# The Mediating Role of Job Stress in the Effect of Cyberbullying on Emotional Exhaustion Levels of Employees

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to determine the effect of cyberbullying behavior on emotional exhaustion level and whether job stress plays a mediating role in this effect. In this context, variables were examined comprehensively, and the concepts of cyberbullying, emotional exhaustion, and job stress were explained. Research hypotheses were developed by considering the studies and theoretical theories on the subject. In order to test the hypotheses, data was collected from 212 private sector employees using the convenience sampling method. The data were analyzed using SPSS and PROCESS MACRO programs. As a result of the analysis, it was seen that cyberbullying behavior positively affected emotional exhaustion through job stress. When the effect of job stress on emotional exhaustion was examined, it was seen that there was a positive effect. When the analysis findings regarding the mediating effect were evaluated, it was determined that job stress played a mediating role in the effect of cyberbullying behavior on emotional exhaustion. Although our research made some contributions to the literature, it also had some limitations. The fact that the sample in the study was selected from one province and only included private banking sector employees prevented the findings from covering the whole. It may be recommended that future studies be conducted using different sampling methods in different provinces and sectors.

The extraordinary changes in technology have led to many positive developments but have also led to some problems. One of these problems, which also shows itself in the business world, is cyberbullying behavior (Wong-Lo & Bullock, 2011). As technology continues to advance rapidly, the number of platforms where cyberbullying can occur is increasing, and a large number of social applications, networking, messaging, e-mail, online games, and even video conferences are among the main tools used to exhibit bullying behaviors (Chisholm &

Day, 2013; Walrave & Heirman, 2011). It is emphasized that cyberbullying behaviors are increasing in workplaces and cause many negativities for both employees and organizations. In this perspective, it is thought that it is very important to evaluate the outcomes of cyberbullying behaviors by addressing them comprehensively. Cyberbullying, which is defined as intentional and repetitive harm through various communication and electronic tools (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006), is defined as repetitive behaviors that negatively affect, sabotage, intimidate, humiliate, and offend an employee's work in the workplace, usually in a power imbalance situation (Zapf & Einarsen, 2001). It is stated in various studies that employees' exposure to cyberbullying behaviors has a negative impact on individuals' mental health and increases psychological and social risks (Tsitsika et al., 2015). One of the negative effects of cyberbullying behaviors in the workplace is exhaustion, which refers to the exhaustion of employees' emotional resources (Esen & Esen, 2021). Cyberbullying, which threatens the basic human needs of employees and damages their relationships and sense of belonging within the organization, can also cause job stress due to the pressure and tension it creates (Alhujailli & Karwowski, 2018). This study aims to evaluate the reflections of digitalized work environments on the emotional moods of employees by addressing the effects of cyberbullying on job stress and emotional exhaustion together. Thus, it aims to reveal how the negative emotional states caused by cyberbullying are related to employees' stress levels and exhaustion processes. It also aims to contribute to the development of intervention strategies to prevent these situations. The literature on the subject was examined, but no study was found that addressed these relationships together. In this dimension, our research is aimed to contribute to the literature. In our research, we sought answers to the questions "Does being exposed to cyberbullying behaviors affect employees' emotional exhaustion levels?" and "Does job stress play a mediating role in the relationship between cyberbullying behaviors and emotional exhaustion level?"

## Theoretical Framework

### Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying has become a common problem in both work and social life following the dizzying developments in communication and technology. This concept, variously referred to as electronic bullying, online bullying or cyberbullying, is defined as a form of harassment through technologies such as social websites, e-mail, chat rooms, cell phone messages, cameras, picture messaging (including sexting), instant messages and blogs (Brewer & Kerslake, 2015; Miller & Hufstedler, 2009). As in traditional bullying, some clues are used to detect cyberbullying: repetitive threats, numerous humiliating posts, and many cruel messages are typical examples. However, in cyberbullying behaviors, attacks may be perceived more negatively than traditional bullying because they appear more intense, frequent, unsuspected, and hard to prevent (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Smith et al., 2008). Moreover, in contrast to traditional bullies, cyberbullies are not constrained by time or space and can hide under the guise of anonymity, which basically allows them to easily attack others wherever and whenever they wish (Kowalski et al., 2008). In addition, cyberbullying can cause more psychological problems than traditional bullying (Chisholm & Day, 2013). Cyberbullying can be classified into three categories: direct attacks, cyberbullying through proxy attacks, and publicly posting derogatory photos or information. In this context, cyberbullies use modern

communication technologies to send derogatory and threatening messages directly to the victim, share personal and confidential communications or pictures for others to see, and make their secret messages public (Campbell, 2005; Li, 2008). These individuals often adopt virtual identities that allow them to act online in situations where they cannot act in person (Aboujaoude, 2011).

Cyberbullying is defined as intentional and repetitive harming behavior through computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices (Bauman & Bellmore, 2015; Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). This definition is similar to traditional bullying in terms of elements such as the behavior being intentional, long-standing, and resulting in harm. Repetition can be considered as the most essential and simply definable element of bullying. Since bullying is a particularly hurtful form of injurious action that creates a permanent worry that the target will be attacked again, it fosters a situation that creates constant worries about the attacker's next move (Grigg, 2010; Randa & Wilcox, 2012). Intent (purpose, intention) is also an element in widely accepted definitions of bullying. In order for a behavior to be considered bullying, the action in question must be done with the intention of causing harm; that is, it must be intentional. Finally, the person targeted in bullying cases must be harmed. Harm can be physical, social, emotional, psychological or behavioral. Sometimes, the damage is less obvious, more complex to define and measure, but somehow necessary (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Technology brings numerous benefits in terms of work productivity and output, but it can also open the door for cyberbullying to become widespread in organization. It is accepted that workplace bullying occurs when one or more individuals perceive themselves to be targeted by persistent and systematic negative behaviors at least once a week for six months or more (Leymann, 1996). There is also an imbalance of power between the victim and the perpetrator. Because of this power imbalance, the victim's ability to cope with being subjected to intentionally unwanted behaviors is severely damaged (Einarsen, 2000). Cyberbullying in the workplace consists of interactions in which the bully exhibits reasonable and negative behaviors against another person using various communication tools and this situation continues for a long time (Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996; Piotrowski, 2012; Samnani & Singh, 2016). Workplace bullying behaviors can lead to undesirable problems in terms of both the physical and psychological health of the victim, and the consequences of the behavior can be reflected in the victim's daily life (Hoel et al., 2004; Kieseker & Marchant, 1999). Moreover, as a result of health problems caused by exposure to workplace bullying, employees are constantly taking time off, and their career progression may suffer (Richards & Freeman, 2002). In addition, employees who witness bullying at work have decreased motivation, commitment, and job satisfaction levels and deterioration in team and work relationships (Lewis & Orford, 2005).

## *The Relationship Between Cyberbullying and Emotional Exhaustion*

Emotional exhaustion, which occurs when individuals psychologically feel that they have nothing left to contribute to others (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach & Leiter, 2016), is also defined as the chronic exhaustion of emotional resources due to demanding jobs (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). Emotional exhaustion is stated to be a consequence of cyberbullying, which is considered a stress factor leading to tension (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). In this

perspective, it can be stated that cyberbullying is an important predictor of emotional exhaustion because it involves permanent behaviors that may cause long-term fatigue.

The relationship between cyberbullying behaviors and emotional exhaustion may also be explained by the Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 2001). Resource Conservation Theory (Hobfoll, 2001) assumes that employees strive to acquire and retain resources that empower them physically and psychologically. According to this, individuals need a number of resources to ensure their psychological and physical health (Kaluza & Junker, 2022). In this direction, an employee who is exposed to cyberbullying has to consume these resources in order to reduce or eliminate the effects of cyberbullying behavior and thus can be both emotionally and physically exhausted. In a study conducted by Esen and Esen (2021), it was concluded that cyberbullying positively and significantly affected exhaustion. Sá and Fleming (2008) found that nurses who were exposed to bullying had significantly higher levels of emotional exhaustion and lower levels of mental health compared to their colleagues who were not exposed to bullying. Einarsen et al. (1998) found that employees who were exposed to bullying had higher levels of exhaustion, lower job satisfaction, and lower psychological well-being. In this context, cyberbullying, which is a widespread problem, causes the physical, mental, and emotional health of individual employees to be disrupted (Zapf et al., 1996).  In line with all these theoretical and empirical descriptions, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

**H1:** Cyberbullying behavior has a significant and positive effect on emotional exhaustion level.

## *The Relationship Between Cyberbullying and Job Stress*

Stress, which is conceptualized as an individual's reaction when they perceive that they lack the ability to cope with the demands of an external event or the resources to meet these demands, is considered a normal reaction to threatening or challenging situations; however, when it continues excessively or for a long time, it can damage the physical, emotional and mental health of the individual (Cooper & Marshall, 1976; Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Ybarra, et al., 2007). Studies have shown that cyberbullying negatively affects the psychological and physical well-being of employees (Kieseker & Marchant, 1999) and causes high levels of stress (Farley et al., 2019). Snyman and Loh (2015) found a significant positive correlation between cyberbullying and stress in a study they conducted. Cyberbullying threatens the victim's basic human needs, damages their relationships and sense of belonging within an organization, and thus causes stress (Alhujailli & Karwowski, 2018). The relationship between cyberbullying and job stress can also be understood through the Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll, 2001). Accordingly, cyberbullying behaviors in the workplace can quickly consume employees' resources such as time, energy, and emotion and cause individuals to face high levels of tension and stress. In this context, the following hypothesis is suggested within the scope of the aforementioned studies and theory:

**H2:** Cyberbullying behavior has a significant and positive effect on job stress.

### The Relationship Between Job Stress and Emotional Exhaustion

Various studies emphasize that emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are related to job stress (Bakker et al., 2000; Kahili, 1988; Maslach, et al., 2001). The relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion is thought to be explained by the Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989). According to this theory, the inadequacy of an individual's resources (time, effort) to meet the demands of the workplace causes a kind of tension and stress (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). In this context, the following hypothesis was proposed by assuming that the mismatch between organizational demands and the resources of the individual to meet these demands may lead to job stress and emotional exhaustion over time and that individuals who do not have the emotional resources to cope with such stress or tension or who exhaust their existing resources may increase the likelihood of experiencing emotional exhaustion:

**H3:** Job stress has a significant and positive effect on emotional exhaustion.

### Work Stress as a Mediating Variable

When the literature is examined, it is emphasized that job stress can be a result of negative actions such as cyberbullying (Farley et al., 2019) and also that prolonged exposure to job stress can lead to emotional exhaustion (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker et al., 2000; Maslach et al., 2001). Considering the mentioned empirical findings and the Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), it can be suggested that job stress can possibly mediate the positive relationship between cyberbullying and emotional exhaustion. In other words, it can be claimed that employees who are exposed to cyberbullying will increase their stress levels at work, and as a result, their emotional exhaustion will accelerate. In this context, our final hypothesis is stated as follows:

**H4:** Job stress has a mediating role in the relationship between cyberbullying and emotional exhaustion.

The research model developed in line with the hypotheses is presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**
*Research Model*



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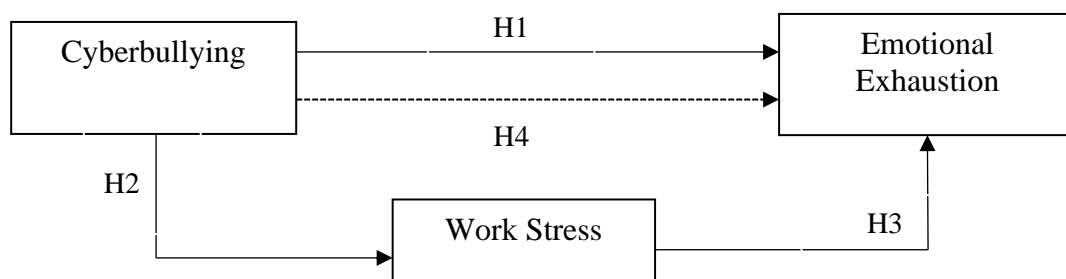
## Method
### Sample

The banking sector was selected as a sample because it is a field where digitalization is intensely experienced, and employees constantly interact through online communication tools.

In this context, negative behaviors that occur in the digital environment such as cyberbullying in the banking sector, have the potential to have serious effects on the psychological health, motivation, and performance of employees. In addition, in this sector, where the security of financial data and the protection of sensitive customer information are priorities, the stress and distraction caused by cyberbullying incidents can both reduce service quality and jeopardize operational security (Wang & Chen, 2019).

Data were collected from individuals working in the banking sector using the convenience sampling method. Survey technique was used to collect the data. The questionnaires were sent via virtual platforms, and employees were asked to respond on a voluntary basis. In this direction, 212 employed in different organizations and sectors responded: The demographic information of these participants was examined, and it was observed that the majority were male (50.9%) and married (67%), aged 35 years or younger (65.6%), had been working for 9 years or more (33%) and had a bachelor's degree (43.4%).

### Instruments

The data were gathered through the questionnaire technique. The first part of the questionnaire, which consists of two parts, includes questions on demographic variables, and the second part includes questions on the concepts of cyberbullying, emotional exhaustion, and job stress. In the study, the one-dimensional 5-point Likert-type "Cyberbullying at Workplace Scale" developed by Farley et al. (2016) and adapted into Turkish by Kanbur and Kanbur (2018) ("never", " sometimes", "once a month", "once a week" or "always"/ The scale includes questions such as "Messages showing me in a negative light were sent to others by another employee.") was used to measure cyberbullying, and the one-dimensional 5-point Likert-type "Work-Related Emotional Exhaustion Scale" developed by Wharton (1993) and adapted into Turkish by Günay (2021) was used to determine the level of emotional exhaustion (1: Definitely Disagree - 5: Definitely Agree/ The scale includes questions such as "I am tired of getting up in the morning and having to face a new day at work".) "Work-related Emotional Exhaustion Scale" was used. Finally, for the determination of job stress, the one-dimensional 5-point Likert-type (1: Definitely Disagree - 5: Definitely Agree/ The scale includes questions such as "When I am at home, I often think about issues related to my work, even if I am doing other things.") "Job Stress Scale" developed by House and Rizzo (1972) and used by Efeoğlu (2006) was preferred.

## Results
### Scale Reliability and Validity Findings

Reliability analysis was carried out to identify the reliability of the scales used in the study, and internal consistency reliability values were examined (Table 1). As a result of the analysis, Cronbach Alpha (CB = .91; EE = .94; WS = .89) and Composite Reliability (CR) (CB = .91; EE = .94; WS = .89) scores of the measures were found to be greater than .70 (Hair et al., 2017). These values indicate that the scales used in the study are reliable. In the study, it was also determined that there was convergent validity since the factor loadings of the variables in the scales were higher than .40, and the scale AVE (Average Variation Extracted) scores were higher than .50 (Hair et al., 2017) (Table 1). For the scales in the research, confirmatory factor analysis was performed using the AMOS 22 statistical program.

It was found that the index values for the scales were above the values taken as reference, and a model fit was found (Table 2).

**Table 1**

*Evidence on Internal Consistency Reliability and Convergent Validity*

|  | Factor Loadings | Cronbach's Alpha | CR | AVE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cyberbullying |  |  |  |  |
| CB 1 | .59 | .91 | .91 | .53 |
| CB 2 | .74 |  |  |  |
| CB 3 | .74 |  |  |  |
| CB 4 | .74 |  |  |  |
| CB 5 | .71 |  |  |  |
| CB 6 | .75 |  |  |  |
| CB 7 | .70 |  |  |  |
| CB 8 | .65 |  |  |  |
| CB 9 | .83 |  |  |  |
| CB 10 | .76 |  |  |  |
| Emotional Exhaustion |  |  |  |  |
| EE 1 | .87 | .94 | .94 | .75 |
| EE 2 | .85 |  |  |  |
| EE 3 | .86 |  |  |  |
| EE 4 | .92 |  |  |  |
| EE 5 | .87 |  |  |  |
| EE6 | .80 |  |  |  |
| Work Stress |  |  |  |  |
| WS 1 | .74 | .89 | .89 | .55 |
| WS 2 | .80 |  |  |  |
| WS 3 | .87 |  |  |  |
| WS 4 | .74 |  |  |  |
| WS 5 | .77 |  |  |  |
| WS 6 | .70 |  |  |  |
| WS 7 | .53 |  |  |  |

**Table 2**

*Confirmatory Factor Analysis Findings Regarding Scales*

| Index | Reference Value | Cyberbullying | Emotional Exhaustion | Work Stress |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| CMIN/DF | $0 < X^{2/SD} \leq 5$ | 1.46 | 1.44 | 1.64 |
| RMR | $\leq .10$ | .01 | .02 | .09 |
| CFI | $\geq .90$ | .98 | .99 | .98 |
| IFI | $\geq .90$ | .98 | .99 | .98 |
| TLI | $\geq .90$ | .98 | .99 | .98 |
| RMSEA | $\leq .08$ | .04 | .05 | .05 |

## *Hypothesis Testing*

In the study, SPSS and Process Macro programs were used to determine the relationships between cyberbullying, emotional exhaustion, and job stress variables and to test the hypotheses. First, the correlations between the variables were examined, and a Pearson correlation analysis was used to determine the results (Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Correlation Analysis of Variables*

|  | Cyberbullying | Emotional Exhaustion | Work Stress |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cyberbullying | 1 |  |  |
| Emotional Exhaustion | .46** | 1 |  |
| Work Stress | .49** | .78** | 1 |

$**p < .01$

In the correlation analysis (Table 3), it was determined that there were positive and significant relationships between cyberbullying and emotional exhaustion ($r = .46$) and job stress ($r = .49$). In addition, a positive and significant ($r = .78$) relationship was found between job stress and emotional exhaustion. After determining the relationships between cyberbullying, emotional exhaustion and job stress, the analyses were conducted with reference to Hayes' Model 4 for simple mediation. The findings are summarized in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**
*Findings Related to Hypotheses*
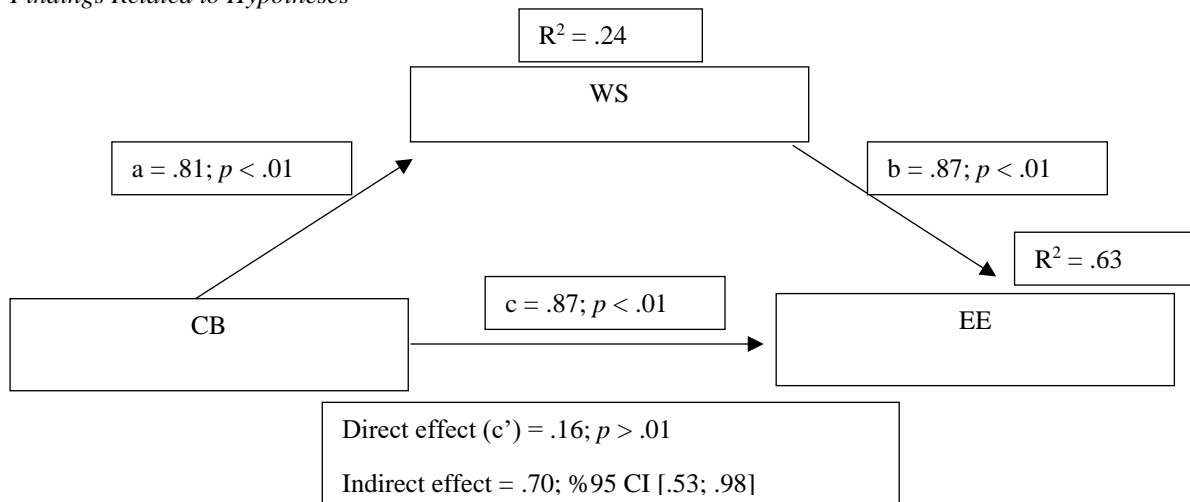


When the findings in Figure 2 are analyzed, it is seen that cyberbullying does not have a direct effect on emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .16$; $p = .07$), while cyberbullying positively and significantly affects job stress ($\beta = .81$; $p < .01$). Therefore, H1 is rejected and H2 is supported. In addition, according to the analysis findings, job stress has a positive and significant effect on emotional exhaustion variable ($\beta = .87$; $p < .01$). Thus, H3 is confirmed. When the findings related to the mediation test were analyzed, it was determined that cyberbullying significantly affected emotional exhaustion indirectly ($b = .70$; 95% CI [.53; .98]) through job stress ($\beta = .41$; $p < .05$). The fully standardized effect size (K2) of the mediation effect is .37. Since this value is close to .25, it is seen that the mediation effect has a high value (Gürbüz, 2019). Therefore, H4 is supported.

## Conclusion

The research examined the effect of cyberbullying behaviors on employees' emotional exhaustion levels and whether job stress plays a mediating role in this effect. According to the findings, it was determined that cyberbullying behaviors positively affect psychological exhaustion through job stress, and thus, job stress mediates the relationship between cyberbullying and psychological exhaustion. Another result obtained from the findings is that job stress positively affects emotional exhaustion levels. The theoretical and practical outcomes of the research findings are discussed below:

Our study was based on the questions "Do cyberbullying behaviors positively affect employees' emotional burnout levels?" and "Does job stress mediate the relationship between cyberbullying behaviors and psychological burnout? Based on these questions, the literature

was extensively reviewed, the research model was developed, and hypotheses were tested. In the literature, it has been observed that studies on cyberbullying generally focus on children and young people studying in schools, and there are very limited studies that address cyberbullying behaviors that occur among working adults. In this context, the fact that our study was conducted on working adults contributed to the literature on cyberbullying. On the other hand, although there is a large body of research on traditional bullying in the workplace, the number of studies focusing on the problems and consequences of cyberbullying in the work environment is limited. In this context, our research is predicted to benefit the literature. In addition, for the first time in the related field, the mediating role of job stress in the relationship between cyberbullying behavior and psychological burnout was investigated in our study. Our study is expected to benefit the field in this respect. According to the findings of the study, cyberbullying behaviors do not directly affect the level of emotional exhaustion. This finding differed from studies suggesting that cyberbullying causes emotional exhaustion (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Einarsen et al., 1998; Esen & Esen, 2021). According to another finding obtained in our research, cyberbullying behaviors positively affect employees' job stress. This finding supported the studies in the literature suggesting that cyberbullying has a positive relationship with job stress (Farley et al., 2019; Kieseker & Marchant, 1999; Snyman & Loh, 2015).

Finally, the study found that job stress has a mediating role in the relationship between cyberbullying and emotional exhaustion. Accordingly, cyberbullying can increase psychological exhaustion level through job stress. In other words, cyberbullying increases work stress by increasing the workload and uncertainties in the work environment, which leads to emotional exhaustion. This emphasizes that job stress is not only an individual issue but also a critical factor that requires attention at the organizational level. This result, which shows that cyberbullying behaviors in the workplace cause employees to experience psychological exhaustion, also shows the importance of preventing cyberbullying behaviors in the workplace in terms of both the physical and psychological health of employees (Hoel et al., 2004). For this reason, it will be vital for organizational managers to clearly determine and implement policies and sanctions to prevent cyberbullying in the workplace so that employees do not experience both emotional and psychological problems. Based on the finding that cyberbullying in the banking sector increases work stress and triggers emotional exhaustion, it is important for organization managers to take steps toward employee health and work efficiency. In this context, several suggestions can be made based on the study findings: First, it is very important for organizations to develop clear and comprehensive anti-cyberbullying principles and policies. These principles and policies should clearly state which behaviors and actions will be considered cyberbullying, as well as how to report such behaviors and what disciplinary processes will be applied in the event of exposure. In addition, employees can be informed about the subject through various training programs. On the other hand, in addition to psychological counseling services for employees in the organization, stress management and workload balancing training can be organized, and progress can be made in the fight against emotional exhaustion. In addition, in this period, when many technological tools and methods are used as a requirement of the digital age, it is very important for managers to raise awareness and provide training opportunities for their employees on the appropriate use of e-mail or other communication tools at work. Finally, preventing and managing cyberbullying

in the workplace is vital for reducing employees' emotional exhaustion. Employers and managers can protect employees' psychological health by effectively combating cyberbullying and creating supportive workplace environments that reduce work stress.

In spite of the contribution of our study to the literature from different perspectives, it also has some restrictions. The fact that the data obtained in the study were obtained from a single province and the results were obtained is an important limitation that limits the generalizability of the results. Different regions, socio-economic, cultural, and demographic structures of Turkey may show significant differences. Therefore, data obtained only from a certain province may prevent reaching a definitive and universal storage about cyberbullying experiences, work stress areas, and emotionally extended widths of employees throughout the country. The study only examined the level of employees' exposure to cyberbullying behaviors and the effect of these behaviors on emotional burnout and job stress. In this respect, it can be suggested that researchers interested in the subject should research why employees are exposed to cyberbullying and how they can cope with this problem or determine the exposure of individuals with managerial duties to cyberbullying behaviors and compare them with other employees.

# Declarations

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## Disclosure Statement

## Ethics Approval

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