**Perish in Gossip? Nonlinear Effects of Perceived Negative Workplace Gossip on Job Performance**

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**Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the curvilinear relationship between perceived negative workplace gossip and target employee’s task performance, and the moderating roles of perceived organizational support (POS).

**Design/methodology/approach** – Using a sample of 275 supervisor-subordinate dyads in a two-wave survey, we adopted a hierarchical regression analysis to test the hypotheses.

**Findings** – The results revealed that there is a U-shaped relationship between perceived negative workplace gossip and task performance. Moreover, perceived organizational support (POS) moderated the curvilinear relationship such that the curvilinear relationship is more pronounced among those with lower POS.

**Research limitations/implications** – This study does not explore the mediating mechanism of how perceived negative gossip affects the target’s task performance. Moreover, as this research was conducted in a Chinese context, the question of the generalizability of our findings calls for more attention.

**Practical implications** – When the negative gossip is still in its early stages, managers should realize the potential threat to target employees and take measures to stop and minimize negative gossiping and rumormongering. Furthermore, managers should do their best to find the optimal levels of organizational support for target employees.

**Originality/value** – This study is among the first effort to understand how perceived negative gossip can influence the target employees’ performance by proposing and demonstrating a nonlinear relationship. Moreover, by illuminating how POS plays a role in the curvilinear relationship between negative gossip and task performance, we not only complement but also extend the literature on workplace gossip and organizational support.

**Keywords:** Perceived negative workplace gossip, Task performance, Perceived organizational support

**Article Type:** Research paper

**Introduction**

As a specific type of informal communication, workplace gossip is a naturally occurring organizational phenomenon. According to one study, more than 90% of employees engage in gossip in the workplace (Grosser, Kidwell, & Labianca, 2012). Broadly defined, workplace gossip is “informal and evaluative talk in an organization, usually among no more than a few individuals, about another member of that organization who is not present” (Kurland & Pelled, 2000, p. 429). Although workplace gossip can either be positive or negative in nature (Foster, 2004), most research has been on negative gossip as “bad is stronger than good” (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Prototypical negative gossip normally presents in a form of disparagingly evaluating others’ reputation, spreading unfavorable news, or reporting on others’ socially disapproved behavior in the workplace.

Existing literature has addressed gossip’s contents and functions (eg., Kniffin & Wilson, 2005, 2010), and its impact on the gossipers (e.g., Waddington & Fletcher, 2005; Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010). More recently, research has begun to investigate the effects of negative workplace gossip on an individual’s work-related behaviors from the target’s perspective (Chandra & Robinson, 2009). For example, Wu, Birtch, Chiang, & Zhang (2018) found that when becoming the target of negative gossip, employees showed lower organization-based self-esteem and engaged less in citizenship behavior. Wu, Kwan, Wu, and Ma (2018) showed that the perceived negative workplace gossip led to emotional exhaustion at work, and thus less proactive behavior.

Despite considerable progress, scholarly work on gossip in organizations remains incomplete, particularly the effects of perceived negative workplace gossip on the target’s task performance. Such research is of significance not only because employees’ task performance represents a most important outcome that brings substantial value to work groups and organizations (Campbell, Liao, Chuang, Zhou, & Dong, 2017), but also because the arguments linking negative gossip to employee performance is equivocal. On the one hand, the perception of being targeted by negative gossip may cause consequences similar to victimization (Aquino & Bradfield, 2000; Wu et al., 2018), such as leading to job stress (Chandra & Robinson, 2009) and impeding the fundamental psychological need of belonging (Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012), all of which can subsequently decrease an individual’s in-role performance (Gilboa, Shirom, Fried, & Cooper, 2008). On the other hand, when gossipers share evaluative information about a gossip target, there is an implicit upward or downward social comparison between the gossiper and the gossip target (Wert & Salovey, 2004; Brady et al., 2016). Employees face higher performance pressure when they think that they are being evaluated informally by others because this informal evaluation is akin to having audience presence at work, an important factor driving performance pressure at work (Tan, Yam, & Nai, 2017). For example, employees will feel pressured to avoid mistakes and perform their task well if they are aware that others are keenly observing and will talk about their actions behind their backs. Thus, when employees perceive to be the target of negative gossip, they experience higher pressure to perform well, which leads to higher task performance. Taken together, both positive and negative associations are plausible. However, to the best of our knowledge, the complex relationship between perceived negative workplace gossip and task performance has yet to be explored by prior research.

To fill these gaps, the first objective of this study is to examine the potential curvilinear (U-shaped) relationship between perceived negative workplace gossip and task performance, based on conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002). According to this theory, individuals, underpinned by either resource conservation or resource acquisition motivation, try to acquire, protect, and retain resources (including time, physical energy, emotional energy, and attention) to deal with stressful situations (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002). Specifically, we suggest that, as negative gossip moves from low to moderate levels, the target employee’s task performance may decrease, in line with resource conservation motivation (Hobfoll, 1998). However, people do not just respond to the stressor by conserving the resource. They may be proactive to protect against the possible future losses of resource (Hobfoll, 1998; Wright & Hobfoll, 2004). As negative gossip moves from moderate to high levels, resource acquisition motivation drives the target employee to show high performance, with the hope of counteracting the destroyed image and reputation. Consequently, the prospect of both positive and negative associations between perceived negative gossip and task performance speaks to the potential of a curvilinear (U-shaped) relationship.

Furthermore, COR theory suggests that an individual’s behavior in response to stressor partly depends on whether he/she can acquire additional supportive resources (Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014; Hobfoll, 1989). Accordingly, we extend our model by identifying perceived organizational support (POS), an important type of resource, as a boundary condition, which is defined as employees’ “beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being” (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986, p. 501). Prior studies have shown that POS will effectively provide workplace-specific forms of support, which facilitates the replenishment of target employees’ deleted resources caused by stressors (e.g., Scott, Zagenczyk, Schippers, Purvis, & Cruz, 2014; Kurtessis, Eisenberger, Ford, Buffardi, Stewart, & Adis, 2017). We argue that the target’s behavioral response to negative gossip, displaying either high or low performance, will depend on their different levels of POS, and therefore the anticipated resource loss and resource gain. Thus, our second objective is to investigate the potential moderating effect of POS on shaping the relationship between perceived negative workplace gossip and task performance. Figure 1 depicts our hypothesized model.

Insert **Figure 1** here

Our study extends previous research in several ways. First, we extend the workplace gossip literature by proposing and demonstrating the general possibility that perceived negative workplace gossip is nonlinearly related to task performance in a field setting. Such a link has yet been established by prior research. Second, based on the competing tenets of COR theory, resource conservation and resource acquisition (Hobfoll, 1998; Ng & Feldman, 2012), we offer an integrative theoretical framework for a curvilinear relationship between perceived negative gossip and task performance. In this way, we not only extend the literature by supplementing the notion that perceived negative gossip, a so-called interpersonal mistreatment (Grosser et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2016) or stressor (Wu et al., 2018), may bring valuable work-related outcome, but also address Brady, Brown and Liang’s (2017) call to explore the potential bright side of negative gossip. Third, an examination of the moderating effect of POS helps to understand when employees will display higher or lower task performance when being the target of negative gossip. In this manner, our research addresses Foster’s (2004) call to explore factors that determine people’s response to gossip and how they act upon it. Finally, our investigation also contributes to the informal communication literature by underpinning an interactionist perspective to understand informal communication. Although there is a tradition of discussing informal communication within formal organizations, the literature on informal communication in management research is being held back (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010). By focusing on the interaction between one of the most important types of informal communication, i.e., negative gossip, and formal support practices from the organization (e.g., POS), our investigation helps establish a theoretical framework to understand the consequences of informal communication broadly.

**Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development**

*The relationship between perceived negative workplace gossip and task performance*

COR theory explains the nature of stress and the coping responses individuals use when confronted by stressors (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002). The theory presents two competing tenets regarding the possible behavioral responses in stressful situations: resource conservation versus resource acquisition (Ng & Feldman, 2012). The resource-conservation tenet argues that “resource loss is disproportionately more salient than resource gain” (Hobfoll, 1998, p. 62). Individuals who suffer from a resource loss are likely to protect their remaining resources by spending less energy on their regular job tasks (Ito & Brotheridge, 2003). The less discussed resource-acquisition tenet suggests that “people must invest resources in order to protect against resource loss, recover from losses, and gain resources” (Hobfoll, 1998, p. 63).

Integrating both perspectives of resource conservation and resource acquisition points to a curvilinear (U-shaped) relationship between perceived negative gossip and task performance. Specifically, according to the resource conservation perspective (Hobfoll, 1989), perceived negative gossip will trigger target employees’ reactive response by reducing task performance, as negative gossip moves from low to moderate levels. First, once becoming the target of negative gossip, employees are forced to focus physical effort and resources on dealing with the stress caused by negative gossip (Greenhaus & Parasuraman 1986; Wu et al., 2018), such as trying to explain the truth to coworkers, and finding the source of the gossip or preventing the spread of the gossip. The target employees may not be able to maintain high levels of performance, as their energy, time and attention have been directed elsewhere. Second, the stress caused by negative gossip might result in information overload, which will distract the target employees’ attention from task-related information and cues, thus inhibiting their performance (Gilboa et al., 2008). Third, negative gossip will provoke physiological reactions, such as anxiety or emotional distress (Chandra & Robinson, 2009), thus inhibiting the target employees from maintaining their usual, high levels of task performance. Recent empirical findings show that perceived negative gossip leads to a decrease in the target employee’s organizational citizenship behavior (Wu et al., 20186) and creativity (Liu et al., 2018). Similarly, Burt’s (2005) study of bankers also found that those who were troubled by negative gossip had difficulties in establishing cooperative working relationships with colleagues. Therefore, we argue that, as negative workplace gossip moves from low to moderate levels, it will result in decreased task performance.

The above inference of the resource conservation perspective portrays the employee as reactive to the negative workplace gossip, by reducing performance. However, as COR theory points out, people do not just respond by conserving limited resources. They may also be proactive to accrue additional resources to offset possible future losses (Wright & Hobfoll, 2004). This is because the fear of losing resources may actually carry greater importance than the actual loss itself (Bilgin, 2012; Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). Based on this logic, we expect that perceived negative gossip will trigger target employees’ proactive response by displaying high performance, as negative gossip moves from moderate to high levels. First, reputation is one of the most important resources an employee has within an organization (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 2002). When the negative gossip becomes prevalent and serious, such widespread damaging reputational information will impact others’ interpersonal cooperation with the target and even his/her career development (Burt, 2005; Feinberg et al., 2014; Tan et al., 2017). In other words, the possible losses of reputation become more salient and imminent than the losses of time and energy as negative gossip moves from moderate to high levels. These concerns may motivate the target employees to protect against further losses of reputation by investing time and energy to elevate their task performance. Second, when perceived negative gossip escalates from moderate to high levels, the target may find it hard to prevent the spread of gossip. Through continual dedication to high performance, the target employees may signal that they are capable and important for the organization (Crouch & Yetton, 1988; Campbell et al., 2017). In this way, the target employees can give warning to the gossipers or clarify the negative gossip to the listeners. Empirical evidence has shown that employees with high performance bring benefits to co-workers, customers, and workgroup, which in turn help them gain good organizational image and reputation (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2015; Campbell et al., 2017).

Taken together, we propose that both resource conservation and resource acquisition logics govern how perceived negative workplace gossip affects the target’s task performance. As negative gossip increases from low to moderate levels, the target employees respond to the stressor by reducing performance in order to conserve their limited resources, such as time and energy. When negative gossip further increases from moderate to high levels, fear of future resource loss, such as the losses of reputation, motivates them to transfer from resource conservation to resource acquisition. Accordingly, they would display high task performance to counteract the destroyed image and reputation. Therefore, we posit the following curvilinear hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** The relationship between perceived negative workplace gossip and task performance is U-shaped.

*The moderating effect of POS*

According to COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002), organizational support is a valuable resource, which will effectively impact how an individual responds to stressful situations (Stamper & Johlke, 2003; Newman, Thanacoody, & Hui, 2011; Scott et al., 2014). Specifically, organizational support provides workplace-specific forms of instrumental, informational, and emotional support (Stamper &Johlke, 2003; Liu, 2009; Scott et al., 2014). All of these supports serve, not only to depress or prevent a stress appraisal response, but also help weaken the association between the stressful experience and the outcome by providing possible solutions to the problem (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Wu, Yim, Kwan, & Zhang, 2012; Du, Zhang, & Tekleab, 2018). Therefore, we expect our proposed U-shaped relationship between perceived negative gossip and task performance may be modified by POS.

Previously, we argued that when negative gossip increases from low to moderate levels, the target employees’ task performance will decrease because they want to conserve their limited resources. This relationship may be especially prominent among those with lower POS. Compared with those with higher POS, employees with lower POS lack access to highly relevant or important information resources, and individual care from the organization (Scott et al., 2014), they tend to be more dissatisfied with their current situation (Kurtessis et al., 2017). As negative gossip moves from low to moderate levels, employees with lower POS are especially likely to be anxious and distracted from their tasks, thus inhibiting their performance. By contrast, employees with higher POS generally have access to valuable, job-related resources and emotional support from their organization in times of need (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). When negative gossip increases from low to moderate levels, employees with higher POS are generally better equipped to cope with gossip, thereby withholding task performance. For example, Ilies, Dimotakis and De Pater (2010) showed that high levels of POS reduced the strength of the relationship between workload and affective distress. Du et al. (2018) have proved that POS moderated the effect of job strain on in-role performance, such that the relationship was weaker for employees with higher POS.

We have argued that, when negative workplace gossip reaches moderate to high levels, employees are motivated to acquire new resources by displaying high job performance. We once again expect this effect will be more pronounced among employees with lower POS. This is because employees with lower POS get less assistance and emotional support from the organization (Scott et al., 2014), resulting in scarcity of coping resources and strategies (Stamper & Johlke, 2003) when the negative gossip becomes prevalent and serious. In other words, for employees with lower POS, displaying high levels of performance may be an effective way to offset the damaged reputation caused by negative gossip. By contrast, high POS signals to employees that organization values their contributions and cares about their wellbeing (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). It provides employees with important cues that their behavior matches the organizational attributes and their membership has a secured future (Lam, Liu, & Loi, 2016). Additionally, employees with higher POS can also have access to more information or emotional support and other resources, which may enhance their coping skills and strategies to stressful situations (Foley, Hang-Yue, & Lui, 2005). As such, they will be less motivated to invest time and energy to display high performance as a way to offset their reputation loss in spite of experiencing increasing levels of negative gossip. In sum, we hypothesize the following:

**Hypothesis 2.** POS moderates the U-curve relationship between perceived negative workplace gossip and task performance such that this relationship is not pronounced among employees with high POS, compared to employees with lower POS.

**Methodology**

*Data collection and sample description*

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a two-wave survey in 5 large companies, located in southern China. Before starting the survey, we shared our research purpose and potential benefits with the companies’ top management team and HR department, who granted their support and access. With the assistance of the HR manager we randomly selected 448 subordinates and their corresponding 448 supervisors from the participating companies (one supervisor rated one subordinate). This way of collecting data can avoid the risk of non-independence, or the called nested effect (i.e., if a single supervisor provided behavioral assessments for two or more subordinates, the supervisor’s rating of one subordinate may influence his/her rating of another) (Chen et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2018).

Moreover, as certain time interval should elapse for one psychological variable to have an effect on behavioral outcome (Law, Wong, Yan, & Huang, 2016), we conducted our study with a one-month time lag in order to observe the impact of negative workplace gossip on performance. This approach has been applied to examine the consequence of workplace gossip (e.g., Wu et al., 2018) or workplace mistreatment (e.g., Lian, Ferris, Morrison, & Brown, 2014). To minimize Common Method Variance (CMV), we promised participants confidentiality of responses to limit their evaluation apprehension and socially desirable responding. We also created psychological separation between the measures in our surveys by using different instructions and putting variables in different parts of the survey with a number of filler items between them (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

In the first wave survey (Wave 1), employees were asked to report perceived negative workplace gossip, perceived organizational support, and demographic information (i.e., age, gender, education, and organizational tenure). One month later (Time 2), supervisors (only those whose subordinates had returned completed surveys in Time 1) were asked to rate their subordinates’ task performance. In Wave 1, we sent questionnaires to the 448 employees and 353 completed questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of 78%. In Wave 2, we sent 353 questionnaires to the corresponding supervisors and 293 supervisors returned the ratings of their subordinates’ task performance, yielding a response rate of 83%. Matching the subordinate and supervisor responses yielded a total of 275 dyads. In terms of their demographic profile, subordinates were on average 33.61 years of age (SD = 6.84), male (54.2%), and employed an average of 4.62 years in their respective organization (SD = 3.84). Supervisors were on average 36.81 years of age (SD = 5.57), male (70.9%), and employed an average of 5.04 years in their respective organization (SD = 3.15).

*Measures*

The survey instrument was administered in Chinese. Since some measures used in the study were originally developed in English, to ensure equivalence of meaning we followed the commonly used back-translation procedure to translate the measures into Chinese (Brislin, 1980). Unless otherwise indicated, responses were made on Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*Perceived negative workplace gossip*

Perceived negative workplace gossip was measured using the three-item scale developed by Chandra and Robinson (2009). This scale has been used by Wu et al. (2016) and Wu et al. (2018). Responses were made on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (daily). A sample item is: “In the past six months, others (e.g., coworkers and/or supervisors) communicated damaging information about me in the workplace”. The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.82.

*Task performance*

We used a 4-item scale developed by Farh and Cheng (1999) to measure task performance. This scale has previously been used in a Chinese context (Chen & Aryee, 2007). A sample item is “This subordinate makes an important contribution to the overall performance of our work unit.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.85.

*Perceived organizational support*

POS was assessed with the 6-item version of Eisenberger et al.’s (1986) scale which asks participants to rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with statements about their organization. A sample item includes: “My organization really cares about my well-being.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.83.

*Control variables*

Following prior negative workplace gossip (Wu et al., 2016) and job performance research (Chen & Aryee, 2007), we controlled for four demographic variables: gender, age, education, and organizational tenure. Age and organizational tenure were self-reported in years, and gender was dummy coded as 0 for female and 1 for male. Education was coded as 1 for high school or below, 2 for junior college, 3 for bachelor’s degree, 4 for master’s degree and 5 for doctoral degree. As our data was collected from five companies, we created four dummy-coded variables and entered these terms in our analyses. In addition, employees’ proactive personality was also controlled. This was done because proactive employees are likely to adopt active coping strategies to cope with stressors (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999), such as negative gossip. Following Wu, Liu, Kwan, & Lee’s (2016) research, we measured proactive personality by using four items with the highest factor loadings of Bateman and Crant’s (1993) scale. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.86.

**Results**

*Confirmatory factor analysis*

Prior to hypotheses testing, we used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) procedures to assess the distinctiveness of the four variables included in this study, namely, perceived negative workplace gossip, task performance, POS and proactive personality. Comparing the baseline model against several alternative models revealed that the four-factor model fit the data considerably better than did any of the alternative models (χ2 = 210.67, df = 113, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.04). We also tested for the presence of a common method effect since perceived negative gossip, POS and proactive personality were collected from a single source. The confirmatory factor analysis showed that the single-factor model did not fit the data (χ2 = 1302.33, df = 119, CFI = 0.37, TLI = 0.29, RMSEA = 0.19, SRMR = 0.16). In addition, we conducted Harman’s single factor test of four variables in this study and found that four factors were extracted with an eigenvalue greater than 1. The accumulated amount of explanatory variance is 64.94% and the largest factor did not account for a majority of the variance (25.89%), suggesting that CMV is not a pervasive problem (Huang, Wellman, Ashford, Lee, & Wang, 2017).

Insert **Table 1** here

*Descriptive statistics and correlations*

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for the variables appear in Table 2. Based on the bivariate correlations, perceived negative gossip is negatively correlated with task performance (r = -0.32, p < 0.01), POS is positively correlated with task performance (r = 0.28, p < 0.01).

Insert **Table 2** here

*Hypotheses testing*

To reduce multicollinearity between the linear terms and their quadratic counterparts, we grand-mean-centered all the predictor variables (Aiken & West, 1991). Table 3 summarizes the results of the regression analysis regarding our hypotheses, including the beta coefficients, pseudo R2, △R2, and F.

Insert **Table 3** here

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the relationship between perceived negative workplace gossip and task performance is U-shaped. To test this hypothesis, according to the procedures recommended by Harris, Kacmar and Witt (2005), we first entered the control variables (Model 1), and the linear term of negative gossip (Model 2), followed by the quadratic term of perceived negative gossip (labeled as negative gossip squared in Model 3). As showed in Table 3 (Model 3), the squared term for perceived negative gossip was positive and significant (β = 0.13, p < 0.05). This curvilinear relationship remained significant even after taking POS into account (Table 3, Model 4). To demonstrate the exact nature of the relationship between perceived negative gossip and task performance, we plotted the relationship, as shown in Figure 2. Taking these results together, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Insert **Figure 2** here

Hypotheses 2 predicted that POS moderates the curvilinear relationship between perceived negative workplace gossip and task performance. To test this hypothesis, we entered POS, as well as their interactions with perceived negative gossip, and negative gossip squared into the regression equations. The results presented in Table 3 (Model 5) show that the coefficient for the interaction term for POS and the squared term of perceived negative gossip was significant (β = -0.25, p < 0.01). Figure 3 presents the moderating effect of POS using the procedures recommended by Dawson and Richter (2006). To further analyze the interaction effect, we tested simple slopes (Aiken & West, 1991). The simple slopes analysis shows there is a curvilinear U-shaped relationship between perceived negative gossip and task performance (β = 0.23, p < 0.01) for employees with lower POS (−1SD), and that perceived negative gossip was negatively and linearly associated with task performance (β = -0.40, p < 0.01) for employees with higher POS (+1SD). Taking these results together, Hypothesis 2 was supported. The values of the variance inflation factors (VIFs) for all of the above models showed a range of 1.04 to 2.73, which fell within acceptable limits (Fox, 1991), indicating that the model parameters are stable and multicollinearity is not an issue.

Insert **Figure 3** here

**Discussion**

The purpose of this research was to uncover the relationship between perceived negative workplace gossip and employee performance. Based on the countervailing arguments on both possibly positive and negative outcomes of perceived negative gossip and integrating the competing tenets of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002), we predicted that the relationship would be curvilinear. Our empirical results based on supervisor-subordinate dyadic time-lagged data (n = 275) were consistent with the quadratic relationship proposition. Furthermore, POS moderated the U-shaped relationship between perceived negative gossip and task performance such that this relationship is more pronounced among employees with lower POS, compared to employees with higher POS.

*Theoretical implications*

This study makes several contributions to the literature. First, our study is among the first effort to understand how perceived negative gossip can influence the target employees’ performance by proposing and demonstrating a nonlinear relationship. Existing research has suggested that negative gossip can invade target’s privacy (Foster, 2004), destroy reputation (Michelson et al., 2010), cause job stress (Chandra & Robinson, 2009) and decreased extra-role behavior (Wu et al., 2018a; Wu et al., 2018b). However, there is a lack of empirical research linking perceived negative gossip to the performance from the target’s perspective, an important topic to organizations. By demonstrating the U-shaped relationship between perceived negative gossip and employee performance in a field study, we provide a nuanced understanding of negative gossip, beyond those merely focus linear negative effects of gossip on work attitudes and behaviors.

Second, to the best of our knowledge, this study is among the first to offer a theoretical explanation for a curvilinear relationship between perceived negative gossip and task performance. Based on the resource conservation tenets in COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002), prior research primarily assumes that individuals only are reactive to negative gossip. Accordingly, it holds a negative view and suggests only the adverse effects of negative gossip on the target (e.g., Wu et al., 2018). However, by introducing the less noticed resource acquisition tenets of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002), we suggest that the target employees could be proactive agents. Negative gossip, so-called aggression (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011) or interpersonal mistreatment (Grosser et al., 2010), may trigger employees to proactively obtain valuable resources by presenting high performance when they experience significant damage to their organizational image and reputation. We, therefore, explored the potential upside of negative gossip, an area that has been understudied in the field of organizational behavior (Brady et al., 2017; Tan et al., 2017).

Third, by illuminating how POS plays a role in the curvilinear relationship between negative gossip and task performance, we not only complement but also extend the literature on workplace gossip and organizational support. Although several studies suggest that the behavioral response of negative gossip may differ as a function of individual differences, such as negative affectivity (Wu et al., 2016) or traditionality values (Wu et al., 2018), little attention has been paid to the role of organizational support perceived by the target. Based on the COR theory, we established POS as a boundary condition to the U-shaped relationship between perceived negative gossip and task performance. By doing so, we addressed Foster’s (2004) call to explore factors that determine people’s response to gossip and how they act upon it. Furthermore, previous organizational support research suggests that in less-than-ideal situations such as low POS, which may act as an impetus for change, employees will become more proactive to deal with difficulty (Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010; Burnett, Chiaburu, Shapiro, & Li, 2015; Li, Chiaburu, & Kirkman, 2017). By demonstrating that the U-curve relationship is not pronounced among employees with high POS, our study offers not only a theoretical explanation but also a test with empirical evidence.

Finally, although our primary contribution is to the workplace gossip literature, this research also extends our understanding of the interaction between informal communication and formal support practices from organizations. How organizational formal practices play a role on the effects of informal communication on employee’s attitudes and behaviors has been overlooked in prior management research for a long time (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010; Wu et al., 2016). This is partly because it is difficult for researchers to gain a full understanding of how informal communication works in organizations. In this study, we examined how formal organizational support practices in terms of POS can moderate the effect of perceived negative workplace gossip from the target perspective, as one of the most important types of informal communication, on job performance. By doing so, our investigation helps establish an interactionist theoretical framework, which can be applied to study how other types of workplace informal communication influence different work-related outcome under different boundary conditions.

*Practical implications*

In interpreting our results, it is important to note that we are not advocating that managers somehow try to increase levels of negative gossip in order to promote employee’s task performance. Rather, the downward slope (at low levels of negative gossip) from our results suggests that managers can maintain employees’ task performance by alleviating their discomfort from being targeted by negative gossip. Similarly, managers should not misinterpret the finding that the task performance increases as the level of gossip increases from medium to high, because this may reflect the desperation of the target employees when facing a high level of negative gossip. However, such high performance as a last resorting coping response cannot be sustainable and the target employees would exhaust. Therefore, managers should provide training and employee assistance programs (EAPs) designed to help target employees through various life challenges that may adversely affect health, well-being and work performance. These programs include assessments and counseling and may also assist individuals to manage stress attributable to negative gossip, by buffering its negative and burning out consequences.

Moreover. our results indicate that low-POS employees are more likely to be proactive than high-POS employees when coping with negative gossip. It is important to note that we are not advocating that managers should reduce organizational support in order to promote employee performance. Rather, our findings imply that although high POS may provide target employees with a resource to cope with negative gossip, it may weaken employees’ motivation for proactive behavior to some extent. Just as Lambert (2000) suggests: “The more supported the workers studied here felt, the more they took the organization for granted” (p. 812). Therefore, managers should do their best to find the optimal levels of organizational support for target employees.

Finally, by outlining how employee response to the negative information spread through informal communication, our research suggests that managers and organizations should build efficient channels for information exchange, provide interpersonal communication courses, and cultivate a healthy, positive organizational culture for communications.

*Limitations and future directions*

As with any research, this study has several limitations. First, although we found that there is a U-shaped relationship between perceived negative workplace gossip and task performance, this study does not explore the mediating mechanism of how perceived negative gossip affects the target’s task performance. For instance, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and reduced organizational identification brought on by negative gossip may fully or partially mediate its effects on task performance. The next important step for workplace gossip research is, therefore, to explore the role of the potential mediators.

Second, we studied one moderator, namely POS, which was chosen based on the COR theoretical framework. However, it is possible that other boundary conditions, such as active or avoidance coping strategies (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010), may moderate the relationship between perceived negative workplace gossip and work-related outcomes. For example, when the target of negative gossip adopts an active coping strategy, he or she might exert more energy on image-enhancement activities, such as increasing task performance or organizational citizenship behavior. Future research in this direction has the potential to offer both theoretical and practical contributions.

Finally, since negative gossip is verbal, covert, and indirect (Foster, 2004) this study investigates the subjective perceptions of the targets rather than the objective nature of negative gossip from the victim perspective (Wu et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2018). However, the accuracy of an employee’s perception of gossip may be affected by dispositional and situational factors. Thus, in order to further capture the influence of negative gossip in an organization, scholars could use a multiple-source method to collect the perceptions of negative gossip (e.g., supervisors, subordinates and coworkers). It will also be interesting to apply a social network approach (Grosser et al., 2010) to collect data from the gossipers, listeners and the victim in future studies.

**Conclusion**

Given the high prevalence of gossip, all employees may experience negative gossip in the workplace at some point. Our results suggest that the perception of being targeted by negative workplace gossip does not always result in reduced employee performance. Instead, the relationship is more complex depending on the levels of negative gossip. By identifying a U-shaped relationship between perceived negative workplace gossip and task performance, the present research sheds important new light on the processes that govern how employees respond to negative gossip. Moreover, by identifying POS as an important situational factor that influences the relationship between negative gossip and task performance, the present research can provide supervisors and organizations with new insights that how organizational support affects target employees’ behavioral response to negative workplace gossip in different ways.

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**Figure 1** Hypothesized model

**Table 1** Model fit results for confirmatory factor analyses

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Model | χ2 | *df* | *Δ*χ2 *(Δdf)* | RMSEA | SRMR | TLI | CFI |
| Baseline Model (PNWG; TP; POS; PP) | 210.67 | 113 | — | 0.06 | 0.04 | 0.94 | 0.95 |
| M1: PNWG + POS; TP; PP | 701.13 | 116 |  490.46(3) | 0.14 | 0.14 | 0.64 | 0.69 |
| M2: PNWG + TP; POS; PP | 466.63 | 116 |  255.96(3) | 0.11 | 0.08 | 0.78 | 0.82 |
| M3: PNWG + PP; TP; POS | 694.46 | 116 |  483.79(3) | 0.14 | 0.12 | 0.64 | 0.69 |
| M4: TP + PP; PNWG; POS | 635.56 | 116 |  424.89(3) | 0.13 | 0.10 | 0.68 | 0.73 |
| M5: PNWG + PP; TP + POS | 1098.78 | 118 |  888.11(5) | 0.17 | 0.16 | 0.40 | 0.48 |
| M6: PNWG + POS; TP + PP | 1124.73 | 118 |  914.06(5) | 0.18 | 0.17 | 0.39 | 0.47 |
| M7: PNWG + TP + POS+PP | 1302.33 | 119 |  1091.66(6) | 0.19 | 0.16 | 0.29 | 0.37 |

Note. N=275. PNWG = perceived negative workplace gossip, TP = task performance, POS = perceived organizational support, PP = proactive personality.

All alternative models are compared to the baseline model.

All Δχ2 are significant at p < 0.001.

**Table 2** Means, standard deviations, and correlations

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
| 1. Gender | 0.54 | 0.50 | — |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2. Age | 33.61 | 6.84 | -0.05 | — |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3. Education | 2.91 | 0.56 | -0.03 |  -0.16\*\* | — |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4. Tenure | 4.62 | 3.84 | -0.04 |  0.72\*\* |  -0.20\*\* | — |  |  |  |  |
| 5. proactive personality | 3.08 | 0.73 | -0.12 | 0.05 | 0.07 | -0.01 | (**0.86**) |  |  |  |
| 6. PNWG | 2.24 | 0.78 |  0.07 | 0.02 | -0.09 | -0.001 | -0.08 | (**0.82**) |  |  |
| 7. Task performance | 3.28 | 0.82 | -0.07 | 0.07 |  0.10 | 0.03 | 0.27\*\* | -0.32\*\* | (**0.85**) |  |
| 8. POS | 3.17 | 0.74 |  -0.13\* | 0.02 |  0.09 | -0.003 | 0.04 | -0.09 | 0.28\*\* | (**0.83**) |

Note. PNWG = perceived negative workplace gossip, POS = perceived organizational support.

Cronbach’s alpha coefficients are shown in boldface on the diagonal.

**\*** p < .05.

**\*\*** p < .01.

**Table 3** Results of hierarchical regression analyses for predicting task performance

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable |  Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
| Step 1: Control variables |  |  |  |  |  |
| Dummy 1 | 0.02 | -0.04 | -0.04 | -0.09 | -0.10 |
| Dummy 2 | -0.12 | -0.13 | -0.13 | -0.14 | -0.16\* |
| Dummy 3 | 0.04 | 0.07 | 0.07 | 0.03 | 0.03 |
| Dummy 4 | 0.02 | 0.01 | 0.02 | -0.02 | -0.02 |
| Gender | -0.04 | -0.02 | -0.01 | 0.02 | 0.01 |
| Age | 0.05 | 0.05 | 0.07 | 0.08 | 0.07 |
| Education | 0.10 | 0.08 | 0.09 | 0.08 | 0.07 |
| Tenure | 0.01 | 0.01 | -0.02 | -0.03 | -0.07 |
| PP |  0.26\*\* |  0.25\*\* |  0.24\*\* | 0.24\*\* | 0.24\*\* |
| Step 2: Independent variables |  |  |  |  |  |
| PNWG |  |  -0.31\*\* | -0.38\*\* | -0.38\*\* | -0.39\*\* |
| Step 3: Quadratic term main effect |  |  |  |  |  |
| PNWG squared |  |  | 0.13\* | 0.17\*\* | 0.10 |
| Step 4: Moderating variable |  |  |  |  |  |
| POS |  |  |  | 0.26\*\* | 0.37\*\* |
| Step 5: Moderation effects |  |  |  |  |  |
| PNWG × POS |  |  |  |  | 0.07 |
| PNWG squared × POS |  |  |  |  | -0.25\*\* |
| *R2* | 0.10 | 0.20 | 0.21 | 0.27 | 0.30 |
| *△R2* | 0.10 | 0.09\*\* | 0.01\* | 0.06\*\* | 0.03\*\* |
| *F* | 3.38\*\* | 6.39\*\* |  6.25\*\* | 8.05\*\* | 7.78\*\* |

Note：\* *p* < 0.05, \*\* *p* < 0.01; PP = proactive personality, PNWG = perceived negative workplace gossip, POS = perceived organizational support.



**Figure 2** The U-shaped relationship between PNWG and task performance

Note: PNWG = perceived negative workplace gossip



**Figure 3** The interaction effect of PNWG and POS on task performance

Note: PNWG = perceived negative workplace gossip; POS = perceived organizational support; TP = task performance.