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Workplace bullying and employee taking charge: the role of organization-based self-esteem, affective commitment and locus of control

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Abstract

Purpose: Workplace bullying is an increasingly serious organizational issue, yet limited research has examined how and when it influences employees' taking charge. Drawing on belongingness theory, this study investigates the relationship between workplace bullying and employees' taking charge, focusing on the sequential mediating roles of organization-based self-esteem and affective commitment, as well as the moderating role of locus of control.

Methods: Data were collected from 356 Chinese employees using a four-wave, time-lagged survey with four-week intervals between waves. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were conducted to assess construct validity, and reliability analyses were carried out to evaluate internal consistency. Path analysis and the bootstrapping method were then employed to test the proposed hypotheses.

Results: The results showed that workplace bullying was negatively related to employees' taking charge. This relationship was sequentially mediated by organization-based self-esteem and affective commitment. Moreover, locus of control strengthened the negative relationship between workplace bullying and organization-based self-esteem, and amplified the indirect effect of workplace bullying on taking charge through organization-based self-esteem and affective commitment.

Conclusions: The findings contribute to research on understanding the relationship between workplace bullying and employee taking charge and have practical managerial implications for organizations seeking to promote employee taking charge.

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Keywords: workplace bullying; organization-based self-esteem; affective commitment; taking charge; locus of control

Introduction

In today's rapidly changing and competitive organizational environments, organizations increasingly rely on employees who can proactively initiate change rather than merely respond to it. Employees' taking charge, a critical form of proactive work behavior, reflects employees' voluntary and constructive efforts to bring about improvement within their organizations [1]. Such behavior has become especially vital for organizational adaptability, innovation, and long-term success [1, 2]. Prior research has shown that employees' taking charge enhances both organizational outcomes and employees' own experiences and performance [3-5]. However, despite growing recognition of its importance, scholars have yet to fully explain why some employees proactively take charge while others remain passive.

Previous studies have primarily examined contextual and individual-level predictors of taking charge. Contextual factors such as workgroup norms [1], organizational justice [3], and enterprise digitalization [6] have been found to significantly impact this behavior. Similarly, individual-level characteristics, including goal orientation [3, 7], proactive personality [8], and calling [9] have also been linked to taking charge. These studies provide valuable insights into how contextual and personal factors influence employees' taking charge. More recent work has examined relational antecedents such as leader–member exchange [10] and relational leadership [11, 12], but this literature has also largely emphasized positive relational dynamics. Thus, the negative side of workplace relationships remains comparatively underexplored in research on taking charge.

Workplace bullying is a pervasive form of negative interpersonal interaction that involves employees' repeated exposure to hostile, humiliating, or exclusionary acts in the workplace [13]. While bullying has long been recognized as harmful in educational contexts [14-17], its organizational counterpart has not been fully examined. Existing research has linked workplace bullying to reduced voice, creativity, organizational citizenship behavior, job satisfaction, and performance [5, 13, 18-21]. However, its influence on taking charge remains insufficiently examined. This omission is important because taking charge is not only discretionary but also change-oriented and potentially risky [15]. Employees who experience repeated rejection, humiliation, or exclusion at work may become less willing to challenge existing routines or propose improvements

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To address this gap, we developed a moderated chain mediation model grounded in belongingness theory. Belongingness theory posits that humans have a fundamental need to form and maintain positive interpersonal relationships [22]. Thus, we propose that workplace bullying impacts employees' taking charge through a sequential process involving organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) and affective commitment. We conceptualize OBSE and affective commitment as sequential mediators because belongingness theory suggests that the perception of being valued, a cognitive evaluation, precedes the emotional experience of attachment. OBSE captures employees' perceived competence and significance within the organization [23, 24], which cognitively anchors affective commitment, the emotional bond with the organization that follows from feeling valued. This causal ordering is also consistent with empirical evidence showing that self-esteem-related cognitions often give rise to affective attachment in organizational contexts [24-26]. Thus, the chain mediation model proposes a cognition–emotion–behavior sequence as an explanatory framework. Specifically, we first argue that workplace bullying erodes OBSE by conveying that employees are not respected or valued [13, 27-29]. Next, we contend that OBSE influences affective commitment, which reflects employees' emotional attachment and identification with the organization [30]. Employees who perceive themselves as having low value to the organization often exhibit weaker emotional bonds and a reduced sense of organizational identity [23, 31-35]. Finally, affective commitment is proposed to enhance taking charge. Affective commitment encourages employees to initiate change and contribute to organizational improvement, thereby increasing their engagement in taking charge [30, 36-40].

Importantly, not all employees react to bullying in the same way. Research suggests that individuals' personality traits influence how they interpret and respond to negative work experiences [41, 42]. Accordingly, we introduce locus of control (LOC) as a boundary condition, which refers to the extent to which individuals believe they can influence life events rather than being controlled by external circumstances [43]. Whereas belongingness theory explains why bullying threatens employees' sense of being valued, LOC helps explain when employees are more likely to internalize such threats. Employees with an internal LOC may attribute bullying to their own shortcomings, which amplifies its detrimental impact on OBSE [44, 45]. In contrast, those with an external LOC may view bullying as beyond their personal control, buffering its negative effects [44, 46].

Our study makes the following contributions. First, it contributes to research on taking charge by examining workplace bullying as an adverse interpersonal condition that may inhibit employees' proactive behavior. This helps complement prior research that has mainly emphasized positive relational and contextual antecedents of taking

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charge. Second, by applying belongingness theory to a negative workplace relational context, this study offers a theoretically grounded explanation of how workplace bullying may undermine taking charge through the sequential roles of OBSE and affective commitment. This perspective helps explain why hostile interpersonal experiences may reduce employees' willingness to initiate constructive change. Third, it identifies LOC as a boundary condition that shapes the extent to which bullying threatens employees' OBSE. In doing so, the study helps explain when workplace bullying is more likely to undermine employees' sense of self-worth.

Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Workplace bullying and employee taking charge

Workplace bullying may be perpetrated by supervisors, coworkers, or subordinates and is typically marked by persistence, systematicity, and a power imbalance[13, 47, 48]. These behaviors can appear in different ways, such as making fun of someone in public, not sharing important work information, or regularly ignoring the person's opinions [49]. Workplace bullying is commonly reflected in repeated exposure to such negative acts over time, which distinguishes it from isolated interpersonal conflicts or occasional mistreatment [47]. Because of this, it is seen as one of the most harmful stressors at work [50]. Numerous studies have demonstrated that workplace bullying leads to serious negative outcomes, particularly for the individuals targeted. Victims of bullying may experience reduced job satisfaction and performance [41, 51], increased absenteeism, higher levels of organizational deviance, and a greater likelihood of leaving their job [5, 52]. Over time, this form of workplace mistreatment can also have detrimental effects on individuals' mental and physical health [53]. Furthermore, research has indicated that in environments where bullying is tolerated, employees may engage in unethical behavior, perceiving the organizational climate as permissive—or even supportive—of such conduct [54].

Taking charge highlights employees' voluntary and constructive efforts to promote organizational effectiveness [1] and is considered a type of organizational citizenship behavior [2]. It involves proactive, constructive, and change-oriented behaviors that go beyond formal job requirements and reflect the voluntary efforts of employees to improve organizational processes or practices [1]. Prior research has indicated that employees' taking charge is influenced by the attitudes and actions of both leaders and coworkers [39, 55, 56]. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: workplace bullying is negatively related to employees' taking charge.

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Workplace bullying, organization-based self-esteem, affective commitment and taking charge

Belongingness theory posits that a fundamental human motivation is the need to belong, which means to form and maintain strong, positive social relationships [22]. This need is universal and enduring, driving individuals to seek acceptance and inclusion across contexts [57]. People are highly attuned to social cues that signal acceptance or rejection [58]. When belonging needs are thwarted, individuals experience negative emotional and psychological responses [59, 60]. Within this framework, self-esteem functions as an internal gauge of belonging satisfaction [27]. In organizational contexts, belonging is derived from feeling accepted, respected, and valued by others [24]. When these needs are met, employees develop positive self-concepts, whereas when these needs are unmet through exclusion or marginalization, their self-concepts decline[21, 61].

From the perspective of belongingness theory, workplace bullying represents a threat to employees' sense of belonging because it communicates rejection and exclusion, signaling that the individual may not be valued within the organizational community. Although individuals generally strive to maintain high self-esteem [62], the social environment at work may at times hinder this pursuit by withholding support, implicitly conveying that the individual is undervalued or unappreciated [63]. Related studies have shown that OBSE is highly influenced by social evaluations [23, 64]. When employees experience bullying, negative social cues such as exclusion, humiliation, or marginalization may lead them to believe that they are not respected or valued, thereby weakening their perception of being important and competent within the organization [13, 48]. Empirical evidence also suggests that bullying-induced exclusion undermines employees' sense of belonging and self-esteem [28, 29, 65]. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis.

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Hypothesis 2: workplace bullying is negatively related to employee OBSE.

Research has shown that affective commitment reflects a deeper emotional bond between employees and their organization [30], thereby increasing their willingness to contribute to the organization [36, 37]. From the perspective of Belongingness Theory, affective commitment can be viewed as an emotional response that develops when employees feel accepted and valued by the organization. We propose that OBSE contributes to affective commitment because employees who perceive themselves as competent, needed, and valued are more likely to identify with the organization and view themselves as meaningful members of it [24, 25]. OBSE also affirms employees' self-worth, making work feel less like a routine obligation and more like a personally meaningful and socially significant experience [23, 24]. From a belongingness perspective, this sense of being an integral

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organizational member reinforces employees' emotional bond with the organization [31, 33]. Moreover, high OBSE is associated with positive affective experiences, such as pride, self-efficacy, and self-actualization, which further deepen employees' attachment and sense of belonging [34, 35]. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: OBSE is positively related to affective commitment.

Furthermore, we suggest that employees' affective commitment enhances their taking charge. According to belongingness theory, when employees experience strong emotional bonds with their organization, they internalize its goals as part of their social identity and feel motivated to contribute to collective success [22, 30]. Employees with high affective commitment identify strongly with the organization, possess greater intrinsic motivation, and proactively initiate changes that promote organizational improvement [9, 30, 36, 37, 55]. Feeling valued and connected satisfies their belongingness need, encouraging them to maintain and strengthen this bond through constructive actions such as taking charge [21, 38, 40]. Moreover, a strong sense of belonging and trust enhances psychological safety, making employees more willing to assume the risks associated with change [38, 39, 66]. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 4: Affective commitment is positively related to taking charge.

Hypothesis 5: OBSE and affective commitment serve as sequential mediators in the relationship between workplace bullying and employee taking charge.

The moderating role of locus of control

The coping strategies employees adopt when facing workplace bullying often depend on how they attribute the cause of mistreatment, whether to their own shortcomings or to others' actions [43]. LOC represents a stable orientation toward attributing success or failure internally or externally [67]. Recent research shows that LOC shapes individuals' cognitive appraisals, emotional experiences, and regulation in response to workplace adversity [42, 68, 69]. From the perspective of belongingness theory, workplace bullying threatens employees' sense of inclusion and value within the organization. However, employees may differ in how they attribute the cause of this threat. LOC helps explain such differences by shaping whether employees interpret bullying as a reflection of their own inadequacy or as a result of external circumstances. Thus, LOC is treated as a boundary condition in the attributional processing of bullying-related belongingness threats [70]. Specifically, internal controllers, who believe outcomes result from their own actions, tend to make self-focused attributions when facing bullying [43]. They are more likely to interpret bullying as evidence of their own shortcomings or lack of worth, which strengthens the

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negative effect of bullying on OBSE [28, 44, 45]. Moreover, because internal controllers generally believe they can influence outcomes [71, 72], repeated failure to stop bullying may further intensify self-doubt and weaken OBSE [68].

In contrast, external controllers tend to attribute outcomes to situational or external forces [43]. They may perceive bullying as a product of organizational culture, power imbalance, or perpetrators' behaviors rather than as a reflection of their own inadequacy. Such externalized attributions may reduce self-blame and help preserve employees' sense of competence and worth within the organization [42, 44, 46]. Empirical findings also indicate that employees with an external LOC are relatively less vulnerable to the negative effects of workplace bullying [42, 70, 73]. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 6: LOC moderates the negative relationship between workplace bullying and employee OBSE, such that the relationship is stronger among employees with a more internal LOC than among those with a more external LOC.

Hypothesis 7: LOC moderates the negative relationship between workplace bullying and employee taking charge through OBSE and affective commitment, such that the indirect relationship is stronger among employees with a more internal LOC than among those with a more external LOC.

Methods

Procedure and participants

The survey employed a four-wave time-lagged design with four-week intervals between waves to capture the temporal sequence among variables and reduce common method bias (CMB) [74]. A four-week interval was deemed appropriate because it minimizes recall bias and consistency motives while maintaining sample stability and preventing excessive attrition [75]. To further mitigate method bias, participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and all items were presented in randomized order. Data were collected via Question Star, a professional Chinese online survey platform widely used in academic research [6, 76]. The platform maintains a large, diverse respondent pool across industries and implements strict quality controls. Participants were required to register with verified mobile numbers, and the system automatically screens for invalid responses based on completion time, patterned answers, or failed attention checks. Each participant received a unique anonymous identification code that remained consistent across all four waves, enabling precise data matching while preserving confidentiality. The research team collaborated with the platform throughout data collection to ensure data integrity.

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The sample comprised full-time employees from Chinese organizations in manufacturing, services, technology, and education. A purposive sampling approach ensured that participants had at least six months of tenure and regular workplace interactions, conditions that are essential for examining workplace bullying and taking charge. This population was suitable for the proposed model, as hierarchical and team-based structures common in Chinese organizations can foster power imbalances associated with bullying [48]. Specifically, at Time 1, we distributed 493 questionnaires to collect data on workplace bullying, LOC, and control variables, and received 438 completed questionnaires. At Time 2, we distributed questionnaires to the respondents who completed the previous wave to collect data on OBSE, and received 401 questionnaires. At Time 3, we distributed questionnaires to the respondents who completed the previous wave to collect data on affective commitment, and received 370 questionnaires. At Time 4, we distributed questionnaires to the respondents who completed the previous wave to collect data on taking charge, and received 356 questionnaires. Attrition analysis indicated that participants who completed all four waves did not differ significantly from those who dropped out after Time 1 or before completing all four waves: workplace bullying, $t = -0.374$, $p = 0.709$; LOC, $t = 0.503$, $p = 0.616$; sex, $\chi^2 = 0.136$, $p = 0.713$; age, $\chi^2 = 1.394$, $p = 0.707$; tenure, $\chi^2 = 2.176$, $p = 0.703$; or education level, $\chi^2 = 3.262$, $p = 0.353$. Thus, no evidence of systematic attrition bias was found.

Among the participants, males accounted for 51.4%, while females accounted for 48.6%. The age range was mainly concentrated in the 26–30 and 31–35 age groups, accounting for 40.7% and 42.1%, respectively. Of the respondents, 81.7% had a bachelor's degree or higher. The work tenure of respondents ranged from 2–4 years and 5–7 years, accounting for 44.4% and 24.4%, respectively.

Measures

All scales were adapted from well-established measures in prior research. To ensure semantic and conceptual equivalence, all items were translated and back-translated between English and Chinese following Brislin's procedure [77]. A professor in organizational psychology conducted the translation, and a management Ph.D. lecturer performed the back-translation. Discrepancies were jointly reviewed and adjusted for cultural and contextual clarity. All variables were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

Workplace bullying

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We used the nine-item scale developed by Notelaers et al. [78] to measure workplace bullying. A sample item was "Having insulting or offensive remarks made about your person, attitudes or your private live." Cronbach's α was 0.858.

Organization-based self-esteem

We used the six-item scale developed by Pierce et al. [24] to evaluate employee OBSE. A sample item was "I am valuable around here." The Cronbach's α was 0.884.

Affective commitment

We adopted six items from Meyer et al. [26] to measure affective commitment. A sample item was "I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own." The Cronbach's α was 0.868.

Locus of control

To measure employee LOC, we used the three-item scale developed by Judge et al. [79]. A sample item was "I determine what will happen in my life." The Cronbach's α was 0.842.

Taking charge

We drew on the studies by Morrison and Phelps [1] and Li et al.[55], and used a six-item scale to measure employees' taking charge. A sample item was "I often try to introduce new structures, technologies, or approaches to improve efficiency." The Cronbach's α was 0.841.

Control variables

We controlled for gender, age, education, and tenure because these demographic and work-related characteristics have been shown to be associated with employees' taking charge [4, 8, 10, 15]. Including these controls helps rule out plausible alternative explanations related to employees' demographic backgrounds and work experience.

Analysis strategies

Firstly, descriptive statistics, correlation, and exploratory factor analyses (EFA), as well as Harman's single-factor tests, were conducted using SPSS 26. Secondly, Mplus 7.4 was used for several key analyses. It was first employed to detect common method bias using the unmeasured latent method factor (ULMC) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) marker variable techniques. Next, CFAs were conducted to assess the discriminant validity of the constructs. Finally, path analyses were performed to test the proposed research hypotheses. Finally,

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bootstrapping simulations were conducted using Mplus 7.4 to further test the mediating and moderated mediation effects of the variables.

Results

Factor analysis and common method bias testing

Prior to analysis, we examined the normality of all continuous variables. The skewness and kurtosis values were within the acceptable range (|skewness| < 2.0, |kurtosis| < 2.0), suggesting approximate normal distributions [80]. An EFA using principal axis factoring and oblimin rotation revealed a well-defined five-factor structure consistent with the theoretical model. The majority of standardized loadings exceeded 0.60, with a few slightly above 0.50, and all items loaded significantly ($p < .001$) on their intended factors with minimal cross-loadings (< 0.30), indicating satisfactory convergent and discriminant validity.

Table 1 presents the results of CFA. The five-factor model ($\chi^2/df = 1.631$, CFI = 0.946, TLI = 0.941, RMSEA = 0.042, SRMR = 0.045) fit the data significantly better than other competing models. Thus, the variables in this study were empirically distinct.

Table 1 Results of confirmatory factor analyses

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Five-factor model (WB; LOC; OBSE; AC; TC)	644.315	395	1.631	0.946	0.941	0.042	0.045
Four-factor model (WB; LOC; OBSE+AC; TC)	1478.418	399	3.705	0.751	0.729	0.087	0.093
Three-factor model (WB +LOC; OBSE+AC; TC)	2033.242	402	5.058	0.624	0.593	0.107	0.118
Two-factor model (WB +OBSE; AC+LOC+ TC)	2401.300	404	5.944	0.540	0.505	0.118	0.126
One-factor model (WB +OBSE+AC+LOC+ TC)	2955.672	405	7.298	0.412	0.369	0.133	0.135

Notes: WB=workplace bullying; OBSE=organization-based self-esteem; AC=affective commitment; LOC=locus of control; TC =taking charge.

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To assess potential CMB, we first conducted Harman's single-factor test. The results showed that the first factor accounted for 25.77% of the total variance—well below the 40% threshold. Although this test has certain limitations, it remains a widely used preliminary diagnostic tool for detecting single-source bias in behavioral research [74]. Second, the ULMC technique was employed to further examine CMB. After adding the common method factor, the six-factor model (χ^2 = 523.620, df = 373, χ^2/df =1.404, CFI = 0.965, TLI = 0.960, RMSEA = 0.034, SRMR = 0.043) exhibited only minor differences from the original five-factor model. Most fit indices indicated no substantial change (|ΔTLI| = 0.019 < 0.050; |ΔRMSEA| = 0.008 < 0.015; |ΔSRMR| = 0.002 < 0.030), suggesting that the addition of a method factor did not meaningfully improve model fit [81]. However, since |ΔCFI| = 0.019 slightly exceeded the recommended cutoff of 0.010, we conducted an additional robustness check using the CFA marker variable technique [82]. A latent method factor was added to the model, with a subset of items from each construct loading onto it. The factor loadings were constrained to equality, and the method factor was specified as uncorrelated with the substantive constructs. The results showed minimal improvement (|ΔCFI| = 0.009, |ΔTLI| = 0.009, |ΔRMSEA| = 0.003, |ΔSRMR| = 0.006), confirming that common method variance was not a serious concern.

Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses

The results of descriptive statistics and correlation analyses are presented in Table 2. Workplace bullying was negatively related to employee OBSE (r = -0.155, p < 0.01), affective commitment (r = -0.397, p < 0.01), and taking charge (r = -0.226, p < 0.01). OBSE was positively related to affective commitment (r = 0.293, p < 0.01), LOC (r = 0.111, p < 0.05), and taking charge (r = 0.307, p < 0.01). Affective commitment was positively related to taking charge (r = 0.448, p < 0.01), and LOC was positively related to taking charge (r = 0.237, p < 0.01).

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	1.486	0.501	1								
2. Age	2.435	0.768	0.130*	1							
3. Tenure	2.542	1.027	0.193**	0.207**	1						
4. Education	3.031	0.713	0.108*	0.140**	0.139**	1					
5. WB	2.677	0.480	-0.051	-0.035	-0.182**	0.062	1				
6. LOC	3.569	0.587	0.024	0.074	0.055	0.014	-0.176**	1			
7. OBSE	3.371	0.588	0.133*	-0.030	0.072	0.054	-0.155**	0.111*	1		

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8. AC	3.578	0.537	0.067	-0.012	0.139**	0.077	-0.397**	0.562**	0.293**	1	
9. TC	3.538	0.539	0.055	0.035	0.153**	0.081	-0.226**	0.237**	0.307**	0.448**	1

Note: Gender was coded as 1 = male, 2 = female. Age was coded as 1 = 18–25 years, 2 = 26–30 years, 3 = 31–35 years, and 4 = 36 years and above. Education was coded as 1 = high school or below, 2 = junior college, 3 = bachelor's degree, and 4 = postgraduate degree. Work tenure was coded as 1 = less than 2 years, 2 = 2–4 years, 3 = 5–7 years, 4 = 8–10 years, and 5 = more than 10 years. WB = workplace bullying; OBSE = organization-based self-esteem; AC = affective commitment; LOC = locus of control; TC = taking charge. * = p＜0.05; ** = p＜0.01.

Hypothesis testing

Figure 1 shows the results of the path analysis after controlling for gender, age, education, and tenure. Workplace bullying was negatively related to employee taking charge (b = -0.257, SE = 0.061, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Workplace bullying was also negatively related to OBSE (b = -0.252, SE = 0.075, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 2. OBSE was positively related to affective commitment (b = 0.216, SE = 0.055, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 3. Affective commitment was positively related to employee taking charge (b = 0.366, SE = 0.059, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 4. The path coefficients ($|b|$ = 0.22–0.37) suggest that the observed relationships are statistically significant and substantively meaningful within the context of the proposed model. Taken together, the significant paths from workplace bullying to OBSE, from OBSE to affective commitment, and from affective commitment to taking charge are consistent with the proposed sequential mediation pattern, thereby supporting Hypothesis 5. This pattern aligns with belongingness theory, which posits that threats to social inclusion first diminish individuals' cognitive self-evaluations (OBSE), leading to reduced emotional attachment (affective commitment) and, ultimately, lower proactive behavioral engagement (taking charge). The interaction effect of workplace bullying and LOC on OBSE was significant (b = -0.281, SE = 0.082, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the relationship between workplace bullying and employee OBSE is moderated by LOC, thus supporting Hypothesis 6.

Among the control variables, tenure had a significant positive effect on employees' taking charge (b = 0.055, SE = 0.023, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that employees with longer organizational tenure tend to engage more in taking charge. In contrast, gender (b = -0.021, SE = 0.054, $p > 0.05$), age (b = 0.015, SE = 0.029, $p > 0.05$), and education

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(b = 0.010, SE = 0.037, p > 0.05) did not have significant effects on taking charge, indicating that these demographic factors do not substantially influence employees' taking charge in this sample.

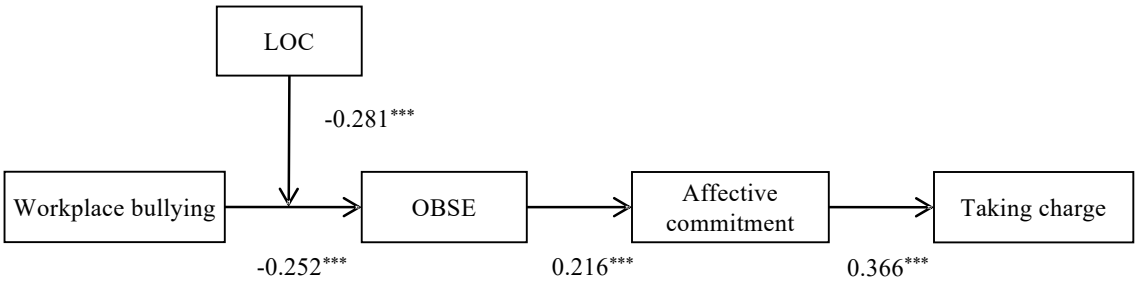

Figure 1 Results of path analysis

Figure 2 presents the simple slopes of the interaction. When employees' LOC was high (+1 *SD*), the negative relationship between workplace bullying and OBSE was stronger (b = -0.417, SE = 0.092, p < 0.001), whereas when LOC was low (–1 *SD*), the relationship was weaker and non-significant (b = -0.087, SE = 0.087, p > 0.05). This pattern suggests thatemployees with a higher internal LOC may be more likely to interpret bullying in self-relevant terms and therefore experience a more pronounced decline in OBSE, whereas those with lower LOC are less affected.

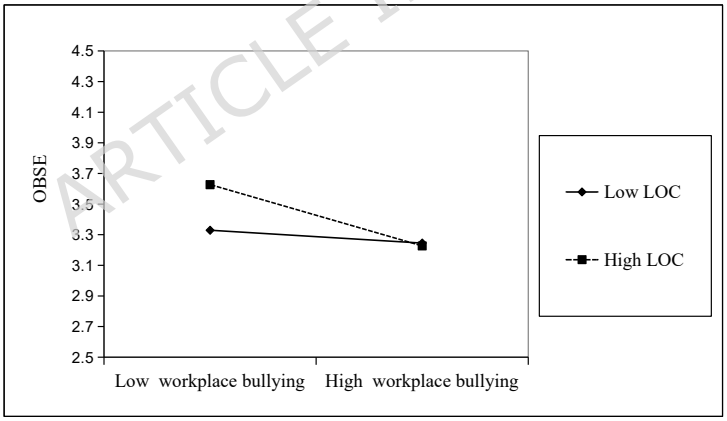

Figure 2 The interaction effect of workplace bullying and LOC on OBSE

The results of the bootstrapping analyses (5,000 resamples) are shown in Table 3. The indirect effect of workplace bullying on employee taking charge via OBSE and affective commitment was -0.020 (95% CI = [-0.037, -0.003]), supporting Hypothesis 5. The indirect effect was significant at a high level of LOC (95% CI = [-0.058, -0.008]), and non-significant at a low level of LOC (95% CI = [-0.022, 0.008]). The difference between these indirect effects (Δ = -0.026, 95% CI = [-0.050, -0.003]) provides evidence consistent with the proposition that LOC

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amplifies the negative indirect association between workplace bullying and taking charge through OBSE and affective commitment. Thus, Hypothesis 7 was supported.

Table 3 Results of bootstrapping simulation

Path	LOC	Effect size	SE	LLCI	ULCI
WB→OBSE→AC→TC	M	-0.020	0.008	-0.037	-0.003
	M + *SD*	-0.033	0.013	-0.058	-0.008
	M - *SD*	-0.007	0.007	-0.022	0.008
	Difference	-0.026	0.012	-0.050	-0.003

Note: WB = workplace bullying; OBSE = organization-based self-esteem; AC = affective commitment; LOC = locus of control; TC = taking charge.

Discussion and conclusion

Drawing on belongingness theory, this study examined how workplace bullying affects employees' taking charge. The results are consistent with our proposition that workplace bullying negatively predicts taking charge through the sequential mediation of OBSE and affective commitment. Notably, LOC strengthens the negative effect of workplace bullying on OBSE, thereby amplifying the indirect negative effect of workplace bullying on taking charge through OBSE and affective commitment.

Theoretical contributions

This study makes the following theoretical contributions. First, our study contributes to the understanding of the dark side of workplace dynamics by showing that workplace bullying undermines employees' willingness to take charge. Prior research has documented the negative effects of bullying on proactive outcomes such as voice and creativity [18, 19]. Meanwhile, existing studies on taking charge have largely focused on its positive antecedents [12], while the role of hostile interpersonal mistreatment has received far less attention. By shifting attention to workplace interpersonal mistreatment, our study provides evidence that is consistent with the view that workplace bullying inhibits employees' taking charge. In doing so, our findings complement the existing literature by showing that taking charge is not only fostered by supportive contexts but also constrained by hostile workplace relationships.

Second, our study applies belongingness theory to explain the association between workplace bullying and employees' taking charge through the chain-mediating roles of OBSE and affective commitment. Although previous

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research indicates that workplace bullying reduces employees' proactive behavior [18, 19], few studies have examined how it inhibits such behavior by undermining employees' fundamental psychological needs, including belongingness and self-esteem. Our findings are consistent with the proposed explanatory sequence in which bullying may disrupt employees' sense of belonging within the organization, which is associated with lower OBSE [40] and affective commitment [31, 64], thereby reducing taking charge. By specifying OBSE and affective commitment as sequential mediators, this study applies belongingness theory to a negative workplace context and provides a more detailed account of how workplace bullying may be linked to lower taking charge. It suggests that employees' reluctance to take charge under bullying conditions may reflect not only a direct reaction to mistreatment but also the psychological implications of repeated negative workplace interactions.

Third, by identifying LOC as a boundary condition, our study clarifies for whom workplace bullying is more likely to undermine OBSE. Prior research has shown that the effects of bullying vary across individuals [5, 28, 42, 68, 69], but less is known about why the same negative interpersonal experience is more damaging to some employees than to others. Our study shows that employees' attributional orientation shapes how they interpret bullying-related belongingness threats [67, 70, 72]. Internal controllers, who are more likely to attribute bullying to personal inadequacy, experience greater OBSE loss, whereas external controllers, who are more likely to attribute bullying to situational factors, show weaker effects. This finding contributes to the workplace bullying and OBSE literatures by showing that adverse interpersonal treatment is more likely to reduce organizational self-worth when employees internalize, rather than externalize, the cause of mistreatment.

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Practical implications

First, our empirical results confirm that workplace bullying undermines employees' OBSE, affective commitment, and taking charge. Therefore, organizations must implement preventive strategies supported by prior research, such as clear anti-bullying policies, formal reporting systems, and leadership accountability mechanisms [18, 52]. Defining bullying behaviors and creating psychologically safe climates can help employees recognize and report mistreatment without fear of retaliation [47, 48].

Second, our findings underscore the central role of OBSE as a psychological resource promoting affective commitment and taking charge. To strengthen OBSE, managers can enhance employees' perceived value through job autonomy, supportive feedback, and career development [23, 83]. Leaders can also provide timely recognition and constructive feedback to help employees maintain confidence in their roles and contributions.

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Third, since affective commitment was found to positively predict taking charge, organizations should emphasize emotional connection and authenticity. Research shows that recognition, inclusion, and value congruence enhance affective commitment and encourage extra-role engagement [30, 33, 37]. Managers can communicate how employees' improvement-oriented efforts contribute to broader organizational objectives, thereby encouraging constructive change initiatives.

Finally, our findings reveal that LOC moderates the impact of workplace bullying on OBSE. For internal controllers, targeted psychological interventions such as resilience or self-compassion training are beneficial [42, 69]. For external controllers, improving the fairness and transparency of organizational processes can strengthen perceived control and mitigate helplessness. Differentiating these strategies ensures that organizational responses to bullying are both evidence-based and psychologically attuned.

Limitations and future research directions

This study also has several limitations. First, although we adopted a four-wave time-lagged design and conducted additional tests for common method bias, all data were collected through self-report surveys. Thus, the observed relationships should be interpreted with caution, as they may still be affected by social desirability, perceptual consistency, or respondents' general affective tendencies. This concern may be particularly relevant because workplace bullying, OBSE, affective commitment, and taking charge are conceptually related and perception-based constructs. Moreover, the time-lagged design cannot fully rule out reverse causality or alternative explanations. Future research could use multi-source data, such as supervisor-rated taking charge, as well as experimental designs or cross-lagged panel models, to strengthen causal inference.

Second, this study focused on employees directly exposed to workplace bullying, overlooking bystanders' reactions, which may also affect team functioning [84]. Although we interpreted the moderating role of LOC from an attribution-based perspective, this explanation is not the only possible interpretation of the observed effect. For example, stronger internal LOC may also make bullying more threatening because employees expect greater personal control but feel unable to change or stop the mistreatment. Moreover, we examined only one individual-level moderator, LOC, without considering broader team or organizational factors such as leadership style, team norms, or perceived organizational support [12, 48]. Future studies could examine attributional processes, perceived control loss, coping responses, and broader contextual factors to better explain how individual traits and workplace contexts jointly shape employees' responses to bullying.

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Third, because our data were collected from Chinese employees, the findings may not fully generalize across cultural or industrial contexts. Cultural values such as power distance, collectivism, and conflict avoidance may shape how employees perceive bullying, attribute responsibility, and respond behaviorally. Future studies could use cross-cultural and cross-industry samples to test the robustness of the proposed model. In addition, although all scales were translated and back-translated following Brislin's [77] procedure, future cross-cultural research should assess measurement invariance to ensure construct comparability across languages and cultural settings.

List of abbreviations

WB: workplace bullying

OBSE: organization-based self-esteem

AC: affective commitment

TC: taking charge

LOC: locus of control

CMB: common method bias

ULMC: unmeasured latent method factor

EFA: exploratory factor analysis

CFA: confirmatory factor analysis

LLCI: lower limit confidence interval

ULCI: upper limit confidence interval

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Author Contributions

Y.H. L. developed the research model, led the conceptualization, coordinated and funded the sample collection, and wrote the original draft. P.L. Y. contributed to data collection, statistical reporting, robustness checks, results interpretation, and led the subsequent manuscript revisions. L.Y. W. contributed to the later-stage revisions, including improving the theoretical framing, manuscript structure, response strategy, and interpretation of the findings. Y.C. F. contributed to the methodology, data collection, and data analysis. X.X. D. polished the language of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data availability statement

The datasets used and analyzed during this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethical Committee of School of Management, Zhejiang University of Technology (Approval No. 2024052702). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The study data are strictly confidential and are for research use only. The study was conducted in line with the Declaration of Helsinki and they were allowed to withdrawal at any time.

Consent for Publication

Not Applicable

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

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