1   **Negative workplace gossip and targets' subjective well-being: A moderated mediation**

2   **model**

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4   **Abstract**

5   Negative gossip is an everyday part of life and work whose outcomes have been the focus of

6   a growing number of studies. However, the impact of negative workplace gossip on

7   employees' subjective well-being (SWB) appears to have received no attention in the

8   literature. Drawing on conservation of resources theory, we use time-lagged data from 243

9   employees in five firms in China to investigate the processes underlying the links between

10   negative workplace gossip and SWB. Our findings show that negative workplace gossip has a

11   significant negative effect on SWB, and that psychological distress mediates this relationship.

12   We also find that emotional intelligence plays a moderating role between negative workplace

13   gossip and targets' psychological distress. Our results indicate for the first time that negative

14   workplace gossip increases psychological distress and lowers SWB among its targets. As a

15   result, several managerial implications are suggested, such as seeking to reduce the

16   prevalence of negative workplace gossip, offering early support to employees in

17   psychological distress, and taking steps to raise the emotional intelligence level of staff.

18

19   **Key words:** negative workplace gossip; psychological distress; emotional intelligence; SWB;

20   conservation of resources theory

Introduction

Gossip is so prevalent that virtually everyone has been involved in it to some extent, whether by engaging in it or hearing it (Kuo, Chang, Quinton, Lu, & Lee, 2015). People spend approximately 65% of their speaking time gossiping (Dunbar, 2004; Emler, 1994). Gossip has been described as informal and evaluative talks between a few individuals about someone who is not present (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). It is omnipresent and is divided into positive and negative categories (Babalola, Ren, Kobinah, Qu, Garba, & Guo, 2019; Brady, Brown, & Liang, 2017; Fine & Rosnow, 1978). Normally, negative information has a more profound influence than positive information (Baumeister, Bratslaysky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Divorce, extra-marital affairs, and stigmatization are typical topics of negative gossip (Kuo, Lu, & Kuo, 2013; Michelson, Van Iterson, & Waddington, 2010; Pierce, Byrne, & Aguinis, 1996).

Previous studies have revealed that gossip can help those who engage in it to gather and validate information, facilitate sense-making, and stimulate learning (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Farley, Timme, & Hart, 2010; Grosser et al., 2010; Kniffin & Wilson, 2010; Mark, Waddington, & Fletcher, 2005; Mills, 2010; Tassiello, Lombardi, & Costabile, 2018). However, more and more scholars have recently been paying attention to negative workplace gossip and its downsides from the perspective of the targets (Babalola et al., 2019; Tian, Song, Kwan, & Li, 2019; Wu, Birtch, Chiang, & Zhang, 2018; Wu, Kwan, Wu & Ma, 2018; Ye, Zhu, Deng, & Mu, 2019). In the workplace, negative gossip can be regarded as mistreatment eliciting a negative mood (Babalola et al., 2019), causing emotional exhaustion (Liu, Kwan, & Zhang, 2020; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018), and affecting targets' work attitudes and

behaviors (Grosser et al., 2010; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Specifically, it can lower targets'

organizational identification (Ye et al., 2019), reduce their organization-based self-esteem

(Wu, Birtch et al., 2018), and decrease their proactive behaviors towards co-workers, the

organization, and customers (Tian et al., 2019).

Despite a wealth of research on the effects of negative workplace gossip, there has

been no focus on how it affects targets' subjective well-being (SWB), which is an inner

feeling rather than an external performance. SWB measures individuals' quality of life

(Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003), and can predict their affective organizational commitment

(Schulz, Martin, & Meyer, 2017), as well as their supportive social relationships and work

performance (De Neve, Diener, Tay, & Xuereb, 2013). Some previous studies have shown a

causal link between negative workplace gossip and another area relating to internal feelings,

emotional exhaustion (Liu et al., 2020; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018); however there are important

differences between the two concepts. SWB consists of cognitive evaluation and emotional

experience. Cognitive evaluation refers to life satisfaction, which is an individual's cognitive

assessment of their overall quality of life, and emotional experience includes positive and

negative emotions (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). In contrast, emotional exhaustion is

a one-dimensional variable, describing a chronic state of emotional depletion with no positive

side (Liu et al., 2020). Therefore, the meaning of SWB is broader than that of emotional

exhaustion. Targets of negative workplace gossip may be negatively affected in their

emotional and psychological states, which will have a further impact on their SWB and thus

affect their work attitude and behavior.

Given the vital importance of SWB, it is therefore significant to focus on how it is

affected by negative workplace gossip. We propose a theoretical framework based on

conservation of resources (COR) theory to explain this process. According to COR theory,

individuals' resources are limited, and the loss of these resources can trigger individual

tension and stress (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001; Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018).

Gossip usually contains negative evaluations of targets and damages their reputation

(Chandra & Robinson, 2010; Shackelford, 1997). Targets' attempts to find the source of

gossip and clarify the truth will continuously deplete their valuable personal resources (e.g.,

time, energy, and mood) (Wu, Birtch et al., 2018). In addition, gossip generally indicates that

the targets have been ostracized, and negative evaluations in gossip may cause more

colleagues to shun or reject them, which leaves them constantly deprived of social support

resources (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Owens, Baker, Sumpter, & Cameron,

2016; Ye et al., 2019). Therefore, negative workplace gossip causes additional psychological

distress to the targets. Having had their resources drained by negative workplace gossip,

targets with psychological distress will lack the resources to maintain their SWB.

In addition, negative workplace gossip, as a work stressor perceived by individuals,

will produce significantly different responses in different employees, depending on their level

of emotional intelligence (Liu et al., 2020; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018). Emotional intelligence is

"*the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among*

them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (Salovey & Mayer,

1990, p. 189). Employees with high emotional intelligence treat negative workplace gossip in

a more positive way and have more resources to deal with it well. Hence, we argue that

employees with high emotional intelligence are less affected by negative workplace gossip

than those with low emotional intelligence; in other words, emotional intelligence can

moderate the relationship between negative workplace gossip and psychological distress.

This research therefore has three main goals: to examine the impact of negative

workplace gossip on employees' SWB; to expand the research in this area by introducing an

important mediator (psychological distress); and to integrate a new boundary condition

(emotional intelligence) into the theoretical framework to further assess what factors can

ameliorate or exacerbate the destructive effects of negative workplace gossip.

The study enriches the literature in several ways. Firstly, it extends knowledge of

negative workplace gossip by extending its adverse outcomes to employees' SWB, and

strengthens our understanding of the causes of reduced SWB by identifying negative gossip

as an essential antecedent. Secondly, by investigating the mediating role of psychological

distress and the moderating role of emotional intelligence, we offer important insights into

the inherent mechanisms and boundary conditions of the effects of negative workplace gossip

on SWB. Thirdly, our study shows that COR theory is an important tool in gaining a full

understanding of the consequences of negative workplace gossip. As individuals have only

limited resources, COR theory explains how employees might feel when negative workplace

gossip consumes their valuable resources. Finally, our multi-wave research design reduces

common method bias and improves the validity of our research results. Figure 1 presents the

conceptual model.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Theoretical background and hypothesis development

Defining negative workplace gossip

Almost everyone gossips (Dunbar, Marriott, & Duncan, 1997; Emler, 1994). Negative workplace gossip, one of the subsets of gossip, is defined as the discussion of a co-worker's personal information, or the spreading of rumors, behind their backs (Chandra & Robinson, 2010). Distinct from other informal talks, negative workplace gossip involves sensitive private issues and the negative evaluation of targets (Foster, 2004; Leaper & Holliday, 1995; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018). As it spreads, the gossip may become distorted, and the incorrect, incomplete contents will hurt targets' status, power, and esteem (Bok, 1982; Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004; Kuo et al., 2015; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Rosnow, 2001). Targets may consider negative workplace gossip as an attack, aggression, or victimization (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012). However, it differs from other types of mistreatment in a social context (Wu, Birtch et al., 2018) or in the workplace. For example, workplace harassment, which refers to "*problematic interpersonal workplace interactions in which one or more employees feel themselves to have been victimized by one or more other employees*" (Claybourn, 2011, p. 283), has a number of significant differences from negative workplace gossip, even though both are forms of work stressor (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018). For example, workplace harassment aims to harm others intentionally (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004; Bowling & Beehr, 2006), while negative workplace gossip causes harm to its targets in a more indirect way: it is spread behind people's backs, and its covert nature makes it hard for targets to find its source (Wu, Birtch et al., 2018; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018). Negative workplace gossip is also a relatively common behavior performed by almost

everyone (Chandra & Robinson, 2010; Dunbar et al., 1997; Emler, 1994). Therefore, the covert, indirect harm caused by negative workplace gossip cannot be equated with the overt, direct, deliberate damage done by workplace harassment. This study explores only the influence of negative workplace gossip.

Negative workplace gossip and SWB

SWB refers to the overall evaluation of an individual's quality of life according to their own standards, and is an important comprehensive psychological index (Diener, 1984). It consists of two basic components: cognitive evaluation and emotional experience. Cognitive evaluation refers to individuals' cognitive assessment of their overall quality of life: in other words their life satisfaction (Diener et al., 2003). Emotional experience includes both positive and negative emotions (Diener et al., 1999).

SWB influences personal mental health and the success of an organization (Schulz et al., 2017). It is also a significant predictor of supportive social relationships, affective organizational commitment, and work performance (De Neve et al., 2013; Schulz et al., 2017). It is therefore worthy of deeper study. Most prior studies on SWB's antecedents have focused on different leadership types, such as family-supportive leadership, ethical leadership, and transformational leadership (Arnold, Turner, Barling, Kelloway, & McKee, 2007; Matthews, Mills, Trout, & English, 2014; Yang, 2014). Notably, Tan, Yam, Zhang and Brown (2021) paid attention to the effect of gossip on individuals' psychological well-being, i.e., the state of their mental health. However, no other studies have explored how the poor mental state caused by being the target of negative workplace gossip influences SWB from the perspective of COR theory.

The present study therefore uses the prism of COR theory to identify how negative

workplace gossip can diminish employees' SWB. Firstly, as shown by prior studies, negative

gossip can be regarded as a type of work stressor, which will cost targets significant time and

energy to deal with (Wu, Kwan et al., 2018), invade their privacy, undermine their reputation,

and make them feel excluded by supervisors and colleagues (Tian et al., 2019; Wu, Birch et

al., 2018; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018; Ye et al., 2019). These consequences can cause targets to

feel angry or aggrieved, draining their limited valuable resources as they seek to find the

source of the gossip (Hobfoll, 1989; Leary et al., 1995). Secondly, negative workplace gossip

has been shown to adversely influence workplace atmosphere and relationships (Kong,

2018). For example, targets may feel pushed aside by their colleagues and supervisors,

leading them to consider interpersonal relationships as meaningless and worthless, and to

experience a decline in affective trust (Grosser et al., 2010; Leary et al., 1995; Wu, Birch et

al., 2018); as a consequence, they find it harder to gain support and access resources from

their workplace (Chua, Ingram, & Morris, 2008; Hobfoll, 1989; Yao, Luo, & Zhang, 2020).

This cycle of continuous loss and non-replenishment of resources results in a decrease in

targets' SWB. Thirdly, COR theory suggests that human beings, as a biological species, have

a basic need to adapt to and survive in the environment in which they find themselves

(Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014; Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al.,

2018), which drives individuals to acquire, maintain, cultivate, and protect their resources.

Once negative workplace gossip has drained targets' resources and made it hard to integrate

into the workplace, employees' SWB will decrease accordingly. Based on the above

arguments, we suggest that negative workplace gossip will deplete targets' valuable resources

and reduce their SWB, and therefore propose:

Hypothesis 1: Negative workplace gossip is negatively related to SWB.

Psychological distress as a mediator

Psychological distress refers to individuals' cognitive and emotional discomfort, and

anxiety (Fletcher & Payne, 1980). It is an affective state characterized by negative thoughts,

depression, and anxiety (Hardy, Woods, & Wall, 2003; Selye, 1976). Psychological distress

often arises because of stressful and emotionally traumatic experiences, including verbal

attacks (Keashly & Harvey, 2005). Negative workplace gossip can increase targets'

psychological distress in several ways. Firstly, it adversely influences targets' identity,

damages their reputation, and marginalizes their power and status (Rosnow, 2001;

Shackelford, 1997). Accordingly, targets spend personal valuable resources (e.g.,

psychological resources) dealing with these adverse consequences (Hobfoll, 1989). Secondly,

it indicates unsupportive working conditions and colleagues (Leary et al., 1995; Ye et al.,

2019). Targets may experience doubt and hostility in the working environment, which further

affects their interpersonal communication. Therefore, it is difficult for targets to access new

resources from their colleagues and supervisors in order to replenish their resource pool

(Hobfoll, 1989). The loss of existing resources and the failure to acquire new ones will

trigger the individual's stress response (Hobfoll, 1989). In short, negative workplace gossip

drains targets' resources, and causes tension and pressure (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al.,

2018). As a result, psychological distress arises (Lim & Tai, 2014).

Psychological distress due to negative workplace gossip can lead to a reduction in SWB. Firstly, targets suffering psychological distress have fewer personal resources with which to tackle their daily life and work. This lack of positive psychological resources makes effective motivation harder, and targets will easily become trapped in a spiral of resource loss (Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002; Demerouti, Bakker, & Bulters, 2004; Mäkikangas, Hyvönen, Leskinen, Kinnunen, & Feldt, 2011; Whitman, Halbesleben, & Holmes, 2014). Since resource depletion creates unhappy feelings for employees, their SWB is lowered. Secondly, employees suffering from psychological distress are generally dissatisfied (Greenley, Young, & Schoenherr, 1982). They focus more on negative aspects, make fewer effective resource investments, and pay less attention to maintaining existing resources to cope with future losses; therefore they face a greater chance of resource depletion (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). As a result, employees' SWB will be negatively affected. Based on the above, we hypothesize that employees' psychological distress will reduce their SWB. We therefore propose:

Hypothesis 2: Psychological distress mediates the relationship between negative workplace gossip and SWB.

Emotional intelligence as a moderator

It is also important to identify the boundary conditions in which the effects of negative workplace gossip will be amplified or weakened (Liu et al., 2020). Previous studies have suggested that targets with different characteristics respond differently to gossip (Foster, 2004; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018). Hence, individuals with differences in emotional intelligence will have different responses to negative workplace gossip. Emotional intelligence describes

the ability to accurately evaluate both one's own emotions and those of others, and to

adaptively regulate one's own emotions to guide one's thinking and behavior (Mayer,

Roberts, & Barsade, 2008; Sy, Tram, & O'Hara, 2006). Indeed, emotional intelligence can be

considered as a kind of personal characteristics resource (Hobfoll, 1989). It involves skills

and traits that help individuals resist stress, and can serve as a mitigating coping factor to

alleviate stress-related outcomes (Prati, Liu, Perrewé, & Ferris, 2009).

Drawing on COR theory, we assert that emotional intelligence weakens the

relationship between negative workplace gossip and psychological distress. The first point to

note is that individuals with high emotional intelligence are better able to make efficient

resource investments to cope with stress than those with low emotional intelligence

(Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 2018; Ito & Brotheridge, 2003; Vinokur & Schul,

2002). Therefore, individuals with high emotional intelligence can recover more quickly from

the resource losses caused by negative workplace gossip, and can access new resources to

replenish their resource pool immediately by various means (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al.,

2018). Consequently, they are less likely to suffer from psychological distress. Secondly,

employees with high emotional intelligence show greater resilience, which makes them more

adaptable in stressful situations (Schneider, Lyons, & Khazon, 2013). Individuals with high

emotional intelligence regard stress as a challenge rather than a threat, and tend to take a

proactive approach to negative workplace gossip, e.g., resolving potential conflicts and

contradictions, and improving relationships with other colleagues (Sy et al., 2006). These

actions will bring them more resources, thereby reducing psychological distress. In contrast,

individuals with low emotional intelligence can easily interpret minor negative comments as

malicious gossip attacks (Wert & Salovey, 2004). They do not have enough resources and

abilities to regulate their emotions, and are more likely to be nervous and irritable (Chang &

Chang, 2010). Based on the above discussion, we argue that employees with low emotional

intelligence are more vulnerable to negative workplace gossip, leading to more resource

losses, which in turn causes more psychological distress. Hence, we propose:

Hypothesis 3: Emotional intelligence moderates the relationship between negative

workplace gossip and psychological distress, such that the positive relationship is

weaker when emotional intelligence is high than when emotional intelligence is low.

Based on the arguments outlined above, we propose an integrated model in which

psychological distress mediates the impact of negative workplace gossip on SWB, and

emotional intelligence moderates the relationship between negative workplace gossip and

psychological distress. Combining Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3, we further suggest that the

indirect effect of negative workplace gossip on SWB via psychological distress will be

weaker when employees' emotional intelligence is high, because these individuals have more

resources with which to handle negative workplace gossip, and can be expected to actively

seek ways to alleviate the positive effects on psychological distress and negative effects on

future SWB. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 4: Emotional intelligence moderates the indirect effect of negative

workplace gossip on SWB through psychological distress, such that this indirect

relationship is weaker for employees with high emotional intelligence.

Method

Sample and procedures

The data for this study was gathered from five companies in two major Chinese cities.

It was collected in three stages, organized at one-month intervals to reduce potential common

method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Lee, 2003). In the first stage (T1), respondents were

asked to provide their demographic information, along with their perceptions of negative

workplace gossip and emotional intelligence. In the second stage (T2), conducted a month

later, the participants reported their feelings of psychological distress. In the third stage (T3),

conducted after another month, they were asked to rate their level of SWB. Before each

wave, we made it clear to all the participants that this was an anonymous survey. The

respondents were asked to fill in the last four digits of their phone number on each

questionnaire to enable us to confirm that all three sets of information were obtained from the

same participants.

Using staff lists provided by the firms, 476 employees were randomly selected as

participants. In the first wave, 362 usable questionnaires were received, a response rate of

76.05%. These respondents were contacted again in the second wave, at which point 289

questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 79.83%. Finally, the second-wave

respondents who had completed the questionnaires were contacted again for the third stage,

and 243 completed questionnaires were received, a response rate of 84.08%. Of these 243

third-stage respondents, 55.6% were male, 49.4% were aged 26 to 35, 13.2% were aged 36 to

45, and 16.9% were 46 and older. Their educational background also varied, with 24.3%

holding a junior or high school degree, 32.5% a junior college degree, and 43.2% a

bachelor's degree or above.

Measures

All the items in our study were developed in English and then translated into Chinese

using a common back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1970). They were evaluated using a

five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The

items are discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

Negative workplace gossip. We used Chandra and Robinson's (2010) three-item scale

to measure negative workplace gossip. Sample items included "As recently as one

month ago, others have communicated damaging information about you to others". This scale

has been widely used in the Chinese context in previous studies (Cheng, Dong, Zhang,

Shaalan, Guo, & Peng, 2020; Wu, Birtch et al., 2018; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018; Ye et al., 2019).

The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.794.

Psychological distress. To measure the employees' level of psychological distress, we

used the 10-item scale developed by Kessler, Andrews, Colpe, Hiripi, Mroczek, Normand,

Walters, and Zaslavsky (2002). Sample items included "Are you constantly distressed by

various psychological health symptoms such as feeling restless or fidgety?" On a scale

ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (frequently), participants reported the frequency of these feelings

in the prior month. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.818.

Emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence was assessed using the 16-item scale

developed by Wong and Law (2002). This scale comprises four dimensions: (1) self-emotion

appraisal (four items), e.g., "I really understand what I feel"; (2) emotion appraisal of other

people (four items), e.g., "I am sensitive to the feelings and emotions of others"; (3) use of

emotion (four items), e.g., "I am a self-motivated person"; and (4) regulation of emotion (four

items), e.g., "I can always calm down quickly when I am very angry". Participants were

asked to rate all the items on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5

(strongly agree). Law, Wong, & Song (2004, p.488) state that "*emotional intelligence is an*

overall latent construct underlying its four dimensions". The overall Cronbach's alpha value

was 0.866.

       SWB. This scale includes life satisfaction and affect. The life satisfaction scale was

developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin (1985) and has five items such as "I am

satisfied with my life". The affect scale, adapted by Segura and González-Romá (2003) from

Warr (1990), is made up of six items such as "To what extent, over the last weeks, did you

feel cheerful/ enthusiastic/ optimistic/ tense/ jittery/ anxious?" The first three items measure

positive affect, while the last three measure negative affect. The Cronbach's alpha values for

life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect were 0.843, 0.739, and 0.812,

respectively. Participants were asked to rate the items on a five-point scale, ranging from 1

(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). We computed SWB by adding up the standardized

life satisfaction and positive affect scores, and then subtracting the standardized negative

affect score (Kifer, Heller, Perunovic, & Galinsky, 2013). The scores ranged from -1 to 1,

with higher scores meaning higher SWB.

       Control variables. Previous research (e.g., Ramos and Lopez, 2018; Zhou, Zou,

Woods, & Wu, 2019) has observed significant relationships between demographic

characteristics and SWB. In the present study, the employees' gender, age, education, and

tenure were therefore installed as control variables. Gender and education were coded, with *female* coded as "0" and *male* as "1"; and *high school diploma or less* coded as "1", *junior college degree* as "2", and *bachelor's degree or above* as "3". General job stress was also used as a control variable to exclude its potential influence on the results (De Jonge, Bosma, Peter, & Siegrist, 2000), and was measured using a seven-item scale developed by Stanton, Balzer, Smith, Parra, & Ironson (2001). Sample items included "hectic" and "pressured". The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.911.

Results

Non-response bias and attrition analysis

As some respondents dropped out in this time-lagged research, Goodman and Blum's (1996) procedure was adopted to examine the risk of non-response bias in the three surveys. First, multiple logistic regression was performed using the survey time as the dependent variable, and the control variables and negative workplace gossip as independent variables. The results showed that all the logistic regression coefficients were non-significant ($p > 0.05$). In addition, t-tests were used to check for significant mean differences in the control variables and negative workplace gossip across waves 1, 2, and 3. The results showed no significant mean differences among these variables ($p > 0.05$). These procedures therefore showed that the respondents had dropped out randomly (Liu, Kwan, Wu, & Wu, 2010; Liu et al., 2020).

Confirmatory factor analysis and common method variance analysis

We conducted a variety of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to test the discrimination of each construct (Cheng, Zhou, & Guo, 2019). Following the procedure for comparing models, we examined seven CFA models: a six-factor model, a one-factor model,

and five five-factor models. As shown in Table 1, we determined that the six-factor model (χ^2 = 272.334, df = 174, IFI = 0.939, TLI = 0.925, CFI = 0.938, and RMSEA = 0.048) fitted our data better than the alternatives, and the standardized factor loadings of all the items were greater than 0.51 and significant, showing satisfactory discriminant validity of the key variables.

Since all the variables were collected from the same respondents by self-reporting, the risk of common method variance (CMV) had to be considered (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We controlled for unmeasured latent method factors to examine its influence. We combined the CMV factor as a latent variable into the six-factor model and allowed all the measurement items to load onto it (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Williams & McGonagle, 2016). Compared with the six-factor model, the index values of IFI, TLI, CFI, and RMSEA in the seven-factor model improved slightly [$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf = 18) = 26.442, *n.s.*], which means CMV was not a major issue in our study (Williams & McGonagle, 2016). In addition, we calculated that the average of the squared standardized factor loadings of CMV in the seven-factor model was 0.031, which is lower than the threshold (0.040) used to judge whether CMV can be regarded as a latent variable (Kwan, Chen, & Chiu, 2020).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Descriptive statistics

The results showed that the standard deviations and correlation coefficient of the control variables and key variables were consistent with existing results, and no abnormal values were found (as indicated in Table 2). The results showed that negative workplace

gossip was positively correlated with psychological distress ($r = 0.290$, $p < 0.01$) and

negatively related to SWB ($r = -0.289$, $p < 0.01$). Moreover, psychological distress was

negatively related to SWB ($r = -0.253$, $p < 0.01$).

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Hypothesis testing

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were adopted to verify Hypothesis 1. The

control variables, independent variable (negative workplace gossip), and dependent variable

(SWB) were placed in separate steps. The results indicated that negative workplace gossip

was negatively related to SWB ($\beta = -0.288$, $p < 0.01$). Hence, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

PROCESS was used with the bootstrapping method to test the mediation effects

(Hayes, 2013). As shown in Table 3, negative workplace gossip had a significant indirect

effect on SWB via psychological distress, as the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval did

not include zero ($\beta = -0.042$, 95% CI [-0.083, -0.009]). Additionally, the direct effect of

negative workplace gossip and SWB was statistically significant ($\beta = -0.249$, 95% CI [-0.373,

-0.124]). Hypothesis 2 was therefore partially supported.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

To reduce multicollinearity, we mean-centered negative workplace gossip and

emotional intelligence when creating the interaction between them (Aiken & West, 1991). As

shown in Table 3, the interaction was negatively related to psychological distress ($\beta = -0.148$,

95% CI [-0.278, -0.017]). To understand the moderating effect more clearly, we followed

Aiken and West's (1991) recommendation by adopting one standard deviation above and one

below the mean of emotional intelligence. Figure 2 shows the interactive mode, which

conformed to Hypothesis 3. More precisely, negative workplace gossip was more positively

correlated with psychological distress when emotional intelligence was low ($\beta = 0.413$, $p < 0.01$) than when it was high ($\beta = 0.117$, $n.s.$). This result therefore supported Hypothesis 3.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

To test the moderated mediation (Hypothesis 4), we adopted Hayes' (2013)

bootstrapping procedure. The results, presented in Table 4, suggest that emotional intelligence

had a significant indirect effect on the relationship between observed negative workplace

gossip and SWB when emotional intelligence was high (conditional indirect effect = -0.017,

95% CI [-0.058, 0.004]) than when it was low (conditional indirect effect = -0.059, 95% CI [-0.121, -0.016]). Furthermore, the index of moderated mediation was statistically significant

for emotional intelligence (Index = 0.021, 95% CI [0.004, 0.053]). Therefore, Hypothesis 4

was supported.

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Discussion

This study differs significantly from previous research, which has focused on the

influence of negative workplace gossip on employees' attitudes, behaviors, and job

performance while ignoring the impact on targets' SWB. This study is the first, to our

knowledge, to investigate the impact of negative workplace gossip on SWB, and to explore

the mediating role of psychological distress and the moderating role of emotional

intelligence. Based on COR theory, we proposed the hypotheses. A multi-phase survey was

conducted to collect the empirical evidence. Our findings show that negative workplace

gossip reduces SWB by causing psychological distress among targets. Emotional intelligence

was also shown to play an important moderating role: employees with high emotional

intelligence were less likely than those with low emotional intelligence to suffer

psychological distress as a result of negative workplace gossip, and consequently also

experienced a weaker indirect effect of negative workplace gossip on SWB through

psychological distress.

Theoretical implications

This study makes several important theoretical contributions. Firstly, we have helped

expand knowledge of the unfavorable consequences of negative workplace gossip to

decreasing targets' SWB. This area had remained underexplored despite the ubiquitous

presence of negative workplace gossip, which differs from workplace harassment (Jung &

Yoon, 2019; Neall & Tuckey, 2014; Wang, Bowling, Tian, Alarcon, & Kwan, 2018) since it

involves casual and unconstrained talks behind the targets' backs (Foster, 2004; Kuo et al.,

2015; Kurland & Pelled, 2000), contains sensitive information about them, and can be

considered an indirect attack, aggression, or victimization (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012;

Ellwardt et al., 2012). On the basis of these characteristics, it is important and necessary to

explore its influences on employees. While previous studies described and explored some

negative aspects of gossip, and examined the effects of negative workplace gossip on

employees' attitudes, behaviors, and job performance (Babalola et al., 2019; Brady et al.,

2017; Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Wu, Birtch et al., 2018; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018; Ye et al., 2019),

we have moved beyond this scope to investigate the relationship between negative workplace

gossip and targets' SWB. The results, based on the moderated mediation model, demonstrate

for the first time that negative workplace gossip results in increased psychological distress

and reduced SWB. In conducting this study, we have answered the call from Babalola et al.

(2019) for exploration of the impacts of negative gossip on employee well-being. We focused

specifically on employees' SWB since it had previously been shown to be essential to

individuals' well-being, positive psychological health, and job performance (Bryson, Forth, &

Stokes, 2017; Diener, Sapyta, & Suh, 1998). Our findings therefore contribute to the literature

on negative workplace gossip literature by extending the outcomes to SWB, which provides a

self-examination rather than external judgment perspective.

Secondly, our study reveals the "black box" between negative workplace gossip and

targets' SWB, that is, that negative workplace gossip decreases SWB by increasing

psychological distress. These results are particularly noteworthy because they confirm the

idea that gossip generates negative emotions (Babalola et al., 2019), complementing the

substantial body of findings supporting the significance of psychological distress in triggering

low SWB, and enhancing theory by shedding light on how and when low SWB emerges.

Finally, by exploring the moderating effect of employees' emotional intelligence, we

have moved closer to an understanding of the mechanisms and boundary conditions of the

relationship between negative workplace gossip and SWB, as recommended by Wu, Birtch et

al. (2018). As shown in prior studies, emotional intelligence is a skill set helpful for

regulating one's emotions effectively (Prati et al., 2009). Our findings go further, providing

evidence that emotional intelligence has a positive influence on alleviating the adverse effects

of negative workplace gossip on psychological distress. In addition to demonstrating the

moderating role of emotional intelligence, we have also confirmed that different employees

react differently to negative workplace gossip.

Managerial implications

Given the prevalence of negative gossip in the workplace (Kuo et al., 2015), our

findings have several implications for managers, especially human resources managers.

Firstly, managers should recognize that, although gossip is ubiquitous and is an integral part

of organizational culture (Babalola et al., 2019; Georganta, Panagopoulou, & Montgomery,

2014), they need to reduce the occurrence of negative workplace gossip, since it will lower

employees' SWB. Team building and collective activities, such as outdoor sports and

department dinners, can create a favorable, harmonious, and positive organizational culture,

reducing the likelihood of occurrence of negative gossip. Supervisors should also encourage

positive informal talks and make clear that negative gossip is unwelcome. Other positive

strategies available to managers include talking to targets face to face, helping them deal with

negative emotions, identifying what triggered the gossip, and giving advice to avoid future

targeting. These activities echo previous recommendations of establishing efficient

information exchange channels (Babalola et al., 2019; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018).

Secondly, given our finding that psychological distress has a significant impact on

employees' SWB, managers should pay attention to the psychological state of employees and

alleviate their distress in a timely manner. From a resource perspective, employees suffering

psychological distress have fewer resources than others, making it crucial to supplement their

resources to relieve their tension and pressure. Previous studies have pointed out that

increasing job control can reduce stress for employees because it is considered as a favorable

work resource and coping mechanism (Chiang, Birtch, & Kwan, 2010). Thus, employees

could alleviate their psychological distress by improving their job control, such as striving for

a higher level of work flexibility and freedom (Chiang et al., 2010). Participating in training

could also provide them with resources to cope with future stressful situations. Managers

should also take the lead in creating a supportive culture, and promote the flow of resources

in the organization, enabling employees to feel safe and comfortable. Improving HR

management systems is another effective way to help with employees' psychological distress.

When employees are suffering, the HR department could offer counselling services or

mediate conflicts between staff. As suggested in prior studies, these responses will lead to

more effective performance by employees, and will create a more confident, competent, and

even passionate workforce (Chen, Lyu, Li, Zhou, & Li, 2017; Tian et al., 2019).

Thirdly, our finding that employees with higher emotional intelligence will be less

troubled by psychological distress indicates the benefits of recruiting candidates with high

emotional intelligence. For existing employees, HR departments can organize training to

improve both emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills, in order to enhance positive

interaction between employees (Hodzic, Scharfen, Ripoll, Holling, & Zenasni, 2018; Kwan,

Mao, & Zhang, 2010). A good example is introducing one-to-one or one-to-many mentoring

programs. Mentors can talk with employees over coffee or lunch, and offer guidance on

dealing with workplace problems and regulating emotions. Mentoring, as an effective human resources management tool, has had profound impacts on individuals' personal lives, employees' careers, and organizational success (Allen, Smith, Mael, Gavan O'Shea, Eby, 2009). Mentoring can perform three functions – career support, psychological support, and role modeling – that are positively correlated to employees' organizational citizenship behavior (Kwan, Liu, & Yim, 2011). Through mentoring programs, more experienced individuals (i.e., mentors) impart their experience to younger colleagues (i.e., protégés). High-quality mentoring relationships can play an important role in encouraging trust, sensitivity, and effective communication, can improve employees' personal skills, and are also helpful for improving employees' emotional intelligence (Hu, Wang, Kwan, & Yi, 2019; Liu, Kwan, & Mao, 2012). Other options include designing interactive games to help employees make correct judgements when they encounter tricky situations in the future. Emotional intelligence training helps employees become more supportive and sensitive to each other's needs, and enhances positive interaction among employees (Kwan et al., 2010; Schreurs, Hetty van Emmerik, Günter, & Germeys, 2012). It is therefore an effective intervention in the workplace (Hodzic et al., 2018).

Limitations and future research directions

Although this study has presented important insights into the impact of negative workplace gossip, some limitations must be recognized. Firstly, all our measures relied on self-reporting, raising concerns over common source bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We tried to minimize these concerns by measuring negative workplace gossip and emotional intelligence at T1, psychological distress at T2, and SWB at T3. Additionally, all our variables were

employees' subjective feelings. Alternative methods of measuring these variables are strongly encouraged in future research: for example, longitudinal research should be considered.

Secondly, while our findings provide support for a partial mediational model based on COR theory, future research could adopt different theoretical perspectives (e.g., person-environment fit theory or equity theory) to explain the relationship between negative workplace gossip and employees' SWB. Thirdly, while SWB has a profound influence on employees' job attitudes and behaviors (Schulz et al., 2017), future research could explore the reverse relationship between them. Fourthly, this research was conducted in Guangdong province in China and therefore has a specific cultural setting. Studies in other parts of China or in other countries may produce different results. Future research could consider samples from a multicultural society to validate our results. Fifthly, negative workplace gossip can sometimes be considered an agent of workplace harassment (Kniffin & Wilson; 2010). Future research could consider workplace harassment as a control variable in order to achieve more accurate research results, or could investigate the differences and connections between the influences of negative workplace gossip and workplace harassment on individuals. Finally, this study did not explore the antecedents of negative workplace gossip. Since understanding these factors would help managers root out negative gossip at its source, future studies could explore the influence of workplace environment, employee personality, and other factors on negative workplace gossip.

Data availability statement

The data that supports the findings of this study is available from the corresponding author (Y. Peng) upon reasonable request.

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7

Tables

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis results

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Seven-factor model: add CMV	245.892	156	1.510	0.948	0.931	0.946	0.046
Six-factor model: three parts of SWB as separate factors	272.334	174	1.565	0.939	0.925	0.938	0.048
Five-factor model 1: psychological distress and emotional intelligence were combined into one factor	372.884	179	2.083	0.880	0.856	0.878	0.067
Five-factor model 2: negative workplace gossip and psychological distress were combined into one factor	346.537	179	1.936	0.896	0.876	0.894	0.062
Five-factor model 3: life satisfaction and emotional intelligence were combined into one factor	480.037	179	2.682	0.814	0.777	0.810	0.083
Five-factor model 4: negative workplace gossip and life satisfaction were combined into one factor	493.977	179	2.760	0.805	0.767	0.801	0.085
Five-factor model 5: negative workplace gossip and negative affect were combined into one factor	509.074	179	2.844	0.796	0.755	0.792	0.087
One-factor model	1165.733	189	6.168	0.391	0.315	0.383	0.146

Notes: $N = 243$. IFI = incremental fit index; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis coefficient; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SWB = subjective well-being.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and correlations of all variables in this study

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	0.556	0.498								
2. Age	2.737	1.374	0.154*							
3. Education	2.189	0.801	-0.099	-0.195**						
4. Tenure	2.412	1.137	0.040	0.236**	-0.154*					
5. General job stress	2.196	0.861	0.104	-0.095	-0.005	-0.126*				
6. Negative workplace gossip	2.096	0.772	-0.050	0.014	-0.038	0.003	-.050			
7. Psychological distress	2.198	0.580	-0.144*	-0.027	0.005	0.098	0.054	0.290**		
8. Emotional intelligence	3.554	0.479	0.188**	0.131*	-0.065	0.036	0.121	-0.122	-0.181**	
9. SWB	0.005	1.871	0.214**	0.057	-0.064	-0.023	-0.088	-0.289**	-0.253**	0.248**

Notes: N = 243; *p* < 0.05; **p** < 0.01; Gender: "0" = *female*, "1" = *male*; Education: "1" = *high school diploma or less*, "2" = *junior college degree*, and "3" = *bachelor's degree or above.*

Table 3. PROCESS results for the overall model

	Psychological distress				SWB			
	Estimate	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	Estimate	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Constant	-0.018	0.060	-0.137	0.101	0.002	0.060	-0.115	0.119
Predictor variable								
Negative workplace gossip	0.265**	0.061	-0.058	0.004	-0.249**	0.063	-0.373	-0.124
Mediator								
Psychological distress					-0.143*	0.064	-0.269	-0.017
Interaction								
Negative workplace gossip * Emotional intelligence	-0.148*	0.066	-0.278	-0.017				
	$R^2 = 0.158$; $F (8, 234) = 5.503$				$R^2 = 0.163$; $F (7, 235) = 6.551$			

*Notes: N = 243; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01*.

Table 4. Results of the moderated path analysis

Moderator variable	Negative workplace gossip (*X*) → psychological distress (*M*) → SWB (*Y*)			
Emotional intelligence	Indirect effects	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
- 1 SD (-0.999)	-0.059	0.026	-0.121	-0.016
0.000	-0.038	0.018	-0.080	-0.010
+ 1 SD (0.999)	-0.017	0.015	-0.058	0.004

Notes: N = 243; Bootstrap sample size = 5000.

Figures

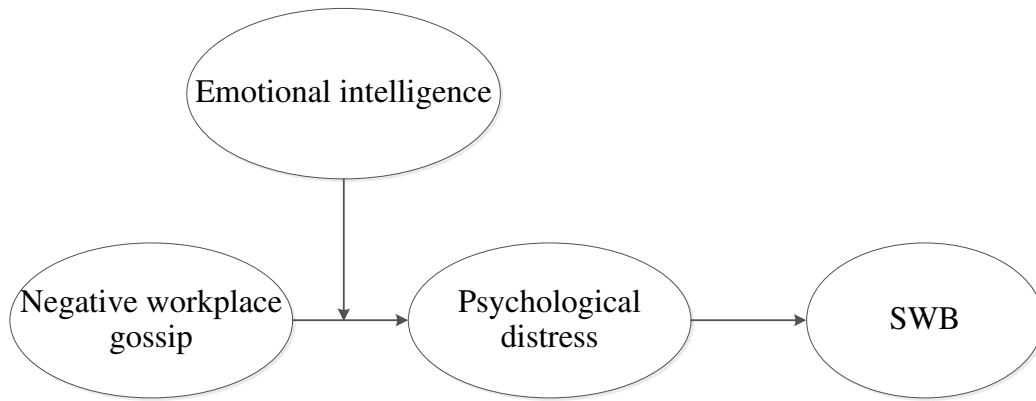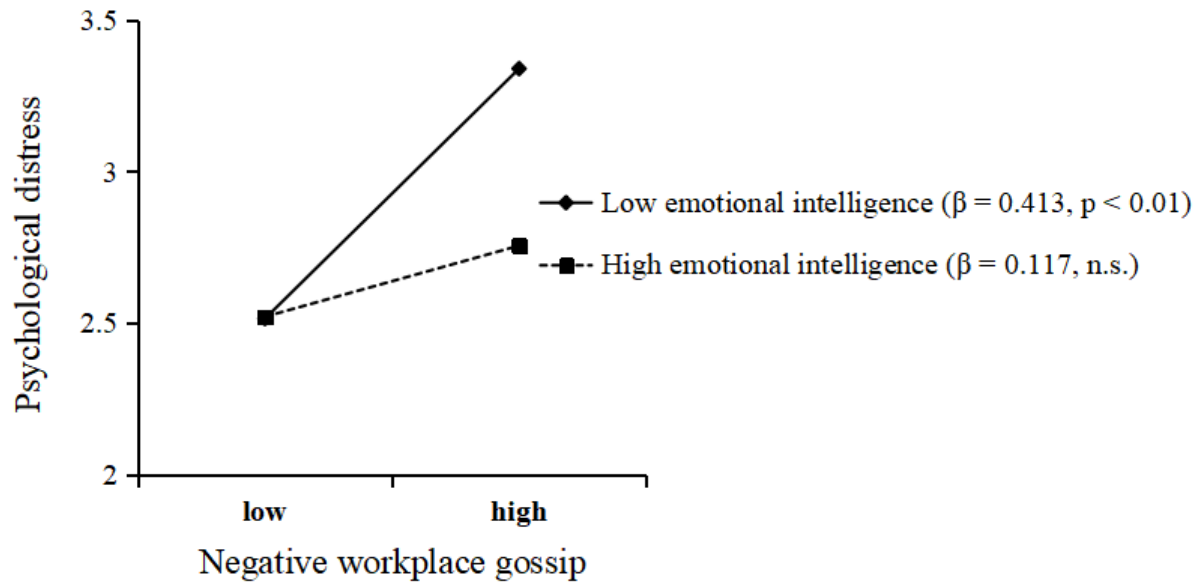**Figure 1. The conceptual model for this study**

Figure 2. The interactive effect of negative workplace gossip and emotional intelligence on psychological distress

Notes: N = 243.