

Turnover Intention: Impacts of Abusive Supervision and Thriving at Work

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of abusive supervision and workplace thriving on employee turnover intention. Employing a quantitative approach, the study results show that abusive supervision positively relates to employee turnover intention. Abusive supervision negatively influences thriving at work. Thriving at work negatively relates to employee turnover intention. In addition, employee thriving at work can partially mediate the association between abusive supervision and employee turnover intention. Study findings yield implications for practicing managers.

Keywords: abusive supervision, thriving at work, turnover intention

1. Introduction

Employees are valuable assets in the organization. They are crucial to organizations' sustainable development. How to retain employees is one of top concerns to organizational managers. High employee turnover can be problematic to organizations. Financially, it is costly for the organization to spend more money in recruiting, selecting and training another new employee when the old one quits the job. Besides, it can undermine remaining employees' morale, which in turn, might lead to decreased productivity among remaining employees. Moreover, high employee turnover can negatively affect organization's social image. The actual turnover is different from turnover intention. The latter refers to a deliberate and conscious intention to withdraw from the organization (Mobley et al., 1978). Past studies on employee turnover has mainly focused on employee turnover intention (Newman, 1974). Likewise, this study will follow this direction.

Previous studies found that leadership is one of the significant factors that influences employee turnover intention (Schat et al., 2006; Zhang et al., 2003; Mathieu et al., 2016). Positive leadership can enhance employee's organizational commitment and employees are more willing to stay with the organization. On the other hand, destructive leadership, for instance, abusive leadership, has been found to positively relate to employee's turnover intention (MacKey et al., 2017; Schyns & Schilling, 2013, Zellars et al., 2002; Wu & Hu, 2009).

The relationship between abusive leadership and turnover intention could be influenced by numerous factors. This study will use employee thriving at work as a variable to examine whether it can mediate the association between abusive supervision and turnover intention. The choice of employee thriving at work is based on two considerations. First, it is in response to other researchers' call for more research on abusive supervision (Mackey et al., 2017). Second, current research on the relationship between leadership style and employee thriving at work is limited (Paterson et al., 2014; Usman et al., 2022).

To sum up, this study will focus on the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention. In particular, based on affective events theory, the study will examine whether abusive supervision could affect individual's vitality and learning (thriving at work), and turnover intention, whether individual's workplace thriving could affect individual's turnover intention, and whether thriving at work mediates the association between abusive supervision and turnover intention. This study attempts to make contributions in the following ways. First, it examines how abusive leadership might lead to employee turnover intention. Currently, study on abusive leadership is limited (Mackey et al., 2017). Second, the study tries to add value to the research on the

association between leadership style and employee thriving at work (Paterson et al., 2014; Usman et al., 2022). Thirdly, this study offers some implications for human resource managers to reduce employee turnover intention.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Abusive Supervision and Turnover Intention

Abusive supervision refers to individual's perception of the extent to which leaders or supervisors engage in hostile and aggressive behaviors, excluding physical contact (Tepper, 2000). Abusive supervision has been a topic of concern mostly in corporate and educational settings (Goodyear, et al., 1992; Hobman, et al., 2009). Previous studies found abusive supervision is related to some work-related consequences, such as employee's job satisfaction, job performance, their perception of justice, organizational commitment, deviant workplace behavior, emotional exhaustion and turnover intention (MacKey et al., 2017; Schyns & Schilling, 2013, Zellars et al., 2002; Wu & Hu, 2009).

Turnover intention refers to individual's propensity to leave the organization permanently or temporarily. Employees quit their jobs for different reasons. Abusive supervision is one of the contributing factors that brings about employees' withdrawal. In the workplace, when employees are ridiculed, scolded, mistreated, or cheated by their supervisor, employees will experience irritation, disappointment and emotional detachment. Some employees will consider quitting their jobs. Liu (2019) conducted the study among workers in automobile-making industries. Abusive supervision is found to be positively related to turnover intention. Abusive supervision undermines employee's perception of justice, reduces employees' job satisfaction, which in turn leads to employees' intention to quit the job. This finding is consistent with that of other studies (Tepper, 2007; Burriss et al., 2008; Sun et al., 2013). Based on the studies discussed above, the following hypothesis is stated:

H1: Abusive supervision positively relates to turnover intention.

2.2 The mediating Role of Thriving at Work

Thriving at work consists of both vitality and learning in the workplace. Vitality is a positive feeling that comes from employees' sense of aliveness and energy. Learning takes place when employees feel they make improvements in their work. Vitality and learning are equally essential components of thriving at work. Without learning, employees experience stagnancy in their work. Without vitality, learning becomes bored and fatigued (Spreitzer et al., 2010; Porath et al., 2012).

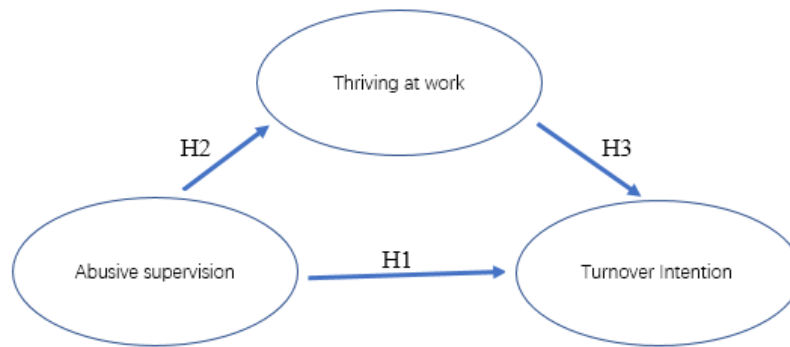
Workplace thriving is impacted by contextual factors (Johns, 2017). Leadership style is one of the significant contextual factors and has been found to be linked to workplace thriving (Mortier et al., 2016; Li et al., 2016). Most of the studies mainly target the relationship between positive leadership and thriving at work (Rego et al., 2012; Li et al., 2006). Still, some studies tend to focus on the association between abusive leadership and workplace thriving. Enrolling 360 full-time employees from a large University in China and adopting a time-lag approach, researchers (Usman et al., 2022) posited that abusive supervision is negatively associated with workplace thriving. Thus, the following hypothesis is stated: *H2: Abusive supervision negatively relates to workplace thriving.*

Research suggests that workplace thriving can exert impact on a variety of work-related outcomes (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009; Gerbasi et al., 2015; Spreitzer et al., 2012). In line with the research question in the present study, special attention is given to the link between workplace thriving and turnover intention. Abid et al. (2016) found thriving employees demonstrate low rate of turnover intentions. The finding is consistent with Zhu's study (2015). As such, the following hypothesis is stated: *H3: workplace thriving negatively influences employee turnover intention.*

Zhai et al. (2020) examined white-collar workers in China and found that workplace thriving fully mediates the relationship between supervisor support and life satisfaction and partially mediates the association between coworker support and life satisfaction. This is in line with affective events theory (AET, Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). According to the theory, the daily upbeats and hassles in the workplace would trigger employees' emotional reactions, which in turn, exert the impact on their job satisfaction and performance. A positive organizational setting enhances employee thriving whereas a negative one hinders thriving. Chang & Busser (2020) examined and found workplace thriving mediated the relationship between perceived organizational support and career turnover intention. Based on the studies discussed above, aligning with AET and incorporating Hypotheses 2 and 3, the following hypothesis is stated:

H4: Workplace thriving mediates the positive relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention.

In summary, the proposed theoretical model is as follows:



3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and Procedure

Participants of this study were full-time employees working in private organizations in the southern part of China. They were invited to join the research to rate their supervisors. Among 133 employees who answered the questionnaire, 126 completed and returned the questionnaire. The response rate was 95%. Table 1 presents the demographics of the participants.

Table 1. Profile of participants

	Number	Percentage of Total
Gender		
Male	36	29
Female	90	71
Age		
20-30 years	63	50
30-40	45	38
40-50	10	8
Older than 50	8	4
Education		
High school	31	25
Bachelor	85	67
Master	10	8
Doctor	0	0
Position level		
Frontline employee	91	72
First-line manager	27	21
Middle manager	8	7

3.2 Measures

The scales used in this research were adapted from prior studies. All the items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 for “strongly disagree” to 5 for “strongly agree”. Abusive supervision was measured using an eight-item scale adapted from Tepper (2000). An example item is: “my supervisor does not keep promise.” The scale developed by Porath et al. (2012) was employed to assess employees’ thriving. It consists of two dimensions, with each containing five items. Sample items are “I find myself learning often in my job” and “I find myself alive and vital.” Participants rated turnover intention using Mobley’s (1978) four-item scale. An example item includes “Within the next year, I intend to leave the organization”.

Descriptive analysis is conducted to understand the variables regarding the minimum, maximum value, mean value and standard deviation. As is shown in Table 2, the standard deviation of abusive supervision, turnover intention and thriving at work is 0.66, 0.83 and 0.51, respectively. All three statistics are less than their corresponding mean value, which shows that the data collected in the study is appropriate for the following

analysis. The mean value for abusive supervision is 3.71, much higher than 3 (median value). This shows that abusive supervision perceived by employees is frequently exhibited in the organization. This is consistent with the findings of prior studies (Mackey et al., 2017; Tepper, 2007). The mean value for turnover intention is 3.96, much higher than 3 (median value). It suggests that employees demonstrate a strong desire to quit the job.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis

Variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
AS	126	1	5	3.7	0.66
TAW	126	1	5	2.39	0.51
TI	126	1	5	3.96	0.83

Note. AS=Abusive supervision, TAW=Thriving at work, TI=Turnover intention.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was done in the following steps: first, reliability and validity of the scale were tested. Second, correlation analysis was done to offer a basis for the following regression analysis. Data analysis was done in SPSS 26 (statistical package for social sciences).

4. Results

4.1 Reliability and Validity Test

In this study, Cronbach's Alpha was used as a measure for reliability test. Cronbach's Alpha of abusive supervision scale, thriving scale and turnover intention scale were 0.783, 0.644 and 0.850, respectively, indicating that the internal consistency of the three scales is relatively highly.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure (KMO) of sampling adequacy is conducted for validity analysis. Results in Table 3 showed that the KMO value of abusive supervision, thriving and turnover intention are over or close to 0.8. The associated probability of Bartlett Sphericity test was 0.000, reaching a significant level (Sig.=0.000), demonstrating an adequate structural validity.

Table 3. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure and Bartlett' s test

Variables	KMO	Bartlett' s Test		
		Approx. Chi-square	df	Sig.
Abusive Leadership	0.904	2536.856	36	0.000
Turnover Intention	0.871	2983.192	66	0.000
Thriving at Work	0.734	1566.255	28	0.000

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis measures whether the variables are correlated and thus offers a basis for the following regression analysis. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Correlation analysis results

Variables	AS	TI	TAW
AS	1		
TI	.733**	1	
TAW	-.287**	-.334**	1

Notes. **: $P < 0.01$ (two-tailed test), AS=Abusive supervision, TAW=Thriving at work, TI=Turnover intention.

As can be seen, abusive leadership correlates positively with turnover intention ($r=0.733$, $p < 0.01$). Abusive leadership correlates negatively with thriving at work ($r=-0.287$, $p < 0.01$). Thriving at work correlates negatively with turnover intention ($r=-0.334$, $p < 0.01$). Result shows a significant correlation between the variables and it is appropriate to conduct the following regression test.

4.3 Regression Analysis and Hypotheses Testing

Regression analysis was conducted in the following steps. First, demographic characteristics such as gender, age, tenure and employee position level were included as control variables and turnover intention as dependent variable in Model 1(M1). On the basis of M1, abusive supervision is added as independent variable to Model 2(M2). Model 3 (M3) involves demographic characteristics as control variables, abusive supervision as independent and workplace thriving as dependent variables. This step is to explore the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace thriving. Model 4 (M4) examine the relationship between workplace thriving and turnover intention. Demographic characteristics were controlled. Workplace thriving and turnover intention were used as independent and dependent variables respectively. The final step (M5) is to test whether workplace thriving can mediate the association between abusive supervision and turnover intention. It is a three-step regression. Demographic characteristics were controlled. Stepwise, both abusive supervision and workplace thriving were included as independent variables for turnover intention. Results of the regression analysis are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Regression analysis result

Variables	TI		TAW		TI
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
Gender	0.06	0.05	0.14	0.1	0.07
Age	0.02	0.06	-0.09	0.05	0.05
Tenure	-0.15	-0.03	0.05	-0.12	-0.03
Position	0.09	0.03	-0.1	-0.01	0.01
AS		0.73***	0.28**		0.69***
TAW				-0.33***	-0.14*
R ²		0.55	0.12	0.14	0.56
Adjusted R ²		0.53	0.09	0.1	0.54
F		28.89***	3.34**	3.89**	25.52***

Notes. ***: $P < 0.001$, **: $P < 0.01$, *: $P < 0.05$, AS=Abusive supervision, TAW=Thriving at work, TI=Turnover intention

As can be seen from Table 5, M2 consists of dependent variable and demographic characteristics. F value of M2 is 28.89, and is in the range of $p < 0.001$; The adjusted R² of M2 is 0.53, indicating that abusive supervision can explain 53 percent of the variance in employee turnover intention. The regression coefficient is 0.73 ($p < 0.001$). Therefore, *Hypothesis 1* is supported: abusive supervision is positively related to employee turnover intention.

F value of M3 is 3.34, and is in the range of $p < 0.01$; The adjusted R² of M3 is 0.09, indicating that abusive supervision can explain 9 percent of the variance in employee workplace thriving. The regression coefficient is -0.28 ($p < 0.01$). As such, *Hypothesis 2* is supported: abusive supervision negatively relates to employee workplace thriving.

F value of M4 is 3.89, and is in the range of $p < 0.01$; The adjusted R² of M3 is 0.1, indicating that workplace thriving can explain 10 percent of the variance in employee turnover intention. The regression coefficient is -0.33 ($p < 0.001$). Therefore, *Hypothesis 3* is supported: workplace thriving negatively influences turnover intentions.

F value of M5 is 25.52, and is in the range of $p < 0.001$; The adjusted R² of M5 is 0.54, indicating that abusive supervision and workplace thriving can explain 54 percent of the variance in employee turnover intention. The association of abusive supervision on dependent variable is significant ($\beta = -0.69$, $p < 0.001$), and workplace thriving exerts a significantly negative effect on the dependent variable ($\beta = -0.14$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, it is concluded that workplace thriving plays a partially mediating role in the association of abusive supervision and employee turnover intentions. Thus, *Hypothesis 4* is supported: Thriving at work mediates the association between abusive supervision and turnover intention. The results of the hypotheses testing are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Hypotheses testing results

Hypothesis	Results
H1	Supported
H2	Supported
H3	Supported
H4	Supported

5. Discussion

This study explores the impact of abusive supervision and workplace thriving on employee turnover intention. Four hypotheses were tested and supported. It is found that:

First, Abusive supervision positively relates to employee turnover intention. This is in line with previous studies (Tepper, 2007; Liu & Wu, 2009; Sun et al., 2013; Liu, 2019). When employees are mistreated by their supervisors on a frequent basis, they tend to experience emotional dissonance, exhaustion, and burnout, which in the long run, negatively influences their job satisfaction and performance (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). When job dissatisfaction and decreased performance accumulate, employees are most likely to quit their job.

The second finding is: abusive supervision negatively influences employee workplace thriving. This echoes the findings of prior study (Usman et al., 2022). Employee workplace thriving is mainly affected by contextual factors in the workplace (Spreitzer et al., 2012). Leadership style is one of the significant factors in the organizational context. When leaders frequently abuse their employees, employees might respond with less work engagement and decreased vitality (Usman et al., 2022).

Thirdly, workplace thriving negatively associates with turnover intentions. The finding is consistent with past studies (Abid et al., 2016; Zhu, 2015). When employees find it difficult to make improvements in their work or to experience vitality in their work, they are more likely to withdraw from the organization.

The final finding is: workplace thriving mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention. It is consistent with the finding of past study (Chang & Busser, 2020). Abusive supervision decreases employees' work engagement and negatively affects their work-related vigor. In turn, when employees see less improvement in their work, they are more likely to quit their jobs. This study finds that workplace thriving is a mediator between abusive supervision and employee turnover intention. Nonetheless, thriving only partially mediates the association between abusive supervision and turnover intention.

6. Implications for Practice

This empirical study has implications for managers. In the first place, managers should realize the detrimental impact of abusive supervision on employees. This study finds that abusive supervision positively influences employees' turnover intention. Though some studies (Mackey et al., 2017; Tepper, 2007) declare abusive supervision is a common occurrence in the workplace, practicing managers should not take it for granted. In the organizational setting, managers are encouraged to take efforts to learn to well manage their own emotion. When dealing with daily hassles in the workplace, managers might consider using personal charisma or humor rather than abusive supervision. To this end, it is suggested that human resource managers in the organization arrange some training programs or offer some seminars to help managers regulate and manage their emotion. In addition, the organization should consider formulating policies concerning the governance of leaders' abusive supervision to help leaders minimize their abusive supervision in the workplace. Furthermore, supervisor-subordinate communication should be underscored.

Second, prior study (Usman et al., 2022) suggests that organizations should consider enrolling individuals with high core self-evaluation (CSE). Individuals with such personality attribute are more likely to be resilient and counteract the abusive supervision. This suggestion is worth noting. As we know, employees have different personalities. Their reaction to abusive supervision also differs from one another. When faced with abusive leadership, some employees might still work very hard whereas some others might quit the jobs without any notice. Therefore, in order to help organizations retain their talents, it is suggested that managers not only consider an applicant's ability but also his/her personality in the employee recruitment and selection stage.

Third, management should attach importance to employee workplace thriving. This research finds workplace thriving partially mediates the association between abusive supervision and turnover intention. Prior studies (Porath et al., 2012; Spreitzer et al., 2005; Elliott & Dweck, 1988) contend that workplace thriving encompasses employees' work passion and their ability and confidence in doing the work. It plays a significant role in

employees' performance (Walumbwa et al., 2018). Previous research indicates leadership style is an important factor that influence employee thriving (Russo et al., 2018). Specifically, past research suggests that constructive leadership styles are more likely to enhance employee workplace thriving (Mortier et al., 2016; Harris et al., 2014; Li et al., 2016; Hildenbrand et al., 2018). As such, it is suggested that management should consider offering leaders leadership training programs that focus on enhancing managers' constructive leadership.

7. Conclusion

This study explores the impact of abusive supervision and workplace thriving on employee turnover intention. It is found that abusive supervision positively relates to employee turnover intention. Abusive supervision negatively influences thriving at work, and thriving at work negatively relates to employee turnover intention. In addition, workplace thriving can partially mediate the association between abusive supervision and employee turnover intention.

This study has certain limitations. First, participants of the present study are confined to one city in the southern part of China. In addition, participants are from different industries and their position level also varies greatly. Third, in terms of data collection, questionnaire is the only method in this study. Finally, thriving at work is chosen as the only mediating variable to explore the association between abusive supervision and employee turnover intention. For future research, participants from more cities should be involved and the number of participants should be increased. Future study might also limit to one specific industry so as to provide more targeted implications to people in that particular industry. Additionally, concerning data collection, interview, focus group are suggested in addition to questionnaire. Finally, including other variables to explore the moderating role between abusive supervision and turnover intention could be another prospect for research.

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