

Why and When Negative Workplace Gossip Inhibits Organizational Citizenship Behavior

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Abstract

The potentially destructive effects of informal communication in the form of negative workplace gossip have recently attracted scholars' interest. Beyond the perspectives of prior studies (e.g., the conservation of resources and self-consistency theories), we offer a new account based on social identity theory and propose that negative workplace gossip is related to the target employees' decreased organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) by undermining their identification with the organization. We also theorize that collectivism influences the extent to which employees identify with the organization when being targeted by negative gossip. By collecting three-wave supervisor-subordinate dyadic data from China, we demonstrated that organizational identification mediates the negative relationship between negative workplace gossip and OCB when the effects of other mediators studied by previous perspectives, i.e., organization-based self-esteem and emotional exhaustion, were controlled. In addition, we found that collectivism moderates the indirect effect of negative workplace gossip on OCB through organizational identification. Theoretical implications and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: perceived negative workplace gossip, organizational identification, collectivism, organizational citizenship behavior

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Behavior

Introduction

As a typical kind of informal communication, gossip is prevalent in the workplace, for example, in the United States and Western Europe, 90% of employees engage in negative workplace gossip (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, Labianca, & Ellwardt, 2012). Negative workplace gossip is defined as the informal and negative evaluative discussion about another member within the organization who is absent, e.g., poor performance (Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Kurland & Pelled, 2000).

The research finds that one of the target employee's responses to negative workplace gossip is reduced organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (e.g, Wu et al., 2018a), defined as individual discretionary behaviors that promote the effective functioning of the organization but are not formally recognized by the organization's reward system (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). The discretionary nature makes decreased OCB a safer response compared with other forms of behavior, e.g., not performing one's formal job demands, which may risk organizational sanctions such as punishment or dismissal (Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002). Since OCB is important for effective organizational functioning (Organ et al., 2006; Peng & Chiu, 2010), we must understand further why and when negative workplace gossip leads to decreased OCB. Such knowledge can guide managers on how to discourage negative workplace gossip and help the target employees cope with negative gossip.

To date, prior research has largely provided two main perspectives on the detrimental

impacts of perceived negative workplace gossip on targeted employees' OCB. Building upon the conservation of resources (COR) theory, some scholars suggest that being the target of negative gossip will give rise to resource loss and emotional exhaustion because the employees must consume time and energy to deal with the negative evaluations of colleagues. Therefore, their OCB will reduce since they do not have extra time and energy towards such efforts under such stress (e.g., Liu, Kwan, & Zhang, 2020; Wu, Kwan, Wu, & Ma, 2018b). Drawing from self-consistency theory, some researchers have argued that negative workplace gossip makes target employees feel that other members of the organization view them negatively, resulting in lowered organization-based self-esteem (OBSE), which is "the degree to which an individual believes him/herself to be capable, significant, and worthy as an organizational member" (Pierce & Gardner, 2004, p. 593). With the decreased OBSE, they will withhold proactive behavior, in this case, OCB, consistent with their negative self-views (Wu et al., 2018a).

These perspectives provide helpful views on why target employees respond to negative gossip by reducing their OCB. However, they ignore that individuals can view the organization as part of their positive self-concept and uphold a positive social identity attached to the employing organization (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which can, in turn, motivate them to perform OCB. As indicated by Ellemers, Gilder, and Haslam (2004, p. 461), "a self-conception in collective terms would energize people to exert themselves on behalf of the group, facilitate the direction of efforts toward collective (instead of individual) outcomes, and help workers sustain their loyalty to the team or organization through times in which this is not individually rewarding." The potential impact of negative workplace gossip on target employees' self-conception, in terms of the relationship between

their self and the organization and its subsequent impact on OCB has not been explored.

This study aims to explain the association between negative workplace gossip and OCB from a social identity perspective. According to social identity theory (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals are inclined to define part of their self-concept by organizational membership and thereby be motivated to engage in group behaviors. However, if individuals are denied or attacked by other members, they will feel that their self-concept is threatened and want to psychologically detach from the organization, consequently withholding their proactive behaviors. A social identity perspective would thus suggest that negative workplace gossip influence OCB by undermining individuals' organizational identification, which refers to the sense of oneness that organizational members feel with their organization and the degree to which they define themselves as members of the organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

Self-concept can be defined in terms of their independence but also interdependence with others (Brewer & Chen, 2007), also called interdependent self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Therefore, social identity theory often assumes the presence of a collective self when describing human motives for seeking social identity (Hogg, 2006; Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Collectivism, which reflects the extent to which individuals regard the self as inseparable from the others in a group, is an important contextual factor moderating the function of identity development (Lam et al., 2016; Triandis, 1990). Thus, we postulate that collectivism may moderate the relationship between employees' perception of being targeted by negative workplace gossip and organization identification. Moreover, collectivism also moderates the strength of the mediating function of organizational identification for the

relationship between negative workplace gossip and OCB.

The current research extends previous research in several ways. First, we offer an alternative perspective, i.e., the social identity perspective, to understand why negative workplace gossip can influence target employees' OCB via organization identification. Second, by exploring the moderating role of collectivism on the relationship between perceived negative workplace gossip, organizational identification, and OCB, we further illustrate the circumstances in which the social identity perspective is more effective in explaining the effects of negative gossip. Finally, by focusing on the mediating role of organizational identification and the moderating role of collectivism on the relationship between informal communication (e.g., negative gossip) and target's work-related behavior (e.g., OCB), our investigation helps establish a social identity perspective to understand the consequences of informal communication broadly.

Theoretical background and development of hypotheses

Negative Workplace Gossip

Gossip is defined as “a sender communicating to a receiver about a target who is absent or unaware of the content” (Dores Cruz et al., 2021, p. 265). Although gossip has been degradingly defined as “idle talk”, “chit chat”, “malicious talk” or “evil tongue”, it is a necessary function of society since it provides individuals a channel of informal communication and information exchange (Brady et al., 2017). Workplace gossip can be either positive or negative in nature (Foster, 2004). According to the principle that “bad is stronger than good” (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), negative gossip topics tend to be more impactful on the target, than positive topics in the workplace. Since it is difficult to

find the original gossiper, verify its content, or prevent the spread of gossip (Brady, Brown, & Liang, 2017; Foster, 2004; Xie, Huang, Wang, & Shen, 2020), available research tends to examine negative gossip from the victim's perspective, i.e., the subjective perceptions of negative workplace gossip from the target (e.g., Babalola et al., 2019; Wu, Birtch, Chiang, & Zhang, 2018a). Consistent with prior studies, our study investigates why and when the perception of being targeted by negative gossip might influence one's OCB.

Perceived negative workplace gossip and organizational identification

When perceived to be the target of negative workplace gossip, employees may lessen their identification with the organization because negative gossip may undermine employees' self-concept of defining themselves in terms of organizational membership. The information delivered by negative gossip normally contains negative evaluations of the targets' role, image, and reputation in the workplace (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Liu et al., 2020). Such negative information can be used to evaluate the relationship between the self and the group to which the individual belongs. From the view of social identity theory (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals define and evaluate their self-concept based on how they believe other organizational members view them. In other words, when individuals perceive a high similarity between themselves and their organizations from others' evaluations, they are inclined to internalize an organizational membership as a meaningful aspect of their self-concept. Conversely, if the evaluations indicate significant distinctions between themselves and their organizations, individuals might not rely on the collective prototype to define and evaluate themselves. Individuals have a basic need to perceive themselves in a positive light, which can be achieved by favoring in-groups over out-groups (Tajfel & Turner,

1986). However, the distinctions raised by negative gossip provide individuals with important cues that their attitudes and behaviors are not consistent with the group prototype. Consequently, individuals will be less likely to rely on organizational membership to define themselves (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

Extending this line of logic, negative evaluative information from gossip indicates a distinction between the target of gossip and others in the organization, thus reducing the target's sense of similarity to the organization. Moreover, such distinctions are also reflected by the form of gossip behavior, which occurs when the target of the gossip is absent, making it difficult for the target to identify the gossiper or verify the content of gossip (Foster, 2004; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Therefore, after becoming the target of negative workplace gossip, employees are less likely to define and evaluate themselves in relevance to their organizational membership, thus feeling psychologically separated from their organizations.

Such psychological separation can typically be indicated by an individual's level of organizational identification, which refers to an individual's feeling of oneness with their organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). It is often used to describe the cognition, evaluation, and affection that jointly denote an individual's self-concept that derives from their perception of their membership of the organizations (Ashforth et al., 2008; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). As a result, perceived negative workplace gossip not only behaviorally isolates the target individuals from others but also psychologically separates them from the organization, resulting in lower levels of organizational identification. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Employees' perception of negative workplace gossip is negatively related to their organizational identification.

Organizational identification and OCB

We argued above, negative workplace gossip, i.e., negative evaluation of self by others within the organization can lead to decreased organizational identification. We will explain further that employees with undermined organizational identification will reduce their proactive efforts aimed to benefit the organization, such as OCB. According to the social identity theory, individuals have the desire to secure a positive self-concept in the organization (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). By categorizing the self as part of the organization, individuals define part of their identity in terms of the organizational membership and develop a better understanding of who they are and how they should behave, consequently achieving ‘a sense of order in their world’ (Ashforth et al., 2008, p. 336). Moreover, individuals then ‘subsume their identity with that of the group’ and ‘see themselves as representatives of that category’ (Brown & Starkey, 2000, p. 103). The identified members thus perform less individualist behavior and instead engage in more cooperative, altruistic, and collective behavior (Hogg & Terry, 2000). This behavior occurs because identified individuals perceive oneness with or belongingness to that group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ploeger & Bisel, 2013; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and incorporate the organization’s attributes and values as their own and act in ways that reflect those beliefs, values, and norms (Lam et al, 2016).

However, employees who are the target of workplace gossip with decreased organizational identification cannot rely on the group to define their self-concepts, reducing the motivation to undertake behaviors that benefit the group. OCB is a typical extra-role behavior that can benefit other organizational members and contribute to the effective functioning of the organization, even is not described by the formal job demands (Organ,

Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). Examples of OCB include helping behavior, voice behavior, and taking action to protect the organization (Farh, Hackett, & Liang, 2007). According to social identity theory, the more likely employees define themselves in terms of organizational memberships, the more likely they are to perform OCB to promote their positive self-concept in the organization. Because such behavior can maintain or promote their positive self-concept as organizational members (Chaput, Brummans, & Cooren, 2011; Lam et al., 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). However, if the self-concept is separated from the group due to low organizational identification, employees will reduce their OCB that promotes the group. As such, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: Employees' organizational identification is positively related to their OCB.

The mediating role of organizational identification

Following the logic of social identity theory, negative gossip from colleagues delivers an unfavorable message that undermines one's organizational and role image (e.g., Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Michelson et al., 2010). Such negative evaluation is expected to harm the target individuals' self-conception of their identification with the organization and the feelings of belongingness. The employees targeted by negative gossip are therefore likely to engage less in OCB to help the organization and its members (Lam et al., 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Van Dick et al., 2008). The theoretical logic we have laid out to this point suggests a mediation model firmly enmeshed within social identity theory, which highlights that individuals affected by negative gossip will be less likely to define themselves in terms of group membership as they perceive significant distinctions between themselves and their groups and tend to

psychologically separate themselves from their groups, consequently reduce their OCB.

Since researchers have demonstrated the mediating effect of emotional exhaustion and organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) in the relationship between negative gossip and OCB, we propose that highlighting the role of the target employees' organizational identification will provide a point of convergence for prior perspectives, which demonstrates a stronger role in the relationship between negative gossip and OCB. Thus, we seek to simultaneously evaluate the extent to which emotional exhaustion and OBSE mediate the effects of perceived negative workplace gossip on OCB by introducing a third mediator, organizational identification, as an alternative explanatory mechanism. As such, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3: Employees' organizational identification mediates the negative relationship between their perception of negative workplace gossip and OCB, even when we consider the mediating roles of emotional exhaustion and OBSE.

The moderating role of collectivism

Social identity theory states that individuals attempt to maintain a positive self through the group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In particular, collectivism, reflecting the extent to which individuals regard the self as inseparable from the others in a group, is an important contextual factor moderating the function of identity development (Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990), especially in an Eastern culture (Lam et al., 2016). Collectivists are more likely to perceive the self in collective, interdependent terms (i.e., 'we'). Those low in collectivism perceive the self in individualizing, independent terms (i.e., 'I'; Triandis et al., 1990).

Because organization identity is an important part of their self-concept, collectivist individuals may be more likely to perceive negative workplace gossip as a threat to their goal

of a positive self-view within the organization. Accordingly, when perceiving themselves to be the target of negative workplace gossip, collectivists are more likely than those with lower collectivism to reevaluate their relationship with the organization. In particular, if they feel negatively evaluated by negative gossip and thus somehow excluded by other organizational members, collectivists are very likely to distance themselves from the organization, i.e., reduced identification with the organization. Lower identification with the organization provides collectivists with a way to reduce their sense of self to hostile others within the organization by minimizing the extent to which they invest their sense of self in the organization (Chen et al., 2013).

By contrast, individuals whose self is relatively independently constructed, who are less collectivistic, should be less strongly affected by negative gossip because threats to their sense of self within the organization are, overall, less of their concern. Such individuals are inclined to demonstrate personal uniqueness and are less likely to see the organization membership as an important source of identity (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Lam et al., 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Therefore, being the target of negative gossip will not be as detrimental to their organizational identification as those collectivists. As such, we propose:

Hypothesis 4: Collectivism moderates the relationship between employees' perception of negative workplace gossip and organizational identification, such that the negative relationship is stronger when the employee is higher in collectivism.

By the above hypotheses, we propose an integrated framework in which organizational identification mediates the negative relationship between perceived negative gossip and OCB, and collectivism moderates the relationship between perceived negative gossip and

organizational identification. Thus, it is logical to believe that collectivism also moderates the strength of the mediator function of organizational identification for the relationship between perceived negative gossip and OCB—a phenomenon referred to as moderated mediation (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). As such, we propose:

Hypothesis 5: Collectivism moderates the negative and indirect effect of employees' perception of negative workplace gossip on OCB. Specifically, employees' organizational identification mediates the indirect effect when collectivism is higher but not when it is lower.

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were drawn from a large commercial bank located in southern China. Before starting the survey, we shared our research purpose and potential benefits with the bank's top management team and HR department, who granted their support and access. Using a name list provided by the HR managers, we randomly selected 300 subordinates and their corresponding 100 direct supervisors from the bank. On the first page of the questionnaire, we claimed that "All the authors don't have any affiliation with the bank at any point" and provided an assurance of confidentiality, promising that the results were not shared with organization leaders. Every participant received 20 RMB (approximately \$2.92 USD) in compensation for each questionnaire completed and was informed that the compensation was funded by the National Natural Science Foundation of China.

A certain time interval should elapse for one psychological variable to have an effect on the behavioral variable (Law, Wong, Yan, & Huang, 2016). In order to observe the adverse

impact of negative workplace gossip on OCB and minimize common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), questionnaires were distributed in three waves, with approximately one month separating each survey wave. This research design has already been applied to examine the consequence of workplace gossip (e.g., Wu et al., 2018a; Xie et al., 2020) or workplace mistreatment (e.g., Lian et al., 2014). In the first wave survey (Wave 1), employees provided information used to measure perceived negative workplace gossip, collectivism, and proactive personality, and provided demographic information. One month later (Wave 2), subordinates who had returned completed surveys in Wave 1 were asked to rate their own levels of organizational identification, OBSE, and emotional exhaustion. Finally, one month after Wave 2 (Wave 3), the direct supervisors were asked to report on employees' OCB. Coding ensured that supervisor-subordinate responses were matched.

In Wave 1, 300 questionnaires were sent to employees and 278 valid responses were received (response rate = 92.67%). In Wave 2, 278 questionnaires were sent and 259 valid responses were received (response rate = 93.17%). In Wave 3, 100 questionnaires were sent to the supervisors of those 259 employees, and 84 completed questionnaires were returned (response rate = 84%). Employees with unmatched supervisor (i.e., 27 employees) data were excluded from the analysis. Our final valid sample included 232 employees (overall response rate = 77.3%) under 84 supervisors (overall response rate = 84.0%) All of the employees in our final sample worked together with their supervisors at the same working locations and had frequent interactions. Therefore, it was reasonable for the supervisors to rate the employees' OCB. The 232 employees were nested in 84 teams. Among these employees, 99 were male (42.7%); 168 had a bachelor's degree or higher qualification (72.4%). The mean age of the

employees was 33.63; the average organizational tenure was 5.25 years ($SD = 4.30$).

Since employees' OCB was rated by different supervisors, the supervisors' rating of one employee may influence his/her rating of another. This way of collecting data may cause the risk of non-independence, or the so-called nested effect (Lam et al., 2015). Based on Wu and Kwok (2012)'s suggestions, Intra class correlation (1) or (ICC1), and Intra correlation (2) or (ICC2) were used to test within-team agreement and between-team variance (Bliese, 2000). Based on one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA), we obtained acceptable ICC values (ICC1=.42, ICC2=.98). Thus, the results provided support for sufficient within-team agreement and between-team variance.

Measures

Perceived negative workplace gossip. Perceived negative workplace gossip was assessed using Wu et al.'s (2018a) 3-item measure. Items included "others (e.g., coworkers and/or supervisors) communicated damaging information about me in the workplace," "others (e.g., coworkers and/or supervisors) spread unfavorable gossip about me in the workplace," and "others (e.g., coworkers and/or supervisors) made negative allegations about me in the workplace." Possible responses ranged from 1=*never* to 5=*daily*. Cronbach's alpha was 0.82.

Organizational identification. Organizational identification was assessed using Meal and Ashford's (1992) 6-item scale. A sample item is 'My organization's successes are my successes.' Possible responses ranged from 1= *strongly agree* to 5= *strongly disagree*. Cronbach's alpha was 0.74.

Organization-based self-esteem. OBSE was assessed using a 5-item measure developed by Van Dyne and Pierce (2004). A sample item is 'I am taken seriously around here.'

Possible responses ranged from 1= *strongly agree* to 5= *strongly disagree*. Cronbach's alpha was 0.88.

Emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion was measured using a 5-item scale developed by Schaufeli et al. (1996). A sample item is 'I feel emotionally drained from my work.' Possible answers ranged from 1= *strongly agree* to 5= *strongly disagree*. Cronbach's alpha was 0.84.

Organizational citizenship behavior. Since employees' OCB is a behavioral variable, which can be observable by supervisors, it was evaluated by their supervisors using Farh et al.'s (2007) 9-item scale. A sample item is 'This employee initiates assistance to coworkers who have a heavy workload.' Possible responses ranged from 1= *strongly agree* to 5= *strongly disagree*. Cronbach's alpha was 0.91.

Collectivism. Collectivism was assessed using Dorfman and Howell's (1988) 6-item scale. A sample item is 'Employees should only pursue their goals after considering the welfare of the group.' Possible responses ranged from 1= *strongly agree* to 5= *strongly disagree*. Cronbach's alpha was 0.86.

Control variables. Following prior research, we controlled for four demographic variables (i.e., subordinate age, gender, education level, and organizational tenure) which prior literature has asserted to potentially influence the effects of negative workplace gossip (e.g., Wu et al., 2018a). In addition, employees' proactive personality was also controlled. This was done because studies point out that proactive personality is likely to affect proactive behavior such as OCB (e.g., Wu et al., 2018a). Following Wu et al.'s (2016) research, we measured proactive personality using the four items with the highest factor loadings of Bateman and

Crant's (1993) scale. Cronbach's alpha was 0.89.

Analytical strategy

First, we examined the discriminant validity of the constructs by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Second, to deal with the non-independence data due to the nested structure of OCB ratings (i.e., 84 supervisors rated 232 employees), we applied Multilevel Structural Equation Modeling (MSEM) via Mplus 7.0 (Wu & Kwok, 2012). This approach is appropriate for our research because it handles non-independence data structures when mechanisms at a single level (i.e., employee level in this study) are examined. Following Mathieu and Taylor (2006), we first modeled a more parsimonious full mediation model where perceived negative workplace gossip is only related to organizational identification, emotional exhaustion and OBSE, while these mediators are related to OCB. Subsequently, we tested for partial mediation by evaluating the change in chi-square ($\Delta\chi^2$) and model AIC values when individual paths from perceived negative workplace gossip to OCB were freed (Ferris et al., 2016). Furthermore, the indirect effects and conditional indirect effects require the calculation of non-normally distributed compound coefficients. We applied Monte Carlo method via R software with 20,000 iterations to provide an additional assessment. By producing 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs), the bootstrapping-based approach can accurately examine the significance of the indirect effects at higher and lower levels of collectivism.

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis

We first conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to evaluate the discriminant validity of the key study measures (i.e., perceived negative workplace gossip, organizational

identification, OBSE, emotional exhaustion, OCB, proactive personality, and collectivism). As shown in Table 1, supporting the distinctiveness of the measures, the results show that the seven-factor model provided a reasonable fit to the data ($\chi^2 [644] = 1001.32$, $RMSEA = .05$, $SRMR = .06$, $CFI = .91$, $TLI = .90$) and a significant better fit than any of the alternative models.

 Insert Table 1 about here

Descriptive statistics

The means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations of all key variables are reported in Table 2. As we expected, perceived negative workplace gossip was negatively associated with organizational identification ($r = -.28$, $p < .01$) and OCB ($r = -.23$, $p < .01$). In addition, organizational identification was positively related to OCB ($r = .35$, $p < .01$).

 Insert Table 2 about here

Hypothesis testing

We first compared the fit of the full mediation model to a partial mediation model where the paths between our independent variable (perceived negative workplace gossip) and dependent variable (OCB) were freed. Compared to the full mediation model ($RMSEA = .09$, $AIC = 6922.168$), the partial mediation model provided a superior fit to the data ($RMSEA = .08$, $AIC = 6920.579$; $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 16.69$, $p < .05$) and was retained for hypothesis testing.

Results for unstandardized estimates are shown in Table 3. Figure 1 represents the results for the overall moderated mediation model.

 Insert Table 3 and Figure 1 about here

Hypothesis 1 predicted that target employees' perception of negative workplace gossip is negatively related to their organizational identification. Hypothesis 2 predicted that target employees' organizational identification is positively related to their OCB. As shown in Table 3, perceived negative workplace gossip had a significant negative impact on organizational identification ($B = -.12, S. E. = .05, p < .05$, Model 1) and organization identification exerted significant positive influence on OCB ($B = .39, S. E. = .12, p < .01$, Model 4). Thus, Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 were supported.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that target employees' organizational identification mediates the negative relationship between their perception of negative workplace gossip and OCB. Results of indirect effect tests indicated that when effects of other mediators (emotional exhaustion and OBSE) were considered, organizational identification had significant mediation effects on the links of perceived negative workplace gossip with OCB (indirect effect = $-.05, S. E. = .02$, 95% CI = $[-.10 \text{ } -.01]$). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported. Additionally, Table 3 and Figure 1 showed that target employees' perception of negative workplace gossip is negatively related to their OCB ($B = -.15, S. E. = .07, p < .05$). These results also supported that organizational identification partially mediated the effect of perceived negative workplace gossip on OCB. Moreover, as indicated in Table 3 (Models 2 and 3), perceived negative workplace gossip was not related to OBSE ($B = -.05, S. E. = .07, p > .05$); nor the relationship between emotional exhaustion and OCB was significant ($B = -.13, S. E. = .11, p > .05$), after controlling for organizational identification. Therefore, the results indicated that the indirect effects associated with emotional exhaustion (indirect effect = $-.04, S. E. = .002$, 95% CI = $[-.12 \text{ } .31]$) and OBSE (indirect effect = $-.01, S. E. = .003$, 95% CI = $[-.04 \text{ } .02]$) were not significant, whereas the

indirect effect associated with organizational identification was statistically significant.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that collectivism moderates the relationship between target employees' perception of negative workplace gossip and organizational identification, such that the negative relationship is stronger when the target employee is highly collectivist. As shown in Table 3, a negative interaction effect between perceived negative workplace gossip and collectivism in predicting organizational identification was found ($B = -.30$, $S. E. = .09$, $p < .01$, Model 1). Following Aiken and West's (1991) procedure, we then plotted the interaction effects by computing slopes one standard deviation above and below the mean of the moderating variable. As illustrated in Figure 2, the relationship between perceived negative workplace gossip and organizational identification was negative and significant when collectivism was higher (simple slope = $-.30$, $S. E. = .08$, $p < .01$) but not when collectivism was lower (simple slope = $.06$, $S. E. = .07$, $n.s.$). Hence, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

 Insert Figure 2 about here

Hypothesis 5 predicted that collectivism moderates the negative and indirect effect of target employees' perception of negative workplace gossip on OCB. To test Hypothesis 5, we then calculated the conditional mediation effect of organizational identification for employees with different levels of collectivism. The results showed that the indirect effect of perceived negative workplace gossip on OCB through organizational identification was stronger when collectivism was higher (conditional indirect effect = $-.12$, $S. E. = .04$, 95% CI = $[-.33 \ .02]$) than when collectivism was lower (conditional indirect effect = $.02$, $S. E. = .03$, 95% CI = $[-.07 \ .23]$). The difference in the indirect effects was significant (diff = $-.14$, $S. E. = .05$, 95%

CI = [-.41 -.08]). Thus, Hypothesis 5 was supported.

Discussion

Recently, some researchers have attempted to explore the underlying psychological mechanisms that link perceived negative workplace gossip, a prevalent type of informal communication, to the behaviors of its targets (e.g., Liu et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2018a; Wu et al., 2018b). Their studies examined intervening variables (emotional exhaustion and OBSE) from the perspectives of resources and self-consistency perspectives. However, researchers have not considered other mechanisms that may exist beyond emotional exhaustion and OBSE. We seek to address the deficiency by simultaneously evaluating the extent to which emotional exhaustion and OBSE mediate the effects of perceived negative workplace gossip on OCB by introducing a third mediator, organizational identification, as an alternative explanatory mechanism. Moreover, an examination of the moderating effect of collectivism between perceived negative workplace gossip, organizational identification, and OCB helps to further identify when the social identity perspective is more effective.

Our analysis of a three-wave field survey of 232 employees and 84 supervisors in China, found that organizational identification plays an important role in mediating the effect of perceived negative workplace gossip on OCB. Furthermore, results indicated that collectivists are more likely than those with lower collectivism to have decreased organizational identification and thus perform less OCB after being targeted by negative gossip.

Theoretical implications

This study makes several contributions to the literature. First, by testing the mediating role of organizational identification, our studies contribute to the workplace gossip literature by

offering an additional account to the current understanding of the relationship between negative workplace gossip and OCB from emotional exhaustion and organization-based self-esteem perspectives. This social identity perspective extension is meaningful because it suggests that negative workplace gossip can shape the target employees' perception of their relationship with the organization and thus influence their intrinsic force driving OCB. This perspective also offers a different framework from previous perspectives in conceptualizing proactive behavior in workplace gossip research. As mentioned earlier, although the resource depletion and self-esteem threat perspectives theorize different reasons for why employees will perform less proactive behavior after being targeted by negative gossip, they ignore the motivation behind the core force that drives proactive behavior. Accordingly, the social identity perspective directs us to understand the nature of negative workplace gossip and proactive behavior from another angle.

Our findings on the moderating role of collectivism also strengthen the applicability of a social identity perspective in explaining the link between negative workplace gossip and OCB. Specifically, the moderating effect of collectivism further strengthens our argument that if one's self-concept would be affected by perceived negative workplace gossip, such influence would be stronger for collectivist employees than those whose self-concept is not associated with the team or organization (lower collectivism). Our findings extend the scope of boundary conditions beyond the moderating effects of personality emphasized in past studies (e.g., Babalola et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2018a) by showing that collectivism as a self-concept in an organizational context can exacerbate or mitigate the adverse impact of negative workplace gossip on proactive behavior. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the moderating results

indicate that for those lower in collectivism, negative workplace gossip did not appear to have a negative association with organizational identification. One potential explanation is that people with lower collectivism may suppress the feelings of or ignore being targeted by negative gossip to demonstrate their uniqueness in the organization. More studies are needed to understand how and when targeted employees may prevent their suffering of negative gossip.

Finally, although the present study has focused empirically on negative workplace gossip, we believe that the social identity perspective as we provided in the current research can be extended to other forms of informal communication, for example, workplace rumors, defined as an unverified belief that is shared within the workplace, share the same disreputable connotation as negative gossip (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). Specifically, a social identity perspective of informal communication in the workplace is powerful in explaining employees' experience and behavior, as such a self-concept, representing one's belief about oneself, has a widespread influence across many different research domains (Wilson & Ross, 2001). The need to maintain a positive self-concept influences different aspects of our lives, including informal communication. Despite the motivational differences, the functions served by both rumor and negative gossip seem to be identical (Michelson & Suchitra Mouly, 2004). We would therefore expect rumors to exhibit a similar pattern of relationships as those seen in this study of negative workplace gossip. By adopting the social identity perspective, our research provides a new theoretical framework for future research on informal communication.

Practical implications

In addition to its theoretical contributions, this study has practical implications for organizations. First, organizations interested in increasing their employees' OCB should at least

take steps to limit negative gossip spread and mitigate its ill effects. Prior studies have emphasized that organizations should enhance employees' organizational identification by formal communication, such as building and delivering a shared organizational vision, to facilitate increased employee OCB (e.g., Lam et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2016). However, our study indicated that negative gossip, which is a kind of informal communication at the workplace, may damage target employees' organizational identification and thus decrease OCB. The finding indicates more actions other than formal communication are needed. For example, organizations should pay attention to the informal communication network in their organizations, communicate openly about the problems, particularly the potentially detrimental effects, and offer support to the target employees of negative gossip. Managers need to emphasize organizational policies that negative, evaluative talks about someone else are not encouraged and acceptable as it may destroy target employees' OCBs. More specifically, two-way communication between supervisors and employees would help to identify issues and related solutions (Peng & Chiu, 2010).

Second, organizations should pay more attention to employees who are higher in collectivism, because they are more sensitive to being the target of negative gossip and are more likely to dis-identify from their organizations and engage less in OCB. Therefore, managers must be better prepared to help collectivists cope with negative gossip such as by increasing their social acceptance at work (Wu et al., 2016). For example, it may be useful to help them develop social networks and gain help from others (Ferris et al., 2007), thus alleviating their discomfort of being targeted by negative gossip. In order to improve employees' coping skills, organizations could use process-focused techniques, such as drama-based

training, developmental simulations, and behavior modeling.

Limitations and future direction of research

One limitation of our work lies in the fact that although our three-wave time-lagged research design enables stronger causal inferences than a cross-sectional design, we cannot unequivocally rule out the possibility of reciprocal relationships between perceived negative workplace gossip and OCB. Future studies that utilize a longitudinal research design will be better able to infer causality.

Second, this study focused only on the target's OCB, which may not fully illustrate the relationship between perceived negative workplace gossip and all employees' proactive behavior. For instance, voice behavior and innovation behavior have been identified as important types of proactive behavior, but remain untested in this research. To extend our work based on a social identity perspective, we, therefore, suggest that future research should explore whether this perspective also can be applied to understand the impacts of perceived negative workplace gossip on other types of proactive behavior.

Finally, since this study investigated only the moderating effect of collectivism in the relationship between negative workplace gossip, organizational identification, and OCB, we cannot answer whether engaging in OCB is a challenge to a collectivist culture or whether more collectivistic individuals would be inclined to engage in OCB. This is because employees have motives to perform different kinds of organizational citizenship behavior (Finkelstein, 2012; Moorman & Blakely, 1995). Therefore, future studies could continue to examine the relationship between negative gossip, collectivism, and different kinds of organizational citizenship behavior, e.g., individual-directed, organization-directed, and change-oriented.

Conclusion

The current research contributes to the workplace gossip literature by offering an additional account to understand the relationship between negative workplace gossip and target employee' OCB. Our results indicated that organizational identification mediates the effect of perceived negative workplace gossip on OCB. Moreover, examining the moderating effect of collectivism helps to enrich our understanding of the condition in which employees will perform more or fewer OCB when they perceive that they are being targeted by negative workplace gossip, via a mechanism of the effect on organizational identification. Our research offers a springboard for future studies of other informal communication constructs and exploration of the underlying mechanisms that discourage proactive behavior.

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Table 1*Model Fit Results for Confirmatory Factor Analyses*

Model	χ^2	Df	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI
M1: PNWG; OI; OBSE; EE; OCB; PP; CL	1001.32	644	.05	.06	.91	.90
M2: PNWG+EE; OI; OBSE; OCB; PP; CL	1245.30	650	.06	.07	.85	.84
M3: PNWG; OI+OBSE; EE; OCB; PP; CL	1275.18	650	.06	.09	.84	.83
M4: PNWG; OI; OBSE; EE; OCB+PP; CL	1499.56	650	.08	.08	.79	.77
M5: PNWG+EE; OI+OBSE; OCB; PP; CL	1505.10	655	.08	.10	.79	.77
M6: PNWG+EE; OI; OBSE; OCB+PP; CL	1741.13	655	.09	.09	.73	.71
M7: PNWG+EE; OI+CL; OBSE; OCB; PP	1511.13	655	.08	.10	.78	.77
M8: PNWG; EE; OI+OBSE; OCB+PP; CL	1766.20	655	.09	.10	.72	.70
M9: PNWG+PP; OI+OBSE+CL; EE; OCB	2327.60	659	.10	.13	.58	.55
M10: PNWG+EE; OI+OBSE+CL+PP; OCB	2611.51	662	.11	.15	.51	.48
M11: PNWG+PP+CL; OI+OBSE+EE+OCB	2878.43	664	.12	.14	.44	.41
M12: PNWG+OI+OBSE+EE+PP+CL; OCB	3025.22	664	.12	.15	.40	.37
M13: PNWG+OI+OBSE+EE+PP+OCB+CL	3319.37	665	.13	.14	.33	.29

Note. $n=232$. NWG = perceived negative workplace gossip, OI = organizational identification, OBSE = organization-based self-esteem,

EE = emotional exhaustion, OCB = organizational citizenship behavior, PP = proactive personality, CL = collectivism.

All alternative models are compared to the hypothesized model (M1).

All $\Delta\chi^2$ are significant at $p < .01$.

Table 2*Means, Standard Deviations and Intercorrelations Among Variables*

	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Gender ^a	0.57	0.50											
2. Age ^b	33.63	6.42	.05										
3. Education ^c	2.94	0.70	.11	.02									
4. Tenure ^d	5.25	4.30	-.08	.76**	-.24**								
5. Proactive personality	3.49	0.84	.06	.04	.003	-.003	(.89)						
6. Perceived negative workplace gossip	2.97	0.83	-.07	.07	.21**	.03	.03	(.82)					
7. Organizational identification	3.14	0.77	.07	-.13*	-.05	-.12	-.08	-.28**	(.74)				
8. Organization-based self-esteem	3.59	0.70	-.08	-.04	-.02	-.08	.14*	-.16*	.16*	(.88)			
9. Emotional exhaustion	2.71	0.68	-.02	-.14*	.15*	-.24**	-.11	-.30**	-.05	.05	(.84)		
10. Organizational citizenship behavior	3.87	0.63	.06	.02	-.02	-.00	.23**	-.23**	.35**	.31**	-.23**	(.91)	
11. Collectivism	3.10	0.60	-.05	-.07	-.19**	-.01	.02	-.16*	-.11	.09	-.03	-.04	(.86)

Note. Cronbach's alpha coefficients are shown in boldface on the diagonal. $n=232$; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

^a 0 = male, 1 = female. ^b in years. ^c 1 = high school or below, 2 = junior college, 3 = bachelor's degree, 4 = master's degree, 5 = doctoral degree. ^d in years.

Table 3*Unstandardized Estimates (Standard Error) of the Moderated Mediation Path Model*

Predictors/outcomes	Organizational identification	Organization-based self-esteem	Emotional exhaustion	Organizational citizenship behavior
Control variables				
Gender	.05(.06)	-.12(.09)	-.03(.07)	.02(.08)
Age	-.01(.01)	.01(.01)	.03** (.01)	.01(.01)
Education	-.03(.05)	-.01(.10)	-.05(.06)	.03(.06)
Tenure	-.01(.01)	-.03(.03)	-.04** (.02)	-.01(.02)
Proactive personality	-.03(.05)	.02(.06)	-.07(.06)	.11*(.05)
Independent variable				
Perceived negative workplace gossip	-.12*(.05)	-.05(.07)	.32**(.07)	-.15*(.07)
Moderator				
Collectivism	-.18** (.07)			-.17*(.08)
Interaction effect				
Perceived negative workplace gossip × Collectivism	-.30** (.09)			
Mediator				
Organizational identification				.39**(.12)
Organization-based self-esteem				.19**(.06)
Emotional exhaustion				-.13(.11)
R^2	.194	.027	.195	.309

Note. $n=232$. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Figure 1

Results for the Overall Moderated Mediation Model

Note. $n=232$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

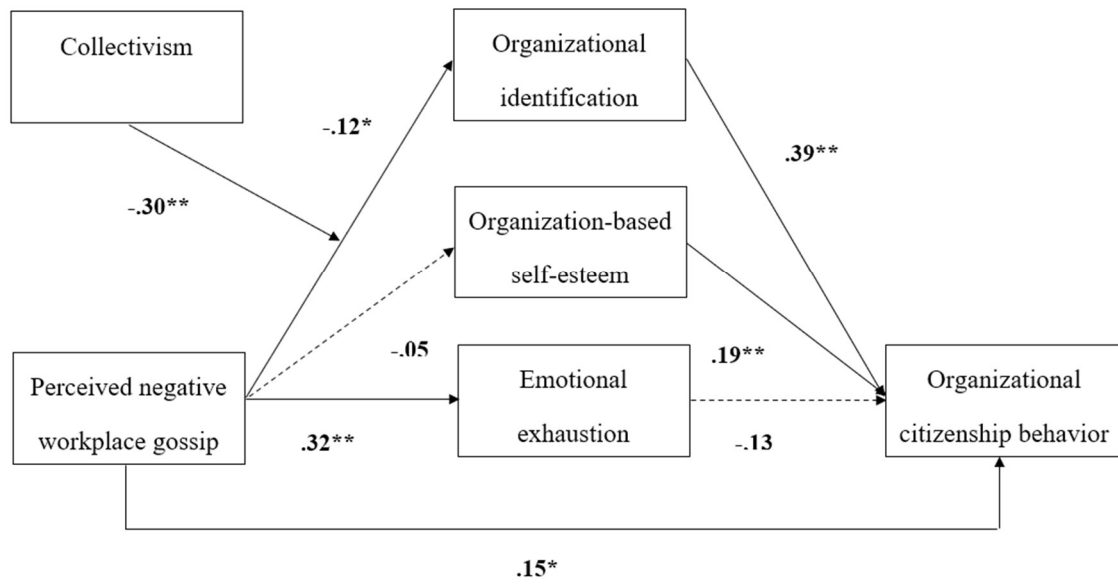


Figure 2

Moderating Effect of Collectivism on the Relationship between Perceived Negative Workplace Gossip and Organizational Identification

