



A Study of the Effect of Negative Workplace Gossip on Employees' Proactive Behavior

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Abstract. Negative workplace gossip spreads through informal channels, bringing negative consequences to the organization and employees. Based on conservation of resources theory, this study introduces emotional exhaustion and psychological resilience to investigate the influence of negative gossip on proactive behavior. By analyzing 230 samples, the study finds that (1) negative gossip affects proactive behaviors negatively; (2) emotional exhaustion partially mediates the connection between negative gossip and proactive behaviors; (3) psychological resilience negatively moderates the connection between negative gossip and emotional exhaustion. This study extends the understanding of the influence mechanism of negative gossip, offering valuable insights for enterprises to effectively manage gossip and foster proactive behaviors of employees.

Keywords: negative workplace gossip; proactive behavior; emotional exhaustion; psychological resilience; conservation of resources theory.

1 Introduction

Gossip occurs as a natural social phenomenon in organizations. This "negative and informal talk about another member" is known as workplace negative gossip [1]. Negative gossip means social damage to employees and they will be difficult to establish good cooperative relations. Although scholars suggest that paying more attention to negative gossip, few studies have explored the influence of negative gossip from the perspective of the "victim". Proactive behavior is spontaneous, aiming to improving oneself and work environment [2]. Conservation of resources theory (COR) states that individuals will strive to acquire and protect the resources they possess, and resource depletion will affect subsequent work attitudes and behaviors [3]. Negative gossip depletes individuals' resources and results in emotional exhaustion, while reducing proactive behaviors is a resource-preserving behavior. Meanwhile, Linnenluecke (2017) states psychological resilience enables individuals to better face adversity and regain equilibrium [4].

In summary, based on the COR, this study aims to explore the role mechanism between negative workplace gossip and employees' proactive behaviors. It's helpful to

expand the research on the influence mechanism and boundary conditions of negative gossip and provide guidance for enterprises to control workplace negative gossip.

2 Theoretical Basis and Research Hypothesis

2.1 Negative Workplace Gossip and Employee Proactive Behavior

Negative workplace gossip refers to negative things that employees perceive others to be talking about behind backs. Gossip targets will compare their behaviors with the content of gossip, which will help to improve the cooperation. Similarly, negative gossip is subjective and the content may be distorted. If the gossip target considers it's an attack, the impact will be shown in the subsequent work. Proactive behavior is spontaneous in which individuals actively complete out-of-role tasks [5]. There are two main categories of factors influencing proactive behavior, one is the role of individual factors in guiding behavior. The second is how external situational factors influence proactive behavior. Negative gossip may be invisible stressor for gossip targets. According to COR, one way to conserve resources is to put less effort into work [6]. So gossip targets are less likely to be proactive. This study proposes Hypothesis 1:

H1: Negative workplace gossip negatively affects employees' proactive behavior.

2.2 The Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is the feeling of emotional overextension. More scholars have explored the antecedent variables that affect emotional exhaustion, such as work engagement. Negative gossip violates the privacy and damages personal reputation. The target of the gossip usually identifies the source and clarifies the content, losing a large amount of psychological resource and leading to emotional exhaustion. COR suggests that when emotional exhaustion occurs, employees choose behaviors carefully to maintain remaining resources [7]. So emotional exhaustion may cause employees to inhibit proactive behaviors. This study proposes Hypothesis 2:

H2: Emotional exhaustion mediates the connection between negative workplace gossip and employees' proactive behavior.

2.3 The Moderating Role of Psychological Resilience

Psychological resilience refers to the ability to act positively facing stressful situations and plays a role in inhibiting anxiety and insecure behaviors. Shatté et al. (2018) confirmed that employees with high resilience related to stress relatively less [8]. Psychological resilience is a self-protective factor. For employees possessing high resilience, they face the work pressure in a positive attitude and take the initiative to break the influence of gossip. For employees possessing low resilience, they are more inclined to take avoidance. It's difficult for them to adjust mental state, thus resulting in emotional exhaustion. This study proposes Hypothesis 3:

H3: Psychological resilience negatively moderates the connection between negative workplace gossip and emotional exhaustion.

The theoretical model is shown in Figure 1.

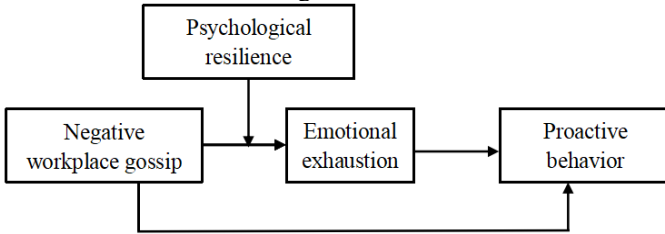


Fig. 1. Research model

3 Research Methodology

This study adopts questionnaire method and selects the employees of enterprises as the research object. A total of 285 questionnaires were sent out in this survey, and 230 valid questionnaires were obtained, with an effective sample recovery rate of 80.7%.

Negative workplace gossip uses the scale designed by Chandra & Robinson, and the Cronbach's α is 0.828. Proactive behavior uses the scale designed by Griffin et al. and Cronbach's α is 0.947. Emotional exhaustion uses the scale designed by Maslach & Jackson, and Cronbach's α is 0.939. Psychological resilience uses the scale designed by Smith et al. and Cronbach's α is 0.921. Control variables contain gender, age, education and years of working. All scales are evaluated on a five-point Likert scale.

4 Data Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

4.1 Validation Factor Analysis

As is shown in Table 1, the four-factor model this study proposed fits best and all the measurements are in the acceptable range. $\chi^2/df=1.723$, RMSEA=0.056, SRMR=0.035, CFI=0.948, TLI=0.943. So it can be used for subsequent data analysis.

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis results (N=230)

Model	χ^2/df	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI
Four-factor model	1.723	0.056	0.035	0.948	0.943
Three-factor model	2.731	0.078	0.086	0.901	0.891
Two-factor model	4.275	0.101	0.100	0.827	0.812
One-factor model	6.447	0.154	0.139	0.597	0.564

4.2 Common Method Bias Test

Since the data of multiple variables in the questionnaire survey are filled in by employees independently, there may be common method bias. So Harman's single-factor test method is adopted for testing. The SPSS 26 factor analysis results show that the variance explanation rate of the first factor extracted without rotation is 36.315%, and there is no serious common method bias.

4.3 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

In this study, SPSS 26 is used for descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The results are shown in Table 2. Negative workplace gossip demonstrates a significant negative association with proactive behavior ($r = -0.534$, $p < 0.001$) while exhibiting a positive correlation with emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.431$, $p < 0.001$). Emotional exhaustion is negatively correlated with proactive behavior ($r = -0.435$, $p < 0.001$). The findings provide initial support for hypotheses.

Table 2. Correlation analysis data (N=230)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Gender	1							
Age	-0.053	1						
Education level	-0.009	-0.023	1					
Working year	-0.105	0.255***	-0.047	1				
Negative workplace gossip	0.020	-0.061	-0.135*	-0.090	1			
Emotional exhaustion	0.151*	-0.105	-0.078	-0.016	0.431***	1		
Psychological resilience	-0.079	0.100	0.104	-0.060	-0.51***	-0.549***	1	
Proactive behavior	-0.062	0.076	0.134*	0.011	-0.534***	-0.435***	0.436***	1
Mean	1.580	2.260	3.740	2.570	2.551	2.611	3.314	3.326
Standard deviation	0.495	0.851	0.861	0.940	1.046	0.957	1.071	1.041

Note: * means $p < 0.05$, ** means $p < 0.01$, *** means $p < 0.001$.

4.4 Hypothesis Test

4.4.1 Main and Mediating Effects Test

As is shown in Table 3, Negative workplace gossip negatively affects proactive behavior ($\beta = -0.524$, $p < 0.001$). H1 is supported. Negative gossip positively affects emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.389$, $p < 0.001$), and emotional exhaustion negatively affects proactive behavior ($\beta = -0.462$, $p < 0.001$). Putting both of them into regression equation, the coefficient of influence decreases from -0.524 to -0.421 ($p < 0.001$). Emotional exhaustion partially mediates the connection between negative gossip and proactive behavior. H2 is supported.

Table 3. Regression analysis results (N=230)

Variables	Emotional exhaustion		Proactive behavior		
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
Gender	0.278*	0.216*	-0.111	0.011	-0.038
Age	-0.097	-0.033	0.069	0.042	0.043
Education level	-0.021	-0.009	0.074	0.123	0.069
Working year	0.060	-0.004	-0.059	0.001	-0.044
Negative workplace gossip	0.389***	0.182**	-0.524***		-0.421***
Emotional exhaustion				-0.462***	-0.264***
Psychological resilience		-0.381***			
Negative workplace gossip × Psychological resilience		-0.099*			
R ²	0.215	0.358	0.296	0.201	0.342
ΔR ²	0.176	0.012	0.269	0.173	0.046
F	12.235***	17.716***	18.843***	11.248***	19.353***

Note: * means $p < 0.05$, ** means $p < 0.01$, *** means $p < 0.001$.

4.4.2 Moderating Effect Test

The interaction term of negative gossip and psychological resilience negatively affects emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -0.099$, $p < 0.05$), which suggests that resilience moderate the connection between negative gossip and emotional exhaustion. A slope chart is shown in Figure 2. When the level of psychological resilience is lower, the slope of negative gossip and emotional exhaustion is steeper. H3 is supported.

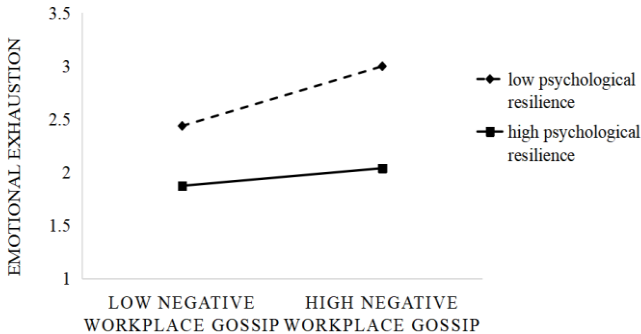


Fig. 2. Moderating effect of psychological resilience

5 Conclusions

Drawing upon the COR, this study delves into the mechanisms underlying the influence of negative gossip on proactive behaviors, while also accounting for the contributory roles of emotional exhaustion and resilience. By analyzing 230 samples, hy-

potheses are valid: negative gossip negatively affects proactive behaviors; emotional exhaustion partially mediates the connection between negative gossip and proactive behaviors; psychological resilience negatively moderates the connection between negative gossip and exhaustion.

There are three theoretical significances. First, this study reveals the black box of negative gossip affecting proactive behavior. Second, this study confirms that negative workplace gossip, as a work situation, can significantly weaken employees' proactive behavior, and expands the research on the antecedents of proactive behavior. Third, it confirms the role of personal characteristics and deepens research on formation mechanisms of proactive behavior.

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