

**“EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT ON HR
PROFESSIONAL IN PAKISTAN IN RESPONSE TO EMPLOYEE
BLACKMAIL AND THREATENING BEHAVIOUR”**



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Fall-2025

Majors: HRM

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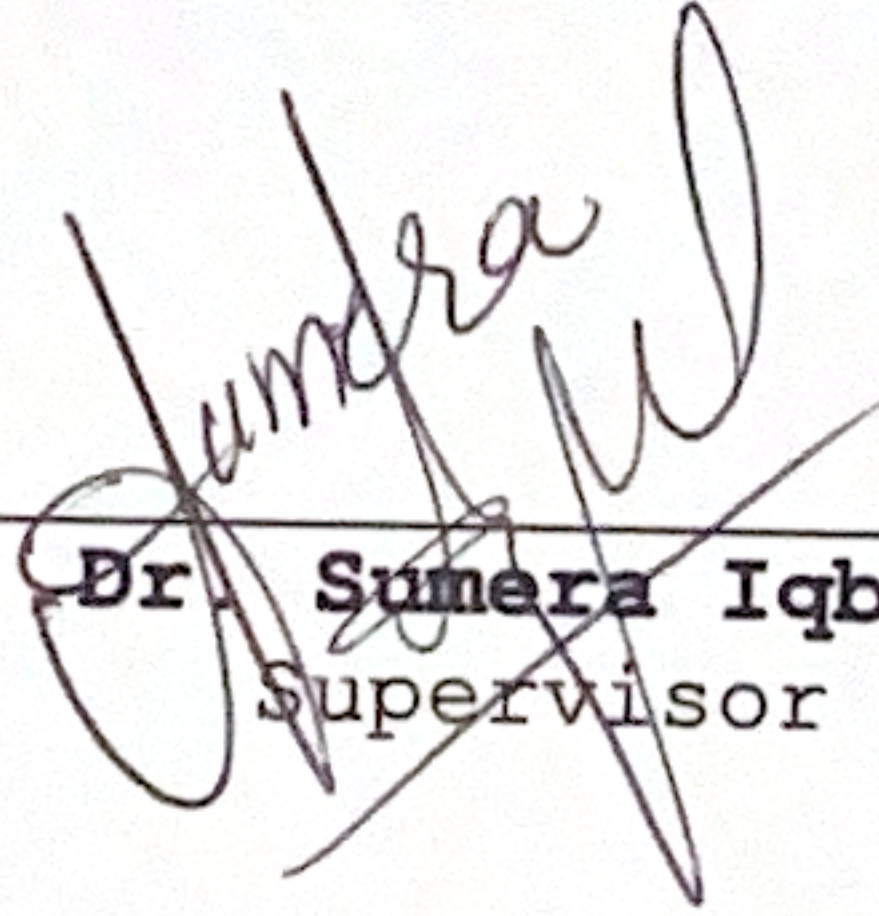
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Signature -----

ABSTRACT

This study examines the emotional and psychological impact of employee hostility on HR professionals in Pakistan, focusing on threats, blackmail, verbal abuse, and external escalation during disciplinary and termination processes. While workplace aggression has been widely studied from the perspective of general employees, HR professionals remain an under-researched group despite their frequent exposure to hostility. Guided by Affective Events Theory (AET), the study explores how repeated hostile workplace incidents trigger immediate emotional reactions that gradually develop into long-term psychological outcomes.

Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 HR professionals from public, private, multinational, and non-profit organizations, selected through purposive sampling. NVivo-based thematic analysis revealed two overarching themes: emotional impact and psychological impact. Findings show that HR professionals experience immediate emotional responses such as fear, anxiety, stress, and emotional fatigue, which, when repeatedly encountered without adequate organizational support, accumulate into psychological outcomes including insomnia, rumination, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction.

The study underscores the need for organizations to recognize employee hostility toward HR professionals as a significant workplace risk and to implement targeted measures such as clearer policies, leadership support, and psychological safety initiatives to protect HR professionals' well-being.

Keywords: HR professionals, employee hostility, emotional impact, psychological impact, burnout, organizational support, Pakistan, qualitative research, Affective Events Theory

DEDICATION

To my amazing parents,

Whose love has been my greatest strength and whose prayers have carried me further than I ever imagined. Every achievement in my life is a reflection of their sacrifices, encouragement, and unconditional support. I am forever grateful for the foundations they built in me.

And to my husband, Sohaib,

Thank you for being my calm in every storm. Your patience, your kindness, and your constant belief in me made this journey easier than it could have ever been. You stood beside me through every late night, every moment of doubt, and every small victory. This thesis carries a part of you too.

With all my heart, thank you.

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My heartfelt thanks go to my parents, who have been the greatest source of strength in my life. Their love, prayers, and unwavering belief in me gave me the courage to continue even on the most challenging days. They are the reason I stand where I am today.

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Introduction

1.1. Introduction

When something goes wrong in many organizations, HR specialists are the first to be contacted. HR specialists are in charge of steering the entire process with objectivity and professionalism, regardless of the issue—workplace conflict, performance issues, misconduct, or an urgent termination. Even when workers react with rage or distress, they are expected to maintain composure, emotional stability, and objectivity. HR frequently handles emotionally charged situations that go well beyond administrative work because they serve as the organizational "buffer" between employees and management (Lutgen & Sandvik, 2006).

The most common way that workplace aggression is discussed is when coworkers, customers, or supervisors mistreat employees. Employees may experience verbal abuse, bullying, harassment, and psychological mistreatment that compromises their emotional stability and productivity, according to numerous studies (Einarsen & Hoel, 2009). HR workers, on the other hand, encounter a distinct type of animosity that is seldom recognized or recorded. They may face verbal abuse, personal insults, threats, and emotional manipulation from employees who feel intimidated or irate during disciplinary meetings or termination talks. These incidents put HR employees in a position where they have to both defend the company's interests and deal with psychological pressure.

Such hostility can cause emotional strain that surpasses typical workplace stress. Previous studies have shown that handling aggressive or psychologically abusive behavior can cause instantaneous emotional reactions like fear, anxiety, and emotional instability (Schat & Kelloway, 2005). This exposure may eventually result in diminished psychological well-being, diminished energy, and emotional exhaustion. Studies indicate that psychological aggression in the workplace, whether coming from managers, colleagues, or customers, is closely linked to heightened job stress and a decline in employee energy over time. (Malik et al., 2021).

Strong correlations between bullying or harassment among employees and anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and lower life satisfaction have also been found in research (Nauman et al., 2019). In service-oriented industries like healthcare, aviation, and education, where employees are regularly subjected to emotional outbursts or aggressive behavior from clients or stakeholders, similar results have been noted. For instance, (Gale et al., 2019) discovered that psychological distress and emotional exhaustion are linked to repeated verbal abuse.

These results strongly suggest that HR professionals in Pakistan, who frequently deal with disciplinary issues, complaints, and terminations, endure comparable or even increased emotional strain. They deal directly with workers when they are at their most vulnerable or reactive. Employees frequently try to sway HR decisions by manipulating, intimidating, or applying emotional pressure, which places HR professionals in a delicate and psychologically taxing situation. Despite this, HR staff members are rarely taken into account as possible victims of workplace violence in academic literature. Rather than being seen as a group in need of psychological protection, HR is usually seen as an administrative function in charge of preventing or resolving workplace issues (Perry, 2008).

Another level of complexity is introduced by Pakistani workplace culture. Power distance, emotional expression in conflict situations, and hierarchical structures all influence the environment (Hofstede, 2007). Unpredictable reactions may result from employees' strong reactions to job loss or disciplinary action. In order to exert pressure on HR departments and have an impact on decision-making, people frequently involve external actors, such as family members, political contacts, or social networks. HR professionals experience anxiety, stress, and insecurity as a result of certain employees escalating problems outside the company. Research has not looked at these cultural and contextual factors in relation to HR well-being, despite the fact that they greatly increase the emotional burden experienced by HR employees.

Furthermore, institutional support for HR professionals is frequently lacking in Pakistan. The protection of general employees is usually given priority in organizational policies, but HR employees are not afforded the same degree of psychological safety. Although many businesses have systems for reporting harassment, these systems are rarely intended for HR personnel, who may encounter animosity directly from workers who are facing disciplinary actions (Perwaiz & Chhotan, 2024). Because of this, HR professionals may experience feelings of loneliness, vulnerability, and uncertainty about how to report or handle aggressive behavior.

The emotional demands of HR work make this lack of structural support even more problematic. Resilience, empathy, and emotional control are necessary when handling conflicts and terminations. These demands can result in stress, burnout, and poor mental health in the absence of adequate support networks. According to (Maslach & Leiter, 2016), one of the most potent signs of burnout is emotional exhaustion, particularly when people are subjected to ongoing emotional difficulties without sufficient support or resources from their organizations.

Given these difficulties, research into the psychological and emotional impacts of employee hostility on HR professionals in Pakistan is essential. Examining whether HR departments themselves have adequate protection and emotional support is crucial as companies place a greater emphasis on employee well-being and mental health. Organizations run the risk of undermining the core division in charge of employee relations, compliance, and organizational stability if HR well-being is neglected.

Therefore, the lived experiences of HR professionals who have faced threats, blackmail, verbal abuse, or emotional hostility during disciplinary actions or terminations are the focus of this study. This study sheds light on a distinctive and little-researched facet of workplace mental health by examining how they interpret such events, how they react emotionally, and how these experiences affect their psychological well-being over time. Comprehending the psychological burden experienced by HR professionals also facilitates the identification of organizational support system deficiencies and the necessary enhancements in policy, training, and safety protocols.

1.2. Research Gap

The majority of current studies in Pakistan and around the world focus on bullying, harassment, or psychological aggression in the context of employees as a whole. For example, a long-term study involving bank staff revealed that psychological aggression initiated by supervisors or customers is associated with heightened stress levels and diminished vitality over time (Malik et al., 2021). Additionally, another research effort connects workplace psychological aggression (from supervisors, colleagues, and customers) to psychological stress, emotional fatigue, depression, and anxiety, highlighting the overall detrimental effects of hostile behavior in the workplace (Pochecho et al., 2021). Although these findings emphasize the detrimental effects of conflict in the workplace, they do not view HR professionals as a particularly vulnerable group.

No research has focused on the Pakistani HR context or examined how the country's distinct organizational culture, power dynamics, grievance systems, and legal structures expose HR personnel to threats or blackmail, despite the high likelihood that HR professionals in Pakistan encounter hostility during terminations, inquiries, and disciplinary meetings. The unique cultural norms of the Pakistani workplace, including hierarchical power, abuse of harassment laws, emotional responses to job loss, and external escalation through social networks or political influence, have not been examined in relation to the well-being of HR professionals. There is an obvious contextual gap as a result of this absence.

Despite their crucial role in enforcing policies, HR professionals are not acknowledged in the literature as potential victims of intimidation despite the abundance of studies on workplace aggression. Instead of seeing HR as workers who might need protection, the majority of studies see HR as support system facilitators. Literature examining the effects of threats, manipulation, blackmail, or emotional coercion on HR employees' psychological well-being, job satisfaction, sense of safety, or long-term dedication to the field is conspicuously lacking. Additionally, research has not examined whether companies offer HR the same reporting procedures and psychological safety precautions as they do for regular employees. There is a substantial gap in the literature because of this exclusion.

The majority of current research on workplace aggression uses quantitative designs, surveys, or general employee datasets, all of which fall short of capturing the richness and complexity of the lived experiences of HR professionals. The personal interpretation, management, and emotional reactions of HR professionals to direct threats, attempts at blackmail, verbal abuse, or external escalations involving media, family pressure, or legal intimidation have not been examined in any qualitative study, especially one that employs thematic analysis. Furthermore, current methodological approaches do not distinguish between aggression from external and internal actors, nor do they look at how repeated exposure affects HR employees' long-term emotional strain. This leads to a glaring methodological gap, which this study fills with a thorough qualitative investigation.

1.3. Problem Statement

Workplace conflict is a common organizational phenomenon and typically involves disagreements, interpersonal tension, or task-related disputes among employees. Such conflicts

are generally reciprocal, situational, and manageable through routine conflict resolution mechanisms. However, employee hostility directed toward HR professionals represents a fundamentally different and more severe phenomenon that extends beyond ordinary workplace conflict.

Employee hostility in the HR context refers to intentional threatening behavior, blackmail, intimidation, verbal abuse, manipulation, and external escalation directed at HR professionals, particularly during disciplinary proceedings, investigations, or termination processes. Unlike general workplace conflict, this hostility is asymmetrical in nature, as HR professionals are required to enforce organizational decisions while maintaining neutrality, professionalism, and emotional control, even when they themselves become the target of aggressive or coercive behavior.

Within the Pakistani organizational context, HR professionals operate in environments shaped by high power distance, emotionally charged responses to job loss, weak boundary enforcement in grievance systems, and frequent involvement of external actors such as family members, media representatives, legal threats, or political influence. These contextual factors significantly increase the likelihood that disciplinary actions provoke hostile reactions that are directed personally at HR professionals rather than at the organization.

Despite the growing emphasis on employee well-being and workplace mental health, HR professionals are rarely recognized as potential victims of workplace hostility. Existing organizational policies and academic research largely focus on protecting general employees from harassment or bullying, while overlooking the emotional and psychological risks faced by HR personnel who manage conflict, misconduct, and terminations. Consequently, HR professionals may experience fear, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, burnout, insomnia, and reduced job satisfaction, often without adequate organizational support or reporting mechanisms.

The lack of focused research on this issue leaves organizations inadequately informed about the psychological burden placed on HR professionals and limits the development of effective protective and support systems. Therefore, there is a critical need to examine how employee hostility, distinct from general workplace conflict, affects the emotional and psychological well-being of HR professionals in Pakistan.

1.4. Research Question

1. How do HR professionals in Pakistan respond to and interpret hostile behaviors such as threats, blackmail, and intimidation during disciplinary proceedings or terminations?
2. What immediate emotional responses do HR professionals have when confronted with hostile employee behavior?
3. What long-term psychological consequences have HR professionals reported as a result of repeated exposure to employee hostility?
4. How does perceived organizational support affect HR professionals' ability to handle and recover from hostile employee encounters?

1.5. Research Objectives

The primary goal of this research is to investigate the emotional and psychological effects of employee hostility on HR professionals in Pakistan.

The study's specific objectives are:

1. Examine the various forms of employee hostility that HR professionals encounter during disciplinary actions and terminations, such as threats, blackmail, intimidation, and external escalation.
2. Identify HR professionals' immediate emotional responses when confronted with hostile employee behavior.
3. Investigate the long-term psychological consequences of repeated exposure to employee hostility for HR professionals.
4. Examine the role of perceived organizational support in influencing HR professionals' emotional and psychological responses when dealing with hostile employees.

1.6. Hypothesis of the Study

- H1: HR workers experience intense, instantaneous emotional reactions, such as dread, worry, and anguish, in response to hostile situations like threats and blackmail.

- H2: Long-term psychological effects like fatigue, sleeplessness, and decreased job satisfaction are linked to frequent exposure to employee hostility.
- H3: HR professionals have less severe emotional and psychological effects when they feel greater organizational support.

1.7. Scope of the Study:

This study is only for HR professionals working in Pakistan who have firsthand experience managing disciplinary actions, investigations, or terminations involving hostile employee behavior.

The study's sectoral scope includes HR professionals from public, private, multinational, and non-governmental organizations.

The respondent profile is limited to HR professionals with at least three years of experience who have witnessed employee hostility in the form of threats, blackmail, intimidation, or external escalation.

Conceptually, the study distinguishes between employee hostility and general workplace conflict, focusing on the emotional and psychological effects on HR professionals. The study takes a qualitative approach and does not attempt statistical generalization beyond the study sample.

1.8. Significance of the Study

This research is important because it draws attention to an often neglected facet of workplace well-being: the emotional and psychological challenges faced by HR professionals. While much of the existing research emphasizes employees as the primary victims of workplace aggression or harassment, HR staff, who frequently enact disciplinary measures and handle conflicts, encounter distinct difficulties that are seldom recognized.

By analyzing the impact of hostile behavior from employees on the emotional and psychological health of HR professionals, this study offers significant insights for both academic circles and practical applications. The results can assist organizations in Pakistan to:

- Acknowledge the unseen emotional and psychological stress experienced by HR professionals.

- Create robust support systems, training initiatives, and policies aimed at shielding HR staff from workplace hostility.
- Boost HR retention, job satisfaction, and overall effectiveness by tackling the risks of stress and burnout.
- Foster a healthier organizational culture by recognizing and addressing the repercussions of hostile employee behavior.

Moreover, this research enhances the academic body of work by filling a gap: despite the extensive examination of workplace aggression among general employees, the experiences of HR professionals are still largely unstudied. By shedding light on this “hidden burden,” the research lays the groundwork for subsequent studies on HR well-being and workplace mental health in Pakistan.

Additionally, this study is in line with global priorities under **SDGs 3 (Good Health and Well-Being)** and **8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)**, which both place a strong emphasis on psychological safety, equitable treatment, and safe workplaces—aspects that are directly related to the difficulties HR professionals encounter in hostile employee interactions.

1.9. Scheme of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters to offer a thorough understanding of the emotional and psychological effects of hostile behavior exhibited by employees towards HR professionals in Pakistan. The chapters are arranged as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter presents the research topic, outlines the context, identifies the research gap, and clarifies the problem statement, research queries, objectives, and significance of the study. It serves as a guide for the research and establishes a basis for recognizing the underlying difficulties encountered by HR professionals.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter examines existing literature concerning workplace bullying, harassment, psychological aggression, and employee well-being. It also underscores the gaps in prior

research related to HR professionals and establishes the theoretical framework and themes that inform this study.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This chapter details the research design, approach, and methodology employed for data collection and analysis. It includes information about the study population, sampling methods, data collection instruments, operational definitions of variables, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

This chapter showcases the analysis of the gathered data, organized according to the established themes and subthemes. It explores the emotional and psychological effects of employee hostile behavior on HR professionals and highlights significant patterns and insights.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

The concluding chapter summarizes the primary findings, discusses their implications for HR practices and organizational policy, and presents recommendations for reducing the emotional and psychological strain on HR professionals. It also points out the limitations of the study and suggests potential areas for future investigation.

Literature Review

2.1. Introduction to Literature Review

Workplace hostility, including bullying, harassment, psychological aggression, and incivility, has become a growing concern in organizational research due to its strong and consistent association with negative emotional and psychological outcomes. Extensive empirical evidence demonstrates that exposure to hostile workplace behaviors significantly increases the likelihood of stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, depression, trauma symptoms, sleep disturbances, and long-term burnout. Consequently, workplace aggression has been examined across a wide range of organizational settings.

However, the majority of existing studies focus on frontline employees, customer service staff, healthcare workers, or general employees. Comparatively little scholarly attention has been given to HR professionals, despite their frequent exposure to emotionally charged and hostile interactions while enforcing organizational policies, conducting investigations, and managing disciplinary actions or terminations. HR professionals occupy a unique organizational position where they are expected to remain neutral, composed, and professional while often becoming direct targets of employee hostility.

This chapter reviews empirical research on workplace aggression from both international and Pakistani contexts and highlights its emotional and psychological consequences. It then narrows the focus to HR professionals by examining emotional labor, role conflict, and psychological safety as key explanatory mechanisms. Affective Events Theory (AET) is introduced as the theoretical lens guiding the study. The chapter concludes by identifying gaps in existing literature and establishing the rationale for the present research.

2.2. Empirical Studies on Workplace Bullying and Psychological Aggression

2.2.1. The Effects of Workplace Bullying on Mental Health

Workplace bullying is widely recognized as a significant predictor of poor mental health outcomes. Empirical research consistently links bullying to elevated levels of stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and depressive symptoms (Einarsen & Hoel, 2009). In Pakistan, a study conducted in Lahore found that workplace bullying significantly predicted depression and insomnia among employees, with sleep disturbances mediating the relationship between bullying and psychological distress (Liaqat et al., 2024). Using validated instruments such as the DASS-21 and the Insomnia Severity Index, the study demonstrated how prolonged exposure to bullying disrupts emotional and psychological functioning.

Recent large-scale and country-specific studies conducted since 2020 confirm and extend these findings. Research continues to show that workplace bullying remains a strong predictor of long-term psychological harm, including chronic anxiety, sleep disruption, and emotional exhaustion (Malik et al., 2021; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2023). These findings suggest that workplace bullying should be understood as a form of psychological trauma rather than a routine interpersonal conflict.

2.2.2. Cyberbullying and Hybrid-Workplace Hostility

With the expansion of digital communication platforms and hybrid work arrangements, workplace hostility is no longer confined to physical spaces. Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant threat to employee well-being. Research conducted in Pakistani service sectors indicates that cyberbullying produces emotional and physical symptoms such as stress, anxiety, and insomnia that are comparable to those caused by face-to-face bullying (Iftikhar et al., 2021).

International studies suggest that cyber aggression may be particularly damaging because it persists beyond working hours, erodes psychological boundaries between work and personal life, and leaves enduring digital traces (Farley, 2015). Common forms of cyberbullying include hostile emails, public humiliation on organizational platforms, digital threats, and harassment through social media. Such behaviors increase perceived helplessness and emotional strain due to the speed and reach of digital communication (Hershcovis, 2011).

2.2.3. Hostility in Healthcare and High-Stress Sectors

Research conducted in high-stress sectors such as healthcare provides valuable insight into the psychological consequences of workplace hostility. Physicians exposed to workplace bullying

report significantly poorer mental well-being, demonstrating that even highly skilled professionals are vulnerable to persistent hostility (Makarem et al., 2025). Similarly, studies on nurses show that workplace bullying is associated with emotional fatigue, reduced psychological empowerment, and diminished coping capacity, ultimately affecting job performance (Michuł et al., 2024).

2.2.4. Meta-Analytic Evidence Across Industries

Meta-analytic and large-scale review studies further confirm the widespread impact of workplace hostility. A systematic review involving more than 20,000 employees worldwide found strong associations between psychological aggression and chronic psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and burnout (Pacheco et al., 2021). More recent reviews focusing on nursing professionals reveal that bullying and job-related stress significantly reduce professional quality of life and job satisfaction (Galanis et al., 2024).

Recent evidence also emphasizes that workplace bullying not only affects short-term well-being but can result in long-term psychological damage, including trauma symptoms, sleep disorders, and enduring mental health problems, particularly in environments lacking psychological safety (Walker, 2025). Additionally, bullying has been linked to negative organizational outcomes such as reduced morale, diminished organizational commitment, and increased turnover intention (Hamza, 2023).

2.2.5. Long-Term Psychological Damage

Longitudinal and qualitative research highlights the lasting psychological effects of workplace hostility. Recurrent exposure to bullying has been shown to produce trauma symptoms, persistent anxiety, chronic sleep disturbances, and rumination, which impair judgment, focus, and emotional regulation over time (Walker, 2025). Victims frequently develop hypervigilance and anticipatory anxiety, fearing future negative encounters even after hostile incidents have ended (Ang et al., 2021). These reactions may lead to avoidance behaviors, social withdrawal, and decreased work engagement.

2.2.6. The Effects of Workplace Hostility on Organizations

Workplace hostility also has serious organizational consequences. Hostile environments are associated with absenteeism, reduced productivity, declining morale, and increased turnover intentions (Hamza, 2023; Hoel & Cooper, 2001). Toxic work cultures undermine psychological safety and discourage the reporting of misconduct, allowing aggression to persist and escalate (Hauge et al., 2010). Organizations experiencing frequent bullying often suffer from reduced employee trust, poor internal communication, diminished leadership credibility, higher turnover costs, and reputational damage.

These organizational consequences are particularly relevant for HR professionals, who are expected to manage and resolve workplace conflict while potentially being exposed to hostility themselves.

2.3. Hostility at Work and the Absence of Attention for HR Professionals

2.3.1. Human Resources Professionals as Ignored Victims

Despite their regular exposure to hostility, HR professionals remain underrepresented in research on workplace aggression. Due to their symbolic role as organizational policy enforcers, HR professionals are often overlooked as potential victims, while healthcare workers, educators, and service employees receive greater scholarly attention (Kulik & Perry, 2008). Research suggests that individuals who deliver unfavorable organizational decisions, such as disciplinary actions or terminations, are particularly vulnerable to retaliation from recipients (Bies, 2013). However, limited empirical work has examined the emotional and psychological consequences of such retaliation for HR professionals.

2.3.2. The Psychological and Emotional Cost of HR Positions

HR professionals perform extensive emotional labor, requiring them to manage their own emotions while dealing with intense emotional reactions from employees. Emotional labor involves suppressing personal feelings and displaying organizationally appropriate emotions, particularly during emotionally charged interactions such as disciplinary meetings, investigations, and terminations (Hochschild, 1983). Sustained emotional regulation has been consistently associated with emotional exhaustion and burnout (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002).

In HR roles, emotional labor is intensified by exposure to employee hostility, including verbal abuse, emotional manipulation, blackmail, threats of legal or procedural escalation, reputational

intimidation, and false accusations. HR professionals are expected to maintain composure, neutrality, and professionalism even in hostile situations. Contemporary research demonstrates that emotional labor combined with recurring hostile incidents significantly increases psychological strain among HR professionals (Grandey et al., 2021; Kulik & Perry, 2021).

Studies further indicate that emotional labor performed without adequate organizational support heightens vulnerability to burnout, emotional dissonance, and psychological withdrawal (Grandey, 2003; Knies et al., 2022). Despite these findings, empirical research rarely focuses on HR professionals as direct recipients of workplace hostility, underscoring a significant gap in the literature.

2.3.3. Role Conflict and Identity Strain in HR Roles

Role conflict is a defining feature of HR work and a major contributor to psychological strain. HR professionals are required to balance competing responsibilities, including safeguarding organizational interests while advocating fairness and employee well-being. During disciplinary actions, this dual expectation often intensifies hostility toward HR professionals.

Recent research shows that HR professionals are frequently perceived as organizational enforcers rather than neutral facilitators, resulting in personalized hostility and blame (Roche & Teague, 2021). Persistent role conflict has been associated with increased stress, burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and heightened turnover intentions among HR practitioners (Knies et al., 2022). Identity strain arises when HR professionals perceive a mismatch between their professional values and the actions they are required to implement, further exacerbating emotional exhaustion.

2.3.4. Psychological Safety and Organizational Support for HR Professionals

Psychological safety refers to the perception that individuals can perform their professional duties without fear of personal harm, retaliation, or unfair consequences. While psychological safety has been widely studied in team and leadership contexts, limited research has examined its relevance for HR professionals managing hostile interactions.

Recent studies emphasize that psychological safety is shaped by leadership backing, policy clarity, and organizational support systems (Edmondson & Lei, 2021). HR professionals who perceive strong organizational support report lower levels of fear, anxiety, and emotional

exhaustion. Conversely, inadequate support increases feelings of vulnerability, hypervigilance, and anticipatory stress, particularly when dealing with hostile employees (Perwaiz & Chhotan, 2024).

2.4. Linking International Findings to the Pakistani Context

International research demonstrates that HR professionals across organizational contexts experience emotional and psychological strain due to exposure to employee hostility. However, cultural and structural factors influence how hostility is expressed and managed. In Pakistan, high power distance, emotionally charged responses to job loss, and reliance on informal social networks shape employee reactions to disciplinary decisions.

Studies in the Pakistani context highlight that employees may escalate workplace disputes beyond organizational boundaries by involving family members, media, or influential external actors, thereby increasing pressure on HR professionals (Malik et al., 2021). Compared to more regulated environments, Pakistani organizations often provide weaker institutional safeguards, limiting psychological safety for HR professionals and intensifying emotional vulnerability.

2.5. Theoretical Support

2.5.1. Overview of Relevant Organizational Behavior Theories

Several organizational behavior theories provide insight into how employees interpret and respond to workplace hostility. Emotional Labor Theory explains the psychological strain associated with regulating emotions in professional roles, particularly in emotionally demanding interactions (Hochschild, 1983). The Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Model highlights how high job demands combined with limited resources contribute to burnout and emotional exhaustion (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Stress and Coping Theory emphasizes cognitive appraisal and individual responses to perceived threats (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

While each of these frameworks contributes to understanding workplace stress, **Affective Events Theory (AET) offers the most comprehensive explanation** for the emotional and psychological consequences of repeated hostile encounters experienced by HR professionals.

2.5.2. Affective Events Theory (AET)

Affective Events Theory, developed by Weiss and Cropanzano (1996), proposes that specific workplace incidents, referred to as affective events, trigger emotional reactions that influence longer-term attitudes and psychological outcomes. Negative events such as threats, intimidation, blackmail, or disrespect provoke emotional responses including fear, anxiety, and anger. When such events occur repeatedly, their cumulative emotional impact contributes to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and reduced job satisfaction (Brief & Weiss, 2002).

Basch and Fisher (2000) further argue that emotional reactions serve as a critical mechanism linking workplace events to psychological outcomes, reinforcing the central role of affect in occupational well-being.

2.5.3. Application of AET to HR Professionals

Hostile employee behaviors such as verbal abuse, blackmail, intimidation, and threats represent recurring negative affective events for HR professionals. According to AET:

- hostile incidents trigger immediate emotional reactions
- repeated exposure leads to cumulative emotional strain
- accumulated emotional responses result in long-term psychological consequences

Given that HR professionals routinely manage such events while maintaining professionalism and neutrality, the affective burden experienced by HR professionals is substantially higher than that of many other occupational groups.

2.5.4. Emotional Reactions Triggered by Hostile Events

Empirical research indicates that negative workplace events evoke fear, anxiety, emotional discomfort, and physiological arousal (Barsade & Gibson, 2007). When HR professionals encounter hostile employee behavior, they may experience heightened stress responses,

emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbances, rumination, and persistent unease. These reactions align with AET's proposition that emotional responses act as precursors to psychological strain and longer-term mental health outcomes.

2.5.5. Affective Events Theory as the Basis for This Study

Affective Events Theory provides the most suitable framework for analyzing the emotional experiences of HR professionals because it explicitly links:

- hostile workplace events (e.g., threats and blackmail)
- emotional reactions (e.g., fear and anxiety)
- long-term psychological consequences (e.g., burnout and insomnia)
- the moderating role of perceived organizational support

Accordingly, AET offers a comprehensive lens for understanding how employee hostility influences the emotional and psychological well-being of HR professionals.

2.6. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in existing literature and guided by Affective Events Theory. It proposes that employee blackmail and threatening behavior directly influence the emotional and psychological well-being of HR professionals, with perceived organizational support acting as a moderating variable.

- **Independent Variable:** Employee Blackmail and Threatening Behavior
- **Dependent Variable 1:** Emotional Impact (fear, anxiety, stress, emotional exhaustion)
- **Dependent Variable 2:** Psychological Impact (burnout, insomnia, mental exhaustion, rumination)
- **Moderator:** Perceived Organizational Support

The framework suggests that hostile events trigger emotional responses which, over time, lead to psychological consequences, while organizational support may mitigate or intensify these effects.

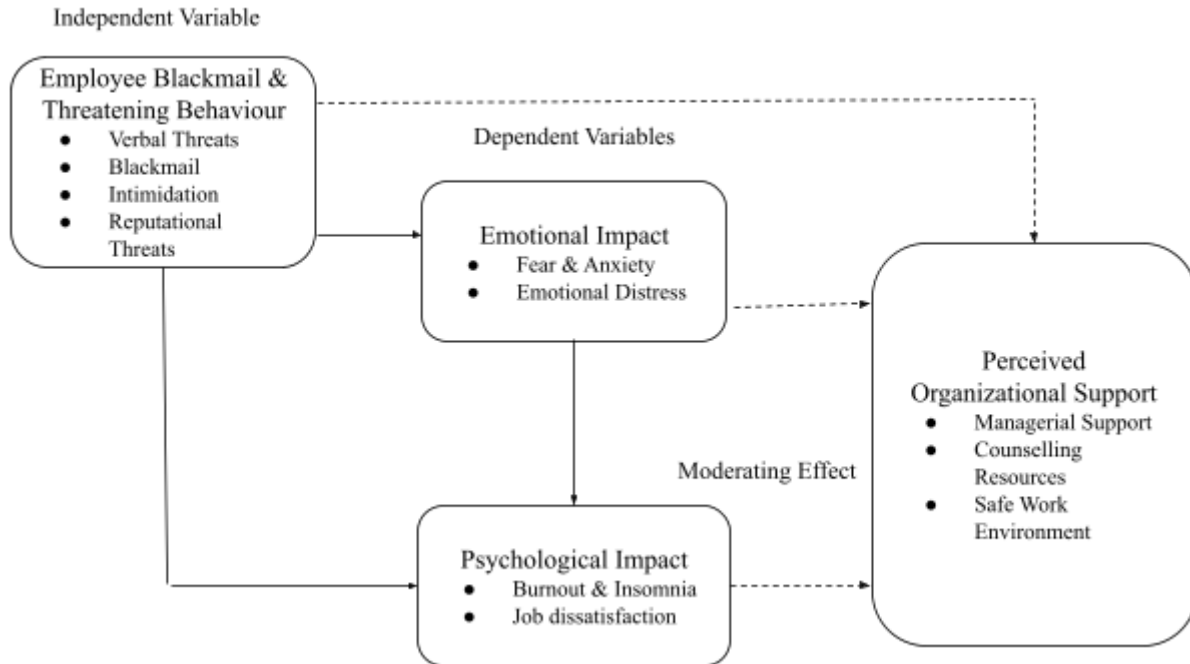


Figure 2.3. *Conceptual Framework Diagram*

2.6.1. Explanation of the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in Affective Events Theory and illustrates the relationship between employee blackmail and threatening behaviour and its emotional and psychological impact on HR professionals. Employee blackmail and threatening behaviour is conceptualized as a negative affective event that triggers immediate emotional reactions such as fear, anxiety, and emotional distress. These emotional reactions, when experienced repeatedly, are proposed to lead to longer-term psychological outcomes including burnout, insomnia, and job dissatisfaction.

Perceived organizational support is positioned as a moderating variable that influences the strength of the relationship between hostile employee behaviour and emotional impact, as well as between emotional impact and psychological outcomes. The framework suggests that strong organizational support may reduce the intensity of emotional and psychological harm, while weak support may intensify these effects.

2.7. Summary of Literature and Research Gap

The reviewed literature establishes that workplace hostility has severe emotional, psychological, and organizational consequences. While these effects are well documented for general employees and high-stress professions, HR professionals remain largely overlooked despite their frequent exposure to hostility during disciplinary actions and terminations.

Existing studies rarely examine how emotional labor, role conflict, and psychological safety interact to shape HR professionals' emotional and psychological well-being. Furthermore, most research relies on quantitative designs and lacks sensitivity to cultural and organizational contexts such as Pakistan. There is a clear absence of qualitative, HR-focused research exploring threats, blackmail, and external escalation faced by HR professionals in Pakistan.

This study addresses these gaps by qualitatively examining the emotional and psychological impact of employee hostility on HR professionals in Pakistan and by exploring the moderating role of perceived organizational support.

Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Data Collection

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the emotional and psychological impact of employee blackmail and threatening behaviour on HR professionals in Pakistan. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this research as it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses to complex and sensitive workplace phenomena. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the limited prior research focusing on HR professionals as recipients of hostility, qualitative inquiry enables the capture of nuanced insights that may not be accessible through quantitative methods.

The study is guided by Affective Events Theory, which emphasizes the role of workplace events in shaping emotional reactions and longer-term psychological outcomes. This theoretical lens aligns with the qualitative design by focusing on how HR professionals interpret and emotionally respond to hostile employee encounters over time.

3.1.1. Rationale for the Qualitative Method

Employee animosity in the form of threats, intimidation, blackmail, and reputational pressure evokes highly individualized emotional and psychological responses. These reactions vary based on personal background, organizational culture, and situational context. Quantitative methods are limited in their ability to capture the nuances of:

- Fear experienced during disciplinary meetings
- Emotional exhaustion following repeated hostile encounters
- Delayed psychological effects such as insomnia or rumination
- HR professionals' appraisal of personal risk and threat

A qualitative approach allows participants to articulate these lived experiences in their own words, offering rich insights grounded in real organizational interactions. This approach is

particularly suitable for sensitive topics where emotional depth and contextual understanding are central to the research objectives.

3.3. Data Collection Method

3.3.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method because they balance consistency with flexibility. The interview guide ensured coverage of key areas aligned with the research objectives, while allowing participants to narrate sensitive experiences at their own pace and comfort level.

This approach was essential as participants described emotionally charged incidents such as:

- Direct threats during termination meetings
- Attempts at blackmail using personal or professional leverage
- Escalation involving family members or external pressure

Rigid or structured instruments would not have allowed sufficient depth to explore such experiences.

3.3.2. Interview Process

A total of **22 HR professionals** participated in the study. Interviews were conducted either in person in Islamabad or virtually via Zoom or Google Meet for participants in other locations. Each interview lasted approximately **30–45 minutes** and was audio-recorded with informed consent.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and imported into **NVivo** for systematic coding and thematic analysis. This process ensured that emotional reactions and psychological effects were captured in participants' own voices and allowed themes to emerge inductively from the data.

3.3.3. Participant Comfort and Emotional Sensitivity

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, the interviewer maintained a supportive, nonjudgmental, and empathetic stance. Participants were informed of their right to pause, skip questions, or terminate the interview at any time. Several participants reported relief in discussing experiences they had never previously disclosed within their organizations.

3.3.4. Interview Guide Development

The interview guide was developed based on a review of relevant literature and guided by Affective Events Theory to ensure alignment with the research objectives. Open-ended questions were used to explore experiences of employee hostility, emotional reactions, psychological consequences, and perceptions of organizational support. **The complete interview guide is provided in Appendix A.**

3.4. Sample Criteria and Justification

3.4.1. Sampling Technique and Criteria

A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure that participants had direct and relevant experience with employee hostility. Inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Currently working in an HR role within Pakistan
- Minimum of three years of HR experience
- Direct involvement in disciplinary actions, grievance handling, or conflict resolution
- Firsthand exposure to employee blackmail, threats, intimidation, or emotional manipulation
- Willingness to participate and consent to audio recording

3.4.2 Sample Size Justification

The sample consisted of 22 HR professionals, which aligns with qualitative research standards recommending approximately 15–30 participants for in-depth interview studies. Sample size determination was guided by the principle of data saturation. After approximately 20 interviews, no new emotional or psychological themes were emerging, and two additional interviews were conducted to confirm saturation. Participants were drawn from public sector organizations,

private companies, multinational corporations, and NGOs, enhancing the credibility and contextual richness of the findings.

3.5. Variable Focus and Qualitative Measurement

This research employs a qualitative methodology, focusing on the exploration of variables through the personal experiences and narratives of participants instead of relying on numerical data. The study centers around one independent variable and two dependent variables, utilizing thematic coding in NVivo to evaluate the findings from the interviews.

Independent Variable (IV): Employee Blackmail and Threatening Behaviour

This encompasses verbal threats, manipulation attempts, aggressive conduct, intimidation, and external or reputational escalation. These actions were categorized under NVivo nodes such as:

- Blackmail or Manipulation
- Verbal Threats & Aggression
- Physical Threat
- Escalation Outside Organisation

Dependent Variable 1 (DV1): Emotional Impact on HR Professionals

These refer to the immediate emotional responses HR professionals faced during or right after hostile incidents. NVivo nodes reflecting emotional effects include:

- Stress & Anxiety
- Emotional Fatigue & Fear

Dependent Variable 2 (DV2): Psychological Impact on HR Professionals

These signify the long-term psychological repercussions stemming from prolonged or intense exposure to employee hostility. NVivo nodes depicting psychological effects include:

- Mental Health Concerns (Insomnia, Overthinking)
- Burnout and Decreased Job Satisfaction

Prior to the analysis of variables, all interview transcripts were imported into NVivo and each participant was designated as a Case (P01–P22). Case classifications were included, covering sector, job position, and years of experience, facilitating cross-case comparisons among NGOs, private companies, public agencies, and multinational entities. This allowed for exploration of both individual and organizational context regarding emotional and psychological effects.

3.6. Coding Structure for NVivo

Open Coding:

Line by line, transcripts were examined to determine:

- Emotional expressions,
- Descriptions of threats
- Psychological references
- Coping mechanisms,
- Organizational responses

The codes were arranged into eight main nodes that accurately represented the experiences that the participants had to share.

1. Stress & Anxiety
2. Emotional Fatigue & Fear
3. Blackmail or Manipulation
4. Verbal Threats & Aggression
5. Physical Threat
6. Mental Health Concerns (Insomnia, Overthinking)
7. Escalation Outside Organization
8. Burnout and Decreased Job Satisfaction

Percentage Coverage

The amount of each transcript linked to each node (e.g., Blackmail ~8%, Emotional Fatigue ~6%, Stress & Anxiety ~9%) was calculated using NVivo's Coding by Item – Percentage Coverage feature. The relative importance of each experience throughout the dataset was established with the aid of these percentages. Thematic saturation was demonstrated by the recurrence of these coded patterns among participants.

Theme Development

Two more general themes that matched the dependent variables of the study were developed from the initial nodes:

- Theme 1: Emotional Impact (Emotional Fatigue & Fear; Stress & Anxiety)
- Theme 2: Psychological Effects (Insomnia & Overthinking; Burnout & Job Satisfaction)

The frequency with which these themes emerged across cases and the ways in which they varied by organizational sector were investigated using NVivo's node summaries, density visualizations, and coding matrices. This method of analysis made sure that themes were firmly rooted in participant narratives and backed up by data produced by NVivo.

3.7. Conceptual Framework

This study uses a qualitative conceptual framework based on Affective Events Theory (AET) rather than an economic or statistical model. The framework shows how HR professionals are affected emotionally (DV1) and psychologically over time (DV2) by employee blackmail and threatening behavior (IV). Additionally, it finds that perceived organizational support is a moderating factor that can either amplify or lessen these effects.

Parts of the Framework:

- Independent Variables: Blackmail and threatening behavior by employees
- First Dependent variable: Emotional impact (distress, anxiety, and fear)
- Second Dependent variable: Psychological effects (burnout, insomnia, diminished wellbeing)
- Moderator: Perceived support from the organization (leadership, policies, and psychological safety)

Rationale:

- The model offers a systematic approach for examining narrative data gathered from interviews.

- It is consistent with thematic analysis, where the independent variable (Blackmail and threatening behavior by employees) is associated with dependent outcomes (emotional and psychological effects) through common themes.
- It facilitates comparative insights across participants from various organizational environments, revealing sector-specific variations in HR experiences.

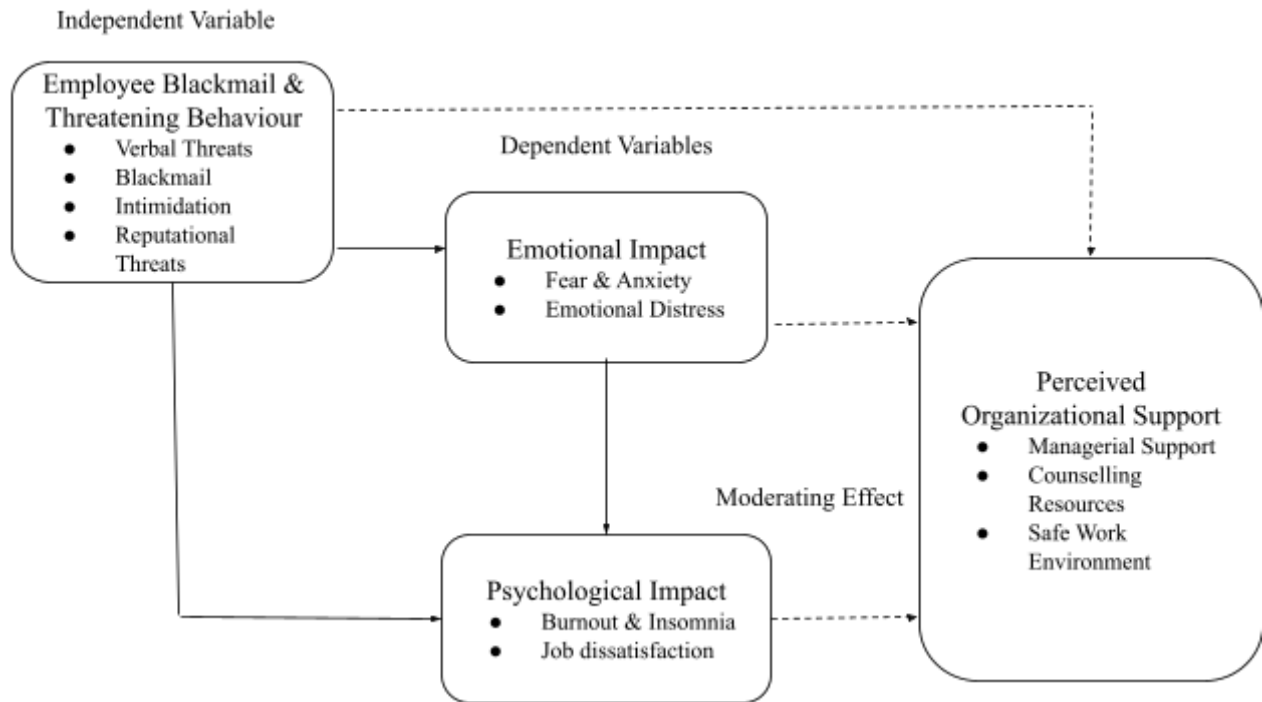


Figure 3.7. Conceptual Framework Diagram

3.8. Analytical Method

No statistical estimation methods were applied because the study is qualitative. Rather, the IV was linked to the psychological and emotional effects using a methodical thematic analysis approach.

The analysis concentrated on:

- Frequency of Experiences: Emotional responses and animosity that recur throughout interviews.
- Narrative Intensity: The degree to which participants expressed psychological strain, fear, or distress.
- Cross-Sector Comparison: Variations in the experiences of public, private, non-profit, and international organizations.

NVivo was utilized for:

- Maintain track of code occurrences
- Determine co-occurring psychological and emotional markers
- Assure consistency and dependability when making coding choices.

In line with the conceptual framework derived from Affective Events Theory, this methodical analytical approach clearly demonstrates how employee threats and blackmail impact HR professionals in Pakistan.

3.9. Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness was ensured using established qualitative criteria. Credibility was enhanced through data saturation and rich participant narratives. Dependability was supported by a transparent and systematic analytical process. Confirmability was maintained by grounding interpretations in participant data. Transferability was facilitated through detailed contextual descriptions.

3.10. Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality

- The usage of pseudonyms
- There are no names of organizations mentioned.
- Anonymized sensitive information

Informed Consent

Every participant signed a consent form that stated:

- Goal
- Risks
- voluntary involvement
- Recording authorization

Emotional Sensitivity

Participants were assured that talking about upsetting events was voluntary and given breaks due to the sensitive subject.

Data Security

Transcripts are password-protected, and recordings are kept on encrypted devices.

Data Analysis and Results

4.1. Introduction to Analysis

The analysis and conclusions from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 22 HR professionals from a variety of Pakistani industries are presented in this chapter. To ensure a variety of organizational contexts, participants were selected from public organizations, private businesses, multinational corporations, and non-governmental organizations. Every participant had firsthand experience dealing with hostile, coercive, or threatening behavior from employees.

NVivo was used for the analysis, which adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis (Naeem et al., 2023). Themes were developed iteratively, nodes were created and refined, cases were categorized, and transcripts were methodically coded. To show coding depth and analytical transparency, NVivo screenshots (coding stripes, node lists, percentage coverage, and case classifications) were incorporated into the analysis.

Two main themes emerged from the data that are directly related to the dependent variables of the study:

1. Emotional Impact
2. Psychological Impact

Every theme has subthemes that are backed up by participant quotes.

These findings are interpreted through the lens of Affective Events Theory, which explains how repeated hostile workplace incidents trigger emotional reactions that accumulate into long-term psychological outcomes

4.2. Participant Demographics

This research included 22 HR professionals from diverse organizational sectors in Pakistan. The participants occupied different positions in HR, spanning from entry-level roles to senior management, with professional experience ranging from 2 to 10 years. Each participant had firsthand experience addressing hostile or intimidating behavior from employees.

Table 4.2. *Summary of Participant Demographics*

Experience Level	Number of Participants
1-3 years	5
4-7 years	12
7+	5

Organizational Sector

Participants represented a wide range of sectors such as public institutions, private businesses, multinational firms, NGOs, and various other industries. This diversity allows for a broad perspective on how different work environments affect experiences with difficult employees.

Table 4.3. *Distribution of Participants Across Organizational Sectors*

Airline / Aviation	2
NGO / International NGO	3
Public Sector / Hospital	2
Retail	2
IT / Tech / Software	3
Banking	1
Private Company	1
Manufacturing / Automobile / Textile	3
Construction	1
Pharmaceutical / MNC	1
Telecom	1
Private school	1
MNC	1

Job Roles

- The study included individuals in a range of HR roles, providing perspectives from multiple levels within the profession:
- HR Officers / Executives / Specialists: 9 participants
- HR Managers / Senior Managers / Leads / Admin Managers: 8 participants
- HR Coordinators / Supervisors / Assistants / Generalists: 5 participants

This variety guarantees that the analysis encompasses experiences from both operational and strategic human resources viewpoints

Each of the participants had personal experience managing angry, manipulative, or threatening employees. This universal criterion ensures that thematic analysis is focused on real-world HR concerns.

4.3. Overview of NVivo Data Analysis

Each participant was created as a Case (P01–P22) with attributes (sector, experience, and job role) after all transcripts were imported into NVivo. Eight major nodes were created through coding, and these were subsequently combined into two final themes.

Key NVivo Nodes Developed::

- Stress & Anxiety
- Emotional Fatigue & Fear
- Blackmail or Manipulation
- Verbal Threats & Aggression
- Physical Threat
- Mental Health Concerns (Insomnia, Overthinking)
- Escalation Outside Organization
- Burnout and Decreased Job Satisfaction

NVivo produced the following % coverage after coding each of the 22 transcripts:

- Stress & Anxiety: 9.4%
- Emotional Fatigue & Fear: 6.2%

- Blackmail or Manipulation: 8.1%
- Verbal Threats & Aggression: 7.3%
- Physical Threat: 2.5%
- Escalation Outside Organisation: 5.8%
- Mental Health Concerns: 6.7%
- Burnout & Job Dissatisfaction: 8.9%

Stress and anxiety had the highest coverage, followed by emotional exhaustion, verbal threats, and mental health issues, according to NVivo's Percentage Coverage tool. These percentages assist in determining the most frequent emotional and psychological response and show how frequently particular events occurred throughout interviews.

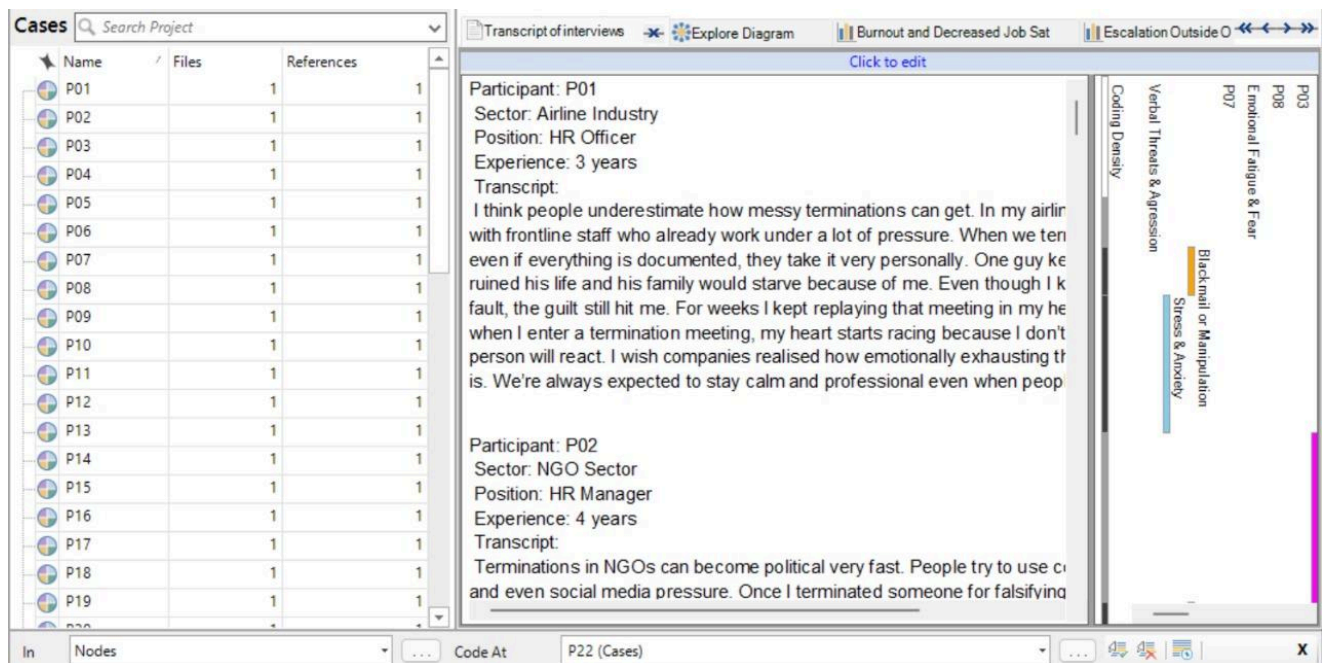


Figure 4.3. NVivo Cases List Showing Participants Included in the Study

From an Affective Events Theory perspective, the NVivo nodes represent both negative affective events (such as blackmail, threats, and escalation) and their emotional and psychological consequences. Higher coverage of stress, anxiety, and burnout indicates that repeated exposure to hostile employee behavior creates cumulative emotional strain, which gradually translates into long-term psychological distress, as proposed by AET

4.4. Theme 1: Emotional Impact of Hostile Employee Behavior

Theme 1 captures instant emotional emotions such as worry, dread, shock, and exhaustion. These feelings frequently surfaced during or right after conflict investigations, terminations, or disciplinary sessions.

4.4.1 Subtheme: Stress and Heightened Anxiety

NVivo Coverage: 9.4%

The most commonly coded emotional responses were anxiety and stress. Nearly all of the participants reported feeling anxious or stressed when confronted with hostile employees. During violent occurrences, many HR professionals reported feeling pressure in their chest, shaking their hands, or experiencing an increase in pulse rate.

Key verbatim:

- "She made a scene and threatened to file a harassment complaint when I had to fire an employee. I had days of calls from journalists. I felt scared. (IT Sector, HRBP, P05)
- "I was threatened with complaints by employees. I was nervous the entire day. (P12, Startup Tech)
- "I couldn't sleep before disciplinary meetings because I was afraid of potential backlash." (Pharmaceutical MNC, P17)
- "My heart began to race as soon as he raised his voice. I was aware that it might become a scene. Despite my fear, I had to maintain my composure" (Private Business, P07).
- "I get nervous as soon as an employee acts aggressively because I don't know where it will go."(Multinational, P12)

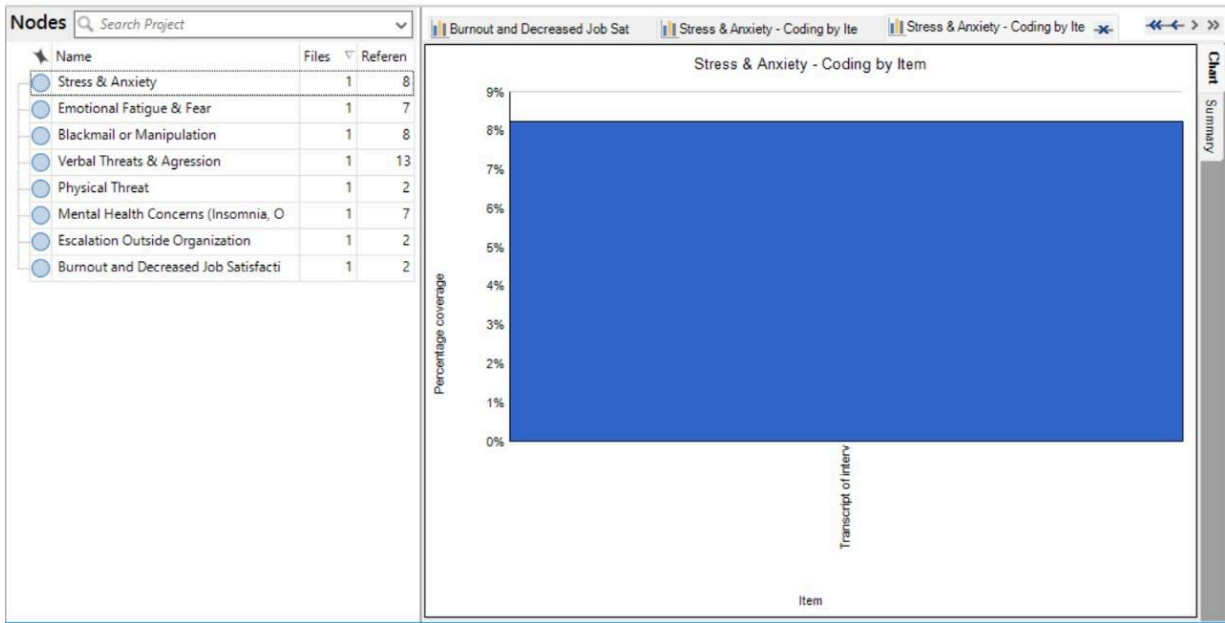


Figure 4.4. The highest emotional code, the Stress & Anxiety node, had 8–9% coverage

When employees used defensive hostility, accusations, or emotional outbursts during a conversation, stress frequently increased. Participants pointed out that internal pressure is increased because HR is expected to maintain composure.

4.4.2 Subtheme: Emotional Fatigue and Frustration

NVivo Coverage: 5.9%

HR workers experienced emotional exhaustion as a result of frequent exposure to hostility. Even after leaving the office, many reported feeling "tired in the soul" or mentally worn out.

Key verbatim:

- “To be honest, it depletes your energy. I feel like I have nothing left for the remainder of the day after dealing with these cases”(NGO,P03).
- “It's not bodily exhaustion. It's emotional exhaustion following a challenging encounter.”(Public Sector, P18)



Figure 4.5.: *The highest emotional code, Emotional Fatigue and Frustration node, had 5.9% coverage*

Participants frequently expressed frustration at being held accountable for organizational decisions that workers felt were unjust, even when HR did not make those decisions.

4.4.3. Subtheme: Fear During Threatening Incidents

NVivo Coverage: 7.3%

During unpleasant conversations, fear surfaced as a powerful emotional reaction. HR specialists expressed apprehension about:

- Possible bodily injury,
- Harm to one's reputation,
- Being verbally accused
- Escalation to influential external actors

Key verbatim:

- I shuddered as he said, "You don't know who I am." It was obviously dangerous. I was worried about my security." (Private Sector, P10)
- "I was concerned that things might spiral out of hand. In the room, I was by myself."(Public Sector, P04)

When workers utilized intimidation techniques or tried to exert pressure on HR through social or political connections, fear was particularly evident.

According to Affective Events Theory, these hostile encounters function as negative affective events that generate immediate emotional reactions. The stress, fear, and emotional fatigue reported by HR professionals reflect the affective responses predicted by AET following exposure to threatening workplace incidents.

4.5. Theme 2: Psychological Effects of Hostile Employee Behavior

In line with Affective Events Theory, repeated exposure to negative affective events does not remain limited to immediate emotional reactions. Over time, these emotional responses accumulate and manifest as longer-term psychological outcomes. The psychological effects discussed below reflect the progression from short-term emotional strain to sustained psychological distress among HR professionals.

Long-term psychological effects, such as burnout, insomnia, overthinking, and emotional disengagement, are reflected in Theme 2.

4.5.1. Subtheme 1: Burnout and Decreased Job Satisfaction

NVivo Coverage: 1-2%

Participants talked about feeling emotionally spent and losing interest in their jobs.

Key verbatim:

- "I was worn out after months of manipulation. Even everyday tasks were stressful. Manufacturing (P08)
- "I lost motivation. I hated working because of the emotional strain. (NGO, P11)
- "On some days, I didn't go to work at all." (P19, Private Education)

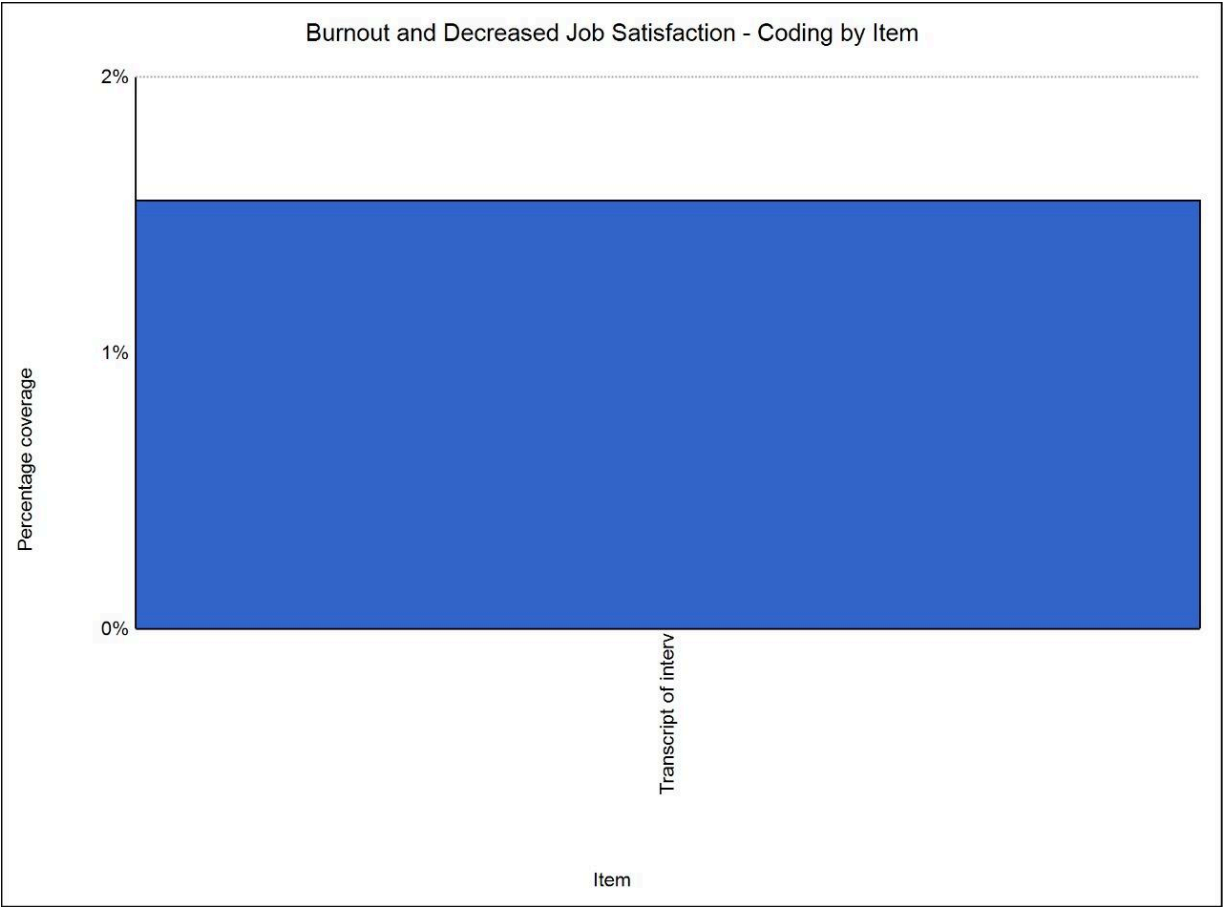


Figure 4.6. *In line with long-term psychological patterns, the burnout node displayed 1-2% coverage*

4.5.2. Subtheme 2: Mental Health Issues (Overthinking & Insomnia)

NVivo Coverage: 5%

Participants reported hypervigilance, excessive rumination, and sleep disturbances.

Key Verbatim:

- "I had trouble falling asleep at night. I couldn't stop thinking about the incident. (Public Sector, P03)
- "Even at home, I remained vigilant, considering possible conflicts." (INGO, P16)
- "I was always thinking about the worst because of threats." (P22, Textile Industry)

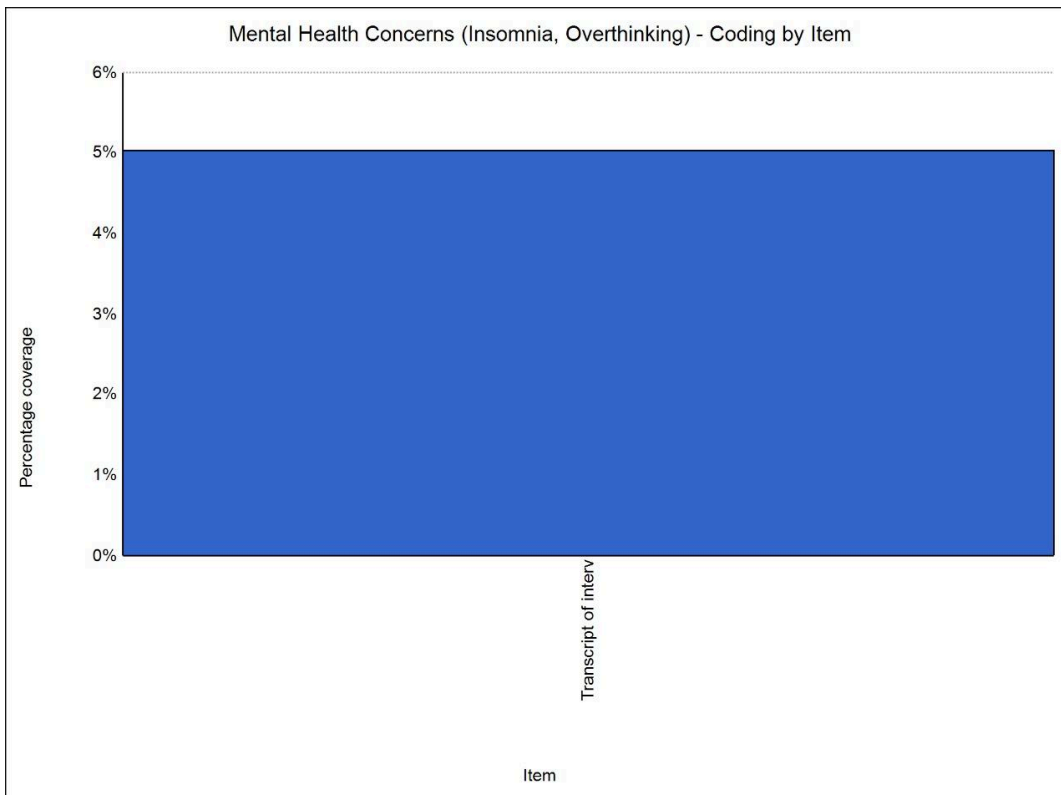


Figure 4.7. *The coverage of the Mental Health Concerns node was about 5%*

4.6. Experiences of Blackmail, Manipulation, and External Escalation

Despite being part of the IV, these episodes seem to be powerful stand-alone patterns

4.6.1. Direct Blackmail Attempts

Examples included employee making threats:

- Bogus allegations of harassment,
- Negative social media reviews,
- Contacting upper management with made-up tales

Verbatim:

- “He threatened to accuse me of harassment if HR carried out the investigation. I was scared.” (INGO, P11)

These encounters increased mental distress and made one feel vulnerable in the workplace.

4.6.2. Verbal Aggression and Intimidation

Shouting, insulting, or trying to exert physical dominance were examples of verbal violence.

Verbatim

- “He continued to step forward and raise his voice. I felt trapped.”(P03)

During these encounters, HR professionals reported feeling psychologically unsafe.s.

4.6.3. Subtheme 3: Escalation Outside Organizational

A number of participants reported instances in which staff members escalated disputes outside the company, involving journalists, influencers, outside pressure groups, or even family members.

Key Verbatim:

- "He put pressure on us by involving a political figure. It turned into a threat to security. (Public Sector, P03)
- "The family of the fired employee continued to call and threaten HR." (P15, Production)

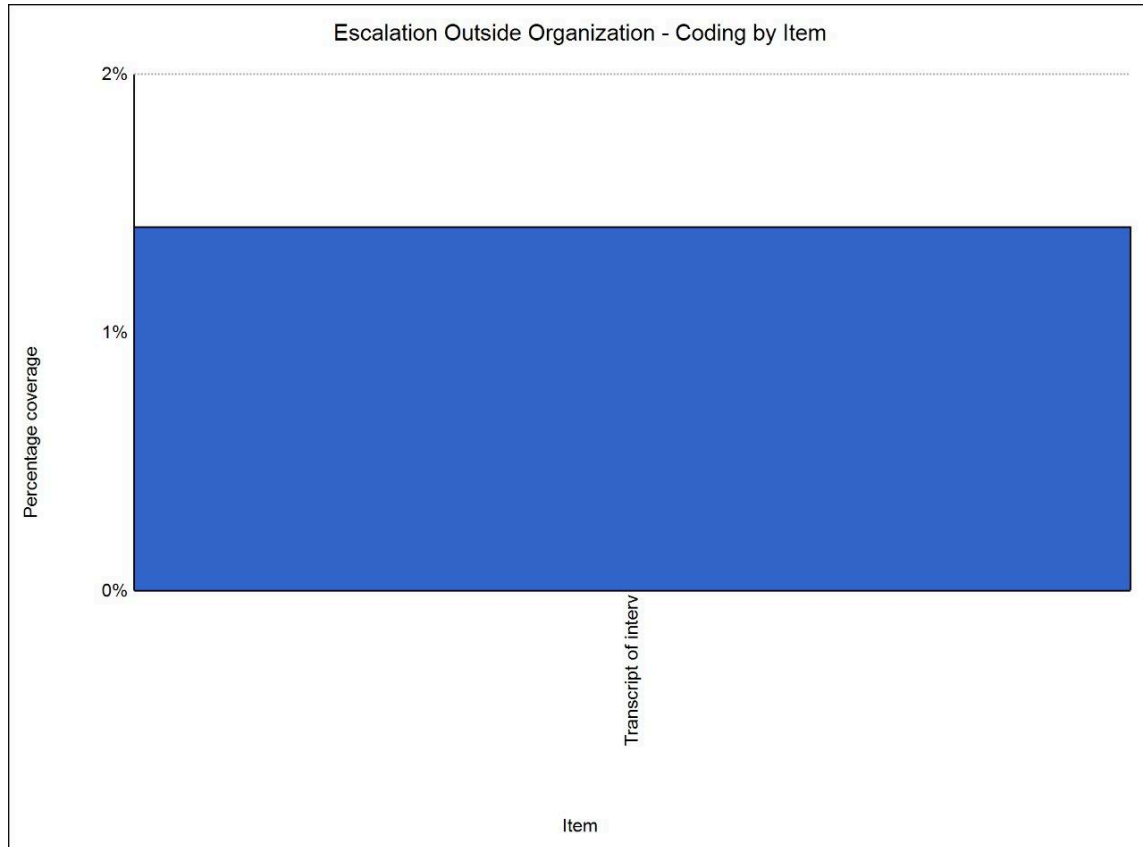


Figure 4.8. *External pressure incidents were reflected in this node's 1-2% coverage*

4.6.4. Observations Based on Sectors

Sector-wise comparisons were made possible by NVivo case classifications:

Public Sector

- Reduced direct dangers
- Stress brought on by bureaucracy

Multinationals and the Private Sector

- Increased verbal hostility
- Increased legal threats and complaints directed at HR

INGOs and NGOs

- Maximum level of emotional exhaustion
- Increased external escalation (such as pressure from the media)

Industrial and Manufacturing Sectors

- Increased hostility in person

4.7. Moderating Role of Perceived Organizational Support

4.7.1. Organizational Support as an AET Buffer

Affective Events Theory acknowledges contextual factors that can amplify or mitigate emotional responses. In this study, perceived organizational support emerged as a critical moderating factor influencing the emotional and psychological impact of hostile events.

HR professionals who perceived strong leadership support, clear policies, and psychological safety reported lower emotional intensity and faster emotional recovery following hostile incidents. Organizational support reduced the accumulation of negative emotional reactions, thereby limiting long-term psychological harm.

4.7.2. Absence of Support and Intensified Psychological Harm

Conversely, participants who perceived weak organizational support reported heightened fear, prolonged emotional distress, and severe psychological outcomes. The absence of support intensified emotional reactions and accelerated the emotional-to-psychological transition described by AET.

These findings confirm the moderating role proposed in the conceptual framework, demonstrating that organizational support shapes how affective events are emotionally processed and psychologically internalized.

4.8. Discussion of Findings in Relation to Literature

The findings of this study align with existing literature on workplace hostility while extending it by focusing on HR professionals. Consistent with AET, hostile employee behaviour functioned as negative affective events that triggered emotional responses, which accumulated and resulted in psychological outcomes. Unlike prior studies centered on general employees, this research highlights HR professionals as direct recipients of hostility and emotional harm.

The progression from emotional reactions to psychological consequences supports prior research on emotional labor, burnout, and workplace stress. However, this study uniquely demonstrates this progression through the lens of Affective Events Theory within the Pakistani context.

4.9. Summary and Connection to Research Questions

This chapter examined the experiences of 22 HR professionals in Pakistan who dealt with hostile and threatening employee behavior in a variety of organizational sectors. Thematic analysis using NVivo revealed two major themes: Emotional Consequences and Psychological Consequences. Verbatim excerpts and coding evidence demonstrate how employee hostility affects the well-being of HR professionals.

Stress, anxiety, fear, and emotional fatigue were among the psychological consequences. Participants described their immediate emotional responses when confronted with threats, blackmail, or manipulative behavior.

The results are directly related to the four research questions outlined in Chapter 1 in this section.

RQ1: How do HR professionals in Pakistan respond to and interpret hostile behaviors such as threats, blackmail, and intimidation during disciplinary proceedings or terminations?

- When confronted with aggression or threats, HR professionals experience immediate stress, anxiety, and fear, confirming the negative impact of hostile behavior on emotional well-being.
- Psychological consequences included burnout, insomnia, overthinking, and decreased job satisfaction. P03 (Public Sector, Assistant Director HR, 6 years) reported ongoing rumination and sleep disturbances, whereas P08 (Manufacturing Sector, HR Executive, 4 years) reported a decline in motivation over time. These findings are directly related to:

RQ2: What immediate emotional responses do HR professionals have when confronted with hostile employee behavior?

- Continuous exposure to threats causes long-term mental health issues such as burnout, emotional exhaustion, and overthinking.

RQ3: What long-term psychological consequences have HR professionals reported as a result of repeated exposure to employee hostility?

- Stress, anxiety, fear, and emotional fatigue were identified as recurring problems, particularly in circumstances involving direct threats or manipulation. The NVivo coding reveals numerous references to "verbal aggression," "blackmail attempts," and "emotional manipulation" among participants.

RQ4: How does perceived organizational support affect HR professionals' ability to handle and recover from hostile employee encounters?

- Burnout, insomnia, overthinking, and a decrease in job satisfaction were among the psychological effects. Sector-specific analysis shows that organizational context and support systems moderate the severity of these effects (refer to Figure 4.7: Sector-wise Matrix Coding).

Summary Statement:

This chapter offered a thorough examination of the psychological and emotional effects that Pakistani HR professionals face while dealing with hostile employees, including verbal abuse, blackmail, threats, manipulation, and external escalation. Two main themes, Emotional Impact and Psychological Impact, came out of the systematic NVivo-assisted coding and thematic analysis of 22 interviews. Following short-term emotional reactions including fear, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and shock, HR professionals reported long-term psychological effects such as insomnia, rumination, burnout, job discontent, and a lower sense of professional safety.

Sector-wise disparities showed that HR professionals in the public and nonprofit sectors encountered more external meddling, whereas those in the commercial sector encountered more overt verbal abuse. Higher levels of perceived organizational support were found in multinational corporations, and this was correlated with HR teams experiencing less emotional and psychological stress.

Overall, the results provide significant support for the conceptual framework based on Affective Events Theory, demonstrating that adverse working experiences cause powerful emotional reactions that eventually lead to psychological distress, particularly when organizational support is inadequate or inconsistent. The study's conclusions, recommendations, limitations, and future directions are presented in the last chapter, which is based on these observations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

The emotional and psychological effects of employee threats and blackmail on Pakistani HR professionals were investigated in this study. The study investigated how hostile workplace incidents cause emotional reactions and develop into long-term psychological consequences using qualitative thematic analysis and Affective Events Theory (AET). To ensure diversity and depth, information was gathered from 22 HR professionals in the public, private, multinational, and non-profit sectors.

The results showed two main themes: psychological impact and emotional impact.

During or right after confrontational interactions with employees, HR professionals frequently experienced emotional exhaustion, stress, anxiety, fear, and feelings of insecurity. The codes associated with stress and anxiety, emotional exhaustion, verbal threats, blackmail or manipulation, and escalation outside the organization (such as media pressure or the involvement of external influencers) were found to be highly prevalent in the thematic analysis. These emotional reactions support the idea put forth by AET that unfavorable events at work cause instantaneous affective reactions.

The results revealed more profound and enduring psychological effects. Burnout, insomnia, excessive rumination, withdrawal behaviors, hypervigilance, and low job satisfaction were all mentioned by HR specialists. This strain was increased by frequent conflicts, and people without organizational support networks were more at risk. A number of participants reported feeling "alone in the process" or "unprotected when employees retaliated," underscoring organizational policy gaps.

According to sector-based analysis, public sector workers faced bureaucratic pressures that exacerbated emotional strain, while HR employees in private businesses, non-governmental organizations, and multinational corporations encountered more severe forms of hostility.

Overall, the study demonstrates that employee animosity is a serious problem that affects HR professionals' psychological health and emotional environment.

By changing the focus from employees as victims to HR staff as covert victims of workplace conflict, this study adds to a much understudied area within HR literature. The results highlight the necessity of psychological safety, organized organizational support, and more explicit policies to shield HR professionals from unfair escalation, manipulation, and retaliation.

5.2. Practical Implications of the Study

The findings of this study carry important practical implications for organizations, senior management, and HR leadership in Pakistan. Organizations must recognize that employee hostility directed at HR professionals is not merely a procedural challenge but a serious occupational risk with emotional and psychological consequences. Failure to address this risk can result in burnout, reduced decision-making capacity, and long-term disengagement among HR professionals, ultimately weakening organizational governance.

This study demonstrates the need for organizations to move beyond reactive conflict handling and adopt proactive systems that protect HR professionals' psychological well-being. By aligning organizational policies and support structures with the emotional realities of HR work, organizations can reduce psychological harm, improve HR effectiveness, and foster a healthier workplace climate.

5.3. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed as specific, actionable organizational measures rather than general suggestions.

5.3.1. Policy Reforms and Procedural Safeguards

Organizations should formally recognize employee threats, blackmail, and intimidation against HR staff as serious misconduct. Clear policies must be developed that define hostile behaviour, outline reporting mechanisms, and specify consequences for such actions. Disciplinary and termination procedures should include structured safeguards for HR professionals, such as the presence of senior management or legal representatives during high-risk meetings.

5.3.2. Strengthening HR Support Mechanisms

Organizations should establish internal support mechanisms specifically designed for HR professionals exposed to hostility. This may include access to confidential counseling services, debriefing sessions after high-conflict cases, and peer support forums within HR departments. Regular psychological check-ins should be normalized to reduce emotional suppression and prevent cumulative psychological strain.

5.3.3. Psychological Safety and Leadership Accountability

Senior leadership plays a critical role in shaping psychological safety for HR professionals. Leaders must explicitly support HR decisions and communicate zero tolerance for retaliatory behaviour. Leadership accountability mechanisms should ensure that HR professionals are not isolated or blamed when enforcing organizational policies. Visible leadership backing can significantly reduce emotional distress and mitigate long-term psychological harm.

5.4. Limitations of the Study

Despite the fact that this study provides insightful information, a number of limitations must be noted:

- **Qualitative Range:** The results are based on 22 participants, which is not intended for statistical generalization but is perfect for qualitative depth.
- **Self-Reported Data:** Participants' memories, which could include selective memory or emotional bias, were the basis for their experiences.
- **Variation by Sector:** Even though the study covered a wide range of industries, certain sectors, like healthcare and law enforcement, may have particular experiences that were not included.
- **Pakistan-Specific Situation:** International generalizability may be limited by cultural and organizational norms that are different from those of other nations.

5.5. Future Directions

Future research in the following areas is suggested in order to build on this work:

1. Quantitative Research

The frequency, severity, and relationship between hostility and psychological outcomes among HR professionals could be measured through extensive surveys.

2. Comparing Countries

International research could investigate whether HR professionals encounter comparable hostility in different cultural contexts.

3. Longitudinal Research

Monitoring HR professionals over time would reveal how long-term mental health and career choices are impacted by cumulative exposure to hostility.

4. Assessment of Interventions

Future studies should evaluate organizational support tools like psychological support systems, resilience programs, and conflict-management training.

Reflections

This research journey was both academically demanding and personally formative. The study set out to examine the emotional and psychological impact of employee blackmail and threatening behaviour on HR professionals in Pakistan, and this focus remained consistent throughout the research process. Rather than reiterating multiple forms of hostility, the reflection centers on how these hostile encounters were experienced, interpreted, and internalized by HR professionals over time.

The qualitative design proved effective in achieving the research objectives. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study captured how short-term emotional reactions, primarily fear, anxiety, stress, and emotional fatigue, emerged immediately following hostile incidents. Importantly, these emotional responses did not remain temporary. When such reactions were repeatedly triggered and left unresolved, they gradually translated into long-term psychological outcomes, including burnout, insomnia, rumination, and reduced job satisfaction. This progression reinforced the theoretical grounding of the study and clarified the emotional-to-psychological pathway underpinning the findings.

From a methodological perspective, the research process was largely well-structured. Conducting interviews across public, private, NGO, and multinational sectors required careful planning and coordination, but data collection progressed smoothly overall. Some participants were hesitant to disclose details involving political pressure or severe threats; however, this challenge was addressed by maintaining confidentiality, adopting an empathetic interviewing approach, and allowing participants to control the depth of disclosure. These strategies helped build trust and ensured the authenticity of the data.

The use of NVivo enhanced analytical rigor by supporting systematic coding and theme development. Rather than examining each emotion or psychological symptom in isolation, the study analyzed constructs in a composite manner. Emotional impact was examined as a combined construct encompassing fear, anxiety, stress, and emotional fatigue, while psychological impact was treated as a broader construct comprising burnout, insomnia, rumination, and diminished well-being. This construct-wise approach reduced fragmentation and allowed for clearer interpretation of how clustered emotional experiences evolved into sustained psychological conditions.

One area for improvement would have been allocating additional time for transcription and early-stage coding, as these phases required more effort than initially anticipated. Nonetheless, the diversity of participants strengthened the study by enabling sector-wise comparisons and adding contextual depth to the findings.

Ethical sensitivity remained central throughout the research. Many participants shared emotionally taxing experiences, making it essential to conduct interviews with patience, empathy, and respect for personal boundaries. This approach not only safeguarded participant well-being but also enhanced the quality of insights gathered.

From a professional standpoint, the research process strengthened key managerial and academic skills, including communication, planning, time management, and critical analysis. Balancing methodological rigor with emotional sensitivity contributed significantly to the researcher's development as both an academic and an HR practitioner.

In retrospect, the study could be further strengthened by expanding the sample to include additional sectors such as healthcare or law enforcement, where exposure to hostility may differ. A mixed-methods approach could also complement the qualitative findings by offering broader generalizability. Including perspectives from line managers or senior leadership may provide further insight into how organizational support systems operate in practice.

Overall, the research was both intellectually rewarding and personally meaningful. It deepened understanding of workplace hostility, clarified how emotional reactions evolve into psychological outcomes, and reinforced the importance of organizational responsibility in protecting HR professionals. The process contributed not only to academic knowledge but also to the researcher's professional growth and reflective practice.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Introductory Script:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of this study is to understand the emotional and psychological experiences of HR professionals who have encountered employee blackmail, threats, or hostile behavior. There are no right or wrong answers. You may skip any question or stop the interview at any time. All information shared will remain confidential and anonymized.

Section A: Background Information

1. Can you briefly describe your current role in Human Resources?
2. How many years of experience do you have in HR?
3. Which sector do you currently work in? (Public / Private / Multinational / NGO)

Section B: Experience of Employee Hostility (Affective Events)

4. Can you describe an incident where you experienced employee hostility such as threats, intimidation, or blackmail while performing your HR duties?
5. What form did this behavior take?
(e.g., verbal threats, emotional manipulation, reputational pressure, legal threats, involvement of external parties)
6. In which HR context did this occur?
(disciplinary action, termination, grievance handling, policy enforcement, etc.)

Section C: Immediate Emotional Reactions (Short-Term Effects)

7. How did you feel emotionally during or immediately after this incident?

8. Did you experience emotions such as fear, anxiety, stress, or emotional discomfort?
Please explain.
9. Did these incidents affect your emotional state before similar meetings or interactions in the future?
10. How did you manage or suppress your emotions while maintaining professional conduct?

Section D: Psychological Impact (Long-Term Effects)

11. Over time, did repeated exposure to such incidents affect your mental or psychological well-being?
12. Have you experienced any of the following as a result?
 - Sleep disturbances or insomnia
 - Overthinking or rumination
 - Emotional exhaustion or burnout
 - Reduced job satisfaction or motivation
13. How long did these effects persist, and did they influence your performance or personal life?

Section E: Emotional Accumulation and Coping (AET Link)

14. Looking back, do you feel that these emotional reactions accumulated over time?
15. At what point did emotional stress begin to feel psychologically overwhelming?
16. What coping strategies, if any, did you use to manage these experiences?

Section F: Organizational Support and Psychological Safety

17. How would you describe the level of support you received from your organization during or after these incidents?
18. Did leadership or senior management support your decisions as an HR professional?
19. Were there clear policies or procedures to protect HR staff from employee hostility?
20. In your view, how did organizational support (or lack of it) affect your emotional and psychological well-being?

Section G: Reflection and Recommendations

21. What impact do you think employee hostility has on HR professionals in general?
22. What organizational measures do you believe could reduce the emotional and psychological burden on HR staff?
23. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience that we have not discussed?

Closing Statement

Thank you for sharing your experiences. Your insights are valuable and will contribute to a better understanding of the challenges faced by HR professionals.

Rida Anwaar Thesis final draft.pdf

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1st Half Semester Progress Report

Name of Student(s)	Rida Anwaar
Enrollment No.	01-322241-020
Thesis/Project Title	Emotional and Psychological Impact on HR Professionals in Pakistan in Response to Employee Blackmail and Threatening Behaviour

Supervisor Student Meeting Record

No.	Date	Place of Meeting	Topic Discussed	Signature of Student
1	04/09/2025	Supervisor Office	Discussion on research idea, refinement of thesis title, clarification of research problem and scope	
2	14/09/2025	Supervisor Office	Review of Chapter 1 (Introduction), formulation of research objectives and research questions	
3	26/09/2025	Online Meeting	Review of relevant literature, identification of research gap and discussion on conceptual framework	
4	06/10/2025	Supervisor Office	Methodology planning, research design, sampling strategy and ethical considerations	

Progress Satisfactory

Progress Unsatisfactory

Remarks: The student has shown satisfactory progress during the first half of the semester. The guidance. research topic is well defined, objectives are clear, and the literature review has been developed appropriately. Methodology has been discussed in detail and finalized as per the supervisor

Signature of Supervisor:

Date: 17-12-2025

Name: Dr Sumera Syed Note:

Students attach 1st & 2nd half progress report at the end of spiral copy.



MBA

2nd Half Semester Progress Report & Thesis Approval Statement

Name of Student(s)	Rida Anwaar
Enrollment No.	01-32241-020
Thesis/Project Title	Emotional and Psychological Impact on HR Professionals in Pakistan in Response to Employee Blackmail and Threatening Behaviour

Supervisor Student Meeting Record

No.	Date	Place of Meeting	Topic Discussed	Signature of Student
5	21/10/2025	Supervisor Office	Review of data collection progress, interview responses and field challenges	
6	07/11/2025	Supervisor Office	Review of findings, conclusions, recommendations	
7	03/12/2025	Supervisor Office	Review of final formatting as per HEC guidelines	

APPROVAL FOR EXAMINATION

Candidates' Name: Rida Anwaar

Enrollment No: 01-322241-020

Project/Thesis Title: Emotional and Psychological Impact on HR Professionals in Pakistan in Response to Employee Blackmail and Threatening Behaviour

I hereby certify that the above candidates' thesis/project has been completed to my satisfaction and, to my belief, its standard appropriate for submission for examination. I have also conducted plagiarism test of this thesis using HEC prescribed software and found similarity index at 6% that is within the permissible limit set by the HEC for thesis/ project BBA/MBA. I have also found the thesis/project in a format recognized by the Department of Business Studies.

Signature of Supervisor:

Date: 17-12-2025

Name: Dr. Sumera Jafal

Major No. 141

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1. Student Name: Rida Anwaar Enrol # 01-322241-020

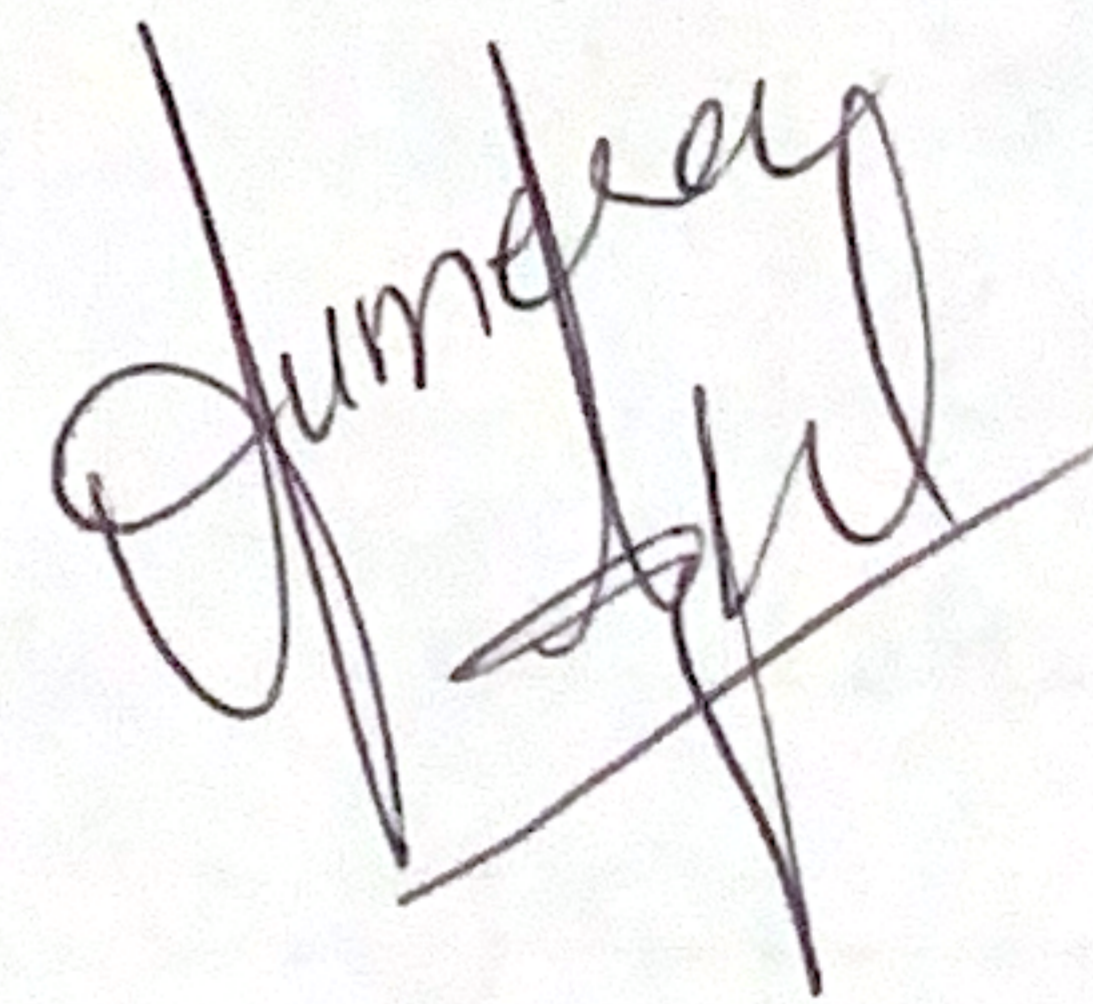
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2. Student Name: _____ Enrol # _____

3. Student Name: _____ Enrol # _____

Specialization: Human Resource Management

Name of Supervisor: Dr. Sumera Iqbal.



Examiner's Instructions: Please fill in the following details.

No.	Corrections required (Suggested by Examiners)	Amendments made	Located on Page
Chapter 1			
	Sharpen problem statement & align objectives.	The problem statement was refined and research obj were aligned more clearly with the study	13-15
Chapter 2			
	Strengthen HR-specific & contextual literature.	The literature review was strengthened with more HR-specific and contextually relevant sources.	22-23
Chapter 3			
	Improve methodological justification & rigor.	Methodological justification was improved to enhance clarity and research rigor.	28-33 31, 32, 36, 37
Chapter 4			
	Increase analytical depth & theory integration.	Analytical depth was increased through stronger theory integration and discussion.	50

Chapter 5			
	Make recommen- dations more actionable.	Recommendations were revised to be more practical and actionable	s5, s6
Executive Summary/Abstract			
	Improve clarity & practical linkage.	Clarity and practical linkage of the abstract were improved.	4
General Comments			
	The research		
	addresses		

** Please add rows if necessary

contemporary and sensitive HR issue. It demonstrates satisfactory analytical ability. Critical arrangement with literature and deeper analytical discussion would further enhance academic rigor.

