



## Does Abusive Supervision Affect Healthcare Employees' Turnover Intention? Investigating the Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion and Moderating Role of Employee Resilience and Future Work Self-Salience

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** The main objective of the present study is to investigate the effect of abusive supervision on turnover intention among healthcare employees. A model has been developed and tested which explains how abusive supervision affects the employee turnover intention directly and through emotional exhaustion and how employees' personality traits (employee resilience and future work self-salience) moderate the relationship between these variables.

**Methods:** With a sample of 375 front-line employees who work in private hospitals of Mashhad, data were collected through questionnaires with a Likert scale. The face validity and structural validity of the questions were tested, and then data were analyzed using IBM-SPSS-AMOS 23.0 software.

**Results:** The findings demonstrated that abusive supervision affected the turnover intention ( $P=0.17$ ,  $t=3.93$ ) and emotional exhaustion ( $P=0.29$ ,  $t=5.28$ ). Emotional exhaustion impacted turnover intention ( $P=0.67$ ,  $t=12.46$ ) and also played a mediating role in the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention ( $P=0.19$ ,  $t=4.86$ ). Moreover, employees' resilience was found to mitigate the relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion ( $\text{sig}=0.022$ ,  $t=-2.29$ ), while future work self-salience increased the likelihood of turnover intention among the employees who experienced abusive supervision. ( $\text{sig}=0.027$ ,  $t=2.22$ ).

**Conclusion:** The findings showed that the supervisors' behavior had a significant impact on the employees' feelings and actions. However, this impact was not equal for all the employees, and their personality traits played an essential role. It can be concluded that if health care organizations attempt to control abusive supervision by properly training the supervisors, they will have less emotionally exhausted employees with lower turnover intention. Moreover, hospitals should be aware that enhancing the employees' resilience benefits the organization by decreasing emotional exhaustion, while future work self-salient employees negatively impacted the health sectors by increasing turnover intention.

**Keywords:** Personnel turnover, Health services, Workplace, Health organizations and management, health care human resource

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### Introduction

As to the growth of service sectors, including health service firms (1, 2), competition is increasing among these organizations, and front-line employees have garnered increasing research attention regarding the essential role they play in providing service to customers (3). Despite the importance of these employees, workplace mistreatments have been recently reported to be more common among them and have influenced their performance (4). Such attitudes, especially those that fall into the category of uncivilized behaviors, are more essential due to the social

changes and cultural reasons that have increased their occurrence. Abusive supervision, an example of the uncivilized behavior which front-line health employees deal with, despite the low severity, has been introduced as a stressor with significant effects on employees due to its frequent occurrence. According to research conducted in different countries, many healthcare employees have encountered this type of supervision during their work (5-8), and it has emerged as a focal topic in the organization literature and healthcare managers around the world which might have serious consequences (9, 10).

Since proper relationship between the supervisors and subordinates is one of the most noticeable employees expectations, it can be implied that the quality of this relationship has a significant effect on employees (11, 12). Turnover Intention and Emotional Exhaustion are two consequences occurring as a direct result of abusive supervision. Based on empirical findings, emotional exhaustion has further been reported to mediate the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention. Employees who are not healthy either physically or mentally find themselves emotionally exhausted and when employees are not in appropriate emotional conditions, they intend to leave the organizations to eliminate the adverse situation. (4, 13). Turnover intention is an employees' decision to leave his/her job, and it is a warning point before actual turnover (14). Actual turnover seems to be a threat to service firms; considering the high importance of human resource to health care organizations, turnover may cause more serious harms such as negative effects on health care services to them (15, 16). With reduction in the quality of health services, customers cannot trust the medical institution which cause them to lose many patients and it can be more harmful to private medical sectors which need to provide income and profitability through their clients. Since health quality and performance have been already damaged in a developing country like Iran (17), it seems necessary to consider and investigate the mentioned factors.

On the other hand, different people have been found to react differently to abusive supervision which may be due to their personality traits (18). According to prior research, employee resilience and future work self-salience are two personality traits that impact how workplace mistreatment affects the employees (19, 20). This line of research illuminates employee resilience as a resource that can reduce the effect of interpersonal stressors on employees' emotional exhaustion (18). On the other hand, future work self-salience is suggested to increase the impact of negative aspects of the workplace such as abusive supervision on turnover (21). However, employee resilience and future work self-salience have seldom been exploited in relation to abusive supervision, which reveals the significant problems due to its high frequency, severity, duration, and unpredictability (22).

Although a rich body of the literature has focused on the effect of abusive supervision on employees' turnover intention and emotional exhaustion (18, 23), little research has considered the role of employee personality traits. This has prompted calls for the investigation of the moderating effect of employee

resilience and future work self-salience discussed in the present study. It should be noted the two personality traits of employee, resilience and future work self-salience, are completely different in terms of the type of function. Employee resilience can mitigate the impact of negative behaviors such as abusive supervision, while future work self-salience can intensify this effect. At no time have studies been conducted to simultaneously examine these two contradictory traits and, for the first time in this field, both variables will be investigated.

### *Hypothesis Development*

Abusive supervision is defined as "employees' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contacts" (24). Abusive supervision is one of the most common destructive behaviors among supervisors, which have costly consequences for organizations such as turnover intention (25). Turnover intention is a withdrawal behavior and defined as thinking about leaving the current organization and joining the new one (13). Drawing on "push" and "pull" theory, proposed by March and Simon (26), the negative factors in the organization which cause a person to leave the organization are the "push" and favorable conditions outside the organization making the space applauding for the person after leaving the job, are the "pull". The employees are pushed to leave the organization by experiencing abusive supervision, and the existing job options, and favorable conditions for finding a new job pull them out of the organization (27). Therefore, in this paper, it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1: Abusive supervision has a positive effect on the employees' turnover intention.

On the other hand, drawing upon the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, developed by Hobfoll (28), individuals are always trying to acquire and maintain valuable resources. Confronting abusive supervision, employees feel threatened with losing their resources and when they cannot either obtain the resources they need nor lose them start feeling anxious and stressed (23). Deprived of social and job resources, employees feel emotionally depleted and emotional exhaustion occurs. Emotional exhaustion is a state of physical and mental exhaustion that occurs due to excessive job demand and constant troubles in the workplace (29). According to Maslach, Schaufeli (30), emotional exhaustion occurs when the emotional pressures of workplace interpersonal interactions such as abusive supervision become too great to cope with. Accordingly, a hypothesis based on the relationship between these two variables is

presented as follows:

Hypothesis 2: Abusive supervision has a positive effect on employees' emotional exhaustion.

Employees who experience emotional exhaustion feel they do not have enough emotional capacity to continue working, and their resources have been depleted (28). As a result, they probably want to quit their job and get out of this situation. In this regard, emotional exhaustion has been introduced as one of the essential factors affecting the employees' turnover intention (4). Therefore, it is concluded if emotional exhaustion increases among employees, they are more likely to show behaviors like turnover intention. Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

Hypothesis 3: Emotional exhaustion has a positive effect on employees' turnover intention.

While experiencing abusive supervision and losing resources, employees become emotionally exhausted and inevitably seek out their lost resources in other organizations (23). However, empirical studies have demonstrated that employees may not leave the organization immediately but may feel frustrated and exhausted to seek alternative jobs (13). Therefore, it can be argued that emotional exhaustion plays a mediating role in the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention and the following hypothesis is presented:

Hypothesis 4: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention.

Personality traits have been introduced to affect the abusive supervision outcomes. Employee resilience, an ability to maintain consistent performance in the face of a highly stressful experience (31), is suggested as a resource that reduces the impact of stressors such as abusive supervision (18), while future work self-salience, the degree of clarity and salience of the future work self (32-35), has been introduced as the factor which exacerbates the effect of such supervision (20). Resilient employees are expected to respond to problems and failures positively and feel less negative impact like emotional exhaustion from the abusive supervision experience (18). Contraventionally, employees who are more salient about their future work themselves are less likely to welcome negative aspects of the workplace such as abusive supervision, and they are expected to leave their jobs if they confront such behaviors (20). Drawing on the findings examining the relationship between abusive supervision and job parameters and then the modifying effect of personality traits, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 5: Employee resilience moderates

the relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion.

Hypothesis 6: Future work self-salience moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention.

As shown in Figure 1, there was an attempt to examine the links among abusive supervision, emotional exhaustion, turnover intention, employee resilience, and future work self-salience among front-line employees of private hospitals from a theoretical perspective. The hypothetical model has been compiled and presented as follows:

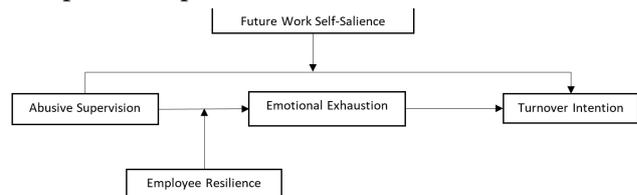


Figure 1: Hypothetical Model

## Methods

### Samples and Participants

This study aimed to investigate the health care front-line employees in which front-line staff of private hospitals in Mashhad who deal with patients daily were selected as the statistical population. A total sample size of 350 people was estimated by using the Morgan table. After distributing 400 surveys, 375 valid questionnaires were collected.

Following ethical principles, all the participants were informed that the information provided was confidential and the findings would be anonymous. The manager of hospitals whose employees were the target of collecting data was informed about the process of data collection. The researchers' name, contact numbers, and organizations, and reason for collecting data were mentioned in the surveys. All respondents were aware that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point without pressure or fear of retaliation, and their involvement was voluntary.

### Measures

To measure each of the variables in this study, the items used by previous researchers were utilized and the available questions were assessed with a Likert scale. The respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with each criterion, rated from one to five, so that number 5 meant complete agreement and number 1 meant complete disagreement. In the present study, to measure the validity, we used face validity and construct validity. To check the face validity, we extracted the questionnaires

from reliable sources and by doing a pre-test, their comprehensibility was confirmed and finally, the opinion of experts was used for final approval. Cronbach's alpha also examined the construct validity of the instrument in questionnaire. Five items developed by Mitchell and Ambrose (36) were used to measure abusive supervision; the six items extracted from the psychological capital scale presented by Luthans, Avolio (37) were used to assess the employee resilience; emotional exhaustion was measured with the four statements presented by Rutherford, Boles (38), and 4 items presented by Kelloway and Gottlieb (39) were used to measure turnover intention. At last, in order to assess the future work self-salience, the 5 items presented by Strauss and Griffin (35) were exploited.

### Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data and model, IBM-SPSS Amos 23.0 software was used. First, the gathered data were coded in a data matrix and entered into the AMOS software. Before performing inferential analyses, the statistical sample was described by demographic variables. Indices of mean and standard deviation also described the main variables. Furthermore, since the variables were measured by interval scales and had normal distribution, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated. Before estimating the research model, the reliability and validity of the gathered data were evaluated. For evaluating the significance of the factor loads of the questions, confirmatory factor analysis was performed. Because of confirming the construct validity of data, all the items were statistically significant and retained for future analyses. A structural equation modelling was conducted to test the research hypotheses. Hierarchical multiple regression and  $R^2$  change tests were used to test the moderating hypotheses. For this purpose, the predictor and moderator variables in the first stage and interactional variables in the second stage entered the regression model.

### Results

The majority of respondents (55%) were women

( $n=209$ ), the age of more than 45% of the respondents was in the range of 31 to 40 years ( $n=171$ ), and more than 69% of them were married ( $n=258$ ). The level of education of most participants (about 60%) was a bachelor's degree. More than 44% were medical staff ( $n=166$ ). The rest were in charge of reception, fund, discharge, security, services, and administration.

### Descriptive Analyses

The descriptive indicators of the main research variables are shown in Table 1. Obviously, the abusive supervision variable had the highest average (3.5) and the variable of employee resilience had the lowest standard deviation (0.65). It is found that the highest correlation coefficient was related to the relationship between emotional exhaustion and turnover intention (0.63) and the lowest to the relationship between emotional exhaustion and employee resilience (0.01). Starred coefficients were 99% significant at the confidence level.

The reliability of data gathered was calculated before estimating the conceptual model, which is reported in Table 2. Since they are all larger than 0.80, it indicates satisfactory data reliability.

Details of confirmatory factor analysis to confirm the structural validity of the questionnaire are also displayed in Table 2. The values reported for the significance number corresponding to the factor load of all questionnaire questions were greater than the accepted significance number of 1.96. Accordingly, the validity of the constructs was confirmed and the remaining questions were retained for the next stages of statistical analysis. In addition, based on the reported fitness indicators, the validity of the factor model was confirmed and could be cited.

### Hypothesis Testing

A structural equation modelling, shown in Figure 2, was conducted in order to test the hypotheses. There are one structural model and three measurement models corresponding to the independent, mediator, and dependent variables in this model. Since the validity of the estimated model was appropriate, we can test the hypotheses by referring to the model

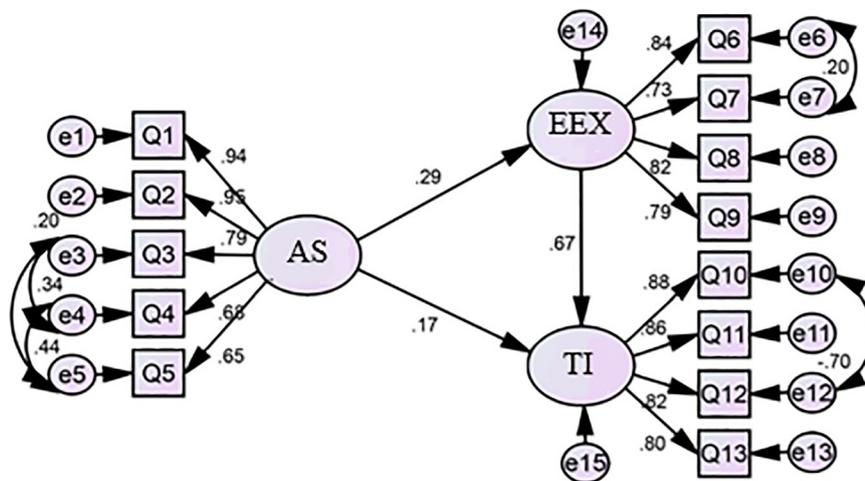
**Table 1:** Mean, standard deviation, and Pearson correlations among all variables

Variable	N	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1- Abusive Supervision	375	3.58	1.125				
2- Emotional Exhaustion	375	3.09	1.115	**0.317			
3- Turnover Intention	375	3.37	1.106	**0.397	**0.637		
4- Employee Resilience	375	1.96	0.655	**0.206-	**0.014	**0.042-	
5- Future Work Self-Salience	375	3.47	0.838	**0.151	**0.280	**0.187	**0.062-

SD=standard deviation, \*\* $P<0.01$

**Table 2:** Validity and reliability of the data gathered

Items	Variable (alpha reliability)	Factor loading	t-value	P value	Fitness
q1	Abusive Supervision (0.917)	0.941	-	0.000	CMIN=442.495 CMIN/DF=1.891 GFI=0.914 CFI=0.962 RMR=0.069 RMSEA=0.049
q2		0.954	33.63	0.000	
q3		0.785	21.37	0.000	
q4		0.681	16.46	0.000	
q5		0.647	15.14	0.000	
q6	Emotional Exhaustion (0.880)	0.858	-	0.000	
q7		0.762	16.91	0.000	
q8		0.802	18.17	0.000	
q9		0.790	17.80	0.000	
q10	Turnover Intention (0.891)	0.875	-	0.000	
q11		0.858	21.02	0.000	
q12		0.821	15.48	0.000	
q13		0.804	19.03	0.000	
q14	Employee Resilience (0.819)	0.713	-	0.000	
q15		0.641	11.48	0.000	
q16		0.903	14.58	0.000	
q17		0.574	9.15	0.000	
q18		0.516	9.25	0.000	
q19		0.560	10.07	0.000	
q20		Future Work Self-Salience (0.868)	0.612	-	0.000
q21	0.632		14.33	0.000	
q22	0.774		11.33	0.000	
q23	0.853		11.90	0.000	
q24		0.839	10.58	0.000	



**Figure 2:** Structural Equation Model with standardized estimates of the hypotheses

parameters [CMIN/DF=2.291; GFI=0.950; CFI=0.979; RMR=0.088; RMSEA=0.059]. The procedure of testing the hypothesis was to compare the estimated significance number with the significant number of the test which was 1.96.

The coefficient of the effect of abusive supervision on turnover intention was 0.17, so the first hypothesis was confirmed (t=3.93). The coefficient of the effect of abusive supervision on emotional exhaustion was 0.29, and the second hypothesis was confirmed as well (t=5.28). Emotional exhaustion with a coefficient

of 0.67 significantly affected the turnover intention (t=12.46), and the third hypothesis was confirmed. Since the effect coefficient of the mediator variable on the dependent variable was confirmed, the mediation hypothesis can also be tested. Based on the Sobel test and the standard error value of the coefficients, the indirect path of 0.19 between abusive supervision and the turnover intention was statistically significant (t=4.86), and the fourth hypothesis was also confirmed.

In line with the adjustment test of the employee

resilience variable, by entering the interactive variable into the regression model in the second stage, the changes in the coefficient of determination were statistically significant ( $\text{sig}=0.022$ ), indicating that there was an adjustment. Therefore, the intensity of adjustment was also extracted which was equal to  $-0.11$ , and it was significant ( $t=-2.29$ ). Emotional exhaustion scores were plotted at combination of the high and low levels for abusive supervision and employee resilience to better understand the interaction effect. Figure 3 demonstrates that the relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion (first-stage effect) was stronger for employees with low level of resilience. Analyses indicated that for employees with low resilience, higher levels of abusive supervision were associated with higher levels of emotional exhaustion, whereas for employees with high resilience, the effect of

abusive supervision on emotional exhaustion was non-significant. Thus, the fifth hypothesis was confirmed based on the results.

Following a similar procedure, regarding the adjustment of the future work self-salience variable, with the entry of the interactive variable into the regression equation, the value of the coefficient of determination increased significantly ( $\text{sig}=0.027$ ) and the adjustment coefficient was equal to  $0.10$  and was significant ( $t=2.22$ ). Hypotheses was examined using the plot of the significant interaction effect. As shown in Figure 4, for employees with high future work self-salience, higher levels of abusive supervision were associated with higher levels of turnover intention, while the effect of abusive supervision on turnover intention was weaker when the level of future work self-salience was low. As predicted, the results indicated in confrontation with abusive supervision,

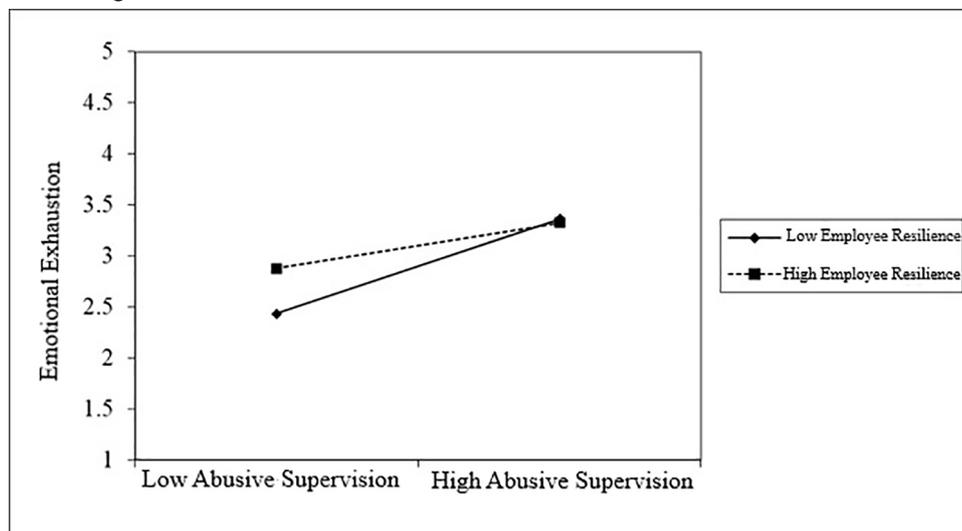


Figure 3: Moderating effect of employee resilience on the relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion

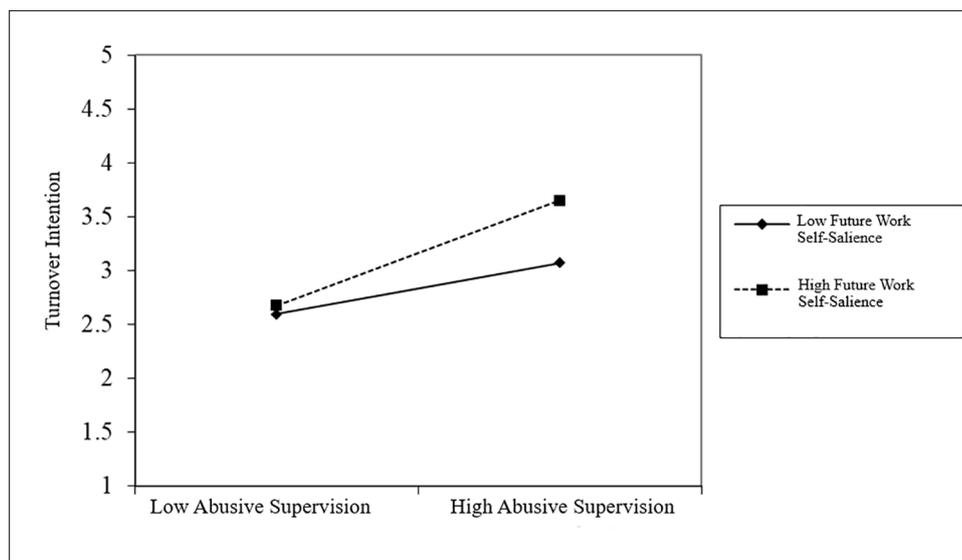


Figure 4: Moderating effect of future work self-salience on the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention

the likelihood of turnover intention is higher when employees have higher levels of future work self-salience. Accordingly, the final hypothesis was also confirmed.

## Discussion

The present study aimed to assess the direct effect of abusive supervision on health front-line employees' turnover intention where emotional exhaustion played a mediating role in this relationship. Moreover, the moderating role of future work self-salience was investigated in the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention. Employee resilience was used as a moderator in the relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion. Six hypotheses were investigated, and all of them were supported.

After examining the first hypothesis, abusive supervision turned out to have a direct effect on turnover intention. Comparisons of the results of this study with other investigations such as those of Saleem, Yusaf (27), and Ahmad and Begum (13), who introduced abusive supervision as a pull factor that forces the employees to leave their job, consistent results have been shown.

The results of this study are also in the same line with those of (18), who examined the impact of abusive supervision as an interpersonal stressor on emotional exhaustion. As noted earlier, based on the second, third and fourth hypotheses, emotional exhaustion, which is suggested to increase as a result of abusive supervision, directly affects turnover intention and plays a mediating role in the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention. These relationships have been justified from the perspective of COR theory in which abusive supervision has been introduced as a factor that makes employees feel threatened about losing their resources which causes them to feel emotionally exhausted and try to leave their job to find their lost resources somewhere else. These findings are also in line with those of Green, Miller (40), who suggested emotional exhaustion as a predictor of turnover intention, and Ahmad and Begum (13), who examined the mediating role of emotional exhaustion.

Meanwhile, after examining the fifth hypothesis of this study, the moderating effect of resilience was supported for the direct impact of abusive supervision on emotional exhaustion. This finding is consistent with those of previous studies like Al-Hawari, Bani-Melhem (18), who introduced employee resilience as a coping mechanism that helps employees regain their lost resources due to abusive supervision. Employee

resilience is a factor that prevents the resource depletion and occurrence of emotional exhaustion. Findings of this study indicate that highly resilient employees tolerate abusive supervision more than others. Thus, enhancement of employee resilience moderates the negative effect of abusive supervision.

On the other hand, the results of testing the last hypothesis indicated that future work self-salience increased the effect of abusive supervision on turnover intention, which is consistent with the findings of Arif, Sindhu (11). As mentioned before, probably employees with a high level of future work self-salience cannot stand the environment negative aspects and perceive workplace mistreatment as a threat to their future work, and tend to leave their job.

All the six hypotheses of this study were supported, and our findings contribute to the emerging literature examining the effect of workplace mistreatments on withdrawal behaviours with the moderating role of employee personality traits.

However, it should be noted that this study contains multiple limitations which must be considered when interpreting the findings. First, this research is dependent on the survey, which some biasing effects may be influential. Moreover, since data were collected during work hours, employees' emotional state and tiredness might have affected the accuracy of their responses. Finally, data were collected from merely private hospitals of one city of Iran. Thus, it might have issues of generalizability.

## Conclusions

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the supervisors' behavior can influence the employees' emotions and work-related behaviours. Therefore, abusive supervision can cause the employees to become emotionally vulnerable and make them think to leave their jobs. However, employee personality traits play an essential role in this situation. Being a resilient person helps the employees prevent being emotionally exhausted dealing with abusive supervision, whereas being salient about their future work influences them more by abusive supervision and causes them to leave the organization. Thereupon, controlling abusive supervision by properly training the supervisors and correcting their behaviour may lead to less emotionally exhausted employees with lower turnover intention, especially in hospital settings where the work environment is very stressful and the situation is out of the organization's control. Further, enhancing employee resilience help to decrease emotional exhaustion while high future work self-salient employees lead to more turnover

intention. Accordingly, hospitals must pay special attention to the morale of their employees and prevent further consequences by carrying out motivating and inspiring activities. Moreover, paying attention to the employees' mental image of the future they envision for themselves seems to be critical for the organization.

**Conflict of Interest:** None declared.

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