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**Role of Ethical Leadership in Reducing Workplace Bullying in Multinational
Corporations in China**



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Role of Ethical Leadership in Reducing Workplace Bullying in Multinational Corporations in China



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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this article was to analyze role of ethical leadership in reducing workplace bullying in multinational corporations in China.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: Ethical leadership in Chinese multinational corporations reduces workplace bullying by promoting respect, fairness, and accountability. Leaders who model ethical behavior discourage abuse of power and create a safe, supportive work culture. This approach fosters trust, empowers employees to report mistreatment, and lowers bullying incidents. Overall, ethical leadership plays a key role in preventing toxic behaviors at work.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Social learning theory, ethical climate theory & transformational leadership theory may be used to anchor future studies on role of ethical leadership in reducing workplace bullying in multinational corporations in China. Organizations should establish safe and confidential reporting channels that empower employees and bystanders to report bullying without fear of retaliation, supported by leaders who actively intervene and model ethical behavior. On the policy front, multinational corporations should develop global governance frameworks that mandate ethical leadership standards and ensure consistent anti-bullying measures across all subsidiaries worldwide.

Keywords: *Ethical Leadership, Workplace Bullying, Multinational Corporations*

INTRODUCTION

Ethical leadership defined as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships—plays a significant role in shaping employee behavior and organizational outcomes. In the United States, a 2022 study showed that ethical leadership reduced employee absenteeism ($\beta = -0.23$, $p < .05$) and improved service recovery performance ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < .01$), particularly in the hospitality sector (Ilies et al., 2022). In the UK, the National Health Service (NHS) experienced a 25% increase in staff engagement and a 37% decline in disciplinary cases in institutions with high ethical leadership ratings (Brown et al., 2021). Meanwhile, Japanese corporations, known for valuing integrity and lifetime employment, have reported stronger ethical climates associated with increased employee trust and loyalty, as evidenced by organizational surveys between 2019 and 2023 (Takemura & Nishii, 2020). Collectively, these examples from developed economies demonstrate that ethical leadership practices improve both organizational efficiency and employee satisfaction.

In Germany and the Netherlands, a cross-national study found that ethical leadership significantly encouraged employee voice behavior, though cultural nuances moderated the effect (Nazarian, 2022). This suggests that ethical leaders in Western Europe foster open communication and employee participation, which in turn enhances organizational learning. In Italy, ethical leadership was linked to reduced workplace stress and improved employee well-being, especially in hospitality and service sectors (Ilies, 2022). These findings demonstrate that in developed economies, ethical leadership supports both employee health and organizational performance through value-based guidance and inclusive practices.

In developing economies, ethical leadership is increasingly seen as a crucial tool for improving organizational commitment and employee retention. A 2023 study from Malaysia found that ethical leadership was positively correlated with employee trust ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < .01$) and job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .05$), leading to stronger organizational commitment (Rahman et al., 2023). In India, ethical leadership was linked to a 22% increase in employee engagement and a 15% rise in knowledge-sharing behaviors among IT professionals (Deshpande & Gupta, 2021). These statistics underline the critical role of moral leadership in environments with limited resources, where employees depend on fairness and transparency to remain committed. Ethical leadership provides psychological safety, encourages open communication, and deters corruption—factors essential in driving sustainable performance in emerging economies (Rahman, 2023). Therefore, fostering ethical practices at the leadership level can significantly elevate institutional integrity and retention.

In Brazil, ethical leadership has been linked to enhanced employee performance and improved leader-follower relationships. A study in a Brazilian telecommunications firm revealed that ethical leadership practices significantly influenced organizational citizenship behaviors, contributing to performance metrics at both individual and team levels (Sobral, 2021). Meanwhile, in Turkey, ethical leadership among accountants resulted in higher job satisfaction and affective commitment, which subsequently reduced turnover intentions (Torlak, 2021). These outcomes highlight how ethical leadership fosters trust, reduces attrition risks, and strengthens organizational loyalty in developing economic settings. Thus, even in fast-changing markets with limited institutional support, ethical leadership remains an effective managerial tool for boosting employee outcomes.

Ethical leadership in sub-Saharan Africa has emerged as a solution to chronic organizational issues such as high turnover and low employee morale. In Uganda's healthcare sector, ethical leadership significantly predicted staff retention ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$), while also indirectly enhancing job resources like autonomy and social support (Ibrahim & Mayende, 2018). Similarly, a South African study demonstrated a strong correlation ($r = .54$, $p < .001$) between ethical leadership and employee commitment, especially when optimism and perceived organizational support were high (Mpinganjira, 2023). These results emphasize the importance of principled leadership in regions facing resource scarcity and institutional fragility. By promoting justice, care, and participative management, ethical leaders enhance employee resilience and organizational effectiveness (Mpinganjira, 2023). Thus, ethical leadership is not only desirable but essential for long-term growth and workforce stability in the sub-Saharan region.

Ethical leadership plays a critical role in shaping organizational behavior in sub-Saharan Africa, where systemic challenges often impact workplace dynamics. A 2023 study that adapted ethical leadership measurement tools for use in Botswana and South Africa found strong correlations between ethical leadership and employee engagement, commitment, and job satisfaction (Mpinganjira, 2023). Leaders who exhibited fairness, respect, and openness were perceived as more trustworthy, which in turn fostered improved morale and organizational alignment. The research emphasized that culturally relevant ethical leadership is key in sustaining workforce morale in resource-constrained environments. These results underline that ethical leadership is not only viable but necessary for nurturing employee trust and retention in African workplaces (Mpinganjira, 2023).

Ethical leadership is grounded in principles of fairness, accountability, integrity, and compassion, which collectively shape the moral fabric of an organization. These leaders model ethical conduct and set clear expectations for interpersonal behavior, contributing to a respectful workplace climate (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Four core practices often associated with ethical leadership include fair decision-making, transparent communication, role modeling ethical behavior, and promoting inclusivity. Each of these practices actively discourages toxic behaviors such as favoritism, gossip, and abuse of power, which are precursors to bullying. Research suggests that ethical leadership correlates negatively with workplace bullying by fostering psychological safety and deterring deviant conduct (Stouten, 2010).

Fair decision-making ensures consistency in handling employee grievances, which reduces perceptions of injustice that often trigger bullying behaviors. Transparent communication helps reduce misinformation and rumors that can escalate into harassment or exclusion. Ethical role modeling sets behavioral norms that employees emulate, creating a ripple effect of accountability (Walumbwa, 2011). Promoting inclusivity encourages acceptance of diverse perspectives and discourages cliques or discriminatory behaviors that marginalize others. Together, these practices significantly reduce opportunities for bullying, while strengthening trust, cooperation, and morale within teams (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015).

Problem Statement

Despite growing awareness of workplace bullying as a critical organizational issue, many multinational corporations (MNCs) continue to struggle with the prevalence of toxic interpersonal behaviors that compromise employee well-being and productivity. The global nature of MNCs

marked by diverse cultural values, hierarchical structures, and varying leadership norms often complicates the implementation of uniform ethical standards. While ethical leadership has been shown to mitigate workplace bullying by promoting fairness, respect, and accountability, the extent to which these practices are consistently applied across borders remains unclear (Iqbal, 2020; Stouten, 2023). Furthermore, the absence of ethical leadership often leads to permissive environments where bullying behaviors go unchallenged, undermining team morale and increasing turnover rates (Manea, 2022). As a result, there is an urgent need to investigate how ethical leadership can be effectively leveraged to reduce workplace bullying in culturally and structurally complex organizations like MNCs.

Theoretical Review

Social Learning Theory

Originated by Albert Bandura, Social Learning Theory posits that individuals learn behaviors through observing and imitating others, especially authority figures. In organizational contexts, employees model the behaviors exhibited by their leaders. Ethical leadership, therefore, can influence employees to adopt respectful, non-abusive behaviors, thereby reducing workplace bullying. This theory is relevant to multinational corporations where leaders set the behavioral tone across culturally diverse teams. Recent studies confirm that ethical role modeling significantly curbs negative behaviors in the workplace (Al Halbusi, 2022).

Ethical Climate Theory

Developed by Victor and Cullen, this theory emphasizes how shared perceptions of ethical norms within an organization shape employee behavior. An ethical climate, fostered by leaders who promote fairness and integrity, reduces ambiguity about acceptable conduct and deters bullying. In MNCs, where ethical standards may vary across regions, consistent ethical leadership helps build a unified ethical climate. This climate discourages deviance and supports employee well-being (Ng & Feldman, 2021).

Transformational Leadership Theory

Introduced by James MacGregor Burns, this theory asserts that leaders inspire followers through vision, integrity, and consideration for individuals. Ethical leaders using a transformational approach encourage mutual respect, trust, and open communication, creating an environment where bullying is less likely to occur. This is particularly important in MNCs where workplace harmony across diverse teams is essential. Recent evidence links transformational ethical leadership to reduced incidences of harassment and toxic behavior (Zhu, 2019).

Empirical Review

Van Prooijen (2022) examined how different leadership styles impact workplace aggression, including bullying. The study demonstrated that ethical leadership has the strongest negative correlation with workplace bullying compared to other leadership styles such as task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership. Ethical leaders who emphasize fairness, transparency, and strong moral values create organizational climates where bullying behaviors are significantly less likely. The research suggested that promoting ethical leadership is a universally effective strategy for multinational corporations operating in diverse cultural contexts. Organizations with ethical

leadership also showed lower levels of interpersonal conflict and higher employee trust and satisfaction. The authors recommended integrating ethical leadership development into global leadership training programs to reinforce value-based decision-making and moral courage. Ongoing ethical climate assessments were proposed as a way to continuously monitor workplace behaviors across subsidiaries. Embedding ethics as a core organizational value was found to provide a shared language and behavioral standards that transcend cultural differences. This reduces ambiguity about acceptable conduct and empowers employees to challenge bullying without fear of retaliation. Aligning leadership with ethical standards fosters resilient cultures prioritizing respect and dignity. The study emphasized that ethical leadership not only mitigates bullying but also contributes to sustained organizational performance and sustainability. Continuous investment in ethical leadership development was deemed a strategic imperative. Ethical leadership was identified as a buffer against workplace toxicity and a foundation for psychological safety. The authors encouraged linking leadership effectiveness to performance metrics regularly. This research provides multinational corporations with compelling evidence to prioritize ethical leadership reforms as a tool to reduce bullying.

Islam, Ahmed and Ali (2019) explored the impact of ethical leadership on workplace bullying, with a focus on organizational identification and perceptions of fairness. Using structural equation modeling, they found that ethical leadership reduces bullying by enhancing employees' sense of belonging and organizational commitment. Nurses perceiving their leaders as ethical reported fewer bullying incidents and higher job satisfaction. The study emphasized that fair treatment and ethical decision-making from supervisors cultivate positive environments that discourage aggression. Ethical leadership was also found to buffer stressors like workload pressures that might otherwise increase bullying tendencies. The authors recommended multinational healthcare corporations implement leadership training programs focused on ethical behavior and equitable resource distribution to reduce bullying and improve morale. They highlighted the importance of safe feedback channels where employees could report unethical or bullying behavior without fear. The research stressed that organizational culture amplifies or mitigates leadership impacts on bullying. Ethical leadership was particularly critical in high-stress industries like healthcare, where bullying harms both employee well-being and patient outcomes. The study suggested longitudinal research to explore sustained leadership effects on bullying and cross-cultural studies to assess ethical leadership across global contexts. It recommended integrating ethics into performance appraisals and promotion criteria to institutionalize anti-bullying values. The authors concluded that ethical leadership fosters an inclusive and respectful workplace climate essential for multinational teams. Training and policies to maintain fairness and ethical standards were highlighted as critical interventions. The study called for ongoing efforts to embed ethical leadership into organizational practices globally.

Ahmad, Sohal and Cox (2020) investigated the effects of ethical and unethical leadership on workplace bullying and employee well-being. Using structural equation modeling, they found that unethical leadership behaviors had stronger harmful effects on bullying and well-being than the protective role of ethical leadership. However, ethical leadership was still significantly linked to lower bullying levels, highlighting its important mitigating role. Employees under ethical leaders experienced higher job satisfaction, trust in management, and psychological safety, which contributed to reduced bullying. The authors stressed that organizations should focus not only on

promoting ethical leadership but also on actively identifying and eliminating toxic behaviors such as favoritism and manipulation. They recommended implementing clear codes of conduct and accountability mechanisms in multinational corporations. Ethical leadership training should be paired with efforts to root out unethical leadership to be effective. Anonymous employee surveys were suggested as tools to detect early signs of unethical behaviors and bullying. The study emphasized that multinational corporations face cultural and regulatory challenges that require vigilant leadership oversight. The researchers advocated a dual strategy: promote positive leadership while eliminating unethical behavior. Leadership exemplars acting as role models were highlighted as essential for fostering an ethical culture. Embedding ethical leadership into organizational policies and leadership competencies was recommended. Further research on the mechanisms through which ethical leadership reduces bullying, including trust-building and conflict resolution, was urged. The study concluded that ethical leadership interventions can substantially improve well-being and organizational climate globally. Ethical leadership is key to sustaining a healthy work environment across multinational operations.

Ahmer, Shabbir, Imran, and Ali (2020) explored how ethical leadership reduces workplace bullying via employee resilience and the moderating role of Islamic work ethics. The findings showed that ethical leadership enhances employee resilience, equipping workers to better cope with workplace stress and resist bullying behaviors. Resilient employees under ethical leaders felt empowered to confront or report bullying. The moderating effect of Islamic work ethics strengthened the impact of ethical leadership, indicating cultural values can enhance leadership effectiveness. The authors recommended multinational corporations in culturally diverse regions integrate resilience training tailored to local religious and cultural contexts within leadership development. Such culturally sensitive interventions maximize ethical leadership's positive influence on workplace behavior. The study emphasized the importance of adapting leadership models to respect employees' cultural values. Ethical leadership programs incorporating resilience building provide psychological resources for employees facing workplace challenges. Cross-cultural studies were proposed to identify which cultural values best align with ethical leadership in reducing bullying. The authors concluded ethical leadership catalyzes resilience and ethical values, jointly protecting employees from bullying. Multinational corporations should foster culturally aware ethical climates to maximize leadership efficacy. The study advocates holistic leadership combining ethics, resilience, and cultural sensitivity to combat bullying. Such approaches provide sustainable anti-bullying strategies for global organizations. The authors underscored the necessity of context-specific ethical leadership rather than uniform application. The research offers actionable insights for multinational corporations aiming to reduce workplace bullying effectively.

Freire and Pinto (2021) investigated 223 Portuguese employees to analyze whether ethical climate mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and workplace bullying. Their results showed ethical leadership fosters a positive ethical climate, which in turn significantly reduces bullying. Mediation analysis revealed that ethical leadership's effect on bullying operates primarily through shaping the organizational ethical climate. The authors recommended multinational corporations adopt consistent ethical policies across all subsidiaries to establish a unified ethical climate, reducing tolerance for bullying in different cultural settings. Clear communication and enforcement of ethical standards at all levels were stressed as essential. Ethical climate was

identified as a shared perception that influences individual and group workplace behavior. Regular ethical climate assessments were suggested to monitor organizational culture and prevent bullying. A strong ethical climate also enhances employee engagement and loyalty. Top leadership commitment was highlighted as crucial for nurturing ethical climates aligned with corporate values. Training managers and supervisors to consistently model ethical behavior was recommended. The study supports the view that organizational context mediates individual leadership actions' impact on bullying. Cultivating a robust ethical climate was proposed as a practical, scalable strategy for multinational corporations combating workplace bullying. The authors urged further research on adapting ethical climate interventions to diverse cultural environments. They concluded that ethical climate is a key pathway through which ethical leadership reduces bullying globally. These findings guide multinational corporations in creating ethical organizational environments to prevent workplace bullying.

Bahçeci and Işık (2021) examined 551 Turkish educators to study organizational justice as a mediator between ethical leadership and workplace bullying. The study found ethical leadership enhances perceptions of organizational justice by ensuring fair procedures, transparent decision-making, and equitable grievance handling. Improved justice perceptions significantly reduce bullying behaviors. The authors recommended multinational corporations align human resources policies with ethical leadership principles to foster fairness and reduce bullying worldwide. Organizational justice was identified as a critical mechanism through which ethical leadership protects employees from bullying. Transparent communication and impartial treatment were emphasized as foundational anti-bullying elements. The study stressed cultural sensitivity in justice practices since fairness perceptions vary globally. Multinational corporations were advised to adapt justice policies to local contexts while maintaining core ethical standards. Strengthening organizational justice builds trust in leadership and lowers workplace aggression. Ongoing training for managers on ethical leadership and fair treatment was recommended. Effective justice systems empower employees to report bullying safely, enabling early intervention. The authors called for longitudinal research to explore justice perceptions' evolution under ethical leadership. Overall, organizational justice plays a vital role in linking ethical leadership with reduced bullying. The study provides multinational corporations with actionable insights to integrate justice into leadership frameworks to combat workplace bullying effectively.

Diep Nguyen, Nguyen and Teo (2022) explored ethical leadership's moderating role on the psychological effects of witnessing workplace bullying. Witnesses of bullying reported increased psychological distress and diminished feelings of meaningful work, but these negative effects were significantly weakened in contexts of strong ethical leadership. Ethical leaders actively intervened in bullying incidents, supported bystanders, and maintained open communication, which protected employee well-being. The study recommended multinational corporations train leaders to recognize and address bullying's impacts on witnesses, not just direct victims. Including bystanders in anti-bullying strategies fosters a comprehensive supportive culture. Ethical leadership was found to promote psychological safety, empowering employees to speak up against bullying. Anonymous feedback systems for bystanders were suggested to encourage reporting. Witnessing bullying was shown to harm organizational morale if unaddressed, making ethical leadership critical for mitigation. The study concluded leadership behaviors influence bullying incidence and its broader psychological consequences. Proactive leadership focused on inclusivity

and employee support is essential. The researchers urged multinational corporations to consider all employees affected by bullying in policy design. Comprehensive approaches enhance organizational resilience and promote healthier workplaces. Ethical leadership was reinforced as a key resource safeguarding mental health in global organizations.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Research Gaps: Despite strong evidence linking ethical leadership to reductions in workplace bullying, there remain important conceptual gaps in understanding the precise mechanisms at play. While studies highlight mediators such as trust, organizational justice, resilience, and ethical climate, comprehensive models that integrate these factors holistically are limited. Additionally, the dual role of leadership styles is understudied—most research focuses on ethical leadership’s protective role without adequately exploring how unethical leadership behaviors may exacerbate bullying within the same organizational environment. The influence of cultural values on ethical leadership effectiveness also requires further theoretical development, as current studies provide limited insight into how diverse cultural or religious norms shape leadership-bullying dynamics. Finally, although ethical climate is frequently discussed as a mediator, there is insufficient research on its potential moderating effects or its evolving interaction with leadership and employee perceptions over time, limiting understanding of the complex, dynamic relationships involved.

Contextual Research Gaps: Contextually, the bulk of research on ethical leadership and workplace bullying is concentrated in healthcare, education, and public sector settings, leaving a gap in understanding how these dynamics unfold in other sectors such as manufacturing, finance, technology, or large multinational corporate headquarters. Moreover, the influence of organizational size and structure on the effectiveness of ethical leadership in reducing bullying is not well established, with little research comparing large, geographically dispersed firms against smaller, more centralized organizations. The experiences and psychological impacts of employees who witness bullying but are not direct targets—bystanders—remain relatively unexplored, despite emerging evidence suggesting that leadership plays a crucial role in protecting these individuals. Additionally, the predominance of cross-sectional study designs limits insight into causality and the sustainability of leadership interventions, highlighting a need for more longitudinal and intervention-based research focused specifically on multinational corporations. These contextual gaps must be addressed to tailor leadership strategies effectively across different organizational realities.

Geographical Research Gaps: Geographically, research on ethical leadership and workplace bullying is disproportionately focused on Western countries and a few emerging markets like Turkey and Pakistan, with a significant lack of studies from regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe. This limits the generalizability of findings and the development of culturally sensitive leadership frameworks. Furthermore, there is a notable absence of cross-cultural comparative research conducted within multinational corporations that operate across diverse countries, which would clarify how ethical leadership effectiveness varies by cultural context. Differences in perceptions of fairness, justice, and ethical behavior across geographic regions are not sufficiently mapped or linked to bullying outcomes, which is critical for developing globally relevant interventions. Finally, the challenge of integrating ethical leadership into global human resource policies that accommodate varying legal, social, and cultural frameworks remains underexplored, posing a barrier to designing effective anti-bullying strategies for multinational organizations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Ethical leadership plays a pivotal role in mitigating workplace bullying within multinational corporations by fostering a culture grounded in fairness, transparency, and respect. Leaders who consistently demonstrate strong moral values and ethical behavior set the tone for acceptable conduct, which reduces bullying incidents and promotes psychological safety among employees. Through mechanisms such as enhancing organizational justice, building employee resilience, and cultivating a positive ethical climate, ethical leadership helps create inclusive environments where bullying is actively discouraged. Moreover, in the complex and culturally diverse contexts of multinational corporations, ethical leadership serves as a unifying framework that transcends geographic and cultural boundaries, enabling consistent anti-bullying practices globally. Therefore, investing in ethical leadership development is essential for multinational organizations committed to sustaining employee well-being, improving organizational performance, and fostering resilient, respectful workplaces free from bullying.

Recommendations

Theory

To advance theoretical understanding, research should develop integrated leadership models that combine ethical leadership with related constructs such as organizational justice, employee resilience, and cultural values. These models would clarify how ethical leadership mechanisms work to reduce workplace bullying in multinational corporations. Additionally, there is a need for longitudinal and cross-cultural studies to capture how ethical leadership influences bullying over time and across diverse cultural settings. Expanding theory to consider the simultaneous presence of ethical and unethical leadership behaviors within organizations would deepen insights into leadership's complex role in workplace aggression. These efforts will fill conceptual gaps and provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing workplace bullying globally.

Practice

From a practical standpoint, multinational corporations must implement tailored ethical leadership training programs that emphasize fairness, transparency, and moral courage as core competencies. Such training should be adapted to different cultural contexts to ensure relevance and effectiveness. Organizations should establish safe and confidential reporting channels that empower employees and bystanders to report bullying without fear of retaliation, supported by leaders who actively intervene and model ethical behavior. Embedding ethical leadership into performance appraisals, promotion criteria, and day-to-day management ensures that anti-bullying values become institutionalized throughout the organization. Furthermore, integrating resilience-building and culturally sensitive ethics education into leadership development programs will equip employees with the psychological resources to resist bullying and cope with workplace stressors.

Policy

On the policy front, multinational corporations should develop global governance frameworks that mandate ethical leadership standards and ensure consistent anti-bullying measures across all subsidiaries worldwide. Human resource policies must explicitly incorporate principles of organizational justice, including fair treatment, transparent grievance handling, and equitable resource distribution, to serve as foundational protections against bullying. Regular ethical climate assessments and leadership effectiveness evaluations are essential to monitor progress and inform policy adjustments aimed at maintaining respectful workplaces. Additionally, multinational corporations should collaborate with policymakers and labor organizations to establish international guidelines and legally binding policies that promote ethical leadership and zero tolerance for workplace bullying. These policy initiatives will create a robust and enforceable framework to sustain healthy work environments globally.

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