Does Ethical CSR Buffer the Creativity Cost of Cyberbullying?

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Abstract: Cyberbullying in the workplace has emerged as a growing concern within higher education institutions (HEIs) across Europe. Drawing on COR theory and micro-level corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature, it develops a moderated mediation framework in which workplace cyberbullying undermines academic creative behaviour by depleting psychological well-being, and employee-oriented CSR attenuates both the direct and indirect effects of this process. COR theory explains why cyberbullying depletes the psychological resources creativity requires; CSR literature supplies the specific organisational resource, a "resource caravan," in Hobfoll's terms that COR theory predicts should buffer this depletion, a pairing not previously made in the cyberbullying-creativity literature. The framework extends resource-based creativity research to an occupational group not yet examined under this lens, and specifies a dual-level buffering mechanism not yet tested jointly elsewhere. We propose European HEIs as the empirical scope for future testing, given the increasing digitalisation of academic work across the continent. The framework carries practical implications for how HEIs design cyberbullying policy, monitor staff well-being, and embed employee-oriented CSR into institutional culture as a safeguard for sustained academic creativity.

Keywords: Workplace cyberbullying, Corporate social responsibility, Psychological well-being, Employee creativity

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly confronted with the threat of workplace cyberbullying, a phenomenon characterised by repeated, intentional, and digitally mediated aggression that crosses temporal and spatial boundaries, leaving targets with limited opportunity to defend themselves (Cassidy et al. 2016; Salazar et al. 2024) and unlike traditional workplace bullying, cyberbullying infiltrates all dimensions of academic life, eroding the collegial trust and psychological safety upon which research, teaching, and scholarly community depend. As universities intensify their reliance on digital communication platforms for collaboration, peer review, and institutional governance, employees' exposure to hostile online conduct has grown correspondingly, yet institutional responses remain underdeveloped. This gap persists in more recent scholarship: institutional measures addressing academic staff targeted cyberbullying remain scarce (Bisaillon et al. 2023).

A particularly under-examined consequence of workplace cyberbullying in academic contexts is its impact on employee creativity, which underpins academic excellence, institutional competitiveness, and societal impact (Tootell et al. 2021). However, despite growing recognition that hostile work environments suppress creative performance (Shabbir and Islam 2024), the specific mechanisms through which workplace cyberbullying undermines creativity in HEI contexts remain insufficiently theorised and empirically underexplored. Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll 2011) provides the primary theoretical lens for this study. COR theory holds that individuals are fundamentally motivated to acquire, maintain, and protect valued resources, including emotional energy, social support, and psychological well-being and that psychological stress arises when these resources are threatened or lost. Workplace cyberbullying constitutes a potent stressor that initiates precisely such resource loss: employees subjected to digital hostility must expend considerable cognitive and emotional effort managing exclusion, disrespect, and interpersonal threat. This resource depletion reduces their psychological well-being and, by extension, their capacity for the sustained, exploratory cognitive engagement that creativity demands. Accordingly, psychological well-being is theorised here as the critical mediating mechanism through which workplace cyberbullying erodes academic creative behaviour.

The severity of these effects is not uniform: organisations vary in the extent to which they cultivate employee-protective environments such as employee-oriented corporate social responsibility (CSR), which may amplify or attenuate cyberbullying-induced resource loss. It is defined as organisational practices that prioritise employee welfare, dignity, fair treatment, and development (Lee et al. 2013), which represents a theoretically compelling boundary condition. From a COR perspective, employee-oriented CSR generates a reservoir of organisational resources that employees can draw on when confronting interpersonal adversity (hostile, demeaning, or exclusionary treatment from colleagues or supervisors, including workplace cyberbullying as a digitally mediated form). When staff perceive their institution as genuinely committed to their well-being through authentic, consistent, and employee-centred practices, the resource-depleting impact of cyberbullying may be substantially weakened (Kim and Lee 2022).

COR and CSR literatures are combined here deliberately, rather than as an additive pairing of convenient theories. COR theory specifies the mechanism by which cyberbullying depletes the psychological resources creativity depends on, but does not by itself identify which organisational-level resource should counteract that depletion. Employee-oriented CSR supplies that missing piece: as an institutionally controlled, employee-directed resource, it is precisely the kind of "resource caravan" (Hobfoll 2011) that COR theory predicts should attenuate stress-driven resource loss, yet this specific pairing has not been applied to the cyberbullying–creativity relationship. This gap is visible across European higher education more broadly: academic staff, as distinct from students, have received comparatively little attention regarding their online victimisation experiences (Bussu et al. 2025), and the mechanism proposed here — resource depletion undermining academic creativity, buffered by an internal organisational resource — is plausibly at work across European HEI contexts wherever academic staff face digital hostility. Section 7 identifies Lithuania and the broader Baltic region, where this gap is particularly pronounced within an otherwise active regional bullying literature, as a starting point for empirical validation.

Against this backdrop, the present study develops a moderated mediation framework that advances understanding of how workplace cyberbullying undermines academic creative behaviour in HEIs, and under what institutional conditions its effects can be buffered. Although Europe has produced a growing body of research on bullying and victimisation in educational institutions (Riso 2024), this evidence base has consistently bypassed HEI cyberbullying as a focal construct, concentrating instead on general bullying among higher education students (de Souza et al. 2022; Gordillo et al. 2024). Its objectives are threefold: to examine the cyberbullying-creativity relationship; to identify psychological well-being as the mediating mechanism; and to advance employee-oriented CSR as a moderator that interrupts this chain. Adopting a conceptual, theory-building approach, this paper synthesises the existing literature on workplace cyberbullying, psychological well-being, employee-oriented CSR, and creativity to advance a set of testable propositions and integrate them into a single moderated mediation framework intended to guide future empirical research in this setting.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Workplace Cyberbullying and Academic Creative Behaviour

Academic creative behaviour is conceptually distinct from organisational creativity, which focuses on the production of novel and useful ideas, solutions, and approaches that advance organisational effectiveness in typical organisational roles. It is largely self-directed rather than task-assigned, evaluated through external peer review rather than internal managerial appraisal, and oriented toward long-horizon scholarly and pedagogical outputs, such as original research and curriculum innovation, rather than short-cycle operational problem-solving (George and Zhou 2001; Amabile et al. 1996). Empirical evidence supports this: among Zimbabwean university staff, collegial and developmental cultures predicted creativity, while hierarchical, control-oriented culture undermined it (Makumbe 2021). These features leave academic staff simultaneously more autonomous in generating creative work and more exposed, reputationally and psychologically, when digital hostility disrupts it.

Cyberbullying, as a persistent digital stressor, constitutes a direct threat to key psychological resources and activities such as creativity (Kalyar et al. 2021; Mushtaq et al. 2022). Unlike general bullying or burnout, cyberbullying's digital, boundary-crossing nature denies targets typical recovery time, intensifying rather than merely adding to creativity-suppressing stress. In academic settings, UK-based scholarship has emphasised that academic staff, as distinct from students, have received insufficient attention regarding their online victimisation experiences (Bussu et al. 2025). However, limited studies have investigated workplace cyberbullying within higher education institutions; Table 1 summarises Web of Science- and Scopus-indexed studies on the digital workplace mistreatment topic in European higher education from 2017 to 2025.

Table 1: Digital Workplace Mistreatment in European Higher Education Institutes

Study	Country / Region	Sample Details
Pitsia et al., 2025	Ireland	N=3,032 employees across 20 Higher Education Institutions in Ireland

Study	Country / Region	Sample Details
Bussu et al., 2025	United Kingdom	N=34 student and university staff victims
Celuch et al., 2024	Finland	N=2,492 university academics (alongside samples of politicians and media professionals)
Bussu et al., 2023a	England (UK)	university staff and students at an English university
Bussu et al., 2023b	England (UK)	student and staff victims; online semi-structured questionnaire
Celuch et al., 2022	Finland	N=2,492 university employees + N=510 local politicians
Oksanen et al., 2022	Finland	N=2,492 university research and teaching staff members across 5 major Finnish universities
Meriläinen and Kõiv, 2019	Estonia	N=864 university faculty members
Coyne et al., 2017	United Kingdom	N=331 UK university employees

Source: Author's own creation

Emerging evidence suggests that hostile digital work environments, particularly those characterised by workplace cyberbullying, pose a significant threat to academic staff's creative capacities. Mushtaq et al. (2022) confirmed that cyberbullying is negatively associated with employee creativity, arguing that exposure to digital hostility eliminates employees' motivation for original thinking. Similarly, Anasori et al. (2023) found that workplace bullying adversely affects employee creativity, with psychologically distressed employees exhibiting significantly reduced creative performance. Jiang et al. (2019) argued that bullying and hostile communication cause employees to mentally detach from their work, diminishing their motivation and impairing their ability to think creatively. Furthermore, Shabbir and Islam (2024) demonstrated through multilevel analysis that both co-worker bullying and abusive supervision significantly reduce employee creative behaviour, consistent with COR theory's prediction that resource loss begets further loss (Hobfoll 2001; Holmgreen et al. 2017). Moreover, while this negative relationship is established among general employees, it cannot be assumed to transfer unchanged to academic staff, whose creative work is self-directed and peer-evaluated rather than managerially supervised; Proposition 1 therefore extends, rather than restates, the general-employee finding for this specific occupational group. Thus, the following proposition is advanced:

Proposition 1: Workplace cyberbullying is negatively related to academic creative behaviour.

2.2 Mediating Role of Psychological Well-being

An increasing body of research on workplace cyberbullying identifies psychological well-being as a fundamental psychological cost through which employees perceive and interpret negative interpersonal interactions (Anwar et al. 2020). Using large-scale Swedish HEI survey data (N=14,047), Mensah et al. (2026) demonstrate that workplace mistreatment significantly exacerbates employees' mental health burden. Drawing on COR theory, cyberbullying operates as a severe hindrance stressor that rapidly depletes an individual's valued psychological and emotional resources, resulting in sustained decline in overall well-being (Holmgreen et al. 2017; Mushtaq et al. 2022; Kalyar et al. 2021). Workplace bullying and psychological well-being are intricately related, as bullying

negatively affects workers' psychological well-being (Gupta and Bakhshi 2018; Bernstein and Trimm 2016). When individuals maintain high levels of psychological well-being, they exhibit greater cognitive flexibility, broader associative thinking, and stronger intrinsic motivation, each essential to generating novel and useful ideas in academic contexts (Zhang 2024; Wang et al. 2022). A meta-analytic review by Acar et al. (2020) confirmed a significant positive relationship between well-being and creativity, establishing that positive affect and psychological flourishing are core antecedents of creative output. Using COR theory, it can therefore be proposed:

> *Proposition 2: Psychological well-being mediates the negative relationship between workplace cyberbullying and academic creative behaviour, such that cyberbullying reduces psychological well-being, which in turn reduces academic creative behaviour.*

2.3 Moderating Role of Employee-oriented Corporate Social Responsibility

CSR represents a critical contextual resource that can attenuate the psychological harm inflicted by cyberbullying. COR theory provides the explanatory logic: cyberbullying depletes valued personal and psychological resources, producing declines in well-being (Hobfoll 2011; Holmgreen et al. 2017), while employee-oriented CSR counteracts this depletion by creating a resource caravan of relational, tangible, and symbolic support (Hobfoll 2011). When employees perceive their organisation as genuinely caring for their welfare, adverse experiences such as cyberbullying are interpreted within a broader framework of organisational support, moderating the psychological damage that would otherwise result. Kim and Lee (2022) extended this reasoning, showing that CSR authenticity — employees' conviction that CSR efforts are sincere rather than symbolic — shapes how organisational support is experienced.

> *Proposition 3: Employee-oriented CSR moderates the negative relationship between workplace cyberbullying and psychological well-being, such that the relationship is weaker when employee-oriented CSR is higher.*

Beyond its effect on psychological well-being, workplace cyberbullying directly suppresses creative behaviour by exhausting the cognitive and motivational resources creativity requires, and by inducing fear and anxiety that undermine academic creative engagement (Kalyar et al. 2021; Mushtaq et al. 2022). Employee-oriented CSR may moderate this direct relationship by sustaining the psychological safety needed for creative engagement (Kim and Lee 2022; Lee et al. 2013), while also limiting the degree to which cyberbullying depletes the psychological resources of cognitive flexibility, attentional scope, and intrinsic motivation — that sustain the indirect pathway from well-being to creativity (Hobfoll 2011; Acar et al. 2020; Zhang 2024). Thus:

> *Proposition 4: The indirect effect of workplace cyberbullying on academic creative behaviour through psychological well-being is moderated by employee-oriented CSR, such that the mediated relationship is weaker when employee-oriented CSR is higher.*

3. Research Framework

Figure 1 integrates the four propositions advanced above into a single moderated mediation framework. Workplace cyberbullying is proposed to reduce academic creative behaviour both directly (P1) and indirectly through diminished psychological well-being (P2), while employee-oriented CSR moderates the strength of this cascade at both the direct cyberbullying-well-being link (P3) and the mediated pathway to creative behaviour (P4).

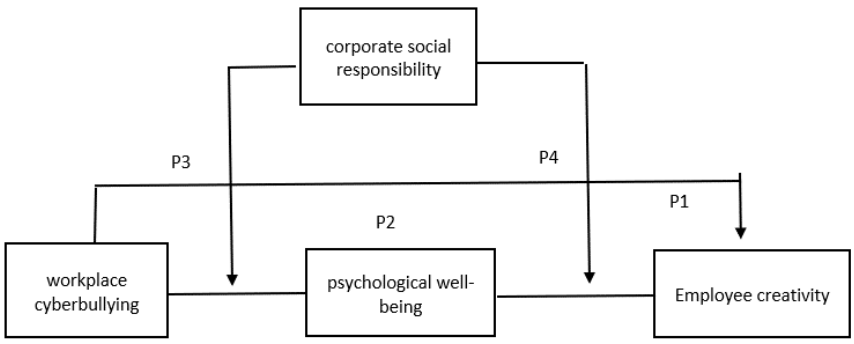


Figure 1: Research Framework

4. Methodology (Conceptual Framework)

This paper follows a conceptual theory-building approach based on a structured review and synthesis of existing literature on workplace cyberbullying, psychological well-being, employee-oriented CSR, and creativity. Rather than testing the proposed relationships against primary data, the study integrates the explanatory mechanisms of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll 2011) with empirical findings drawn from adjacent workplace cyberbullying, well-being, and creativity literatures to construct a coherent moderated mediation framework applicable to the higher education context.

The framework's constructs are anchored to established measurement traditions from the literature, even though this conceptual paper does not itself collect or analyse primary data. Workplace cyberbullying corresponds to the domain captured by the Inventory of Cyberbullying Acts at Work (ICA-W) developed by Vranjes et al. (2018); psychological well-being corresponds to the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) developed by Diener et al. (1985); employee-oriented CSR corresponds to the employee-perception CSR scale of Lee et al. (2013); and academic creative behaviour corresponds to the creativity scale of George and Zhou (2001). This anchoring supports the propositions' future empirical operationalisation.

Two theoretical mechanisms structure the framework: workplace cyberbullying operates as a resource-depleting stressor that erodes psychological well-being and the creative capacity it sustains (Propositions 1-2), while employee-oriented CSR acts as a contextual resource caravan that buffers this depletion at both the direct and indirect levels (Propositions 3-4). Together, these propositions offer a coherent theoretical structure to guide future empirical testing across European higher education institutions.

5. Discussion

This conceptual paper advances a moderated mediation framework explaining why workplace cyberbullying undermines academic creative behaviour through diminished psychological well-being, and why employee-oriented CSR can attenuate these harmful effects. Sector-specific evidence indicates that cyberbullying in higher education is not a marginal interpersonal issue but a workforce sustainability concern with measurable mental-health consequences: in a large Swedish HEI dataset, workplace cyberbullying significantly exacerbated employees' mental health burden (Mensah et al. 2026). Institutional responses, however, remain underdeveloped; most HEIs still lack dedicated cyberbullying management policies, leaving academic staff without formal recourse (Bisaillon et al. 2023; Ifon 2023; Salazar et al. 2024). Building on this evidence, the present framework positions cyberbullying as a resource-draining exposure that erodes the psychological capacity required for sustained scholarly and pedagogical creativity.

The proposed model also responds to a persistent gap in the European literature specifically. Academic staff, as distinct from students, have received comparatively little attention regarding their online victimisation experiences in UK-based scholarship (Bussu et al. 2025), and similar attentional gaps are evident in European studies (Celuch et al. 2024; Bussu et al. 2023a, 2023b; Pitsia et al. 2025). This pattern also holds within individual European national literatures. Consistent with COR theory's resource-based logic, the mediating role of psychological well-being is central to this conceptualisation. Workplace bullying and cyberbullying have been shown to erode workers' psychological well-being (Gupta and Bakhshi 2018; Bernstein and Trimm 2016), and this depletion carries downstream consequences for creativity: a meta-analytic review confirms that well-being and creativity are positively related, with positive affect and psychological flourishing acting as core antecedents of creative output (Acar et al. 2020), while other work links leadership-driven well-being to organisational creativity and innovation (Zhang 2024; Wang et al. 2022). This mirrors direct evidence that cyberbullying and workplace bullying suppress creative behaviour by depleting motivation and inducing psychological withdrawal (Mushtaq et al. 2022; Anasori et al. 2023; Jiang et al. 2019; Shabbir and Islam 2024). Positioning psychological well-being as the proximal cost through which cyberbullying translates into diminished creative behaviour is therefore consistent with both the direct and indirect evidence reviewed above.

Finally, the framework foregrounds employee-oriented CSR as a protective, internal institutional mechanism. CSR authenticity, employees' conviction that CSR efforts are value-driven and sincere rather than merely symbolic, has been shown to shape how organisational support is experienced (Kim and Lee 2022), and employee perceptions of CSR activities are known to carry meaningful internal consequences (Lee et al. 2013). Building on this reasoning, employee-oriented CSR is theorised here as a resource caravan, in Hobfoll's (2011; Holmgreen et al. 2017) terms, that weakens both the direct performance-relevant impairment and the indirect pathway through psychological well-being. In short, CSR is positioned not merely as an external reputational

instrument but as an internal ethical and relational mechanism that can reduce the likelihood that cyberbullying becomes normalised and buffer academic staff against resource loss when hostile interactions occur.

6. Managerial and Practical Implications

This framework carries significant implications for how HEIs understand, respond to, and prevent workplace cyberbullying, revealing it as a systemic threat to institutional creativity rather than merely a disciplinary matter. The four propositions suggest several interconnected directions for managerial and policy action. Most HEIs lack clear, dedicated cyberbullying management policies; where institutional responses do exist today, they tend to be reactive and IT-centred, such as account-level monitoring or post-incident content takedown, rather than proactive measures aimed at protecting staff well-being and creative capacity (Ifon 2023; Salazar et al. 2024), leaving academic staff without formal institutional recourse. First, institutional leaders should recognise that workplace cyberbullying in academic settings is not merely an interpersonal conflict but a creativity-suppressing stressor with institution-wide consequences, and should adopt a proactive stance toward digital workplace culture by establishing clear, behaviourally specific policies that define unacceptable conduct across digital channels.

Second, early-career academics and those in precarious employment warrant particular attention, given their elevated vulnerability; monitoring well-being through anonymous climate surveys helps identify emerging hotspots before cumulative damage to creative capacity sets in. Third, academic managers and heads of department should receive targeted training in recognising and interrupting early signs of cyberbullying and in cultivating the psychologically safe environments that creativity requires. Together, these measures call for HEIs to treat academic creativity as an organisational resource requiring active protection: incorporating well-being, perceived CSR, and digital climate into routine monitoring allows targeted, rather than generic, intervention.

7. Future Research Directions

Future research is required to empirically test the proposed moderated mediation model across European higher education institutions. Lithuania and the broader Baltic region are a natural starting point: existing research on digital workplace mistreatment in European HEIs has concentrated mostly in the UK (Bussu et al. 2025), leaving academic-staff cyberbullying in the Baltic region comparatively unexamined. Initial testing there could subsequently be extended to other European HEI systems to establish the framework's generalisability across differing institutional and regulatory contexts. Such testing would ideally use a two-wave time-lagged design to separate predictor and outcome measurement and reduce common method bias. Researchers should also examine whether relationship strength varies across academic career stages and employment security levels, given differential exposure and vulnerability. While this framework foregrounds psychological well-being as the central mediating mechanism, future studies could examine complementary mediators such as psychological safety, professional identity threat, or emotional exhaustion to clarify which mechanisms are most consequential for creative behaviour in academic settings. The growing integration of artificial intelligence into academic and administrative work also raises new questions for this agenda: AI-mediated communication tools may introduce novel vectors through which cyberbullying is enacted or concealed, while institutional AI-based monitoring systems may offer new, though ethically complex, means of detecting and mitigating hostile digital conduct; both merit future investigation. Finally, extending the model beyond employee-oriented CSR to other institutional resources, such as perceived organisational support or digital workplace climate, may further refine understanding of the conditions under which cyberbullying's creativity costs can be contained.

8. Conclusion

This conceptual paper advances a moderated mediation framework explaining how workplace cyberbullying erodes academic creative behaviour in HEIs, and identifies the institutional conditions that can contain this damage. Grounded in COR theory, it positions psychological well-being as the mechanism through which cyberbullying-induced resource loss suppresses creativity, and employee-oriented CSR as the boundary condition that weakens both the direct and mediated pathways to diminished creative output. The paper’s added knowledge is thus threefold: it extends COR-based cyberbullying–creativity research to academic staff as a distinct occupational group; it is the first framework to model employee-oriented CSR as a buffer operating at both the direct and mediated levels within a single model; and it pairs COR theory’s account of resource loss with the CSR literature’s account of the specific organisational resource that offsets it.

Ethics Declaration: This is a conceptual paper that synthesises existing published literature to develop a theoretical framework and does not involve the collection of primary data from human participants. Accordingly, no ethical clearance was required for the research reported in this paper.

AI Declaration: n AI tool (Claude, Anthropic) was used to support the preparation of this manuscript. It was used to check and correct grammar, to format the paper in line with the conference style requirements, and to check and format the reference list according to the Harvard referencing style. All substantive content, analysis and interpretation remain the authors' own.

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