

## Abuse, emotions, and workload in the distribution business: Implications for employees' engagement

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### ABSTRACT

Distribution networks and services are one of the major business drivers in any economy. The present study attempted to examine what is the impact of some of the deleterious work prospects on employees working in the distribution businesses on their psychological work wellbeing. Therein, the study examined the role and impact on work stressors including abusive supervision, emotional demands and workload on employees work engagement. Five major distribution companies were sampled in the present study to examine these relationships on the staff level employees. Structural equation modelling using PLS 2.0 M3 resulted in significant negative impact of abusive supervision on employees' work engagement. Accordingly, emotional demands also posed a significant negative impact on employees' psychological resources thus decreasing their work engagement. In parallel, workload also reported a significant negative impact in a similar fashion. The study has forwarded noteworthy implications based on findings for the distribution businesses in particular and service based occupations in general. The study also sheds light on limitation and scope for future studies.

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### 1. Introduction

Work stress is becoming a major issue across the globe and makes critical influences on people (Körner et al., 2012; Twumasi and Gyensare, 2016). Employees across the various organizations and occupational setups have been reportedly mentioning various kinds of stressful entities that are seriously causing negative impact on their behaviors and work outcomes. For example, stressful work elements like job demands like emotional demands and workload have been found resulting in work anxiety (Melchior et al., 2007); burnout (Crawford et al., 2010; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004); mental strain (Karasek, 1979); sickness (Demerouti et al., 2009) and emotional exhaustion (Van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). In parallel, such stressful elements also affect performance aspects (Bakker et al., 2004) and engagement (Crawford et al., 2010;

Demerouti et al., 2014). Notably, recent studies have underlined another element causing stressful situations at work thus, resulting in depleting employee behaviors and outcomes and that is abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000). Abusive and disrespectful supervisor or immediate manager has been found damaging employees' job morale ignites resistance behaviors (Tepper, 2007) and often found resulting in disobedience from subordinates (Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007).

Important to note that abusive supervision or incidents of supervisors/managers showing abusive behaviors have also been reported occurring more often in complex work environments (Martinko et al., 2013). Accordingly, abusive supervision has also been found affecting employees work behaviors (Lyu et al., 2016) thus, reportedly resulting in damaged work outcomes. Likewise, emotionally charged situations have also been reported as significantly damaging individual's psychological resources (e.g., Totterdell and Holman, 2003). Studies have reported that emotionally pressing situations at the workplace pose a significant negative impact on employees' work engagement.

Since jobs in all major supply chain domains ranging from logistics to distribution are reported being full of stressful situations, the present study

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attempted to explore as to what length, abusive supervision, emotional demands and workload poses negative effect on employees' work engagement.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Work stress in service based employments

Service based jobs are faced with stressful demands (work-family conflict, emotional discord, and long work hours, etc.) that influence employees' job outcomes and motivation deleteriously (Zhao and Mattila, 2013). Healthy literature underlines that not all stressors can have a negative effect on employees' outcomes. Cavanaugh et al. (2000) classified stressors into two distinct categories: hindrance stressors and challenge stressors. It has been claimed that the first stressor (hindrance) has a negative impact on the job outcomes (Crawford et al., 2010). While the second stressor (challenge) activates employees' motivation and job outcomes since it aims at increasing positive emotions, personal accomplishment and growth (LePine et al., 2005).

The stressor-strain-result viewpoint or the wellbeing hindrance procedure of the JD-R demonstrate has been utilized to find out whether work requests increment strain and hence contrarily impact representative dispositions and practices. For instance, in an investigation of forefront workers in the Korean the travel industry and accommodation industry, Choi et al. (2014) found that client related social stressors alleviated administration recuperation execution and client introduction through passionate weariness. Accordingly, study has also underlined that client contact representatives were sincerely depleted because of enthusiastic cacophony, and along these lines, were disappointed with the activity (Lee and Ok, 2012). According to Podsakoff et al. (2007) anyone might expect, strain/passionate weariness prompts negative employment results, since it expands negative emotional situation and perceptions.

There are many types of stressors that may have a direct impact on job outcomes and that could be attitudinal or behavioral. It is essential for employees to understand as to whether job demands and other similar elements have implications for their well-being (Judge and Colquitt, 2004). Challenge stressors contribute strongly and enhance job satisfaction and thus employees see them as a positive attribute since they help in personal development and accomplishment. They are also linked to high motivation and have a positive influence on work engagement Crawford et al.'s (2010).

### 2.2. Work stress in the distribution based jobs

Particularly, across the distribution jobs majority of the job roles are reportedly said to be highly stressful not only mentally but also physically

(Ferguson et al., 2012) hence, prone to resulting in lowering employee positive behaviors and work outcomes. In the distribution jobs, the effect of such elements becomes higher since the job requires the incumbent to be strong both, mentally as well as physically. Conclusively, keeping in view the tough nature of job role and responsibilities demanding mental and physical strength, it becomes crucial for employees to have a work environment that is free from all the stressful elements.

According to Cheung and Rowlinson (2007), in supply chain and related job roles, the most important things is the relationship management which can help enhance employee behavior and outcomes. This idea automatically leads us to understand how damaging it could be if there is an abusive supervisor. Bulk of evidences and corporate reports can be tracked outlining distribution networks and jobs there to be highly stressful in terms of workload and demanding requirements (Mulky, 2013). Likewise, there is a lot said regarding the number of stressful incidents that occur in the jobs related to supply chain and similar roles including distribution (Macdonald, 2014) principally due to tough time lines and humungous quantity of work. However, talking about empirical results, there is dearth of research in terms of how such stressful elements including emotional demands, workload and abusive supervision can effect employees' positive behaviors and outcomes in the distribution businesses.

### 2.3. Work engagement

A number of researches (Sorenson, 2013; Ahmed et al., 2016; 2019) pointed the importance of engagement in achieving high and profitable results at the work place. Work engagement has a constructive relation with job performance and other important work-related outcomes (Ahmed et al., 2015; 2017b; 2019; Afsar et al., 2019). It is defined as a positive state of mind that leads employees to be dedicated, highly immersed, and able to perform well in their jobs (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008). In fact, even if the literature is rich on how engagement can have a positive relation with work performance it presumably fails to outline the factors that could impair engagement levels (Crawford et al., 2010). According to some scholars, engagement underlines alignment between physical, emotional and cognitive energies. Engaged employees have a strong connection with their workplace. Though, some of studies have also pin pointed engagement to vary from one point to another (Sonnetag, 2003). As it the case for many constructs, engagement varies between and within the person (Thoresen et al., 2003).

### 2.4. Abusive supervisor and work engagement

According to Tepper (2000), abusive supervision denotes to the length to which the employees views

his/her supervisors using hostile language and behaviors towards its subordinates. The explanation defines that abusive supervisor works with a subjective attitude which results in serious negative behaviors and outcomes. For example, study by Zellars et al. (2002), abusive supervisors can damage employees' citizenship behaviors. Accordingly, empirical study by Yu and Duffy (2016) has suggested that supervisor's abusive behavior can negatively consequent on careers of employees. The study further suggested that supervisors that use immoral language and hostile nonverbal behavior to their employees generally fail to push them to responsively achieve the organizational goals. Accordingly, study by Forrester et al. (2016) have asserted that supervisor's abusive attitude can result in depleting psychological resources of the employees thus resulting in elements such as anxiety, frustration and work demotivation. Important to note that abusive supervision or incidents of supervisors/managers showing abusive behaviors have also been reported occurring more often in complex work environments (Martinko et al., 2013; Stefan, 1997). Accordingly, abusive supervision has also been found affecting employees work behaviors (Lyu et al., 2016) thus, reportedly resulting in damaged work outcomes.

Pertaining to engagement, limited studies can be found reporting about this its association with abusive supervision. For instance, study by Barnes et al. (2015), abusive supervisors result in damaging work engagement levels. Moreover, recent study by Dai et al. (2019) has asserted that abusive supervisor has serious consequences towards work engagement. Thus, based on these empirical understandings, the present study tested the following:

**H1:** There will be a significant relationship between abusive supervisor and work engagement

## 2.5. Emotional demands and work engagement

Emotional demands refer to emotionally stimulating situations at work (Heuven et al., 2006); which lead individuals towards work strain (Totterdell and Holman, 2003). Studies can be traced outlining the deleterious effect of emotional demands on work engagement (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2007). These studies have underlined that emotionally challenging situations and experiences from customers and/or work prospects can distract employees from bringing full energy and absorption towards their work hence damaging work engagement. Very recent study by Van Woerkom et al. (2016) on 832 respondents from Dutch mental health organizations found that emotional demands positively enhanced absenteeism. The study found that high job demands discouraged individual attachment with work and resulted them being absent from work. Consequently, Bakker and Sanz-Vergel (2013) reported emotional demands acting as a challenge thus, strengthening resources to enhance

work engagement whilst workload working the other way. Henceforth, there are significant empirical evidences available suggesting the deleterious impact of emotional demands on work engagement however, there is little known pertaining to this relationship in the distribution businesses in general and in Bahrain in particular. Therefore, the following hypothesis was tested:

**H2:** There will be significant negative relationship between emotional demands and work engagement

## 2.6. Workload and work engagement

Workload refers to the amount of work an employee is asked to do. Most of the times this is accompanied by strict deadlines (Van Veldhoven and Meijman, 1994a). The term is also associated with negative outcomes since it can generate outcomes such as absenteeism and exhaustion Van Woerkom et al. (2016). Workload can affect the employee psychologically since it can stress them and create a negative connection with the work (Llorens et al., 2007) and thus affect work engagement (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Siregar, 2018).

Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) stated that work engagement is affected negatively by workload. It is also commonly known that employees in different sectors experience different quantity of workload that can have a harmful connotation sometimes since it affects work engagement. However, study of Crawford et al. (2010) found that work engagement may not be necessarily affected by workload since it all depends on employees. If workload is considered as a challenge and results in bringing more energy and connectivity with work, it will not be considered as negative. Henceforth, the current study tested the following:

**H3:** There will be a significant negative relationship between workload and work engagement

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Operationalization of the constructs

The present study operationalized work engagement based on the definition of Schaufeli et al. (2002) as positive work-based state that brings energy that an employee exerts towards responsively positive outcomes in their work. Accordingly, emotional demands were operationalized in the current study based on the assertions of Heuven et al. (2006) as perceptions of employees about the emotionally stimulating situations at work from the work and clients in contact. Similarly, the present study operationalized workload as burden of work and time pressures on the job based on the definition of Van Veldhoven and Meijman (1994a). Lastly, the present study operationalized abusive supervisor as interpersonal mistreatment of the immediate authority; (generally

the supervisor) with the employee based on the definition of [Tepper \(2000\)](#).

### 3.2. Measurements

Work engagement was tested using the shorter version of Utrecht university engagement scale UWES ([Schaufeli et al., 2006](#)). Emotional demands were tested through using the 6-item scale by [Van Veldhoven and Meijman \(1994a\)](#) which inquires individuals pertaining to emotionally charged situations that can face at the workplace. Accordingly, Workload was assessed through using 11-item scale by [Van Veldhoven and Meijman \(1994b\)](#) asking respondents pertaining to work burden and time constraints on the job. Lastly, Scales by [Tepper et al. \(2011\)](#) have been popularly used for testing abusive supervision and its consequences. The present study used 6 items by combining 4-item scale from [Tepper et al. \(2011\)](#) and 3-item scale from [Tepper et al. \(2004\)](#) whilst eliminating one repeated item.

### 3.3. Control variables

With the objective of assuring the hypothesized relationships between the antecedents and work engagement are not cofounded; the present study controlled the demographic variables including age (continuous variable) and years of experience (concinuous).

### 3.4. Sampling

5 major distribution companies operating in the food business in Bahrain were sampled for this study. Therein, staff level employees including loaders, drivers, fleet supervisors, distribution supervisors, food supply coordinators, shift in-charge and daily delivery contractors were targeted as respondents for the study. Reason behind choosing these employees were mainly two employees in these job roles play the tougher yet crucial role in ensuring the distribution network achieves its daily objectives hence, it seemed important to understand how they go handle stressful elements. Secondly, the authors found no

specific study putting particularized attention on the role and impact of emotional demands, workload and abusive supervision on the engagement of these employees. [Table 1](#) provides information pertaining to number of employees in each of the companies based on details provided by them.

**Table 1:** Company names and number of employees in the chosen roles

S. No.	Company Name	Number of Employees
1	Trafco Group	138
2	HHM Group	132
3	Yaquby International	116
4	Somco Bahrain	87
5	Middle East Food Company	54
	Total	527

Table of [Krejcie and Morgan \(1970\)](#) was referred to outline the minimum number of samples required to choose respondents for the total of 527. As per the table, 226 is the minimum number of respondents required to conduct the study effectively. Keeping in view the assertions of some authors ([Sekaran and Bougie, 2010](#)), authors should distribute a greater number of questionnaires in order to ensure considerable response rate. Henceforth, 550 questionnaires in total were distributed across the five companies based on the percentage of share against the total number of required respondents through using proportionate stratified random sampling technique ([Sekaran and Bougie, 2010](#)). [Table 2](#) provides further details in this regard.

### 3.5. Response rate

The data collection attempts were taken with regular visits to the chosen companies whereby, individual members working in the company were also made responsible to facilitate the process. A total of 469 questionnaires were received back after the 6-week primary data collection process which turned to be 85.2 % as initial response rate. However, 97 questionnaires were discarded due to their incompleteness. In conclusion 372 questionnaires were taken for data analysis and interpretation thus, terming 67.63% as the final response rate.

**Table 2:** Sample size and number of respondents from each company

S.No	Company	No of Staff	% of Population	Required Questionnaires	Round off
1	Trafco Group	138	26.18	143.5	144
2	HHM Group	132	25.04	137.7	138
3	Yaquby International	116	22.01	121	121
4	Somco Bahrain	87	16.55	91	91
5	Middle East Food Company	54	10.25	56.3	56
	Total				550

### 3.6. Data analysis

Structural equation modelling using Smart PLS 2.0 M3 was used for the present study ([Ringle et al., 2005](#)). In this, based on the recommendations of [Hair et al. \(2016\)](#), two stage process was followed

which includes assessment of measurement model and assessment of structural model. More and more studies are focusing on structural equation modelling using Smart PLS approach these days ([Ahmed et al., 2017b](#); [Umrani et al., 2016](#); [2018](#)).

### 3.7. Measurement model assessment

In the first stage, the current study tested the psychometric properties of the model constructs including internal consistency, reliability and convergent validity. Table 3 and Fig. 1 provides these details whereby; the individual item loadings were assessed following the assertions of Hair et al. (2016). Therein, the loadings are supposed to be equal or great than 0.5. For the construct of emotional demands, 2 items were deleted due to loading not meeting the recommended threshold. Accordingly, 6 items were also removed from workload construct for the same reason. In parallel, reliability and validity of the constructs was also ensured through following the instructions of Fornell and Larcker (1981) whereby, the AVE scores are suggested to be 0.5 or above. Table 3 highlights that all the constructs have responsively achieved the threshold. Accordingly, composite reliability for each of the construct was also ensured where the CR value should be great than or equal to 0.7. Table 3 underlines that all the constructs attaining significant composite reliability scores, ranging between 0.881 to 0.915 thus achieving the recommendations of Bagozzi and Yi (1988).

After confirming the principle psychometric properties, the present study also examined discriminant validity whilst following the assertions of Fornell and Larcker (1981). Therein, the authors have suggested taking the square root of the AVE scores which should result in greater value compared to other scores in a cross loadings table. Table 4 provides further details in this regard,

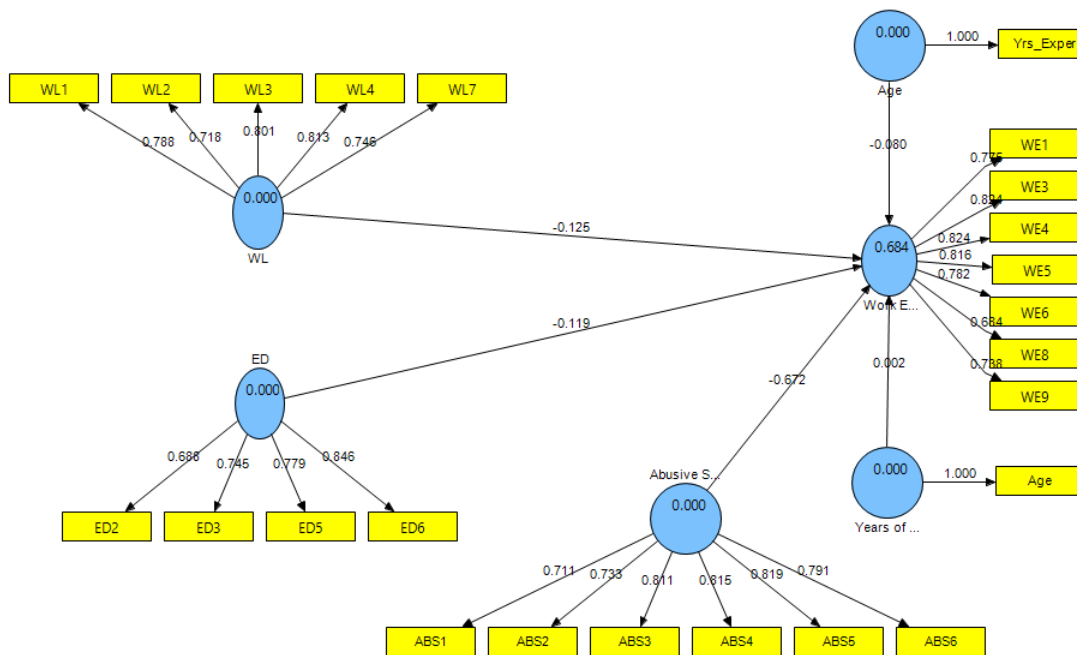
assuring significant discriminant validity amongst the latent constructs of the scientific study.

**Table 3: Loadings, AVE and composite reliability**

Construct	Loadings	AVE	Composite Reliability	R <sup>2</sup>
Abusive Supervisor		0.610	0.903	
ABS1	0.7110			
ABS2	0.7326			
ABS3	0.8111			
ABS4	0.8147			
ABS5	0.8194			
ABS6	0.7911			
Emotional Demands		0.588	0.850	
ED2	0.6884			
ED3	0.7453			
ED5	0.7793			
ED6	0.8460			
Work Engagement		0.607	0.915	0.683
WE1	0.7754			
WE3	0.8236			
WE4	0.8242			
WE5	0.8162			
WE6	0.7820			
WE8	0.6843			
WE9	0.7383			
Work Load		0.599	0.881	
WL1	0.7876			
WL2	0.7184			
WL3	0.8014			
WL4	0.8128			
WL7	0.7461			

### 3.8. Assessment of structural model

Upon successfully confirming the psychometric properties, the present study furthered to stage 2 whereby, significance of the path coefficients was assessed to test the hypothesized relationships.



**Fig. 1: Measurement model**

**Table 4:** Discriminant validity

Abusive Supervisor	Emotional Demands	Workload	Work Engagement	
Abusive Supervisor	0.7811			
ED	-0.0182	0.7669		
WL	-0.0442	0.7019	0.7741	
Work Engagement	-0.0502	-0.5812	-0.5651	0.7792

Therein, 5000 bootstraps were applied on 371 samples and the results found significant negative impact of emotional demands on employees' work engagement ( $\beta=-0.1190$ ;  $t=2.3203$ ). The finding has landed support to the first hypothesized relationship asserting that employees in the distribution businesses experiences emotionally charged situations which badly affected their work wellbeing (work engagement). The findings are consonant to the empirical results of (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2007) suggesting that people at work experience emotional demands whereby, they experience bad behavior from the work environment or from the clients which depletes their engagement with the work. The findings also have confirmed the assertions of studies (Gursoy et al., 2011; Zhao and Mattila, 2013) suggesting that stressful things at work can damage employees' positive behaviors and outcomes. The findings hence underline that any elements that ignite emotional sensitivities at the workplace can be dangerous not only the person experiencing but also for the organization he/she works for. Pertaining to service businesses, one can also foresee its serious consequences especially whilst handling clients. The findings are in agreement with Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) and Ahmed et al. (2017a) asserting that emotional challenges can negatively affect psychological work wellbeing of employees.

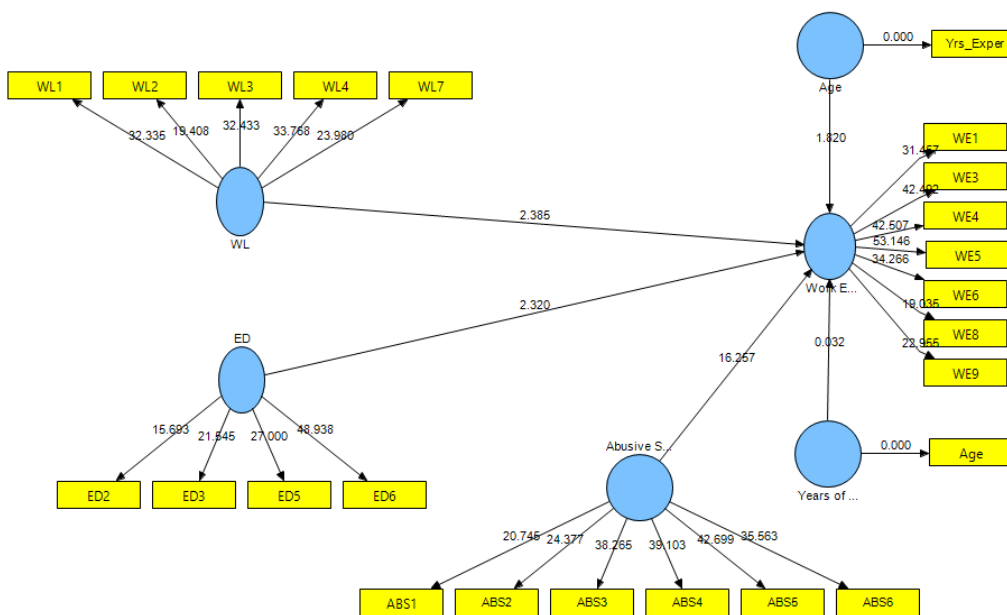
Accordingly, the present study also worked to outline the impact of workload on work engagement and the bootstrap results outlined that excessive workload drains physical energies which can lead towards reducing immersion and vigor towards job

thus, negatively affecting work engagement ( $\beta= -0.1253$ ;  $t=2.3846$ ). The results are in agreement with Taipale et al. (2011) that also underline significant negative impact of workload on employees' work engagement. Pertaining to hotel industry in Jordan, the findings have underlined that employees experienced more assigned work with tough deadlines and emotional challenges which affected their work engagement significantly.

Likewise, the results also reported significant negative impact of abusive supervisor on employees work engagement in the hotel industry in Jordan ( $\beta=-0.6717$ ;  $t=16.257$ ). The results hence suggest that employees in the hotel industry experienced rude and misbehaving attitude from their immediate supervisors which decreased their commitment, absorption and passion towards work thus, affecting their work engagement. On a comparison, abusive supervision has termed to be highly negatively significant than emotional demands and workload. This therefore points that hotel employees are experiencing abusive supervision more than emotional demands and workload.

**4. Discussion and implications**

Based on the results showed in Fig. 2 and Table 5, the study forwards significant implications for theory and practice. Pertaining to theory, the present study has confirmed the assertions of JD-R model asserting that demands and challenging situations at work can affect employee wellbeing.



**Fig. 2:** Structural model

**Table 5:** Hypotheses results

Relationship	Beta	Std Error	t-value	Decision
Abu Supervisor -> Work Engagement	-0.671	0.041	16.257	Supported
ED -> Work Engagement	-0.119	0.051	2.320	Supported
WL -> Work Engagement	-0.125	0.052	2.384	Supported

Thus, making us understand that challenging situations like abusive supervisor, workload and emotional demands can negatively affect employees' work behaviors such as engagement. On the course of practice, the present study has reported that employees' work engagement can be nurtured through positive prospects at work but if they face elements that would result in hindering their work then it would result in depleting their psychological well-being. In line with this argument, the findings of the present study have underlined that abusive supervision is not healthy for businesses and can make a considerable impact on employees' attachment and immersion in the work thus resulting in affecting individual and organizational performance. though it is a global issue (Martinko et al., 2013) yet still management can do much about it through bringing appropriate policies and consequences in place (Ahmed et al., 2017a). Henceforth, distribution companies in Bahrain need to work likewise to ensure that there are policies and practices in place that could help employees mistreated by their supervisors. This on a larger note is also important to be addressed since mistreated employees will never be able to serve customer as per expected or provide highest level of customer service. Accordingly, the findings also imply businesses particularly the service sector employees to understand the critical impact of emotional challenges at work. The finding has suggested that distribution business employees face a variety of emotional challenges particularly while dealing with customers and the rude gestures which affects their engagement. Training interventions can turn out to be very effective in helping employees in the distribution business to understand and tackle such demands (Schweizer et al., 2013). Thus, organizations can bring focused training programs to help their employees to cope up with such issues at work to ensure they do not lose out on their psychological wellbeing at work (engagement). Lastly, the study also found significant negative impact of workload and employee employees' work engagement. Scholarly work from past suggests that supervisory support can be of great help for people experiencing work stress and other similar issues (Kirmeyer and Dougherty, 1988).

#### 4.1. Limitations and scope for further studies

The present study has underlined some of the very important elements that organizations need to understand and manage to look after employees' work engagement. However, despite these elements, there are certain prospects that future studies may attempt to look into. At first, the study only worked on testing work stressors hence, future studies may

look into examining factors that could potentially enhance engagement. In parallel, future studies may also look at other possible stressors to help educate scholars and corporate accordingly. The present study also looked at major distribution businesses in Bahrain hence limiting its findings in terms of drawing causal inferences. Future studies therefore may look into sampling more companies both, locally as well as from abroad. Likewise, longitudinal approach may also be used by future scholars since the present study collected primary data through cross-sectional approach.

#### 4.2. Conclusion

Towards the end, the present study has empirically indicated towards the work stress issue faced by employees in the distribution businesses in Bahrain. The study has concluded that similar to other studies conducted world-wide, abusive supervision, emotional demands and workload is being experienced by employees in the distribution businesses in Bahrain as well. Moreover, the present study has also reported that these stressors are making a significant negative impact on the engagement of employees as well. The findings have concluded that regardless of the sector and occupational set ups, these elements largely have a negative impact on employees work engagement.

#### Compliance with ethical standards

#### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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