

Research review of workplace negative gossip

Yang Liu *

Guizhou University of Finance and Economics, College of Business Administration, Guiyang, China;

Abstract. workplace negative gossip refers to the informal and negative evaluation and discussion of third-party members who are not present when members of the organization communicate with each other. As a manifestation of workplace 'cold' violence, workplace negative gossip has the characteristics of concealment, difficulty in tracing back to the source, and rapid dissemination. The research on the antecedents of workplace negative gossip mainly focuses on the individual, interpersonal and organizational levels. The research on the negative gossip outcome variables in the workplace can be divided into its effect on employees' cognition, emotion, behavior and performance and its mechanism. The research in this field is very important for seeking effective countermeasures to control workplace negative gossip and improving organizational management methods.

1. Introduction

Gossip, defined as conversations about absent individuals, was first introduced in the workplace context by Kurland and Pelled (2010)^[1]. They conceptualized workplace negative gossip as negative evaluative discussions about absent members among a minority within the organization. workplace negative gossip is multidimensional and can be understood from the perspectives of the gossip spreader, the target of gossip, and the recipient of gossip. From the gossip spreader's standpoint, it is defined as intentional communication of informal, negative evaluations and discussions about the absent member (the target of gossip) among organizational members during interactions. From the target of gossip's perspective, it is defined as the perception of negative discussions and dissemination of information about oneself by gossip spreaders and recipients within the organization. From the recipient of gossip's standpoint, it can be defined as the reception of informal, typically subjectively assessed negative information about the target of gossip from the gossip spreader.

Negative workplace gossip typically exhibits the following characteristics: (1) Secrecy. Negative workplace gossip often takes place in private or non-public settings, such as in the office, break rooms, parking lots, where surveillance is typically absent. These locations make it easier for gossip spreaders to discuss matters covertly. Additionally, negative workplace gossip tends to occur within small groups, limiting the number of participants and enhancing the covert nature of discussions. (2) Difficulty in Tracing Origins. Negative workplace gossip may undergo oral transmission among multiple spreaders, each potentially adding subjective perspectives or modifying information. Given its oral nature without written records or traces, it becomes challenging for the

target of gossip to trace the original source of the information. (3) Rapid Dissemination. Negative workplace gossip often involves controversial or dramatic content, sparking curiosity among individuals. In the workplace, where employees typically have close connections and social networks, this fosters rapid dissemination of negative workplace gossip (Ye et al., 2022)^[2].

2. Measurement of workplace negative gossip

Since the concept of workplace negative gossip was first proposed, many scholars at home and abroad have carried out a lot of research on the measurement methods of workplace negative gossip. At present, scholars mainly refer to and adopt the following three relatively mature research results: First, in order to evaluate the degree of workplace negative gossip perceived by members of the organization (i.e., the gossip) about their own workplace negative gossip, Chandra and Robinson(2009)^[3] developed and designed a negative gossip measurement scale in the workplace based on the perspective of the gossip, which contains three items. Including 'In the workplace, someone spread harmful information to me', 'In the workplace, someone spread gossip against me', 'In the workplace, someone has made negative accusations against me'. The second is the workplace gossip measurement scale developed and designed by Kuo et al.(2015)^[4] with two dimensions (work-related and work-independent) and a total of twelve items. Work-related gossip, including 'Have you talked about the gossip of colleagues lack of experience and work knowledge recently', 'Have you talked about the gossip of colleagues poor performance recently' and so on. Work-irrelevant gossip, including 'Have you recently talked about the

* Corresponding author: liuyang@mail.gufe.edu.cn

gossip of lying or betraying your partner ', ' Have you recently talked about the gossip of getting engaged or getting married ' and so on. The third is that Brady et al.(2017)^[5] divided gossip into four dimensions : negative and positive gossip for bosses, negative and positive gossip for colleagues, with 5 items in each dimension. Including 'criticize your boss when talking to colleagues ', ' say good things to your boss when talking to colleagues ', ' criticize another colleague when talking to colleagues ', ' Colleagues said good things about another colleague. 'and so on.

Table 1. Measurement of workplace negative gossip.

scholar	dimensional
Chandra and Robinson (2009)	The degree of perception of the negative gossip by the gossips to their own negative gossips
Kuo et al. (2015)	Work-related gossip
	Work-irrelevant gossip
Brady et al. (2017)	Negative gossip to the boss
	Positive gossip to the boss
	Negative gossip to colleagues
	Positive gossip to colleagues

3.The formation factors of workplace negative gossip

3.1.individual level

Firstly, gender plays a significant role. Research indicates that gender differences impact the reception and propagation of workplace negative gossip. Women tend to be more inclined towards building intimate relationships and sharing information, while men may lean towards competition and power struggles. This suggests that women may be more susceptible to getting involved in the dissemination of workplace negative gossip. Additionally, due to cultural and societal gender stereotypes, these impressions may lead to a more stringent or biased attitude towards female employees. Therefore, even in similar situations, female employees may face more challenges in the workplace, including dealing with attacks from workplace negative gossip, adding extra pressure to their professional development and work environment (Guo et al., 2021)^[6].

Secondly, ethical norms are influential. Shibusani (1966)^[7] points out that individuals who violate workplace ethical norms are more likely to become targets of workplace negative gossip. This is because the actions of individuals violating workplace ethical norms are considered a threat to the survival and development of the entire group. To ensure that these individuals adhere to the ethical norms within the group, other group members often exert social pressure by spreading negative gossip about the target, thereby constraining the target to conform to the ethical norms within the organization.

Lastly, power dynamics play a crucial role. Individual power significantly influences the formation and dissemination of negative workplace gossip. Individuals with higher power typically have more channels to influence or control the spread of workplace negative

gossip. They can actively engage in organizational rumor spreading, shape their own image, or establish positive relationships with employees to minimize the spread of negative gossip. Conversely, those with lower power lack sufficient support to counteract the dissemination of workplace gossip, making them more vulnerable to becoming the focus and target of workplace negative gossip (Brady et al., 2017)^[5].

3.2. Interpersonal level

Firstly, employee interpersonal relationships are crucial. Positive employee relationships are typically built on trust and cooperation. When employees have established a strong trust relationship, they are more likely to address issues through direct communication rather than resorting to spreading workplace negative gossip to convey information or resolve conflicts. Conversely, in the absence of trust among employees, there is a tendency for them to express dissatisfaction through the dissemination of workplace negative gossip. Furthermore, the intimacy between gossip spreaders and listeners plays a vital role in the formation and spread of workplace negative gossip. When the relationship between these individuals is close, they are more likely to share gossip information with each other, while those considered as "outsiders" with more distant relationships often become the topics and targets of gossip (Tassiello et al., 2018)^[8].

Secondly, managerial behavior is influential. Abusive managerial behaviors have an impact on the formation and spread of workplace negative gossip. Employees subjected to abusive management often experience frustration, dissatisfaction, and anger. These negative emotions may drive them to seek an outlet to express their dissatisfaction. When employees feel unable to express dissatisfaction directly to their leaders, they may turn to spreading workplace negative gossip as a way to vent their negative emotions. If managers exhibit behaviors characterized by integrity, fairness, and respect for others, employees are likely to view them as role models and emulate these behaviors, thereby reducing the spread of workplace negative gossip (Kim et al., 2019)^[9].

3.3. Organizational level

Firstly, organizational culture plays a significant role. Organizational culture has a substantial impact on the dissemination and influence of gossip. Formal communication within an organization can diminish the spread of workplace negative gossip and also restrict those attempting to leverage it for power. Conversely, in environments characterized by intense internal competition and unclear leadership roles, gossip tends to be more prevalent. In such situations, gossip serves as a means to enhance the power of spreaders, and employees skillfully use workplace negative gossip to shape their own image (Dores Cruz et al., 2021)^[10].

Secondly, organizational cohesiveness is influential. The level of organizational cohesiveness also affects the speed of gossip dissemination and the perception of gossip targets. Highly cohesive organizations find it easier to

achieve information sharing and circulation, facilitating the rapid spread of workplace negative gossip. This diminishes the likelihood of workplace negative gossip remaining hidden, and the targets of gossip are more likely to perceive it in cohesive organizations (Guo et al., 2021)^[6].

4.The influence effect of workplace negative gossip

4.1. Cognitive variable

Yao et al. (2020)^[11] posit that when employees discover their colleagues or leaders spreading gossip, it diminishes their trust in other members within the organization. This may lead to a breakdown in trust, subsequently affecting employees' relational identification. Ye et al. (2019)^[12] found that the negative evaluations embedded in workplace negative gossip can lead employees to make unfavorable assessments of themselves, questioning their own worth and capabilities, plunging them into a state of self-doubt, thereby threatening their self-esteem. Cheng et al. (2020)^[13] suggest that when faced with workplace negative gossip, targeted employees often perceive their colleagues as unfriendly and unethical. This perception can lead to confusion about the moral standards valued within their organization, reducing their moral efficacy.

4.2.Emotional variable

Wu et al. (2018)^[14] propose that when employees perceive workplace negative gossip, they may worry about a breach of their privacy or anticipate negative impacts on their reputation and image, leading to a negative emotional experience and emotional exhaustion. Naeem et al. (2020)^[15] suggest that when employees encounter workplace negative gossip, they may feel attacked or unfairly treated, further intensifying negative emotions. Zong et al. (2023)^[16] found that employees targeted by gossip may attribute the negative discussions about themselves to their own negative behaviors and characteristics. This internal attribution can have a destructive impact on an individual's sense of self-worth and self-esteem, causing employees to feel ashamed.

4.3. Behavioral variable

Cheng et al. (2020)^[13] discovered that workplace negative gossip damages employees' reputation and status. Faced with multiple disadvantages and challenges, employees feel an urgent need to engage in political behavior to influence the thoughts, perceptions, and actions of other organizational members in order to regain support and address current difficulties. Xie et al. (2019)^[17] argue that the characteristics of workplace negative gossip make it difficult to trace, leading employees to tend to reduce organizational citizenship behavior and decrease their involvement with the organization. Li et al. (2023)^[18] propose that workplace negative gossip disrupts the team's shared values, hindering the establishment of trust among

colleagues. In such an environment, employees become skeptical that sharing their knowledge will yield corresponding benefits, further impeding internal knowledge sharing.

4.4. Performance variable

Babalola et al. (2019)^[19] found that workplace negative gossip leads to an increase in employees' negative emotions. Employees may carry these negative emotions into customer service, resulting in a decline in employee service performance. Ye et al. (2019)^[12] suggest that when employees perceive themselves as targets of workplace negative gossip, it diminishes their organizational identification. Employees no longer fully engage in their work, consequently leading to a reduction in employee service performance.

5.Conclusions

Through the exploration of the concept, influencing factors, and outcomes of workplace negative gossip, we can see that research in this area has made significant progress. However, it is essential to note that there are some shortcomings in the study of workplace negative gossip that require further in-depth research, as follows:

Firstly, previous research has predominantly focused on the negative impact of workplace negative gossip on employee positive behaviors or performance. This inclination has led the academic community to emphasize the adverse relationship between workplace negative gossip and positive behaviors, overlooking the positive associations with negative behaviors. This research imbalance may hinder a comprehensive understanding of the impact of workplace negative gossip on organizations. "Every coin has two sides," workplace negative gossip may, in some situations, be positively associated with certain negative behaviors among employees. For example, workplace negative gossip may stimulate competition and conflict among employees or lead some employees to adopt confrontational behavior. Negative behaviors displayed by employees can have highly destructive consequences for organizations, resulting in irreparable losses. Therefore, research on workplace negative gossip should comprehensively explore its relationship with employee negative behaviors to gain a more accurate and complete understanding and assist organizations in formulating effective intervention measures.

Secondly, most previous studies on workplace negative gossip and employee attitudes and behaviors have approached the subject from perspectives such as resource conservation theory and social information processing theory. There is a need to explore the impact mechanisms of workplace negative gossip from new theoretical perspectives to unveil the complex mechanisms behind it. This will contribute to a better understanding of the profound effects of workplace negative gossip on employees.

Finally, the examination of the boundary conditions of workplace negative gossip is not comprehensive enough. While past research has explored the moderating effects of

organizational and situational factors in the relationship between workplace negative gossip and employee behavior, there has not been sufficient attention given to the moderating role of individual traits in the relationship between workplace negative gossip and employee behavior. Therefore, future research on the boundary conditions of workplace negative gossip needs to be more comprehensive and holistic.

References

- 1 Kurland, N. B. and Pelled, L. H. (2000), Passing the word: Toward a model of gossip and power in the workplace, *Academy of Management Review*, 25(2):428-438.
- 2 Ye, C., He, B., Sun, X. (2022). Subordinates' negative workplace gossip leads to supervisor abuse: based on the conservation of resources theory, *Chinese management studies*(2), 16.
- 3 Chandra, G. and Robinson, S. L. (2009), "They're talking about me again: The impact of being the target of gossip on emotional distress and withdrawal", Paper presented at the meeting of academy of management, Chicago.
- 4 Kuo, C. C., Chang, K., Quinton, S., Lu, C. Y., Lee, I. (2015), Gossip in the workplace and the implications for HR management: A study of gossip and its relationship to employee cynicism[J]. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 26(18): 2288-2307.
- 5 Brady, D. L., Brown, D. J., Liang, L. H. (2017). Moving beyond assumptions of deviance: The reconceptualization and measurement of workplace gossip. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 102(1):1-25.
- 6 Guo, G., Gong, Q., Li, S., Liang, X. (2021), Don't Speak Ill of Others Behind Their Backs: Receivers' Ostracism (Sender-Oriented) Reactions to Negative Workplace Gossip, *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*, 14:1-16.
- 7 Shibutani, T. (1966). *Improvised news: A sociological study of rumor*. Oxford, England: Bobbs-Merrill.
- 8 Tassiello, V., Lombardi, S., Costabile, M. (2018). Are we truly wicked when gossiping at work? The role of valence, interpersonal closeness and social awareness. *Journal of Business Research*, 84:141-149.
- 9 Kim, A., Moon, J., Shin, J. (2019). Justice perceptions, perceived insider status, and gossip at work: A social exchange perspective. *Journal of Business Research*, 97:30-42.
- 10 Dores Cruz, T. D., Nieper, A. S., Testori, M., Martinescu, E., Beersma, B. (2021), An integrative definition and framework to study gossip. *Group & Organization Management*, 46(2): 252-285.
- 11 Yao, Z., Luo, J., Zhang, X. (2020), Gossip is a fearful thing: The impact of negative workplace gossip on knowledge hiding, *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 24(7):1755-1775.
- 12 Ye, Y., Zhu, H., Deng, X., Mu, Z. (2019), Negative workplace gossip and service outcomes: An explanation from social identity theory, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 82:159-168.
- 13 Cheng, B., Guo, G., Tian, J., Shaalan, A. (2020), "Customer incivility and service sabotage in the hotel industry", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 32(5): 1737-1754.
- 14 Wu, X., Kwan, H. K., Wu, L. Z., Ma, J. (2018), "The effect of workplace negative gossip on employee proactive behavior in China: The moderating role of traditionality", *Journal of Business Ethics*, 148:801-815.
- 15 Naeem, M., Weng, Q. D., Ali, A., Hameed, Z. (2020), "An eye for an eye: does subordinates' negative workplace gossip lead to supervisor abuse?", *Personnel Review*, 49(1): 284-302.
- 16 Zong, B., Martinescu, E., Beersma, B., Xu, S., Zhang, L.(2023), How multi-source gossip affects targets' emotions and strategic behavioral responses. *Journal of Business Ethics*.
- 17 Xie, J., Huang, Q., Wang, H., Shen, M. (2019), "Coping with negative workplace gossip: The joint roles of self-monitoring and impression management tactics", *Personality and Individual Differences*, 151:109482.
- 18 Li, P., Huang, Z. X., Wang, R. N., Wang, S. K. (2023), How does perceived negative workplace gossip influence employee knowledge sharing behavior? An explanation from the perspective of social information processing. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 113:103518.
- 19 Babalola, M. T., Ren, S., Kobinah, T., Qu, Y. E., Guo, L. (2019). Negative workplace gossip: its impact on customer service performance and moderating roles of trait mindfulness and forgiveness. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 80:136-143.