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Psychological Warfare at Work: Emotional Intelligence as a Moderator between Workplace Gaslighting and Employee Well-Being

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<p>Tehreem Amjad MBA Research Scholar, Business Studies Department, Bahria University Karachi, Pakistan.</p> <p>Dr. Munaza Bibi Assistant Professor, Business Studies Department, Bahria University, Karachi, Pakistan. Email: munaza.12star@yahoo.com</p> <p>Dr. Tarique Mahmood Senior Assistant Professor, Management Studies Department, Bahria University Karachi, Pakistan. Email: dr.tariquerana@gmail.com</p>	<p>Abstract</p> <p>Gaslighting is an emerging notion that is linked to the psychological manipulation that seeks to sow doubt in individuals and typically leads to affecting the individual's well-being. However, there are limited studies in this regard. Hence, this study examines how workplace gaslighting (WPGL) impacts employee well-being (EWB) in the presence of emotional Intelligence (EI) as a moderator, from the lens of the job demands-resources (JD-R) theory. In this study, a deductive (quantitative) approach was employed to test the hypothesis, utilising a survey method to collect information from employees working in Pakistan's banking sector, with a sample of 259 respondents. SmartPLS was used as a tool for analysing the collected data. According to the results, WPGL has a significant impact on EWB, while EI has a moderating effect on both WPGL and EWB. This suggests that some employees not only withstand manipulation but also use it as a source of inner growth. Practical implications are discussed for mitigating the harmful effects of WPGL on EWB through the provision of ET training.</p>
<p>Keywords:</p>	<p>Workplace Gaslighting, Employee Well-being, Emotional Intelligence</p>



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Introduction

Emotional well-being (EWB) has become a focal point for organisations to manage, as it can be affected by both organisational practices and coworkers' behaviours (Elufioye et al., 2024). It includes different aspects such as satisfaction in areas of life (i.e., satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction with social life, family life, recreation, spirituality, and so forth), job satisfaction (like roles, relationships with colleagues, and opportunities for advancement), and overall health (Marin-Garcia & Bonavia, 2021; Schmitt, 2024). On the other hand, gaslighting is a psychological manipulation that leads to uncertainty in a person's beliefs (Fielding-Singh & Dmowska, 2022). Gaslighting may be a one-time event, but it more commonly appears as ongoing abuse, making it challenging for individuals to identify its impact early on (Johnson et al., 2021). It is worth noting that the person using gaslighting may not always realize the negative consequences of this on the other person.

Studies indicate that these actions are frequently linked to narcissistic personality disorder, as the offender aims to assert power by disregarding the victim's emotions and viewpoints (Boring, 2020). Furthermore, workplace gaslighting (WPGL) can have an impact on EWB (Ciabatti et al., 2024). Bullying and gaslighting can both develop slowly over a long time, causing individuals to suffer. Bullying can occur among peers at various levels within a workplace, while gaslighting typically happens in situations with unequal power dynamics, such as between a supervisor and an employee (Hackett, 2024; Sweet, 2019).

Moreover, emotional intelligence (EI) has been discovered to have a significant impact on workplace attitudes, including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions (Hasibuan et al., 2024; Miao et al., 2017). Improved emotional states and wellness can enhance cognitive flexibility and problem-solving abilities in job tasks (Fredrickson, 2001). Furthermore, WPGL involves psychological manipulation to disorient an individual and cause them to lose their perception of reality, which is harmful to EWB and happiness (Jain, 2023). In contrast, satisfied employees are more likely to proactively expand their job resources and exhibit creative and proactive behaviours, thereby improving their work effectiveness. Therefore, experiencing positive feelings through involvement broadens a person's repertoire of thoughts and actions, ultimately increasing that person's physical, intellectual, and social resources, all of which will help them perform in- and out-of-role roles (Islam et al., 2024).

Furthermore, support systems within organisations become crucial, particularly in environments that undergo rapid change (Hidalgo-Fuentes et al., 2024). To increase EWB and performance, businesses must also focus on psychological resource elements, including job independence and EI, as well as encouraging occupations (Muppidi & Manoharan, 2025). This study seeks to explore how EI can affect the link between WPGL and EWB by fully integrating these concepts. As a result, this would influence organizational theory and practice (Lee & Jo, 2023). However, WPGL has impacted the overall EWB in Pakistan's banking sector due to a lack of empirical evidence, and EI can be considered a protective factor between WPGL and EWB, as this relationship needs to be examined in different cultural contexts (Harfst, 2024). Hence, this study explores the impact of WPGL on EWB and how EI moderates this relationship in the Pakistani banking sector.

Literature Review

According to the job demands-resources (JD-R) theory, every job has unique job demands (physical and psychological) and resources (support, feedback and autonomy) (Mbabazi, 2024). Role conflict, time pressure, workload, and other organizational, social, or physical components require ongoing effort and may have adverse effects on one's physical or mental health are examples of workplace demands. Job resources, on the other hand, are characteristics such as feedback, job control, and support from coworkers that help to accomplish work goals, lower job pressures, and promote personal development (Podea, 2025).

According to the JD-R paradigm, job demands represent possible losses to workers' resources, energy, and general well-being (the process of health impairment). They are complemented with resources that can aid in acquiring and safeguarding resources while promoting greater employee involvement and well-being (motivational process) (Galanakis & Tsitouri, 2022). This study is based on the JD-R theory, which proposes that gaslighting is a job demand that drains employees' psychological resources and can affect EWB (Galanakis & Tsitouri, 2022). On the other side, EI as a personal resource helps to mitigate this effect (Podea, 2025). Hence, this study suggests that EI mitigates the harmful effects of WPGL on EWB. The following section provides elaboration on each variable mentioned earlier.

Workplace Gaslighting and Employee Well-being

A person's mental image of general job satisfaction and good attitudes is what is meant by their workplace well-being (Antonaci et al., 2024). One may also argue that the inclusion of a social relationship component in the conceptualisation of well-being at work (and, primarily, in general) reflects the reality that many positive experiences people have occur at work (Fisher, 2014). Happier employees tend to give their work more thought and feedback (Canaff & Wright, 2004; Day & Randell, 2014; Keyes & Grzywacz, 2005). Because well-being is a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses both feeling good and functioning well, the current study relies on research that suggests a combination of hedonic (happiness) and eudaimonic (self-actualisation) viewpoints is correct (Aked et al., 2008).

Increased favorability in various organisational attitudes, including job satisfaction, teamwork, and work engagement, has been linked to workplace well-being (Bakker, 2015). EWB refers to the overall physical, mental, and social well-being of employees in the workplace, which extends beyond illness and is linked to satisfaction, purpose, and engagement (Martínez-Falcó et al., 2024). Engagement variability significantly moderates the relationship between emotional stability and job performance. While engagement variability typically interferes with performance, its effect is less pronounced for employees who are emotionally stable themselves (Tewfik et al., 2024). The study findings suggest that interventions targeting social relationships at work, job design, and work-life balance can positively impact well-being and productivity (Krekel et al., 2019).

Gaslighting at work is a form of psychological abuse. It occurs when a boss or supervisor does something that makes the target question the reliability of their opinions, assessments, or even skills in the context of their job (El-Sayed et al., 2025). Intentional and inadvertent propensities to cause harm to the other party, as well as outright dismissal of the victim's concerns, are common tactics used in the workplace (Kukreja & Pandey, 2023).

At the workplace, gaslighting can occur in several ways. For instance, "boss-subordinate gaslighting" refers to a relationship in which power is imbalanced between the supervisor and the subordinate. Any coworker, spouse, lay member, or colleague can be the victim of peer-to-peer gaslighting, and its effects are especially severe when the perpetrator holds a higher position (Kukreja & Pandey, 2023). An organization's "surreal social environment" is facilitated by institutional gaslighting, which gives the appearance that its employees are "crazy" (Calef & Weinshel, 1981). Several "knots of bad ideas and feelings," as well as cognitive and emotional impairment, are among the psychological impacts of gaslighting (Petric, 2022). Prior studies have emphasised the need to understand the WPGL phenomenon, including its effects on EWB in the presence of EI (Kukreja & Pandey, 2023).

WPGL is a crucial aspect that influences work-related outcomes. WPGL has an impact on professionalism and psychology, such as an indirect form of psychological abuse in which an individual or group uses gaslighting behaviors to gain personal benefits, which tends to foster an environment that makes employees more stressed, anxious, and depressed. On the other side of the veil, such a situation tends to deplete resources and can breed negativity, which hurts both an individual's performance, interpersonal relationships and well-being (Kukreja & Pandey, 2023). In addition, WPGL directly influences the state of job embeddedness and the level of work motivation, which in turn may affect retention and motivation (Farid et al., 2024) and EWB (Anna Drescher, 2024). Therefore, the following hypothesis was framed:

H1: WPGL has a significant impact on EWB.

Moderating Effect of Emotional Intelligence

Built upon Goleman's model of EI (2020), which measures these five main domains of EI in terms of work and social situations, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills (Goleman & Cherniss, 2024). Since EI components influence how people perform and interpret such incidents, it is theorized that they reduce the impact of WPGL on EWB (Bujang et al., 2022). Managers with a high EI are efficient in managing their thoughts and behavior to remain objective and rational before making balanced and effective decisions (Dwight Mihalicz, 2024). In addition, managers high in EI can better understand the emotional needs of their team members, which enables them to resolve conflicts more effectively and build morale within the team, ultimately leading to increased productivity (Thuy Sindell. On the other hand, workers with high EI would be able to manage stress and well-being (By & Tom Kellot, 2024).

Accordingly, Mancini et al. (2022) found that EI can lessen workplace stress and improve mental health and well-being. Additionally, this review by Bhoir and Sinha suggests that HR practices supporting emotional Intelligence can mitigate the negative effects of workplace stressors, such as gaslighting, thereby enhancing EWB (Bhoir & Sinha, 2024). EI appears to mitigate at least some of the conditions associated with the negative impact of gaslighting and helps improve EWB-related outcomes (Tong et al., 2022). Subsequently, the following hypothesis was framed and conceptual; the framework is shown in Figure 1.

H2: EI moderates the relationship between WPGL and EWB.

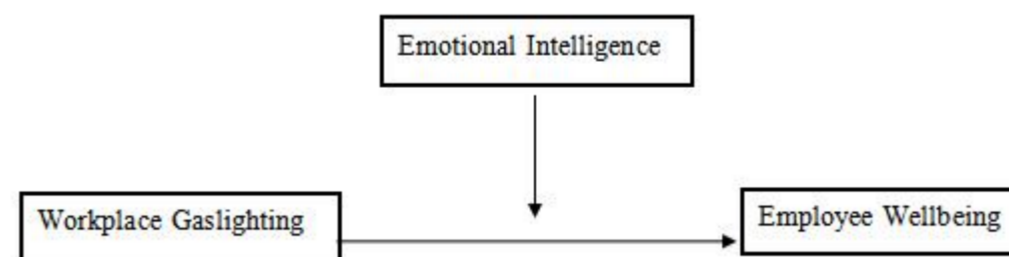


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Research Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional research design to collect data at a single point in time. Moreover, a deductive approach was employed to test the hypothesis, and an explanatory (quantitative) type of research was used to establish causal relationships among variables. Data were collected from employees working in Karachi, Pakistan's banking sector, with a sample of 259, using a convenience sampling method. The demographic profile of 259 bank employees from Karachi gives key insights.

Among the respondents, 191 (73.7%) were male and 68 (26.3%) were female, which affirms a workforce composition that could influence perception about WPGL. In terms of age, respondents were categorised as follows: 21-30 (63 respondents; 24.3%), 31-40 (73 respondents; 28.2%), 41-50 (67 respondents; 25.9%), and over 50 (56 respondents; 21.6%). This age pyramid illustrates a mix of early professionals and seasoned ones, who may have differing perspectives on workplace interactions. The researchers' qualifications were diverse: 94 (36.3%) were undergraduate, 73 (28.2%) were graduate, 84 (32.4%) held a master's degree, and 8 (3.1%) were Ph.D. holders.

To measure each variable, scales were adopted from different sources. To measure WPGL, seven items were used from the scale developed by Kukreja and Pandey (2023). Nine items were used to measure EWB (Pradhan & Hati, 2022) and 11 items were used to measure EI (Davies et al., 2010). Smart PLS software was used for data analysis. The measurement model assesses validity and reliability through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The structural model was employed to analyse the relationships between variables. Model fit indicators described how well the overall structural model aligned with the data.

Results

Measurement Model

Table 1 presents the factor loadings, alpha and average variance extracted values. Items with factor loadings greater than 0.70 were retained, and items with low factor loadings were removed. The factor loadings demonstrate outstanding relationships between the research's primary constructs. Furthermore, alpha values indicate the reliability of the questionnaire as all values were greater than 0.70. Additionally, the AVE was greater than 0.50. Thus, no issues of construct validity exist. The measurement model is shown in Figure 2.

Table 1: Measurement Model

Construct	Items	Loadings	Sig	Alpha value	(rho_a)	(rho_c)	AVE
EI	EI10	0.768	0.000	0.938	0.942	0.948	0.67
	EI11	0.863	0.000				
	EI3	0.831	0.000				
	EI4	0.828	0.000				
	EI5	0.816	0.000				
	EI6	0.853	0.000				
	EI7	0.831	0.000				
	EI8	0.846	0.000				
	EI9	0.722	0.000				
EWB	EWB1	0.870	0.000	0.946	0.947	0.954	0.699
	EWB2	0.846	0.000				
	EWB3	0.799	0.000				
	EWB4	0.826	0.000				
	EWB5	0.760	0.000				
	EWB6	0.815	0.000				
	EWB7	0.878	0.000				
	EWB8	0.846	0.000				
	EWB9	0.878	0.000				
WPGL	WPGL1	0.901	0.000	0.901	0.911	0.924	0.671

WPGL3	0.751	0.000
WPGL4	0.785	0.000
WPGL5	0.785	0.000
WPGL6	0.787	0.000
WPGL7	0.894	0.000

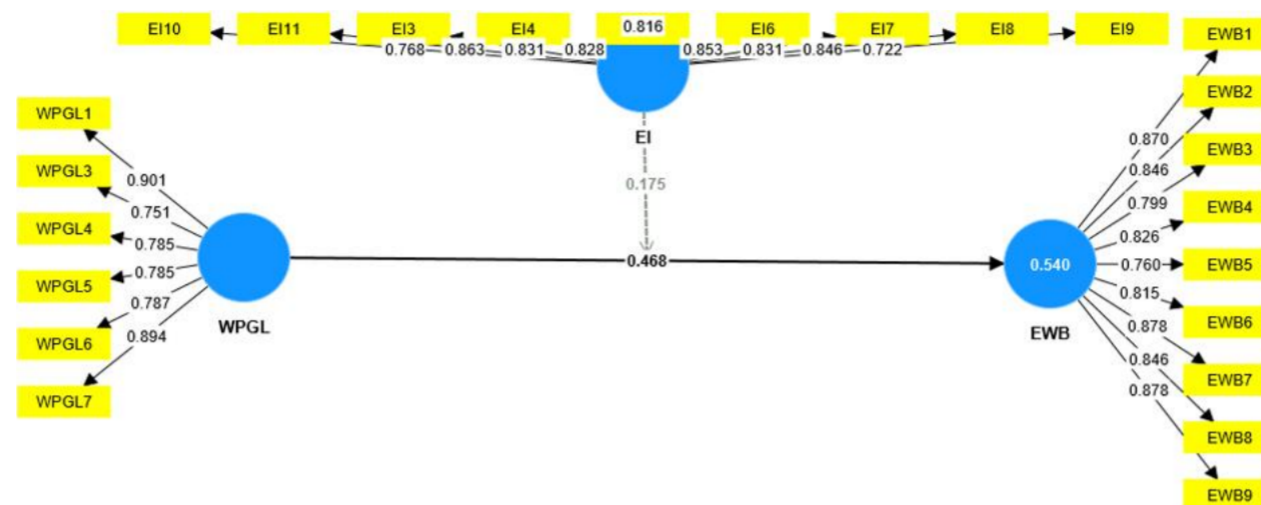


Figure 2: Measurement Model

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity aims to ensure that each construct in a study measures a distinct component of the theoretical framework, thereby enhancing the differential precision and accuracy of the results. (Cheung et al., 2024). The HTMT value is less than the threshold of 0.85 between these variables, indicating good discriminant validity and confirming that each construct is reasonably distinct from the others.

Table 2: Discriminant Validity (HTMT)

	EI	EWB	WPGL
EI			
EWB	0.616		
WPGL	0.273	0.567	
EI x WPGL	0.074	0.123	0.275

R Square Statistics

Table 3 shows that the WPGL combined with the EI explains 54% of the variance in EWB. Furthermore, the adjusted R-square, which stands at 0.534, provides a more exact picture by accounting for the number of predictors in the model.

Table 3: R-Square

	R-Square	R-square adjusted
EWB	0.540	0.534

Hypothesis Testing

The results shown in Table 4 confirm a strong and statistically significant positive effect of WPGL on EWB, as indicated by the path coefficient of 0.468 and a p-value of less than 0.001. The second hypothesis (H2) examines the moderating effect of EI on the association between WPGL and EWB. With a path coefficient of 0.175 and a p-value of less than 0.05, the interaction term (EI x WPGL) suggests that EI moderates the link between WPGL and EWB. Figure 3 shows the path analysis, and Figure 4 presents the interaction slope.

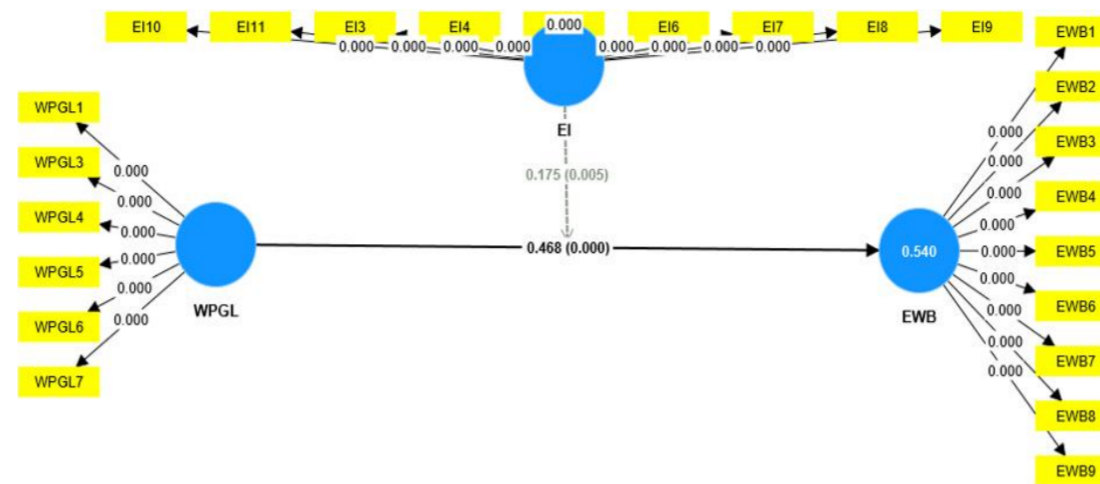


Figure 3. Structural Model

Table 4: Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesized Relationships	Beta	STDEV	T statistics	P values
H1 WPGL → EWB	0.468	0.075	6.236	0.000
H2 EI x WPGL → EWB	0.175	0.062	2.832	0.005

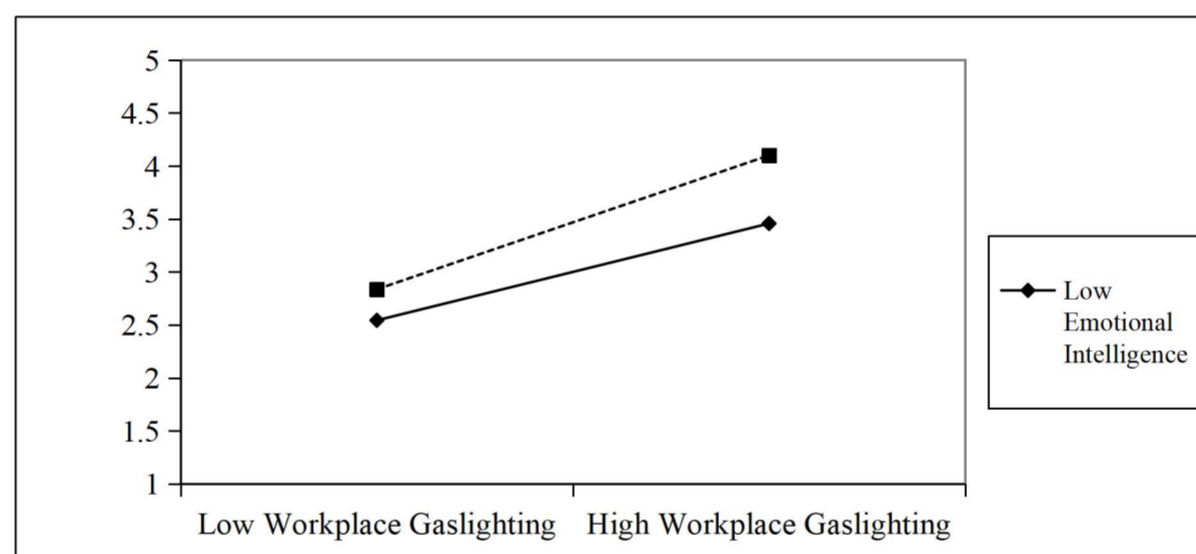


Figure 4: Interaction Analysis

Discussion

In this study, the impact of WPGL on EWB was examined in the presence of EI as a moderator among professionals working in the banking sector. According to the results, WPGL has a significant impact on EWB. This indicates that WPGL, a form of psychological manipulation, is seen as a significant predictor for EWB. This shows employees may develop strength in response to psychological manipulation. It depends on how individuals adapt or grow despite the presence of WPGL. Results are not linked to the studies of Dumitriu et al. (2025) & Kukreja and Pandey (2023).

According to the results, EI moderates the link between WPGL and EWB. Furthermore, EI has emerged as an important variable that may help in mitigating the impact of WPGL and EWB. Employees with higher EI result in psychological empowerment and well-being (Karimi et al., 2021). Therefore, it can be inferred that employees with higher EI can cope better with the stress and turmoil associated with WPGL, subsequently maintaining their overall EWB. This is further supported by Jain (2023), who claims that people with such high emotional Intelligence are skilled at dealing with WPGL. On the other hand, EI was a positive trait, but it did not substantially counteract the negative effects of toxic behaviours on worker well-being (Pudasaini Thapa et al., 2023), which is not aligned with the results of this study.

Conclusion

Gaslighting is an emerging notion that is linked to the psychological manipulation that seeks to sow doubt in individuals and typically leads to affecting the individual's well-being. However, there are limited studies in this regard. Hence, this study examines how workplace gaslighting (WPGL) impacts employee well-being (EWB) in the presence of



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emotional Intelligence (EI) as a moderator, from the lens of the job demands-resources (JD-R) theory. According to the results, WPGL has a significant impact on EWB, while EI has a moderating effect on both WPGL and EWB. This suggests that some employees not only withstand manipulation but also use it as a source of inner growth. Therefore, it is concluded that the presence of WPGL cannot be fully mitigated. However, its impact on EWB can be lessened in the presence of EI. Fostering proactive emotional support and a positive organisational culture can help employees maintain their well-being, even in the presence of WPGL. Addressing the issues of emotional Intelligence and psychological safety is critical for employee well-being.

Theoretical Implications

The findings offer a theoretical understanding of the dynamics at play and underscore the importance of EI in mitigating the negative consequences of WPGL. According to the job demands-resources (JD-R) theory, every job has unique job demands (physical and psychological) and resources (support, feedback and autonomy) (Mbabazi, 2024). This study contributes to the existing literature, which views WPGL as a job demand that drains employees' psychological resources and can affect EWB (Galanakis & Tsitouri, 2022). On the other side, EI as a personal resource helps to mitigate this effect (Podea, 2025). Hence, this study suggests that EI mitigates the harmful effects of WPGL on EWB. This is proven through the empirical results of this study.

Practical Implications

From a practical point of view, organizations should focus on developing EI among employees through training and development initiatives to enhance the overall quality of such a workplace without the negative, alarming impacts that WPGL causes. Since well-being interventions significantly boost organizational performance. Implementing EI courses can help develop and cultivate an environment of open communication, where employees feel comfortable reporting unethical behaviour. Thus, a workplace that combines social and physical elements will increase employee engagement and EWB.

Limitations and Directions for Future Researchers

The scope and design of this study are limited. The study focused solely on the banking sector in Karachi, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other industries/regions. Future researchers can conduct studies in different sectors to examine the impact of WPGL on EWB in the presence of EI as a moderator. Furthermore, convenience sampling was used. It may be subject to bias and common method variance, which can limit the degree of generality of the results. It examined relationships in a cross-sectional manner, preventing causal inferences. Future studies can incorporate a longitudinal study design to examine behavioural changes over time.

Additionally, due to cultural norms and power disparities in Pakistan, the experience of WPGL may vary. Future studies may be conducted in other cultural contexts to examine the impact of WPGL on EWB in the presence of EI as a moderator. Future research can utilise multi-source data, as well as peer or supervisor ratings, since this study focuses solely on employees.

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