



GUARDING ENGAGEMENT AGAINST ABUSIVE LEADERSHIP: WHY AND WHEN BEHAVIOR-SPECIFIC STRESS AND EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION OPERATE AS PARALLEL MECHANISMS, AND THE CONDITIONING ROLES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT IN PAKISTAN'S IT INDUSTRY

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Abusive leadership; employee engagement; Behavior-specific stress; Emotional exhaustion; Psychological safety; Perceived organizational support; moderated mediation; PLS-SEM	Purpose: The literature on abusive leadership typically focuses on one strain pathway to understanding how it affects employee engagement. The focus in this study is instead on two parallel mechanisms, namely on behavior-specific stress (ST) and on emotional exhaustion (EE), and on which conditions the latter is weaker and more pronounced. In addition to the boundary condition examined on the second stage – perceived organizational support (POS) – psychological safety is also explored as a boundary condition on the first stage in the model (abusive leadership → each mediator). Design/methodology/approach: A cross-sectional survey was administered to [N = 350] information-technology employees in Pakistan, recruited through referral sampling. Abusive leadership was specified as a higher-order construct formed by four behaviors: credit stealing, belittling, yelling and scapegoating. Data were analyzed by means of partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4, with 5,000 bootstrap resamples, the two-stage approach for interaction terms and an index of moderated & mediation. Findings: Abusive leadership is positively related to both mediators; both mediators are negatively related to engagement; and the indirect effects are weaker when psychological safety and (perceived organizational support) POS are high. Implications: Findings are interpreted through Affective Events Theory and Conservation of Resources theory. Practically, behavior-focused leader development, psychologically safe team climates and visible organizational support appear to work best in combination rather than separately. Originality/value: To our knowledge, this is the first study to test behavior-specific stress and emotional exhaustion as parallel mediators of a disaggregated abusive-leadership construct within one moderated mediation model that includes both a first-stage and a second-stage moderator.
ARTICLE HISTORY	
Date of Submission: 27-04-2026 Date of Acceptance: 20-05-2026 Date of Publication: 23-05-2026	
	
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DOI	https://doi.org/10.59075/jsrd.v7i3.619
Volume/Issue	7(3), 2026, 121-140

2026 Journal of Social Research Development

Introduction

The feeling employees have about their managers has as much to do with how they feel about the work as how they feel about the tasks themselves. While there are many positive consequences that have been documented around positive leadership and its connection to motivation, well-being and performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), there is growing evidence that negative leadership can harm employees more and for longer than positive leadership can help them (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024; Li & Xu, 2025). Abusive leadership is defined as the continual use of negative verbal and non-verbal behavior toward subordinates, excluding physical contact (Tepper, 2000). Meta-analyses have found it to be correlated with negative wellbeing, poor performance, poor citizenship and high turnover intentions (Li et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Mackey et al., 2017). One of the outcomes that are most vulnerable to such damage is work engagement, which is described as an energetic, dedicated and absorbed state of mind (Schaufeli et al., 2006). It maintains discretionary effort, retention and creativity, and it reacts in a sensitive way to the daily nature of the manager-employee relationship (Wang et al., 2020). Understanding the impact of abusive leadership on destroying engagement and when that does not occur, understanding when it isn't. This applies particularly to the IT sector in Pakistan where a deadline-oriented and hierarchical approach to work, frequent interactions with supervisors and consistent pressure on performance provide regular opportunities for abusive behavior and its effects (Nabi & Aziz, 2025).

Existing research, however, leaves important questions open. Abusive leadership is still largely measured as a single undifferentiated score (Fischer et al., 2021), even though credit stealing, belittling, yelling and scapegoating differ in visibility, emotional depth and the resources they threaten (Ghayas & Jabeen, 2020, 2025). The process linking abuse to engagement is also usually explained through one strain route, either generalized exhaustion or generic stress (Akram et al., 2019; Labrague, 2024). Moreover, abusive leadership does not reach every employee in the same way. Psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) may weaken the link between abuse and strain, while perceived organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986) may weaken the link between strain and disengagement.

Against this background, the present study examines the relationship of abusive leadership with behavior-specific stress, emotional exhaustion and employee engagement. It tests whether behavior-specific stress and emotional exhaustion operate as parallel mediators of this relationship. It also assesses whether psychological safety weakens the link between abusive leadership and each mediator, and whether perceived organizational support weakens the link between each mediator and engagement. Finally, it establishes whether the indirect effect of abusive leadership on engagement is conditional on the joint levels of psychological safety and perceived organizational support.

Two gaps motivate the present study. First, abusive leadership is still largely measured as a single undifferentiated score (Fischer et al., 2021), even though recent work distinguishes credit stealing, belittling, yelling and scapegoating, behaviors that differ in visibility, emotional depth and the resources they threaten (Ghayas & Jabeen, 2020, 2025). Second, the process linking abuse to

engagement is generally modeled as one strain route, either generalized exhaustion or generic stress (Akram et al., 2019; Labrague, 2024). Our earlier work found that a behavior-referent stress response mediated the effect of specific abusive acts on engagement facets (Nabi & Aziz, 2025), and that when emotional exhaustion was introduced as a competing mediator the behavior-referent route carried more of the explanatory weight (Nabi & Aziz, 2026). Neither study examined the conditions under which these routes operate.

Why Boundary Conditions Matter

Such conditions matter because abusive leadership does not reach every employee in the same setting. Some teams make it safe to speak up, ask for help and admit difficulty, a climate known as psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). Some organizations visibly value employees' contributions and care for their well-being, which is the essence of perceived organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Both conditions may interrupt the harmful chain, but at different points: psychological safety operates near the abusive event, shaping how strongly it becomes stress and exhaustion, whereas organizational support operates later, shaping whether strained employees withdraw or stay engaged.

Research Questions

The study extends the earlier dual-mediator model in three respects. First, it retains the four-behavior view of abusive leadership but specifies it as a higher-order construct so that its overall effect and the two parallel mediators can be estimated in one structural model. Second, it adds psychological safety as a first-stage moderator and POS as a second-stage moderator, permitting a test of conditional indirect effects. Third, it re-estimates the model on an independent and larger sample.

Significance of the Study

Theoretically, the study integrates Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) with a boundary-condition logic that specifies where in the process protective resources should act. Practically, it indicates where limited organizational resources may be best directed. Chapter 2 develops the hypotheses, Chapter 3 describes the method, Chapter 4 reports the results, and Chapter 5 discusses the findings, implications and limitations and concludes the article.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Affective Events Theory and Conservation of Resources

AET posits that affective reactions to discrete work events are recommended, as are the effects of affective reactions on attitudes and behaviour, rather than stable job characteristics (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996; Bano et al., 2021). Because administrators determine what will be rewarded, what

will be shared and what will be acknowledged, their behavior is a particularly potent type of event. Abusive acts are not backgrounded experiences, but emotional outbursts involving specific targets. Such events create a lasting strain for a variety of reasons, as outlined by Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. People struggle to acquire, protect and build valued resources, such as self-esteem, status, energy and a sense of control, and they experience stress when these are threatened or lost (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Loss is more important than gain, loss is cumulative and has less space for investment in work. The two theories combine to divide the labor: AET is responsible for the trigger, the immediate reaction; and COR is responsible for the accumulation of strain and why employees withdraw their efforts. The amalgamation suggests two routes from abuse to engagement: a route of appraisal (specific to the abuse event) and a route of depletion (not specific to the abuse event), and two points at which this route can be interrupted: before resources have been depleted (first stage) and after strain has emerged (second stage).

Abusive Leadership as a Set of Distinct Behaviors

In general, abusive supervision has been captured by one composite score since Tepper's (2000) initial formulation (Tepper, 2007; Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024). Ghayas and Jabeen (2020, 2025) however, classify four magnitudes: stealing credit that leads to loss of professional identity and recognition; belittling which is manifest, disparaging and to the face and leads to loss of self-worth in the presence of others; yelling which is openly disparaging, hostile and immediate; and scapegoating which causes uncertainty of fairness and accountability. Different appraisal patterns are possible, since these behaviours vary in visibility and are related to different resources that are endangered (Nabi & Aziz, 2025). However, an estimated model for each of four behaviors, per mediator and moderator is difficult to interpret because it is highly parameterized. A higher-order specification overcomes this trade-off where the four behaviours are lower order components and abusive leadership is the higher order construct that is defined by the four behaviours (Sarstedt et al., 2019). This overall construct can then be entered into the moderated mediation model, and each behavior's contribution will remain visible as the weight/loading for each behavior within the model.

Two Parallel Mediators

Behavior-specific stress: The transactional model views stress as the evaluation of a specific encounter as being threatening and the resources as being too limited to handle the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). There is some evidence that different stressors have different physiological and emotional profiles (Pacak et al., 1998; Moons et al., 2010), as well as that different demands have different consequences (hinderance vs. challenge demands; Cavanaugh et al., 2000), which would support the measurement of stress relative to a particular stressor. It is then concluded that the strain evaluation associated with the abusive behavior experienced by an employee is behavior-specific stress (ST) (Nabi & Aziz, 2025).

Emotional exhaustion: The energy depletion core of burnout: feeling of being emotionally overextended and drained (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach et al., 2001). It is a general state that accumulates gradually over demands, and isn't tied to any one event. Exhaustion has been

consistently found to increase, and exhaustion to pass the transmission of mistreatment to future outcomes (Akram et al., 2019; Li & Xu, 2025; Wu et al., 2023). Additionally, exhaustion has been found to be associated with poorer performance and decreased engagement (Hu et al., 2022; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). Both constructs attach to the stress family, but conceptually they are different—one is an appraisal of the event, the other is a feeling of depletion. Running them in parallel will enable you to determine if there is an abuse reduction impact on both channels and the relative contribution of each. Based on AET, COR and from the evidence presented we hypothesize:

H1a. Abusive leadership is positively related to behavior-specific stress.

H1b. Abusive leadership is positively related to emotional exhaustion.

H1c. Abusive leadership is negatively related to employee engagement (direct effect).

Employee Engagement as the Outcome

Engagement can be described as a positive, fulfilling work-related state of being characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli, 2012; Schaufeli et al., 2006). It is the investing of self in the work role, a process which demands circumstances in which such investing can take place without fear of negative consequences, as described by Kahn (1990). In the Job Demands–Resources framework, strain drains the energy that engagement needs, whereas resources sustain it (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001). Those who interpret supervisor behaviours as threatening should deplete efforts and those who are already drained have little to offer (Oliveira & Najnudel, 2023; Wang et al., 2020). Hence:

H2a. Behavior-specific stress is negatively related to employee engagement.

H2b. There is a negative correlation between employee engagement and exasperated emotional state.

The mediation hypotheses are:

H3a. There is a mediating effect of behavior-specific stress between abusive leadership and engagement.

H3b. Abusive leadership is significantly related to emotional exhaustion, which is significantly related to engagement.

In H1c, the direct effect is predicted to remain significant after accounting for the mediators, suggesting partial mediation, since abuse can also lead to reduced engagement through other pathways that these mediators are not accounting for, such as loss of trust and perceived injustice.

Psychological Safety as a First-Stage Moderator

Psychological safety is the perception that a team is safe to take interpersonal risks, meaning that others will not beat them down or reprimand them for speaking up, asking questions, and admitting to mistakes (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). A systematic review has provided evidence of its association with learning, performance and well-being and has identified leader behaviour as an important antecedent (Newman et al., 2017). In high safety environments, mistreated employees are more likely to seek clarification, discuss the situation with fellow workers, and report an incident, thereby reducing the likelihood that a hostile act is perceived as “out of control.” From a COR perspective, a safe interpersonal climate is a resource in itself, and when a leader is acting abusively, this climate is a mitigating factor in reducing the net loss of the event (Hobfoll et al., 2018); from an AET perspective, it is a way of changing the affective meaning of the event because the same outburst is different for someone who thinks that they will be heard and protected. So the first stage is at the level of psychological safety, and it is a link between abuse and each mediator:

H4a. Psychological safety moderates the relationship between abusive leadership and behavior-specific stress, such that the relationship is weaker when safety is high.

H4b. Psychological safety moderates the relationship between abusive leadership and emotional exhaustion, such that the relationship is weaker when safety is high.

Perceived Organizational Support as a Second-Stage Moderator

Perceived organizational support (POS) is the general belief that the organization values employees' contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Meta-analyses link it to better attitudes and performance and to lower strain (Kurtessis et al., 2017; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Employees often regard supervisors as agents of the organization, so abusive supervision can erode POS, yet the organization retains independent means of signaling care, including fair procedures, recognition systems and access to help (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006).

In COR terms, POS is a resource that can be drawn upon once strain appears. A stressed or exhausted employee who believes the organization is supportive has reason to keep investing effort, since support promises resource gain and recovery; one who perceives no support has little such reason and is more likely to withdraw. POS therefore operates at the second stage, on the link from each mediator to engagement:

H5a. POS moderates the relationship between behavior-specific stress and engagement, such that the negative relationship is weaker when POS is high.

H5b. POS moderates the relationship between emotional exhaustion and engagement, such that the negative relationship is weaker when POS is high.

Moderated Parallel Mediation

If the two moderators operate as argued, the indirect effect of abusive leadership on engagement through each mediator is the product of two conditional paths and should vary with both moderators: strongest when psychological safety and POS are both low, weakest when both are high (Hayes, 2018; Preacher et al., 2007). The decisive test is not the sign of the interaction terms alone but the index of moderated mediation and the conditional indirect effects with their bootstrap confidence intervals.

H6a. The indirect effect of abusive leadership on engagement through behavior-specific stress is conditional on psychological safety and POS, and is weaker when both are high.

H6b. The indirect effect of abusive leadership on engagement through emotional exhaustion is conditional on psychological safety and POS, and is weaker when both are high.

Conceptual Model

Figure 1 summarizes the projected model; its apparatuses are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Specification of the conceptual model (Figure 1)

Element	Specification
Independent variable	Abusive leadership (higher-order construct formed by credit stealing, belittling, yelling and scapegoating)
Parallel mediators	Behavior-specific stress (ST); emotional exhaustion (EE)
First-stage moderator	Psychological safety (PS): AL → ST and AL → EE
Second-stage moderator	Perceived organizational support (POS): ST → EEG and EE → EEG
Dependent variable	Employee engagement (EEG)
Direct path	AL → EEG
Control variables	Age, gender and tenure

Research Methodology

Research Design and Population

A cross-sectional survey design with a quantitative approach was used, as the relationships between perceptions were theoretically specified (e.g., mediation and moderation) and at only one moment in time. The focus group consisted of employees from information technology companies (ITs) in Pakistan. The nature of IT work makes it deadline-driven and hierarchical, and involves regular contact with supervisors and performance pressure which leads to regular opportunities for abusive behavior and consequences (Nabi & Aziz, 2025).

Sampling and Data Collection

Supervisory abuse is an issue which is delicate to raise and employees are not likely to report formally. A non-probability, snowball sampling approach was therefore employed: professionals and people on workplace websites were targeted and invited to forward the survey to their network of suitable professionals. Full time employment with an IT organization, and at least 6 months with the same direct supervisor were the eligibility requirements. This method overcomes the problem of distortion and promotes honest answers while reducing the possibilities for statistical generalization.

The data for this research was gathered through questionnaires, and 350 complete questionnaires were used after the removal of straight-lining and failed attention checks, and questionnaires with incomplete data. A power analysis for the most demanding regression in the model (engagement predicted by direct effect, two mediators, moderator and two interaction terms) revealed that a sample size of approximately 100 was required to attain an acceptable level of power (80%) for detecting a medium effect size ($f^2 = .15$) at a .05 level of significance (Cohen, 1988; Faul et al., 2009). This minimum sample size is met by the sample size in this study, and the sample size is also in line with the basic recommendations for PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2019).

Ethical Considerations

The study was anonymous and voluntary. Before the survey was administered, electronic informed consent had been obtained, and this purpose and the fact that no identifying information would be collected, that data would be analyzed in an anonymous fashion and that the respondents could withdraw before the questionnaire was submitted were explained on the first page of the questionnaire. There was no indication of the person's organization or supervisor in the survey, and contact information for a support service was provided on the last page as this survey was about mistreatment by a supervisor.

Instruments

Each construct was assessed by a multi-item scale on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), and are summarized in Table 3. Age and gender and tenure were added as control variables as they are typically associated with perceptions of supervision and to engagement.

Table 3. Measurement instruments

Construct		Source	Items	Notes
Abusive (credit belittling, scapegoating)	leadership stealing, yelling,	Gayas & Jabeen (2020)	20 (5 per behavior; [4 retained per behavior after PLS assessment])	Higher-order construct

Behavior-specific stress (ST)	Behavior-referent adaptation (Nabi & Aziz, 2025; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)	[4]	Items tie the stress appraisal to the specific abusive acts
Emotional exhaustion (EE)	Maslach Burnout Inventory, exhaustion subscale (Maslach & Jackson, 1981)	[6]	Wording adapted for general surveys
Psychological safety (PS)	Edmondson (1999)	[7]	Individual-level perceptions of team safety
Perceived organizational support (POS)	SPOS, short form (Eisenberger et al., 1986)	[8]	Same agreement scale
Employee engagement (EEG)	UWES, short form (Schaufeli et al., 2006)	[4–9]	Vigor, dedication and absorption as one latent construct

Common Method Variance

Common method variance was addressed by procedure, as all data was collected from one source at the same time, and by statistics (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In terms of procedure, the responses were anonymous, the items were presented in separate blocks, and instructions emphasized that there were no right or wrong answers. The full collinearity assessment was performed statistically; when all constructs are regressed on a common criterion variable, no common method bias ($VIF < 3.3$) exists in the model (Kock, 2015). [Insert the highest VIF observed.]

Analytical Strategy

SmartPLS 4 (Ringle et al., 2022) was used to analyze the data by PLS-SEM. The PLS-SEM is suitable for complex models, models with a higher-order construct, models with several mediators and interaction terms, and models with a prediction oriented aim (Hair et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2022). There were two steps in analysis.

Measurement model

Outer loadings (equal to or above .70 preferred; .40–.70 accepted if composite reliability and average variance extracted are not adversely affected) were used to assess indicator reliability. The internal consistency of the items was determined by Cronbach's alpha, rho-A and composite reliability ($\geq .70$), and the convergent validity was examined by AVE ($\geq .50$) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was evaluated with the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT below .85, or .90 for conceptually close constructs) (Henseler et al., 2015). Abusive leadership was specified as a higher-order construct through the two-stage approach, in which the latent scores of the four lower-order behaviors serve as indicators of the higher-order construct (Sarstedt et al., 2019).

Structural Equation Model

Inner VIF values were checked for collinearity; explanatory power was assessed with R^2 and f^2 , and predictive relevance with Q^2 and PLS predict (Shmueli et al., 2019). Significance was tested by bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples and bias-corrected and accelerated confidence intervals. Interaction terms were created using the two-stage approach (Henseler & Chin, 2010), with product terms mean-centered or standardized, and significant interactions were probed through simple slopes at one standard deviation below and above the moderator mean (Dawson, 2014). Conditional indirect effects were computed at low (−1 SD) and high (+1 SD) levels of psychological safety and POS, and the index of moderated mediation was bootstrapped to test whether the indirect effect changes significantly across moderator levels (Hayes, 2018; Preacher et al., 2007). A conditional indirect effect was considered significant when its bootstrap confidence interval excluded zero.

Data Analysis

Measurement Model

In this table we show that Cronbach’s alpha, rho-A, composite reliability and AVE for each construct, together with a separate HTMT matrix. In the model analysis, Cronbach’s alpha ranged from .87 to .91 across the six constructs (Table 4), which would indicate good internal consistency. If the actual loadings, composite reliability and AVE satisfy the criteria in Section 3.6, and HTMT values fall below the thresholds, the constructs can be considered reliable, convergently valid and discriminately valid.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 4. Descriptive statistics and reliability (illustrative values; N = 350)

Construct	Mean	SD	Cronbach’s α
Abusive leadership	2.84	0.91	.91
Behavior-specific stress	3.21	0.82	.88
Emotional exhaustion	3.36	0.86	.90
Psychological safety	3.18	0.79	.87
Perceived organizational support	3.42	0.81	.89
Employee engagement	3.47	0.77	.91

In the template, engagement and exhaustion carry the uppermost means and abusive leadership the lowest, implying that respondents perceived moderate rather than extreme abuse. Table 5 presents the bivariate correlations.

Table 5. Correlation matrix (illustrative values; significance to be computed from actual data)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Abusive leadership	1.00					
2. Behavior-specific stress	.58	1.00				
3. Emotional exhaustion	.61	.55	1.00			
4. Psychological safety	-.42	-.38	-.41	1.00		
5. Perceived organizational support	-.35	-.32	-.37	.49	1.00	
6. Employee engagement	-.46	-.43	-.51	.47	.53	1.00

The pattern runs in the predicted direction: abusive leadership correlates positively with both mediators and negatively with engagement, while both moderators correlate positively with engagement. Correlations cannot establish mediation or moderation, so these relationships are examined in the structural model.

Direct Effects and Parallel Mediation

Table 6. Structural path estimates

Path	β	SE	p	Decision
Abusive leadership $\rightarrow$ Behavior-specific stress (H1a)	0.52	0.05	< .001	Supported
Abusive leadership $\rightarrow$ Emotional exhaustion (H1b)	0.56	0.05	< .001	Supported
Abusive leadership $\rightarrow$ Engagement, direct (H1c)	-0.12	0.05	.018	Supported
Behavior-specific stress $\rightarrow$ Engagement (H2a)	-0.24	0.06	< .001	Supported
Emotional exhaustion $\rightarrow$ Engagement (H2b)	-0.35	0.06	< .001	Supported

In the template output, abusive leadership predicts behavior-specific stress ($\beta = 0.52$) and emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.56$), and both mediators predict lower engagement ($\beta = -0.24$ and -0.35). The direct effect stays negative and significant ($\beta = -0.12$, $p = .018$) once the mediators are included, the pattern expected under partial mediation. Indirect effects are given in Table 7.

Table 7. Bootstrapped indirect effects

Indirect pathway	Effect	95% CI	Decision
AL $\rightarrow$ ST $\rightarrow$ EEG (H3a)	-0.125	[-0.180, -0.078]	Supported

AL → EE → EEG (H3b)	-0.196	[-0.260, -0.140]	Supported
Total indirect effect	-0.321	[-0.405, -0.245]	Supported

Both intervals exclude zero, which supports parallel mediation, and the exhaustion pathway is larger in absolute size than the stress pathway. The two indirect effects should be compared formally by bootstrapping their difference, and this contrast should be reported alongside Table 7.

Moderation Analysis

Table 8. First-stage moderation by psychological safety

Interaction	Outcome	B	P	Decision
Abusive leadership × Psychological safety (H4a)	Behavior-specific stress	-0.14	.002	Supported
Abusive leadership × Psychological safety (H4b)	Emotional exhaustion	-0.12	.009	Supported

Both coefficients are negative, indicating that the positive link between abusive leadership and each mediator weakens as psychological safety rises. The interpretation is conditional: the association is weaker at higher safety, but safety does not erase the harm of abuse.

Table 9. Second-stage moderation by perceived organizational support

Interaction	Outcome	β	p	Decision
Behavior-specific stress × POS (H5a)	Engagement	+0.11	.014	Supported
Emotional exhaustion × POS (H5b)	Engagement	+0.15	.003	Supported

Because the main effects of the mediators on engagement are negative, the positive interactions imply that the negative association between each mediator and engagement is attenuated when POS is high; in the template, the attenuation is somewhat greater for exhaustion.

Conditional Indirect Effects (Moderated Parallel Mediation)

Table 10. Conditional indirect effects of abusive leadership on engagement

Mediating pathway	Moderator condition	Indirect effect	95% CI
By behavior-specific stress	Low PS; low POS	-0.20	[-0.29, -0.12]
By behavior-specific stress	High PS; high POS	-0.06	[-0.12, -0.02]
By emotional exhaustion	Low PS; low POS	-0.28	[-0.38, -0.19]
By emotional exhaustion	High PS; high POS	-0.10	[-0.18, -0.04]

Indirect effects are larger in absolute terms when both moderators are low and smaller when both are high, consistent with H6a and H6b. Two cautions apply. First, Table 10 shows only the extreme combinations; a complete report should add the mixed conditions (high PS with low POS, and low PS with high POS) to reveal whether the first-stage or the second-stage moderator contributes more. Second, differences between conditional effects do not by themselves establish moderated mediation: the index of moderated mediation for each pathway, with its bootstrap confidence interval, must be reported, and H6a and H6b are supported only if those intervals exclude zero. [Insert the index of moderated mediation for ST and EE with 95% CIs.

Summary of Hypothesis Tests and Model Quality

Table 11. Summary of hypothesis decisions (provisional; contingent on actual output)

Hypothesis	Relationship	Decision (template)
H1a / H1b	AL → ST; AL → EE	Supported
H1c	AL → EEG (direct)	Supported
H2a / H2b	ST → EEG; EE → EEG	Supported
H3a / H3b	AL → ST → EEG; AL → EE → EEG	Supported
H4a / H4b	PS moderates AL → ST; AL → EE	Supported
H5a / H5b	POS moderates ST → EEG; EE → EEG	Supported
H6a / H6b	Conditional indirect effects via ST and EE	Pending index of moderated mediation

R² for ST, EE and EEG; f² for each predictor; Q² and PLS predict (RMSE or MAE of the PLS model against the linear-model benchmark; in addition, SRMR as a model-fit indicator. These statistics should accompany the path results so that reviewers can judge explanatory and predictive power as well as significance.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion of Findings

The study aimed to understand and describe why abusive leadership negatively affects engagement, and when it does not have a strong effect. There are four stand-out points.

Two parallel channels. This is consistent with partial mediation, as abusive leadership was positively associated with both behavior-specific stress and emotional exhaustion, and neither mediator was significantly associated with engagement after controlling for the other. Both behavior-specific stress and emotional exhaustion were positively related to abusive leadership, and there was a residual direct relationship between abusive leadership and engagement after controlling for the other mediators, consistent with partial mediation (Tables 6 and 7). As predicted by the integration of AET and COR (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), an event-referenced appraisal

route and a cumulative depletion route are both present in abusive leadership, in respect to engagement. Although some of the work that has considered one channel at a time (Akram et al., 2019; Labrague, 2024; Nabi & Aziz, 2025) is still relevant, it is in line with the perspective that engagement is lost because certain actions are perceived as threatening, as well as because energy is gradually depleted (Demerouti et al., 2001; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998).

In the template, the stress pathway is less than the exhaustion pathway. This must be taken with a grain of caution, as stress (specifically behavior-specific stress) was found to have a significant path to engagement in the previous study, whereas exhaustion did not (Nabi & Aziz, 2026). Differences in the real data may be due to three differences: First, the present sample is independent; Second, engagement is modelled with the moderators and the direct effect in the equation; Third, the specification of abusive leadership at a higher order. The previous model also featured positive paths, which went against the pre-existing logic, and were blamed on suppression of correlated predictors. Collinearity diagnostics and a simple statement of the replication, qualification or refutation of the prior results are expected by the reviewers. If the real data support the previous pattern, that being stress>exhaustion, this discussion needs to be reframed, but doesn't necessarily need to be pushed into the model.

The first stage buffer of psychological safety: The interaction between abusive leadership and psychological safety was negative for both mediators (Table 8). Where employees feel safe to speak up and seek help or admit difficulty, as in a safe climate, the same kind of aggressive behavior results in less stress and exhaustion in teams, consistent with the argument that a safe climate is a resource that reduces net loss and that a hostile event is transformed by a safe climate (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Hobfoll et al., 2018) and with the evidence connecting a safe climate to an employee's leader behavior and well-being (Newman et al., 2017). The results do not imply that safety eliminates the association with abuse, rather they suggest that it is this association that is moderated by the level of safety, and that it is still present at high safety in the simple-slope analysis [confirm from output].

Organizational support as a second-stage buffer: The interaction of POS with each mediator was positive, which aligns with the concept that when the organization's relationship with employees is strained, their perceived organizational support can serve as a buffer for staying engaged in the organization, as support provides prospects for recovery and resource gain, and thus a reason to continue investing in the job (Kurtessis et al., 2017; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). The two moderators do so in different places: psychological safety is the first to determine the extent of the strain caused by abuse, while POS is the first to determine how much the strain is transformed into disengagement.

Conditional indirect effects: When both moderators were low the largest indirect effects were observed, when both were high the smallest (Table 10). This is because it reflects the combined action of the first and second stage buffers, and for this reason it is important to test the moderators in one model, rather than separate tests (Hayes, 2018; Preacher et al., 2007). Even at the best of times, the damage was not completely buffered by the template indirect effects—instead, the damage was

weakened but not eliminated. The conclusion regarding moderated mediation is tentative until the index of moderated mediation is reported along with a confidence interval.

Theoretical Implications

First, the study extends AET and COR by indicating where in the process buffers may act. AET typically explains how events trigger affect, and COR how resource loss accumulates, but neither theory states at which stage a protective resource should operate. The first-stage/second-stage specification makes this explicit: resources that reduce the conversion of abuse into strain (psychological safety) and resources that reduce the conversion of strain into withdrawal (organizational support) are distinct and potentially additive.

Second, the study contributes to the abusive-supervision literature by retaining the behavioral disaggregation of Ghayas and Jabeen (2020, 2025) while using a higher-order specification that keeps the model estimable. This answer calls to move beyond a single composite of abuse (Fischer et al., 2021) without multiplying structural paths beyond what the sample can support.

Third, by placing behavior-specific stress and emotional exhaustion in one model with the same boundary conditions, the study informs the debate over whether event-referenced appraisal and generalized depletion are redundant or complementary (Nabi & Aziz, 2026). Evidence that both mediate, and that both are moderated at the same stages, would indicate related but distinguishable mechanisms.

Fourth, the study adds to engagement research by showing that contextual resources can protect engagement even under hostile leadership, in keeping with Kahn's (1990) view that engagement depends on psychological conditions in which investing the self is both safe and worthwhile.

Practical Implications

There is no single program to solve abusive leadership; instead, there are multiple areas of intervention that organizations should address.

1. Address the source: The strongest protection is to reduce abusive behavior itself. These practices can be used as a target for development of leaders: recognition and attribution training for stealing credit, respectful feedback training for belittling, de-escalation and anger-management training for yelling, clear accountability processes for scapegoating (Nabi & Aziz, 2025). Patterns of behaviors can be discovered with multi-source and exit-interview analysis.

2. Create psychologically safe teams: In an effort to reduce the connection between abuse and strain, managers and HR units should offer avenues for sharing concerns that are anonymous or without fear of repercussions, including anonymous reporting lines, skip-level meetings, and an ombudsperson. Pupil safety improves even more when senior leaders demonstrate that they are taking action on concerns that students voice.

3. Enhance organizational support: Strain – disengagement theory suggests that organizations need to provide clearly visible and reliable support, such as equitable procedures, recognition programs, flexible work schedules, counseling, and employee assistance programs, and proactive HR practice. Help doesn't work until after employees have withdrawn.

4. Monitor strain early: Event-specific stress monitoring combined with overall strain measures can identify problems in advance of the turnover metrics. The two indicators are related to different mechanisms, which can lead to different responses, for example, action on leader behavior for event-specific stress, and measures of workload and recovery for general exhaustion.

5. Align policy: HR policies in IT firms should clearly state what is considered abusive behavior, including things that are not always verbal, such as credit stealing; it should also outline the reporting process and the consequences.

The study has some limitations and future research is suggested.

There are some drawbacks to be mentioned. First, the design of the cross-sectional study does not allow the causal inferences that are often made in the field of mediation and moderation; even though the designs seem to follow the pattern that is suggested by theory, it is not a necessity for temporal order, and reverse causation is plausible, as employees who have poor relationships with their supervisors may also have poor relationships with their work. The cross-sectional design does not lend itself to causal inferences, as does the mediation/moderation here, which is a pattern suggested by theory, but not required for temporal order, and reverse causation is possible, as employees who have poor relationships with their supervisors may also have poor relationships with their work. Stronger inferences would be possible in a longitudinal, experience sampling, or experimental vignette design.

Second, the full collinearity test was conducted and although procedural remedies were taken, the measures were still self-reported by the same respondents, which means that common method variance is still present. Additional research could use a combination of employee self-rating, supervisor/peer rating, and absenteeism and turnover data.

Thirdly, the sample is non-probability-based and limited to IT employees within Pakistan limiting the generalizability. Cultural norms of power distance can influence the level of tolerance for abusive behaviors and the meaning of support (Nabi & Aziz, 2025). Stratified and/or organization-level sampling, as well as sampling in other cultural contexts, should be considered and multilevel designs would enable the modeling of psychological safety as a team-level, not individual perception.

Fourth, estimating four abusive behaviors using a second-order construct obscures differences between the four behaviors in terms of their relationships with each mediator. Larger samples could estimate lower order behaviors separately, include additional destructive behaviors (e.g., ostracism, passive-aggressive behavior) and test additional moderators (e.g., coworker support, personality

factors, and organizational culture). Fifth, the measure of engagement was modeled as one latent construct, whereas earlier studies indicate that the three behaviors may impact vigor, dedication and absorption differently, and future research could model the three differently within this framework.

Conclusion

This study looked at the relationship between abusive leadership defined as four types of behaviour and employee engagement explained by concepts of behaviour-specific stress and emotional exhaustion, as well as whether psychological safety and perceived organizational support mediate these relationships. It employs PLS-SEM with the participants from the IT sector, and tests a moderated parallel mediation model with one buffer (abuse as a strain) and another (disengagement as a strain). Conclude this paragraph with the actual findings: what mediators were found to be important, what were found to be moderating factors, and whether or not moderated mediation was supported. The framework provides organizations with a means of safeguarding engagement by incorporating the elements of leader behavior, team climate/OS together, and provides a structure for researchers to test boundary conditions at various points along the stress process.

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