



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND
MANAGEMENT PRACTICES
(IJEMP)

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WHEN LEADERSHIP TURNS TOXIC: BULLYING IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 15.02.2026

Revised date: 09.03.2026

Accepted date: 26.03.2026

Published date: 31.03.2026

To cite this document:

Kuek, T. Y., Choong, Y. O., Awee, A., Mohsin, F. H., Chai, B. B. H., & Yap, T. T. V. (2026). When Leadership Turns Toxic: Bullying in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and*

Abstract:

This study develops a conceptual model to explain workplace bullying among academics in Malaysian universities as an organisational phenomenon shaped by leadership and climate. Grounded in Conservation of Resources theory, the manuscript proposes that toxic leadership acts as an upstream source of resource depletion that increases vulnerability to repeated negative acts at work. Psychosocial safety climate (PSC) is positioned as a mediating mechanism that explains how leadership-related resource loss is translated into workplace bullying. Addressing gaps in Malaysian higher education research, the study advances two propositions: that toxic leadership positively affects workplace bullying, and that this relationship is transmitted indirectly through PSC. Methodologically, the study proposes a quantitative design using survey data from academics in Malaysian universities and structural equation modelling to test the hypothesised relationships. This study contributes to bullying and higher education literature by shifting attention from individual coping

Management Practices, 9(33), 617-632. to systemic prevention, highlighting leadership practices and PSC as key organisational levers for healthier academic workplaces.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEMP.933037

Keyword:

Academics, Malaysia, Psychosocial Safety Climate, Toxic Leadership, Workplace Bullying



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Introduction

Workplace bullying has emerged as a widespread psychosocial risk spanning various industries and countries, and there is extensive empirical evidence of the negative impacts of such behaviour on employee health, performance and organisational efficacy (Sun et al., 2025). Blomberg et al (2025) are of the view that research on bullying has moved over the years towards finding upstream determinants, especially leadership, as key leverage points around which to base preventive and intervention strategies. In Malaysia, there has been increase of concerns about psychosocial risks in the workplace with the focus on employee wellness and organisational sustainability (Department of Occupational Safety and Health, 2024; Subramaniam, 2025; Tan, 2026). Empirical research in Malaysian settings has shown that bullying is not rare and leadership behaviours are one of the contributing factors. For example, research conducted in Malaysian public-sector environments have proposed a strong relationship between destructive leadership behaviour and bullying in the workplace (Omar et al., 2015) and has strengthened the view that leadership can create a positive environment for mistreatment.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are a particularly salient workplace bullying setting. Corbett et al. (2024) have stated that academic work is often characterized by high role demands, high performance expectations, and competition for resources, as well as hierarchical decision-making structures that may normalize forms of coercive supervision and discourage whistleblowing. These structural features can create conditions in which repeated negative acts are more easily enacted and harder to challenge, particularly when authority gradients are steep and organisational responses are perceived as weak. In such environments, bullying can undermine not only individual wellbeing but also collegiality, scholarly productivity, and the broader educational mission. This concurs with recent Malaysian research that documented workplace bullying among academics in both public and private universities and linked

bullying exposure to adverse psychological outcomes (Abas et al., 2021; Goi et al., 2024). Taken together, these findings support the need to examine bullying in Malaysian HEIs not only as an interpersonal problem but as an organisational phenomenon shaped by leadership. A key leadership-related antecedent proposed in the bullying literature is toxic leadership, a type of destructive leadership. In Malaysian organisational research, toxic leadership has been examined as a harmful leadership form with measurable negative consequences among Malaysian employees (Lee et al., 2024).

Despite growing recognition of workplace bullying as a serious psychosocial hazard, Malaysian HEIs continue to face risks of bullying among academics, with evidence indicating meaningful psychological harm (Goi et al., 2024). However, the conditions of organisation that support the existence of bullying in this context, especially the issue of toxic leadership, are not specified adequately within the context of Malayan literature about higher education. For instance, previous research in Malaysia has suggested that toxic leadership predicts bullying in public sector organisations (Omar et al., 2015; Sim et al., 2021), while previous research from Malaysia that is specific to higher education has mostly been concerned with the prevalence of bullying and its consequences (Awai et al., 2021; Goi et al., 2024). This pattern had implied a need for empirical models in Malaysian universities that had integrated toxic leadership with established bullying mechanisms to clarify how leadership behaviours had translated into repeated negative acts within academic workplaces. This is consequential because leadership is not only a likely source of bullying risk but also a primary lever through which universities can shape norms, policies, and daily practices. In the absence of a precise conceptualization of the relationship between toxic leadership and bullying at work in the context of Malaysian institutions of higher education, interventions aimed at prevention are likely to focus on individual coping mechanisms or ad hoc complaint processes, at the expense of focusing on primary interventions in order to create systemic improvements. A promising systems-level approach is the psychosocial safety climate (PSC). This concept suggests that PSC affects exposure to psychosocial hazards, including bullying. It does this by influencing job demands and resources, as well as the organization's norms about acceptable behavior (Inoue et al., 2023). Empirical research supports PSC as a lead indicator of bullying and harassment and as a practical target for intervention, given its grounding in management commitment and organisational systems rather than individual resilience alone (Law et al., 2011). Hence, in HEIs settings, PSC offers a theoretically coherent framework for understanding how institutional priorities and leadership signals may either constrain or enable mistreatment.

This study addresses two key research gaps (Miles, 2017) in the Malaysian higher education literature. First, an empirical gap exists because the direct relationship between toxic leadership and workplace bullying has not been sufficiently examined within this setting. Second, a theoretical gap remains in how this relationship is explained and positioned. Hence, this study proposes PSC as an upstream climate-based resource that helps account for how and why toxic leadership relates to bullying. In doing so, the study advances Malaysian higher education research by offering a clearer conceptualisation of PSC as an explanatory mechanism within the toxic leadership–bullying model.

Literature Review

Underpinning Theory in this Study

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, developed by Hobfoll (1989), offered a broad perspective for explaining the processes of stress and strain in organizational settings. The theory argues that people are motivated to acquire, maintain, and preserve valued resources, which include objects, personal characteristics, energies, and conditions (Hobfoll, 2001). Stress is thus conceptualized as occurring in response to the threat to, loss of, and inadequate replenishment of these resources subsequent to significant investment. A key assumption of COR theory is that the effect of resource loss is more powerful than the effect of resource gain, and that individuals that have already experienced initial losses are therefore more vulnerable to additional depletion. This increased vulnerability could start a cycle of loss, which would worsen strain and lead to negative results over time (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

In the workplace, leadership behaviour represented a critical contextual condition that shaped employees' access to, and protection of, key resources. Clarke et al. (2026) mentioned that leaders influenced social support, autonomy, predictability, fairness, and psychological safety, resources that were essential for employee functioning and resilience. The theory has enjoyed wide range of use in organizational research, and its usefulness in studying the behavior of leaders stems from its ability to explain how maladaptive leadership behaviors may lead to resource depletion processes, which will eventually lead to negative outcomes for employees and interpersonal dynamics (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

Guided by COR theory, this study positioned toxic leadership and workplace bullying as focal variables within a unified resource-based framework. Toxic leadership functioned as the primary antecedent of resource loss, whereas workplace bullying represented a consequential and reinforcing outcome of that depletion. According to Bou Reslan (2025), COR theory suggested that sustained exposure to resource-draining conditions heightened vulnerability to further losses, making this theoretical lens particularly appropriate for examining how toxic leadership behaviours translated into persistent interpersonal harm at work. Accordingly, this study conceptualised toxic leadership as a key driver of resource loss and workplace bullying as a consequential manifestation of COR-based loss spirals. By examining these two constructs together, this study contributed to understanding how leadership-related threats to resources can develop into ongoing patterns of interpersonal harm.

In order to expand COR theory and explain the process by which toxic leadership leads to workplace bullying, the present study proposed psychosocial safety climate (PSC) as a mediating mechanism. PSC was posited as a higher-order condition resource that shaped the extent to which employees' psychological and social resources were protected or depleted in response to workplace stressors. Hence, PSC functioned as a transmission channel for resources whereby resource depletion induced by leadership - as the case of toxic leadership - was transformed into the bullying phenomena. By incorporating PSC into the theoretical framework of COR, the current study expanded the model beyond individual level stress mechanisms to include both leadership and climate related dynamics of resources. This holistic framework highlighted the importance of organisational context in the extent to which resource loss due to toxic leadership eventually took the form of workplace bullying.

Workplace Bullying: Hidden Harm at Work

The phenomenon of workplace bullying was often described as the repeated and ongoing exposure of a person to negative acts in a situation where the target was exposed to difficulties in defending him or herself (Einarsen et al., 2020). This conceptualisation distinguished bullying from one-off conflicts or general incivility by emphasising frequency, and asymmetry of power (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). Workplace bullying was typically modelled as an exposure that could be predicted by job, leadership, and organisational conditions, and that subsequently predicted wellbeing and work outcomes (Einarsen et al., 2020). General models located bullying within psychosocial work environments in which organisational structures and climate enabled mistreatment. Bullying was associated with adverse outcomes such as psychological distress, burnout, lower job satisfaction and engagement, and turnover intentions where these effects were commonly explained through stress and resource-loss mechanisms (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011; Einarsen et al., 2020). Importantly, bullying was not purely interpersonal; organisational tolerance, weak conflict management, and ambiguous role expectations could normalise repeated negative acts and make reporting risky (Einarsen et al., 2020).

Nielsen et al. (2022) highlighted that contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualised bullying as an organisational phenomenon, and it was instantiated through both formal hierarchies and informal power dynamics. HEIs had certain structural and cultural conditions that might enhance the risk of bullying, such as steep status hierarchies, competition for limited resources, and usually unclear managerial accountability in collegial governance systems. A recent scoping review showed the multiplicity of staff groups and methodological approaches in bullying research in HEIs and the sector-specific drivers including restructures, performance metrics and precarious employment that exacerbated power imbalances and vulnerability (Hodgins et al., 2024). Earlier studies with a focus on faculty experiences also stressed how bullying in academia could be subtle and might be difficult to address where normative of academic freedom or departmental autonomy overlapped the lines of acceptable conduct (Keashly & Neuman, 2010).

A systematic evidence review further supported the claim that harassment and bullying were ongoing issues of concern for higher education faculty across the globe with implications for individual wellbeing and effectiveness of organisations (Henning et al., 2017). Contemporary scholarship argued that bullying in academia was not the result of the actions of individual but was fundamentally linked to departmental culture and systemic structures (Björklund & Jensen, 2025). Analyses of cultural and structural responses to bullying led to the suggestion that competitive environments and informal gate-keeping solutions fed into and perpetuated bullying through the fostering of silence, normalisation and apprehension when it came to the career ramifications (Migliaccio et al., 2024). Consistent with bullying theory in general, these HEI-specific contexts might compound the effects of being bullied where academics might suffer a loss of scholarly productivity, decreased collaboration, and disengagement that endangered institutional objectives with respect to teaching, research, and talent retention (Hodgins et al., 2024; Keashly & Neuman, 2010). In the Malaysian higher-education sector, Goi et al. (2024) studied academic staff in both public and private universities and concluded with findings that workplace bullying was positively related to psychological distress. In addition, the presence of the moderating effect of perceived organisational support implied that when organisational climates were supportive, the negative effect of bullying might be reduced, despite its occurrence.

Toxic Leadership: The Bad Style

Toxic leadership was a consistent pattern of behaviours by leaders that was destructive to followers and negatively affected the operation of the organisation. Early work framed toxic leaders as individuals whose dysfunctional conduct damaged people and institutions (Whicker, 1996; Lipman-Blumen, 2004). More contemporary researchers viewed toxic leadership as a multistage phenomenon that was influenced by the traits of a leader and the organisational environments. This toxic triangle hypothesis was based on the fact that toxic leadership developed when such leaders interacted with vulnerable followers, combined with favourable environments that undermined accountability (Padilla et al., 2007). The dark side of personality research suggested a higher likelihood that toxic leadership and related workplace harm were linked to personality traits such as narcissism and Machiavellianism (Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Spain et al., 2014). In general, past reviews demonstrated that toxic leadership was a reliable predictor of negative implications in terms of well-being, relationships, and performance, warranting continued refinement and measurement development (Krasikova et al., 2013; Mackey et al., 2017).

Despite the fact that most of the earlier studies focused on corporate and military contexts, the toxic leadership issue was progressively studied in HEIs, where governance norms coexisted with formal administrative hierarchies (Klahn Acuña & Male, 2024). Although these structures may have limited blatant abuse, nevertheless they also facilitated less apparent kinds of toxicity by imposing unclear accountability and extreme reliance on reputational relations. According to Bieńkowska and Tworek (2025), conditions that were typical in HEIs and that could stimulate such phenomena included a lack of job resources, restructuring, and high-level pressure on performance, which could make academics more susceptible to toxic leadership. Such dynamics could undermine collegiality and institutional trust, with possible downstream consequences for the research productivity and teaching quality. Based on this, scholars such as Erickson et al. (2015) and Fahie (2020) believed that prevention of, and management of, toxic leadership behaviour in the higher education facility required a two-fold strategy: the development of personal leadership skills and the establishment of structural measures such as, but not limited to, transparent decision-making procedures, plausible grievance frameworks, and strengthened control over the administration.

In terms of higher education sector of Malaysia, the process of corporatisation and systemic restructuring has reconfigured the governance structure and managerial expectations and in so doing, exacerbated the importance of informal influence and reputation in deciding academic matters (Lee, 2004). These transformations have been reinforced by national reform agendas and performance regimes which have foregrounded the importance of measurable outcomes and institutional accountability, which in turn increase pressures on academic staff and create conditions in which toxic leadership behaviours could become normalised or unchallenged (Adnan et al., 2022; Omar & Ahmad, 2020).

Psychosocial Safety Climate as the Explanatory Factor

PSC was defined as employees shared perceptions of their organisation's policies, practices, and procedures that were intended to protect workers' psychological health and safety, and it was shaped largely by management practices (Law et al., 2011). PSC had been introduced as a leading, upstream organisational climate that captured shared perceptions of senior management values, policies, practices and procedures for protecting employees'

psychological health and safety. For instance, Dollard and Bakker (2010) had integrated PSC into a Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) pathway, suggesting that high PSC had been associated with better resourcing and lower chronic demands. Across the wider occupational health psychology literature, PSC had been linked to a broad set of work and health outcomes via both demand- and resource-based mechanisms. Law et al. (2011) had reported that PSC had functioned as a lead indicator of workplace bullying and harassment, job resources, psychological health and engagement, implying that low PSC climates had enabled harmful social behaviour and constrained resources that otherwise supported well-being. PSC had also moderated stress processes as PSC buffered the job demand–resource interaction when predicting workgroup distress, consistent with PSC operating as a contextual higher-order climate that altered how demands and resources translated into strain (Dollard et al., 2012).

Based on Parkin et al. (2023) observation, PSC research within the higher education sector had been especially relevant because university work had combined high cognitive and emotional demands, strong performance surveillance, and competing imperatives. While there has been a smaller number of direct PSC studies in higher education compared to healthcare and other human service sectors, emerging research focused on universities has underscored the role of institutional systems, workload distribution, managerial strategies, and detrimental behaviours in psychosocial safety and staff mental health, which is in line with the PSC concept's focus on upstream organisational drivers (Luu et al., 2025; Wang & Kee, 2025). Sector specific evidence had therefore suggested that PSC informed interventions in universities would likely have needed to target governance, workload design, communication and genuine participation, rather than relying only on individual resilience approaches (Loh et al., 2024). Evidence from Malaysia had added a valuable contextual layer because Malaysian higher education policy had explicitly pursued world-class university performance agendas. Idris et al. (2012) studied Malaysian sample with reported lower mean PSC relative to its Australian context, reinforcing the importance of investigating PSC within Malaysia's institutional conditions. Teoh and Kee (2020) had described how research universities (RUs) status and associated key performance indicators (KPIs) had increased performance pressure on academics, creating conditions in which burnout risk had been salient. In that context, PSC had been proposed as a management lever capable of improving job design by reducing hindrance demands, supporting challenge demands and strengthening engagement pathways to mitigate burnout.

Empirical Malaysian university studies had also begun to test PSC pathways more directly. Gan and Kee (2022) had examined lecturers across Malaysian RUs during the pandemic period and had modelled PSC in relation to work engagement and organisational commitment through job resources. Their findings had indicated that PSC had been positively associated with organisational commitment and job resources, while the direct PSC engagement link had not been significant in that sample, implying that PSC effects on engagement may have operated indirectly through resourcing. Taken together, Malaysian higher education evidence had suggested that PSC had been a promising framework for diagnosing upstream organisational contributors to academic strain, but that relationships may have varied across career stage, role composition, and periods of sector disruption.

Linking Toxic Leadership, Workplace Bullying and Psychosocial Safety Climate

Empirical research had increasingly positioned toxic leadership as a proximal, top-down antecedent of bullying because leaders both enacted mistreatment directly and shaped climates in which aggressive interpersonal conduct had been normalised (Cao et al., 2023). Bou Reslan

et al. (2025) and Mackey et al. (2021) highlighted that across sectors, evidence had generally indicated a positive association between toxic leadership and workplace bullying. Multilevel evidence from Malaysia had shown that toxic leadership had been positively related to bullying at work, and that job insecurity had mediated the toxic leadership–bullying linkage, suggesting that leaders’ harmful behaviours had heightened intimidation partly by destabilising employees perceived employment security (Sim et al., 2021). Similar studies in other contexts had also reported that toxic leadership had significantly predicted workplace bullying and that this relationship had operated through intervening psychological and behavioural processes (Ashfaq et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings had supported the interpretation that toxic leadership contributed to bullying both by modelling mistreatment and by constraining targets’ resources, thereby increasing vulnerability to repeated negative acts.

Malaysia based studies had provided direct empirical support for leadership-driven bullying dynamics. In a public service setting, destructive leadership behaviour such as toxic leadership behaviour had exhibited a strong positive influence on workplace bullying, alongside a high reported prevalence of bullying exposure within the sampled agency (Omar et al., 2015). Extending this line, a multilevel Malaysian study had shown that toxic leadership had been positively associated with bullying at work, with job insecurity functioning as a mediator (Sim et al., 2021). This showed that the nature of leadership function as a key enabling condition for bullying, particularly in hierarchical contexts where leaders had possessed substantial control over work design, appraisal, and access to opportunities.

Empirical studies within higher education sector had also indicated that destructive leadership such as toxic leadership practices had been implicated in the perpetuation of bullying. According to Hollis (2019), survey evidence from professionals in American higher education has linked the persistence of bullying to organisational failures to curb managerial abuse with such leadership enabling abetting processes wherein subordinates were employed to enact or reinforce mistreatment. Qualitative evidence goes further to suggest that these leadership behaviours of academic middle leaders have led to a lack of morale and have resulted in climates that are consistent with the risk of bullying within higher education environments (Ghamrawi et al., 2024).

Accordingly, we propose that:

P₁: Toxic leadership has a positive effect on workplace bullying experienced by academics in Malaysian universities.

Empirical work had supported PSC’s distinctiveness and its role as a precursor to job demands, with downstream implications for psychological health (Idris et al., 2012) Workplace bullying had been treated as a severe psychosocial hazard that was more likely to emerge and persist when organisations signalled low protection of psychological health. Evidence had indicated that PSC had functioned as a lead indicator for bullying and harassment and had related to employee wellbeing through resource and health pathways (Law et al., 2011). Longitudinal findings had further suggested that PSC had reduced later bullying partly through concrete organisational procedures and actions that curtailed bullying and psychological harm over time (Dollard et al., 2017). Process-oriented evidence had also implied that higher PSC had enabled more constructive coping and resolution, whereas low PSC had corresponded with limited voice and poorer resolution of bullying episodes (Kwan et al., 2016).

These insights had made PSC theoretically suitable as a mediator between toxic leadership and bullying. Toxic leadership had been expected to weaken PSC by signalling that psychological health was not a genuine management priority, that reporting was risky or futile, and that participation in psychosocial risk management was discouraged, aligning directly with the PSC domains (Hall et al., 2010). When PSC had been eroded, organisations had been less likely to implement and enact effective preventive and corrective systems, thereby increasing the likelihood and persistence of bullying (Dollard et al., 2017; Law et al., 2011). Wang and Kee (2025) stated that in higher education, PSC had been especially relevant given persistent performance pressures, administrative intensification and complex governance, all of which had elevated psychosocial risk. Evidence among Malaysian academics have showed that PSC is related to lower level of burnout via the work engagement, thus suggesting that PSC remains a salient organizational lever for psychological well-being amid in universities (Teoh & Kee, 2020). When combined with broader PSC–bullying findings, the literature had collectively supported modelling PSC as an organisational mechanism through which toxic leadership had increased bullying risk by weakening the climate and enactment of psychological health protection.

Hence following the transmittal approach (Rungtusanatham et al., 2014), we propose that:

P₂: Toxic leadership has a positive indirect effect on workplace bullying experienced by academics in Malaysian universities through psychosocial safety climate.

The proposed research framework is illustrated as Figure 1.

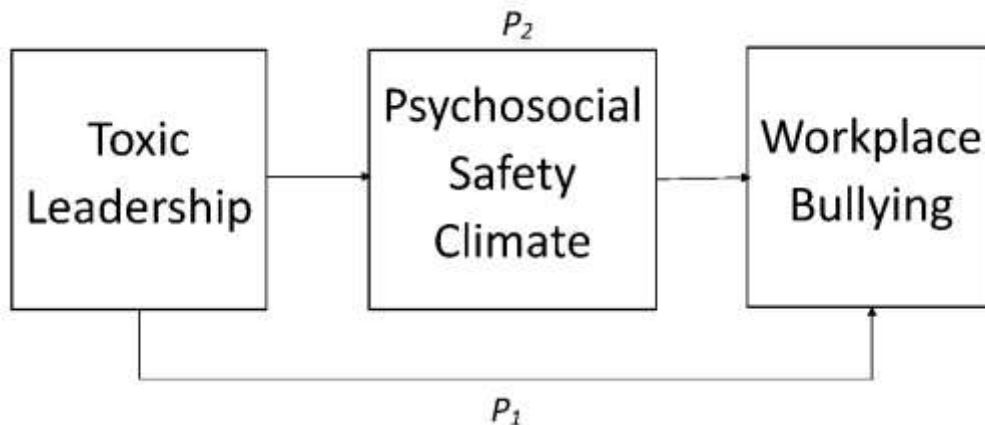


Figure 1: Proposed Research Framework

Source: Developed for this study.

Methodology

This study will use a quantitative research design to examine the relationships between workplace bullying, toxic leadership, and the psychosocial safety climate in a university setting. The quantitative design is considered to be appropriate because the purpose of the study is to test hypothesized relationships among constructs using standardized measures and statistical analysis. The study is grounded in structural equation modelling (SEM), which is appropriate for examining the relationships among multiple latent constructs simultaneously. Prior to the main analysis, the data will be screened and cleaned using SPSS. Subsequently, the measurement and structural models will be analysed using SmartPLS 4. Data will be gathered using a self-administered questionnaire that will be distributed using an online medium. The

target respondents are academics based in Malaysian universities and a minimum sample size of 200 academics will be obtained to ensure that enough statistical power is provided for multivariate analysis (Hair et al., 2010). The study will use purposive sampling, which only participants who meet the set criteria will be included. These participants will be recruited online. Before collecting data, ethical approval will be obtained from the relevant university to ensure that all research ethics are followed. Participation in this study will be entirely voluntary. Prospective participants will receive comprehensive information regarding the study's purpose, the confidentiality of their responses, and their prerogative to withdraw from the study at any point. The constructs of the study will be measured using established instruments with items adapted to fit the study context. Workplace bullying will be measured with items adapted from the Malaysian Workplace Bullying Index (MWBI) developed by Kwan et al. (2020). Toxic leadership will be assessed from items adapted from Toxic Leadership Scale (Schmidt, 2008). As the conceptualization of toxic leadership is multidimensional, hierarchical component modelling (HCM) will be used to model the hierarchy of its higher-order structure. On the other hand, psychosocial safety climate will be assessed by means of items adapted from Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC-12) Scale created by Hall et al. (2010). Miller and Simmering (2023) Attitude Toward the Color Blue scale items will appear in the questionnaire as a theoretically unrelated marker variable, which will allow for statistical assessment and control of possible common method bias.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current conceptual study argues that workplace bullying in Malaysian universities must be interpreted primarily as an organisational phenomenon which is created by toxic leadership and a prevailing PSC culture as opposed to interpreting it as a result of interpersonal malfunction. Drawing upon COR theory, the analysis makes the following assumptions about toxic leadership: Toxic leaders systematically drain employee resources; thus, making employees more susceptible to bullying, and the PSC framework explains the mechanisms underlying the propagation of this negative leadership setting of recurrent adverse conduct.

This study adds to the existing body of scholarship on Malaysian higher education by responding to identified gaps by developing a model that links toxic leadership, workplace bullying and PSC. It also highlights that effective prevention should focus on organisational and leadership-level interventions, including stronger psychosocial safety practices, rather than relying only on individual coping or complaint processes. The study offers an important basis for further empirical studies, and to improve academic work environment in Malaysian universities.

Acknowledgements: The authors sincerely thank their colleagues for their encouragement and support, which contributed significantly to the completion of this manuscript.

Funding Statement: No Funding

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices (IJEMP).

Ethics Statement: This study did not involve any human participants, animals, or sensitive data requiring ethical approval. The authors confirm that the research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic integrity and ethical publishing standards.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed significantly to the development of this conceptual paper. Thiam Yong Kuek led the conceptualisation and overall supervision of the manuscript. Yuen Onn Choong contributed to the writing of the introduction and the framing of the paper. Azeyan Awee led the literature review and the synthesis of prior studies. Farhana Hanim Mohsin developed the methodology section and contributed to the articulation of the paper's methodological foundation. Bobby Boon Hui Chai contributed to the conclusion and helped ensure consistency and integration across the manuscript. Timothy Tzen Vun Yap was responsible for critical revision, language refinement, and final manuscript polishing. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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