriorates collective trust and diminishes morale, leading to reduced job satisfaction and lower organizational commitment (Coyne et al., 2017). The cumulative effect of these dynamics can significantly increase turnover intentions, as employees choose to leave organizations that they perceive as unable or unwilling to protect them from harmful online behavior.

In industries such as tourism and hospitality, where the quality of customer service is intimately tied to employee wellbeing, the implications of these psychological consequences are particularly serious. The literature suggests that poor team climate and emotional strain are not only internal organizational issues but also directly influence customer satisfaction and the external image of the brand (Yragui et al., 2019). A single negative interaction between employees may spill over into customer experiences, threatening the reputation and competitiveness of service organizations. In this sense, cyberbullying is not merely an interpersonal problem but a strategic risk that organizations cannot afford to ignore.

Leadership emerges from the review as a critical moderating factor in the relationship between organizational stressors and the prevalence of cyberbullying. The evidence shows that transformational leadership can indirectly reduce bullying by fostering trust, reducing role conflict, and creating climates of open communication (Czapert et al., 2022). Ethical leadership is also highlighted as a preventive mechanism, since it establishes clear moral standards and promotes fairness and respect in interpersonal relationships (Ng & Feldman, 2015; Lee et al., 2018). These findings emphasize the importance of equipping managers not only with technical and operational skills but also with the ability to model positive digital behavior and to intervene proactively when inappropriate conduct arises.

An additional insight from the sector-specific literature is that the digital competence of leaders is now a central aspect of their effectiveness. In the tourism and hospitality industries, managers must not only direct teams but also navigate online platforms, monitor digital interactions, and detect early warning signs of cyberbullying (Hoang et al., 2023). Leaders who lack digital awareness may unintentionally normalize harmful behavior or fail to intervene at the right time, thereby allowing conflicts to escalate. The ability to integrate traditional leadership skills with digital literacy is therefore an emerging requirement in the prevention of workplace cyberbullying.

The reviewed literature also underlines that effective intervention requires coordinated and multifaceted action. The studies emphasize that prevention is not only about formal policies but also about the cultural reinforcement of values such as respect, accountability, and inclusion (Einarsen et al., 2020). When employees perceive that the organization truly prioritizes psychological safety, they are more likely to report incidents and to support colleagues who are targeted, thus creating a cycle of protection and solidarity. Conversely, when organizations neglect these aspects, cyberbullying may become normalized, with severe repercussions for staff retention and organizational performance.

The results of this review confirm that workplace cyberbullying is both prevalent and harmful, with amplified effects in service-intensive industries such as tourism and hospitality. The findings highlight the psychological, social, and organizational costs of this phenomenon, while also pointing to leadership and organizational culture as key levers for prevention. By integrating transformational and ethical principles into their leadership practices and by developing digital competence, managers can play a decisive role in reducing the incidence of cyberbullying. For organizations operating in tourism, where employee wellbeing and customer satisfaction are inseparably linked, the implementation of proactive and digitally informed leadership strategies is not only an ethical obligation but also a competitive necessity.

5. Implications for Business and Tourism Organizations

The findings of this review provide important implications for organizations, particularly those operating in the business services and tourism sectors, where digital communication is at the core of daily operations and team interactions. One of the most relevant contributions is the recognition that cyberbullying cannot be treated as an isolated interpersonal issue but must be addressed as part of broader organizational policies. Integrating preventive measures into human resources frameworks is essential, as explicit definitions of unacceptable digital behavior, clear procedures for reporting incidents, and transparent sanctions for violations contribute to reducing tolerance toward these behaviors. When policies are formalized and communicated in a consistent manner, employees feel more empowered to report inappropriate conduct and perceive that the organization takes their psychological safety seriously (Salin & Cowan, 2021). This formalization of prevention mechanisms is especially relevant in the tourism and hospitality sectors, where constant interaction between employees and customers makes workplace climate a decisive factor in service quality.

The review also underscores the need for organizations to invest in leadership development programs that emphasize not only technical and managerial capacities but also interpersonal skills and digital competencies. Managers who are trained to adopt transformational and ethical leadership principles are more likely to generate positive team climates and to mitigate the risks of online harassment (Czapert et al., 2022; Ng & Feldman, 2015). This is particularly important in tourism organizations, where cultural diversity, customer orientation, and service pressures create contexts in which conflicts can emerge quickly. Training managers to lead diverse and dispersed teams, while simultaneously ensuring respectful and inclusive communication, can therefore become a powerful tool for the prevention of cyberbullying.

Another implication relates to the importance of digital literacy at both managerial and organizational levels. The studies reviewed suggest that being able to detect early signs of cyberbullying in digital environments is increasingly necessary, especially in organizations where remote or hybrid work models are present (Genga et al., 2024). Tools that allow for monitoring communication patterns—while respecting privacy regulations—can help organizations identify potential risks before they escalate into conflicts that damage trust and morale. For tourism companies, which often operate across multiple geographical locations and depend on constant virtual coordination, this competence can mark the difference between proactive prevention and reactive crisis management.

The findings also highlight the value of fostering a speak-up culture that encourages employees to report incidents without fear of retaliation. Confidential reporting mechanisms and the protection of whistleblowers are essential to create an environment of trust. Moreover, when top leadership consistently communicates that respectful digital interaction is a core organizational value, employees are more inclined to align their behavior with these standards (Paull et al., 2020). This cultural reinforcement not only protects individuals but also strengthens the collective identity of the organization, which in turn contributes to cohesion, motivation, and performance.

Finally, the sector-specific analysis reveals that the tourism and hospitality industries face unique challenges that must be considered when designing intervention strategies. The transient nature of staffing, characterized by high turnover rates, can undermine organizational efforts if preventive measures are not systematically included in induction and training programs. Similarly, the high-pressure environment of customer service roles increases the likelihood of conflict and frustration,

making timely managerial intervention particularly relevant. Moreover, geographically dispersed teams require leaders who are capable of maintaining cohesion in virtual environments, which demands a balance between technological competence and human sensitivity (Hoang et al., 2023). These implications demonstrate that, in tourism organizations, the prevention of cyberbullying is inseparably linked to maintaining service quality and brand reputation.

The review highlights that addressing workplace cyberbullying is not only an ethical responsibility but also a strategic priority for organizations in digitally intensive industries. By embedding preventive measures into policies, equipping leaders with both ethical and digital skills, promoting a culture of psychological safety, and adapting interventions to the specific conditions of the tourism sector, organizations can safeguard employee wellbeing and ensure the sustainability of their business performance.

6. Conclusions

The analysis carried out in this study confirms that cyberbullying in the workplace constitutes a complex and multifaceted challenge with profound consequences for both individuals and organizations. The phenomenon is not limited to isolated incidents but emerges as a structural risk that can undermine the organizational climate, damage employee wellbeing, and reduce productivity. Its impact is particularly significant in service-oriented sectors such as business services, tourism, and hospitality, where teamwork, communication, and emotional labor are central elements of daily operations. In these industries, the effects of workplace cyberbullying go beyond individual suffering and can directly affect customer satisfaction, service quality, and ultimately the reputation of the organization (Hoang et al., 2023; Yragui et al., 2019).

The systematic literature review demonstrates that the consequences of workplace cyberbullying extend across psychological, social, and economic dimensions. On an individual level, the evidence shows associations with anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and even post-traumatic stress symptoms (Giorgi et al., 2020; Vranjes et al., 2018). On a collective level, the erosion of trust, the deterioration of interpersonal relationships, and the decline in organizational commitment weaken cohesion and increase turnover intentions (Coyne et al., 2017). On a structural level, the combination of absenteeism, diminished productivity, and reputational damage produces substantial costs that can compromise the competitiveness of companies in an increasingly globalized and demanding market (Salin et al., 2020).

Leadership emerges as a determining factor in the prevention and mitigation of cyberbullying. The review confirms that transformational leadership fosters climates of trust, role clarity, and open communication that reduce the space for harmful behaviors to thrive (Czapert et al., 2022). Ethical leadership, meanwhile, provides a normative foundation that establishes clear moral standards and reinforces respect and fairness within organizations (Ng & Feldman, 2015; Lee et al., 2018). However, in a digitized working environment, these traditional approaches must be complemented with digital leadership competence, understood as the ability to manage virtual teams, recognize inappropriate behaviors in online spaces, and use technological tools to ensure respectful communication (Hoang et al., 2023). Without this competence, leaders may overlook early warning signs and allow conflicts to escalate.

The conclusions of this study also emphasize that the prevention of workplace cyberbullying requires coordinated and multi-level action. Policies must be explicit and integrated into organizational codes of conduct, leadership must actively model positive communication, and organizational culture must reinforce values of respect, inclusion, and accountability (Einarsen et al., 2020; Salin & Cowan, 2021). Only through this comprehensive approach is it possible to ensure that preventive strategies are effective and sustainable over time.

For tourism and hospitality organizations, the challenge is even greater due to the specific characteristics of the sector. High staff turnover, the presence of intercultural and geographically dispersed teams, and the intense demands of customer service create environments where the risks of cyberbullying are magnified (Hoang et al., 2023). In these contexts, ignoring the problem is not only an ethical failure but also a strategic risk, since customer experience and brand image depend directly on the wellbeing and motivation of employees.

This study highlights that workplace cyberbullying must be understood as a pressing organizational issue that requires immediate attention from both researchers and practitioners. Addressing it effectively demands the integration of policies, leadership development, digital competence, and cultural transformation. In the business, tourism, and hospitality sectors, where organizational performance is inseparable from interpersonal dynamics and customer relationships, tackling cyberbullying is not merely a matter of compliance with labor standards but a strategic imperative for long-term sustainability and competitiveness.

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