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The Hidden Costs of Negative Workplace Gossip: Its Effect on Targets' Behaviors, the Mediating Role of *Guanxi* Closeness, and the Moderating Effect of Need for Affiliation

Abstract

This research explores the harmful effects of negative workplace gossip (NWG) on targets and organizations, including its impacts on helping behavior and knowledge hiding. The mediating role of *guanxi* closeness and the moderating role of need for affiliation are also examined. The study, based on conservation of resources theory, collected data from 526 employees in the hospitality industry in China, using a three-wave survey design. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was employed to test the hypotheses. The empirical results showed that NWG was a strong predictor of reduced helping behavior and increased knowledge hiding; and that *guanxi* closeness mediated both the negative relationship between NWG and helping behavior, and the positive relationship between NWG and knowledge hiding. Additionally, need for affiliation was shown to act as a moderator between NWG and *guanxi* closeness: high need for affiliation amplified the negative impact of NWG on *guanxi* closeness, and then further affected employees' helping behavior and knowledge hiding. This study therefore offers an important new perspective for interpreting the detrimental effects of negative gossip in organizations, providing not just theoretical advances but practical ways in which managers can proactively reduce these impacts.

Keywords: Negative workplace gossip, *guanxi* closeness, helping behavior, knowledge hiding, need for affiliation

1 Introduction

Gossip is a natural and common social phenomenon whose importance as a research topic has been recognized by many scholars (e.g., Babalola et al. 2019; Chandra and Robinson 2010; Cheng et al. 2020; Dunbar 2004; Foster 2004; Kniffin and Wilson 2010; Kong 2018; Kuo et al. 2015; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018). Hearing and spreading gossip, whether wittingly or unwittingly, is a normal part of daily life for many people; it is also common for individuals to become the subject of gossip (Cheng et al. 2020; Dunbar 2004). Studies have shown that people spend 65% of their conversational time discussing social topics, and that up to two-thirds of their conversations are about third parties (Emler 1994). Gossip in the specific setting of the workplace has also been widely explored, leading to its recognition as an important means by which employees gather and exchange information and satisfy their social needs (Beersma and Van Kleef 2012; Brady et al. 2017; Kniffin and Wilson 2010; Kuo et al. 2015; Mills 2010), as a self-enhancement strategy, and as a form of social control within groups (McAndrew and Milenkovic 2002; McAndrew et al. 2007). Gossip has also been shown to be important for the survival of organizations (Kniffin and Wilson 2005), for example by discouraging selfishness and promoting cooperation (Feinberg et al. 2012; Feinberg et al. 2014).

However, alongside these positive consequences of certain forms of workplace gossip, the potential harms of negative workplace gossip (NWG) cannot be overlooked, since they can include many undesirable consequences for both targets and organizations (Chandra and Robinson 2010). NWG is defined as negative, informal, and evaluative talk about the personal information of an organizational member or the spreading of rumors behind their back (Chandra and Robinson 2010; Kong 2018; Wu, Birtch et al. 2018; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018).

Many studies have explored its consequences from the perspective of the targets (Babalola et al. 2019; Cheng et al. 2020; Tian et al. 2019; Wu, Birtch et al. 2018; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018; Ye, Zhu et al. 2019). Because it contains sensitive personal information, NWG can damage targets' reputation (Lee and Barnes 2021) and invade their personal privacy (Foster 2004). Its other negative impacts include harming targets' emotional wellbeing (e.g., triggering emotional exhaustion, Liu et al. 2020; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018) and cognition (e.g., causing employee cynicism, Kuo et al. 2015), as well as decreasing perceived insider status (Kong 2018), organization-based self-esteem (Kong 2018), and organizational identification (Ye, Zhu et al. 2019). Its multiple behavioral impacts include reducing proactive behavior (Wu, Kwan et al. 2018), in-role behavior (Babalola et al. 2019; Kong 2018; Ye, Zhu et al. 2019), organizational citizenship behavior (Kong 2018), and customer-oriented organizational citizenship behavior (Ye, Zhu et al. 2019). It has also been shown to negatively affect ability, for example by decreasing creativity (Liu et al. 2020). Furthermore, targets of NWG may tend to adopt political acts, which are a form of a self-serving behavior (Cheng et al. 2020). In addition, NWG causes negative impacts on the organization by reducing targets' job performance (Lee, Chou et al. 2016).

Despite this large number of studies, the literature still has some limitations. Firstly, the research on NWG's effects on employees' behaviors is not comprehensive. Prior studies have focused on how the targets of NWG carry out their jobs and work tasks, for example exploring changes in organizational citizenship behavior (Kong 2018; Ye, Zhu et al. 2019) and self-serving behavior (Cheng et al. 2020). However, the literature has overlooked behaviors in another important area of workplace life: interpersonal interactions among colleagues. This is

an extremely important and valuable area of study that is worthy of urgent academic attention, since the workplace is a sphere where employees communicate and interact with each other in order to make work progress smoothly (Ye, Lyu et al. 2019). Positive interactions not only facilitate the successful completion of existing tasks, but also lay the groundwork for dealing effectively with future challenges (Raub and Liao 2012); by contrast, ineffective or negative interactions can adversely affect both individuals and organizations (Zhu et al. 2017). Typical positive workplace interactions include helping behavior and knowledge sharing, both of which provide effective solutions to challenges, improving the way employees carry out their work and thus enhancing customer satisfaction and organizational performance (Lee, Foo et al. 2016; Mahdi et al. 2019; Mossholder et al. 2011; Podsakoff et al. 2000). Helping behavior, a powerful indicator of group and organizational performance, is essential in dealing with non-routine aspects of work in an organization (Mossholder et al. 2011; Podsakoff et al. 2000). Knowledge sharing also delivers numerous benefits to individuals and the organization (Pandey et al. 2021); however, if employees intentionally fail to share knowledge for some reason, this hinders the creativity and innovative behavior of the organization's members, inhibits the performance of new product project teams (Černe et al. 2017; Fong et al. 2018; Yao et al. 2020; Zhang and Min 2019), and reduces competitive advantage (Connelly et al. 2019; Hernaus et al. 2019; Malik et al. 2019). Deliberately hiding knowledge is therefore harmful to creativity at the individual and team level, and to long-term organizational development (Pandey et al. 2021). Consequently, given the importance of helping behavior and the significant adverse effects of knowledge hiding, this study explores whether and how they are affected by NWG.

Secondly, existing studies have not paid enough attention to the role of personal

connections in the relationship between NWG and targets' behaviors. For example, the Chinese concept of *guanxi* is defined as "an informal, particularistic personal connection between two individuals who are bounded by an implicit psychological contract to follow the social norm of *guanxi* such as maintaining a long-term relationship, mutual commitment, loyalty, and obligation" (Chen and Chen 2004, p. 306). This study focuses not on *guanxi* itself, but on *guanxi* closeness, which differs from *guanxi* in that it is an indicator of *guanxi* status at a specific point in time (Chen and Chen 2004; Chen et al. 2013). *Guanxi* closeness comprises two components: trust and feelings (Chen and Chen 2004). Positive behavioral events enhance the closeness of coworker relationships, while negative ones weaken it (Chen and Peng 2008). Since NWG implies the exclusion of targets, it may negatively affect their interpersonal connections (Cheng et al. 2020; Dunbar 2004; Foster 2004; Kniffin and Wilson 2010; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018), particularly in cultures, such as Chinese society, in which interpersonal bonds are highly valued, and people believe that connections and relationships play a very important role in their daily life and work. Therefore, this study tests, in the Chinese context, how NWG influences employees' *guanxi* closeness, consequently causing even greater impacts on their helping behavior and knowledge hiding.

Thirdly, there is an urgent need for more light to be shed on the moderators of NWG. Existing studies have shown that perceptions of NWG are partly driven by targets' personal traits and characters (Babalola et al. 2019; Cheng et al. 2020; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018; Ye, Zhu et al. 2019), such as traditionality (Wu, Kwan et al. 2018), hostile attribution bias (Kong 2018; Ye, Zhu et al. 2019), and moral disengagement (Cheng et al. 2020). Moreover, individuals' desire for social contact or belongingness (i.e., need for affiliation) may have certain effects on

their perception of the degree of NWG's impact. Need for affiliation expresses an individual's degree of desire to work with team members, including elements such as perception, cooperation, recognition, and communication (Steers and Braunstein 1976). Individuals with a high need for affiliation are more sensitive to and accurate in identifying and interpreting social cues, especially when these are negative (Weinberger et al. 2010; Kong et al. 2017). Hence, if targeted by NWG, which places them at a personal or political disadvantage (Robinson and Bennett 1995; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018), these employees are more likely than others to perceive the gossip and to respond more strongly, lowering their *guanxi* closeness more significantly. Therefore, it is important to understand whether need for affiliation plays a moderating role in the relationship between NWG and *guanxi* closeness.

Finally, while the NWG literature involves various research settings, few studies have focused on the hospitality industry (Ye, Zhu et al. 2019). Hospitality employees interact with customers every day. If they are targeted by NWG, the consequences may extend to the customers, i.e., outside the organization, causing even more damage. Moreover, frontline employees must constantly solve unconventional and tricky problems as they deal with customers' individual needs (Raub and Liao 2012), making interactions among colleagues particularly relevant (Mossholder et al. 2011). This study therefore pays much-needed attention to NWG in the hospitality context.

Given the research gaps that have been identified, this study proposes a theoretical model based on conservation of resources (COR) theory to explore the significant questions of how and when NWG influences interactions among colleagues in the hospitality industry. Specifically, the integrated conceptual model includes *guanxi* closeness as a mediator between

NWG and interactions among colleagues, and need for affiliation as a moderator in the relationship between NWG and *guanxi* closeness. This framework is shown in Figure 1.

[Fig. 1 near here]

2 Theory and Hypotheses

2.1 Conservation of Resources Theory

Conservation of resources theory is a branch of stress research that is based on the assumption that individuals actively strive to maintain, protect, and build what they perceive to be valuable resources whose potential or actual loss is a threat to them (Hobfoll 1989). In recent years, COR theory has received increasing attention from scholars, and has been widely used to explain the effects of stressful situations including abusive supervision (Feng and Wang 2019; Harris et al. 2007; Xu et al. 2015), workplace ostracism (Xia et al. 2019; Zhu et al. 2017), customer incivility (Cheng et al. 2020), and family incivility (Cheng et al. 2021, Cheng et al. 2019; De Clercq et al. 2018). These stressors deplete employees' valuable resources and place them in a state of resource deprivation, which in turn causes emotional, cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral changes (Hobfoll 1989, 2001). NWG, as a negative workplace event, can also cause employees to be stressed and drain their resources, including time, energy, emotion (Halbesleben et al. 2014; Hobfoll 1989, 2001; Penney et al. 2011; Wu, Birtch et al. 2018; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018; Ye, Zhu et al. 2019).

In COR theory, resources include anything that individuals consider valuable and capable of helping them achieve their goals, such as material resources, conditional resources (e.g., status in the organization), personality traits (e.g., self-esteem), and energy resources (e.g., time)

(Hobfoll 1989). Resources incorporate not only elements that meet individuals' needs, but also those that help them accurately identify themselves and position themselves socially. As a result, some researchers have adopted a COR perspective when considering the role of interpersonal relationships such as leader-member exchange (Dong et al. 2020; Harris et al. 2011), since the supervisor-subordinate relationship is a major source of support for accumulating, supplementing, and protecting resources. Following this line of thought, the present study considers workplace *guanxi* as a resource, arguing that *guanxi* closeness may play a role between NWG and interactions among colleagues in terms of increasing or expending resources.

2.2 The Nature of NWG

NWG refers to the discussion of a co-worker's personal information or the spreading of rumors, behind their backs (Chandra and Robinson 2010). It is a subcategory of workplace gossip, which refers to informal, evaluative conversations about an absent party in the workplace (Kurland and Pelled 2000; Wu, Birtch et al. 2018). NWG shares many of the characteristics of workplace gossip, for example operating as a relational or group process rather than a simple sender-receiver dyad (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007; Dunbar 2004; Ellwardt et al. 2012; Foster 2004; Grosser et al. 2010; Wu, Birtch et al. 2018), since the process includes at least three subjects: gossips, receivers, and targets. Moreover, workplace gossip occurs naturally, requires a shared frame of reference and privacy protection between the gossips and receivers (Michelson et al. 2010), and is informal and unconstrained (Kurland and Pelled 2000; Wu, Birtch et al. 2018; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018; Ye, Zhu et al. 2019). Other similarities include its verbal and covert nature, and the fact that it is spread when the subjects are not present, meaning

that, although targets can perceive its existence, they struggle to identify the source or discover the content.

Alongside these similarities between workplace gossip and NWG, clear differences also exist. The biggest of these is that NWG contains negative private and sensitive information (Foster 2004; Kuo et al. 2015; Kurland and Pelled 2000), which may be exaggerated and even fabricated (Bok 1989; Dunbar 2004; Foster 2004; Kuo et al. 2015; Kurland and Pelled 2000). NWG can cause real psychological harm to the targets, such as eliciting a negative mood, and can damage interpersonal relationships (Babalola et al. 2019; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018). Furthermore, NWG is a unique social psychological construct that differs from other types of social mistreatment (Wu, Birtch et al. 2018), for example abusive or aggressive behaviors that contain both overt and covert social mistreatment (Duffy et al. 2002; Wu, Birtch et al. 2018). It is regarded as an indirect attack involving aggression (Beersma and Van Kleef 2012) or victimization (Ellwardt et al. 2012). These features of NWG tend to preclude confrontation and generate greater uncertainty (Wu, Birtch et al. 2018).

2.3 NWG and Interactions Among Colleagues

NWG, as an unhealthy and hurtful experience, can exert significant effects on targets' interactions with colleagues (Kong 2018; Wu, Birtch et al. 2018). These interactive behaviors include helping behavior and knowledge hiding. Within organizations, helping behavior can promote cooperation and communication, as well as improving interpersonal relationships (Dalal and Sheng 2019). Knowledge hiding, by contrast, has a harmful nature that goes beyond simply not sharing knowledge (Ahmad and Karim 2019; Nguyen et al. 2019; Tang et al. 2015), and may have a negative impact on creativity for individuals (Černe et al. 2014) and teams

(Bogilović et al. 2017; Fong et al. 2018). Therefore, studying the impact of NWG on these two typical interactions among colleagues is of far-reaching significance.

Helping behavior is defined as a kind of discretionary and voluntary behavior in interpersonal communication (Mossholder et al. 2011; Podsakoff et al. 2000). For example, coaching new employees and assisting colleagues in order to share the workload can strengthen the bond between colleagues (Bowler and Brass 2006; Settoon and Mossholder 2002). Knowledge hiding – in which knowledge mainly refers to information, opinions, and professional experience related to work tasks – is defined as the choice by organizational members to conceal or withhold knowledge for some purpose when faced with a knowledge request by colleagues (Connelly et al. 2012). It is an intentional behavior whose motivation may be deceptive or protective (Huo et al. 2016). Possible antecedents of knowledge hiding include interpersonal conflicts such as distrust (Connelly et al. 2012), perceived knowledge ownership (Huo et al. 2016; He 2013), and workplace ostracism (Zhao et al. 2016).

In this study, we propose that NWG can lead to targets reducing their helping behavior and increasing their knowledge hiding. These behavioral changes may occur for several reasons. Firstly, being the target of NWG is an undesirable experience. False information and malicious content drain employees' energy, upset them, and leave them seeking the source of the gossip and trying to verify its content (Baumeister et al. 2004; Foster 2004; Kong 2018; Wert and Salovey 2004; Wu, Birtch et al. 2018; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018; Ye, Zhu et al. 2019). According to COR theory, targets may devote considerable resources such as time and energy to seeking information about the NWG, and may fall into a state of resource deprivation (Hobfoll 1989, 2001). Moreover, despite investing resources in their search for the colleagues who initiated

and spread the NWG, targets cannot always succeed in identifying them (Chandra and Robinson 2010). As a consequence of the resources lost during this process, targets may tend to reduce behaviors that require extra resources, such as helping colleagues and sharing knowledge with them. Given this pattern of behavior, we focus on changes to targets' helping behavior and knowledge hiding, arguing that these are manifestations of their efforts to protect themselves from falling into a resource loss spiral after losing resources due to NWG.

Secondly, according to COR theory, individuals are always actively striving to maintain, protect, and make good use of their limited valuable resources (Hobfoll 1989; Hobfoll et al. 2018). This means that when they suffer the loss of resources, they will be sensitive to this process and will tend to make efforts to preserve their remaining stocks (Cheng et al. 2020; Hobfoll 1989). When encountering NWG, targets will seek to maintain and even enhance their own competitiveness, because their exclusive knowledge and experience are resources that can help them achieve their goals (Burmeister et al. 2019; Fong et al. 2018; Yao et al. 2020). As a result, they will help others less, fail to pass on job-related skills to their coworkers, and hide their opinions and thoughts even when asked (Connelly et al. 2012; Mossholder et al. 2011). Therefore, both reducing helping behavior and engaging in knowledge hiding can help targets to conserve their remaining resources to cope with future losses.

Thirdly, the indirect, covert nature of gossip usually makes it impossible to confront the perpetrators and leaves targets prone to greater uncertainty (Wu, Birtch et al. 2018), since they do not know who is responsible. In this context, reducing helping behavior and increasing knowledge hiding become relatively safe ways to express dissatisfaction, as well as operating as a form of secret retaliation against the NWG.

On the basis of these points, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1a: NWG is negatively related to helping behavior.

H1b: NWG is positively related to knowledge hiding.

2.4 The Mediating Role of Guanxi Closeness

Guanxi closeness, which captures the quality of *guanxi* at a particular point in time, consists of trust and feelings, where trust is based on cognition and feelings are based on emotion (Chen et al. 2004, 2013; Chen and Peng 2008; Fu et al. 2006). Higher levels of trust and positive emotions indicate a closer relationship (Chen and Chen 2004; Chen and Peng 2008). Higher *guanxi* closeness with colleagues means that employees can communicate and cooperate at work and receive support, understanding, and trust (Chen and Peng 2008). A higher degree of *guanxi* closeness indicates a higher level of relationship resources, which employees can use to complete their work tasks more efficiently (Chen et al. 2004; Chen and Peng 2008). By contrast, employees with a low degree of *guanxi* closeness with their colleagues may find it more difficult to accomplish job assignments, since they lack the help of others. Researchers suggest that *guanxi* closeness changes dynamically over time (Chen et al. 2004) under the influence of factors including prior closeness (Chen and Peng 2008), relationships with others (Chow and Ng 2004; Zhu et al. 2013), social interactions and exchanges outside work (Wong et al. 2003), and in particular personal experiences in the workplace, such as interpersonal incidents (Chen and Peng 2008).

As noted in the Introduction, it is important to distinguish *guanxi* closeness from *guanxi* itself. *Guanxi* is a concept, but not a measurable variable. *Guanxi* closeness, as a representation

of the state of *guanxi* at a particular time, is an operationalized notion of how many resources are available in the *guanxi* relationship. In China, both theory and practice support the classification of *guanxi* as a resource – a reality encapsulated by the traditional saying “More friends, more roads”. Researchers argue that *guanxi* is both instrumental and functional (Chen and Chen 2004). It can be regarded as a form of human or organizational capital that helps businesses gain a competitive advantage (Fan 2002; Luo et al. 2012), reduces transaction costs (Davies et al. 1995), or mobilizes political support (Hou and Zhu 2020). Because *guanxi* can help individuals achieve their work goals, it can also be seen as a resource from the COR perspective (Cheng et al. 2020; Halbesleben et al. 2014).

On the basis of the above discussion, the present study proposes that if employees are targeted by NWG, their *guanxi* closeness with colleagues will decrease. There are at least two reasons for this process. Firstly, NWG signals that the targets are unwelcome and excluded by their colleagues. For example, conversations may stop abruptly when the targets approach, or coworkers may deliberately avoid eye contact with them (Beersma and Van Kleef 2012; Foster 2004; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018). The targets’ feeling of being ‘out of the loop’ or ‘frozen out’ hinders them from maintaining close personal relationships (O’Fallon and Butterfield 2011). As they perceive this abnormal and embarrassing atmosphere, they tend to avoid other colleagues. This process consumes their relationship resources, thereby reducing their *guanxi* closeness. Secondly, because of the invisibility of NWG, targets cannot identify the source of the gossip (Chandra and Robinson 2010). However, it is human nature to try to find out its source and content (Leary et al. 1995; Ye, Zhu et al. 2019). As targets devote their resources to identifying the perpetrator and correcting the untrue content, their trust in and positive feelings

towards their colleagues are diminished: in other words, their *guanxi* closeness decreases (Kong 2018).

The reduction of *guanxi* closeness caused by NWG will further decrease targets' helping behavior and increase their knowledge-hiding behavior. COR theory points out that individuals lacking resources have difficulty in handling daily life (Hobfoll 1989, 2001; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018). Decreased *guanxi* closeness results in targets' subjective unwillingness (i.e., lack of sufficient psychological and relationship resources) or objective inability (i.e., limited energy or time) to complete extra actions. Targets with less *guanxi* closeness may feel they have no reason to help colleagues or share knowledge with them, and as a result reduce their voluntary helping behavior and increase knowledge hiding (Halbesleben and Bowler 2007; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018). We therefore propose:

H2a: *Guanxi* closeness mediates the negative effect of NWG on helping behavior.

H2b: *Guanxi* closeness mediates the positive effect of NWG on knowledge hiding.

2.5 The Moderating Role of Need for Affiliation

Prior research has shown that the negative impact of NWG depends on the targets' subjective perceptions (Babalola et al. 2019; Cheng et al. 2020; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018; Ye, Zhu et al. 2019). Indeed, NWG relates to an individual's perception that someone is spreading rumors about them, making false accusations against them, or communicating destructive information to others (Chandra and Robinson 2010). Thus, we propose that differences in individuals' need for affiliation will lead to varying degrees of NWG's impact on *guanxi* closeness.

Need for affiliation refers to individuals' desire for social contact or belongingness (Veroff

and Veroff 2016; Wiesenfeld et al. 2001; Zhu et al. 2017). The need for social contact is a basic human motivation, and includes seeking and enjoying relationships with others (Deci and Ryan 2008; Van Rompay et al. 2012). Furthermore, a higher degree of need for affiliation represents a stronger inclination to communicate and gain social gratification from harmonious interpersonal communication (Deci and Ryan 2008; Wiesenfeld et al. 2001). By contrast, individuals with a lower degree of need for affiliation feel more independent and care less about belongingness (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Wiesenfeld et al. 2001; Zhu et al. 2017).

In line with COR theory, this study proposes that need for affiliation can moderate the relationship between NWG and *guanxi* closeness. Several reasons lie behind this suggestion. Firstly, employees with a high need for affiliation value interdependence. Individuals have different perceptions of whether they are independent or interdependent, i.e., separate from or connected to others (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Wiesenfeld et al. 2001). Individuals with a high need for affiliation tend to perceive themselves as interdependent, to intrinsically value group membership, and to expect social rewards from harmonious relationships (O’Fallon and Butterfield 2011; Wiesenfeld et al. 2001). Since these employees are more sensitive and accurate in identifying and interpreting social cues, especially negative ones (Weinberger et al. 2010; Kong et al. 2017), they are also more likely to sense an abnormal atmosphere and perceive the existence of NWG. Compared to individuals with low affiliation needs, they value social connection and the sense of belonging more; and since NWG hinders the fulfilment of their needs to a greater extent, it may produce more negative responses, making it easier for them to get caught in the spiral of resource loss (Halbesleben et al. 2014; Hobfoll 1989, 2001; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018). In this way, NWG may lead to more harm to these targets and cause

greater resource consumption (Kong 2018).

Secondly, due to their emphasis on harmonious relationships, employees with a high need for affiliation may divert resources away from their work and towards coping with NWG and gaining support in the workplace. COR theory suggests that individuals need to replenish their resource pool once they have suffered a loss (Hobfoll 1989, 2001). Support resources from the organization, colleagues, and supervisors are especially important for employees with a high need for affiliation. However, it is hard for the targets of NWG to get support resources from their colleagues to replenish their resources pool, because the gossip itself means they are out of the loop (O'Fallon and Butterfield 2011). The more that targets try to invoke existing resources to acquire new ones, the more they will lose, and the more disappointed they will become in their relationships with other coworkers. Therefore, their *guanxi* closeness decreases more. On the contrary, low need for affiliation allows targets to focus more on themselves and self-regulation for resource supplementation, rather than relying on social interaction with other members of the organization. They may see themselves as separate from others, have less of an inherent need to belong, and may not feel the same benefits from warm relationships and team membership (Zhu et al. 2017). As a result, their resource loss is lower, and their *guanxi* closeness declines by a lower degree. The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

H3: Need for affiliation moderates the negative relationship between NWG and *guanxi* closeness, such that the relationship is stronger when employees' need for affiliation is high.

Based on the above arguments, we propose an integrated model in which *guanxi* closeness

mediates the impact of NWG on helping behavior and knowledge hiding, and need for affiliation moderates the relationship between NWG and *guanxi* closeness. Combining hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 3, we further suggest that the indirect effect of NWG on helping behavior and knowledge hiding will be stronger when employees' need for affiliation is high, because when they suffer NWG, they are more likely to get caught in a spiral of resource loss and find it harder to replenish their resources. We therefore propose:

H4a: Need for affiliation moderates the indirect effect of NWG on helping behavior through *guanxi* closeness, such that this indirect relationship is stronger for employees with a high need for affiliation.

H4b: Need for affiliation moderates the indirect effect of NWG on knowledge hiding through *guanxi* closeness, such that this indirect relationship is stronger for employees with a high need for affiliation.

3 Method

3.1 Sample and Procedures

The data for this study was collected using a three-wave survey method in 15 companies in the hospitality industry, all located in the major Chinese cities of Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Using samples from Eastern developing countries is very beneficial for diversity, given the prevalence of research based on samples that could be categorized as 'WEIRD' (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic), even though the majority of the world's population does not fall into this category (Henrich et al. 2010). The three-wave method, with a one-month interval between stages, was used to minimize the risk of common method variance (CMV) (Podsakoff

et al. 2003). In the first wave (T1), respondents provided their demographic information and their perceptions of NWG, as well an assessment of their need for affiliation. One month later (T2), the information on *guanxi* closeness was collected from participants who had completed the first questionnaire. After another month had elapsed (T3), those who had responded to both the T1 and T2 surveys reported their knowledge-hiding behavior, and their immediate supervisors were contacted to evaluate the respondents' helping behavior. A coding system was applied to make sure that the data collected in all three stages was from the same respondents.

The participants were selected with the cooperation of the heads of the companies who permitted the use of their staff lists for this purpose. A total of 1,050 employees was randomly selected to be invited to take part. In the three stages of the survey, responses were received from 846, 667, and 526 people, respectively, representing response rates of 80.6%, 78.8%, and 78.9%, respectively. Of the 526 questionnaires completed in the third and final stage, 62.7% were from female respondents. In terms of age, 17.5% of these third-stage respondents were aged 18-23, 29.5% were 24-29, 21.5% were 30-35, 17.5% were 36-41, and 14.0% were 42 and older. Regarding education, 66.3% of this group held a junior or high school degree, 25.9% a junior college degree, and 7.8% a bachelor's degree or above. The length of tenure was one year or less for 26.6% of the participants, two to three years for 41.6%, three to five years for 13.2%, and five years or more for 18.6%. Earnings were 500 dollars or less per month for 17.7% of the group, 500 to 700 dollars for 42.0%, 700 to 900 dollars for 23.0%, and 900 dollars or more for 17.3%.

3.2 Measures

The study used English language scales, which were translated into Chinese using a common

back-translation procedure (Brislin 1970). A five-point Likert-type scale was used, with scores ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The following paragraphs describe the details of each scale.

NWG: Chandra and Robinson's (2010) three-item scale was adopted, with sample items including “As recently as one month ago, others have communicated damaging information about me to others”. This scale has been widely used in the Chinese context in previous studies (Cheng et al. 2020; Wu, Birtch et al. 2018; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018; Ye, Zhu et al. 2019). The Cronbach's alpha value for this scale was .87.

Guanxi closeness: The study used a nine-item scale developed by Chen and Peng (2008), with items relating to the expressive component including “We have similar interests and hobbies”, and items relating to the instrumental component including “We can fully communicate about the problems at work”. The Cronbach's alpha value was .92.

Need for affiliation: This was assessed using Steers and Braunstein's (1976) five-item scale. Sample items included “When I have a choice, I try to work in a group instead of by myself”. The Cronbach's alpha value was .90.

Helping behavior: This was measured using a three-item scale developed by Yue et al. (2017). Sample items included “This employee helps other employees when it is clear their workload is too high”. The Cronbach's alpha value was .86.

Knowledge hiding: A 12-item scale developed by Connelly et al. (2012) was used, with sample items including “I pretended I did not know what s/he was talking about”. The Cronbach's alpha value was .94.

Control variables: Employees' gender, age, education, tenure, and income were used as

control variables. Gender and education were dummy-coded, with *male* coded as ‘0’ and *female* coded as ‘1’, *high school diploma or less* coded as ‘1’, *junior college degree* coded as ‘2’, and *bachelor's degree or above* coded as ‘3’.

4 Results

4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Multicollinearity Testing

A series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) was performed to test the constructs’ discrimination (Cheng et al. 2020). In order to compare models, we tested seven CFA models: a five-factor model, five four-factor models and a one-factor model. Table 1 shows the results. The five-factor model ($\chi^2 = 1484.60$, $df = 454$, $IFI = .90$, $CFI = .90$, and $RMSEA = .07$) provided the best fit for the data. The standardized factor loadings of all the items were greater than .70 and significant, illustrating that the discriminant validity of the key variables was satisfactory.

To examine the hypotheses, a series of multicollinearity tests was employed. The results showed that the variance inflation factors ranged between 1.01 and 1.28. Since they were less than 10.00, this indicates that multicollinearity was not an issue (Cohen et al. 2003).

[Table 1 near here]

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for each variable, including the means and standard deviations. Correlation analyses between the variables were also conducted and no abnormal values were found. As indicated in Table 2, NWG was negatively related to *guanxi* closeness ($r = -.33$, $p < .01$) and helping behavior ($r = -.33$, $p < .01$), and positively related to knowledge hiding ($r = .22$, $p < .01$). Moreover, *guanxi* closeness was positively related to helping behavior

($r = .28, p < .01$), and negatively related to knowledge hiding ($r = -.22, p < .01$).

[Table 2 near here]

4.3 Hypothesis Testing

To test Hypotheses 1a, 1b, 2a, and 2b, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were employed. In the first step, the control variables were inputted, followed by the independent variable (NWG), and the dependent variables (helping behavior and knowledge hiding). As shown in Table 3, NWG was negatively related to helping behavior ($\beta = -.32, p < .01$, Model 6), and positively related to knowledge hiding ($\beta = .22, p < .01$, Model 10). H1a and H1b were therefore supported.

Next, the mediating effect of *guanxi* closeness between NWG and interactions among colleagues (helping behavior and knowledge hiding) was tested. Model 2 suggested that NWG was negatively related to *guanxi* closeness ($\beta = -.33, p < .01$), while *guanxi* closeness was positively related to helping behavior ($\beta = .28, p < .01$, Model 7) and negatively related to knowledge hiding ($\beta = -.21, p < .01$, Model 11). After inputting *guanxi* closeness, NWG's negative effect on helping behavior and positive effect on knowledge hiding were reduced ($\beta = -.26, p < .01$, Model 8; $\beta = .17, p < .01$, Model 12), while both the positive correlation between *guanxi* closeness and helping behavior, and the negative correlation between *guanxi* closeness and knowledge hiding, remained ($\beta = .19, p < .01$, Model 8; $\beta = -.15, p < .01$, Model 12). Thus, H2a and H2b were partially supported.

In addition, we evaluated the statistical significance of the indirect effect of negative workplace gossip on helping behavior and knowledge-hiding behavior by adopting Edwards

and Lambert's (2007) PRODCLIN tool. The results indicated that NWG had a significant indirect effect on helping behavior via *guanxi* closeness, as the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval did not include zero ($\beta = -.07, [-.11, -.04]$). NWG also had a significant indirect effect on knowledge hiding via *guanxi* closeness, as the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval did not include zero ($\beta = .03, [.02, .06]$). Thus, H2a and H2b were further supported.

[Table 3 near here]

H3 proposed that need for affiliation played a moderating role between NWG and *guanxi* closeness. To prove this, a four-step regression analysis was used, in which the control variables, NWG, need for affiliation, and the interaction between NWG and need for affiliation were put into the regression equation step-by-step.

Before the above steps, NWG and need for affiliation were both mean-centered to create the interaction between them, so that multicollinearity could be reduced (Aiken and West 1991). As shown in Table 3, the interaction was negatively correlated to *guanxi* closeness ($\beta = -.20, p < .01$, Model 4). To further understand the moderating effect of need for affiliation, as recommended by Aiken and West (1991), one standard above and one below the mean of need for affiliation were adopted to show the interactive moderating effect. Figure 2 conformed to H3 and showed that NWG was more negatively related to *guanxi* closeness when need for affiliation was high ($\beta = -.33, p < .01$) rather than low ($\beta = .05, n.s.$). Thus, H3 was supported.

[Fig. 2 near here]

To test the moderated mediation hypotheses (H4a and H4b), Edwards and Lambert's (2007) bootstrapping procedure was then employed. As shown in Table 4, the indirect impact

of NWG on helping behavior through *guanxi* closeness varied significantly between different levels of need for affiliation ($\Delta \beta = -.07, p < .01$). H4a was therefore supported. In the same way, Table 5 shows that the indirect impact of NWG on knowledge hiding through *guanxi* closeness varied significantly across different levels of need for affiliation ($\Delta \beta = .09, p < .01$). Thus, H4b was supported. Furthermore, as shown in Tables 4 and 5, the first-stage moderating effects were significant ($\Delta \beta = -.31, p < .01$), further supporting H3.

[Table 4 and Table 5 near here]

5 Discussion

This research used a three-wave survey to test the impact of NWG on two types of interaction among colleagues, i.e., helping behavior and knowledge hiding, in the context of the hospitality industry in China. The results showed that NWG had a negative impact on helping behavior and a positive effect on knowledge hiding. Additionally, it led to reduced *guanxi* closeness, which in turn further decreased helping behavior and increased knowledge hiding. Moreover, need for affiliation was found to augment the negative effect of NWG on *guanxi* closeness.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

Our research contributes to the current literature in three main ways. Firstly, it extends the negative consequences of NWG to interactions among colleagues, demonstrating a negative impact on helping behavior and a positive impact on knowledge hiding. Although researchers have previously explored the impact of NWG on employees' behaviors, including in-role behavior and organizational citizen behavior, few studies have looked at NWG from the perspective of interactions among colleagues (Babalola et al. 2019; Lee, Chou et al. 2016; Wu,

Kwan et al. 2018; Xie et al. 2019). Since good interactions among colleagues help work progress smoothly, our study provides valuable insights by showing how helping behavior and knowledge hiding are affected by NWG.

Secondly, our results show how employees' workplace behaviors are influenced by NWG through *guanxi* closeness on the basis of COR theory. *Guanxi* occupies a very important position in Chinese society: employees need to rely on good interpersonal relationships in addition to personal abilities and skills to achieve their work goals. Since *guanxi* closeness is an indicator of individuals' *guanxi* with others at a particular time, it is of significance to understand its mediating role between NWG and interactions among colleagues. Previous research has called for more attention to be paid to the role of Chinese *guanxi* in the workplace (Mao et al. 2012). Therefore, by introducing *guanxi* closeness as a mediator, the present study provides a useful explanation of why NWG can influence interactions among colleagues. In addition, most previous studies have sought to explain relationships using other theories, including social exchange theory and leadership-member exchange theory. However, due to the covert nature of NWG, these theories are not applicable, and cannot be used to explain the overall decrease in individual *guanxi* closeness. Although this study is not the first to apply COR theory to interpersonal relationships (e.g., Guan and Frenkel 2019; Harris et al. 2011; Ren and Chadee 2017), it is the first, to our knowledge, to use it to study *guanxi* closeness. Thus, by integrating colleague *guanxi* closeness into a resource-based perspective, we extend the scope of COR theory and provide a new theoretical perspective of *guanxi* closeness as a mediator.

Thirdly, the study demonstrates an important boundary condition by investigating the

moderating role of employees' need for affiliation. The results verify that NWG is more harmful for targets with a high need for affiliation, because they value the sense of belonging and support from colleagues more than those with a low need for affiliation. Therefore, if they suffer from NWG and cannot get enough support resources from others, their *guanxi* closeness will be further decreased, causing less helping behavior and more knowledge hiding. Thus, we provide further evidence for the notion that the influence of NWG depends to some extent on individual traits (Babalola et al. 2019; Cheng et al. 2020; Wu, Kwan et al. 2018; Ye, Zhu et al. 2019). In addition, while previous studies have shown that employees with a high need for affiliation value group membership and usually have strong organizational identification (Wiesenfeld et al. 2001; Zhu et al. 2017), the present study has shown that they are also more vulnerable to the negative effects of NWG. This suggests that looking at individual characteristics from different perspectives may result in different findings.

5.2 Managerial Implications

The empirical results of this study have a number of managerial implications. Firstly, owing to NWG's serious negative consequences, our study highlights the need for individuals and organizations to address the issue. The findings suggest that managers should pay attention to the atmosphere of their organization to ensure that NWG is within an acceptable range. Since prior studies have shown that NWG is ubiquitous (Babalola et al. 2019), managers should find practical ways to reduce its occurrence. These could include making clear to everyone in an organization that NWG may hurt targets both mentally and physically, encouraging employees to put themselves in each other's shoes and not to breach each other's personal privacy, and setting rules such as a workplace ban on discussing other people's private affairs.

Secondly, as our research demonstrates, *guanxi* closeness is essential if employees are to successfully perform their work tasks and achieve long-term development. Furthermore, a united team is better able to accomplish organizational goals and to enhance the long-term interests of both organizations and individuals. To help create and maintain a positive organizational climate, managers could consider organizing staff activities outside the workplace, such as outdoor team-building events or inviting employees for afternoon tea. These methods may help promote mutual understanding among colleagues and thus form a harmonious organizational climate, simultaneously decreasing NWG while enhancing *guanxi* closeness between employees.

Thirdly, considering that need for affiliation could affect how targets perceive NWG, it is important for managers to consider this personal trait. Our results highlight that NWG's resource loss consequences are magnified when need for affiliation is high, because it hinders the achievement of employees' need for affiliation and prevents them replenishing their resource pool using support from colleagues. Therefore, managers first need to understand the level of need for affiliation of their subordinates, which can be achieved either through a questionnaire or simply by holding informal discussions with them, before ensuring that all employees have a sense of belonging to the organization and that all feel they are needed by the team. Particular attention should be paid to employees with a high need for affiliation when they become the targets of NWG. Manager should take care of their feelings and work to rebuild their trust in other people, and engage in one-to-one communication with them to minimize the harmful effects of NWG.

Fourthly, given the importance of helping behavior and knowledge sharing (the

counterpart of knowledge hiding), measures should be taken to promote both beneficial behaviors within an organization. Although they are volunteering behaviors, rewards could be set to motivate employees to help others and actively share knowledge. For example, if managers deliver verbal praise at staff meetings to employees who have engaged in these positive behaviors, a sense of pride could be engendered, making staff more willing to engage in such behaviors and thereby creating a virtuous circle.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Even with these contributions, the study has some limitations. The first relates to CMV, which was impossible to completely eliminate given the use of self-reporting questionnaires (Podsakoff et al. 2012). However, several steps were taken to reduce its influence, for example through the use of anonymous questionnaires and a three-wave collection method, and tests showed that CMV was not a serious concern.

Secondly, although many scholars observe that NWG's verbal, covert nature makes it difficult for targets identify the culprits (Chandra and Robinson 2010), they may still suspect particular individuals and treat them differently as a result. Our study did not take this possibility into account, and we hope future researchers will seek to explore it using an experimental approach.

Thirdly, our study did not examine the possibility that changes in *guanxi* closeness might be an antecedent of NWG as well as an outcome of it. In other words, if individuals have bad workplace relationships, it is possible that their colleagues are more likely to spread negative information about them. However, as our study focused on the consequences and mechanisms of NWG's effects, this interesting possibility was not explored. Future studies could use

longitudinal data or experimental methods to verify this possible two-way causal relationship.

Fourthly, *guanxi* is a Chinese concept deeply rooted in the country's culture (Chen et al. 2013; Dunning and Kim 2007). In other countries and cultures, *guanxi* may have a less central role, and social affects and perceptions are less closely intertwined (Chen et al. 2013; Chua et al. 2009). Since our study took place in China, future research could consider the issue of cross-cultural generalizability by testing our model in different settings, in order to enrich the relevant literature further.

Fifthly, since *guanxi* closeness partially mediates the relationship between NWG and employees' workplace behaviors, other theories may also explain the underlying mechanism, which means there may be other mediators between the independent and dependent variables. Future research could explore this issue from different theoretical perspectives.

Finally, as the impact of NWG on employees' workplace behaviors was examined only in the context of the hospitality industry, future studies could test the relationship in other industries, such as high-tech enterprises.

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Figure legends

Fig. 1 The conceptual model of this study

Fig. 2 The interactive effects of negative workplace gossip and need for affiliation on *guanxi* closeness

Tables

Table 1 Confirmatory factor analysis results

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	IFI	CFI	RMSEA
Five-factor model: each variable as a separate factor	1484.60	454	3.27	.90	.90	.07
Four-factor model 1: <i>guanxi</i> closeness and helping behavior were combined into one factor	2184.18	458	4.77	.84	.84	.09
Four-factor model 2: NWG and knowledge hiding were combined into one factor	2312.41	458	5.05	.82	.82	.09
Four-factor model 3: NWG and need for affiliation were combined into one factor	2291.34	458	5.00	.83	.82	.09
Four-factor model 4: NWG and helping behavior were combined into one factor	2125.85	458	4.64	.84	.84	.08
Four-factor model 5: <i>guanxi</i> closeness and need for affiliation were combined into one factor	2974.77	458	6.50	.76	.76	.10
One-factor model	6785.48	464	14.62	.40	.39	.16

Notes: ¹ $N = 526$; NWG = negative workplace gossip; IFI = incremental fit index; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation.

Table 2 Means, standard deviations and correlations of all the study variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	.63	.48									
2. Age	2.81	1.30	.16**								
3. Education	1.41	.63	.01	-.04							
4. Tenure	2.24	1.04	-.04	.42**	.15**						
5. Monthly salary	3.33	1.09	-.08	-.02	.01	.06					
6. NWG	2.13	.89	.00	-.02	.00	-.09*	-.02				
7. <i>Guanxi</i> closeness	3.13	.66	.04	.03	.01	.05	.06	-.33**			
8. Need for affiliation	3.56	.84	.04	.05	.00	.05	.07	-.25**	.11*		
9. Helping behavior	2.60	.93	.08	-.02	.11*	.10*	.01	-.33**	.28**	.02	
10. Knowledge hiding	3.59	.63	-.07	-.06	-.10*	-.10*	-.08	.22**	-.22**	-.13**	-.12**

Notes: ¹*N* = 526; * *p* < .05; ** *p* < 0.01; NWG = negative workplace gossip; Gender: “0” = *male*, “1” = *female*; Education: “1” = *high school diploma or less*, “2” = *junior college degree*, and “3” = *bachelor's degree or above*.

Table 3 Results of hypothesis testing

	<i>Guanxi</i> closeness				Helping behavior				Knowledge hiding			
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12
Control variable												
Gender	.04	.04	.04	.05	.09*	.09*	.08	.08*	-.07	-.07	-.06	-.07
Age	.00	.01	.01	.03	-.08	-.07	-.08	-.07	-.02	-.03	-.02	-.03
Education	-.00	.01	.01	-.01	.08	.09*	.08*	.09*	-.09	-.09*	-.09*	-.09*
Tenure	.05	.01	.01	-.00	.12*	.09	.11*	.08	-.07	-.05	-.06	-.05
Monthly salary	.06	.05	.05	.05	.01	.004	-.01	-.01	-.08	-.08	-.07	-.07
Independent variable												
NWG		-.33**	-.32**	-.29**		-.32**		-.26**		.22**		.17**
Mediator												
<i>Guanxi</i> closeness							.28**	.19**			-.21**	-.15**
Moderator												
Need for affiliation			.03	-.03								
Interaction												
NWG × Need for affiliation				-.20**								
<i>F</i>	.76	10.94**	9.42**	11.02**	3.12*	12.92**	10.13**	14.41**	3.02*	7.01**	6.53**	7.79**
ΔF	.76	61.41**	.35	19.86**	3.12*	60.18**	43.93**	20.46**	3.02*	26.28**	23.45**	11.60**
<i>R</i> ²	.01	.11	.11	.15	.03	.13	.11	.16	.03	.08	0.07	.10
ΔR^2	.01	.10	.00	.03	.03	.10	.08	.03	.03	.05	0.04	.02

Notes: ¹*N* = 526; * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; NWG = negative workplace gossip.

Table 4 Results of the moderated path analysis (Y = Helping behavior)

Moderator variable	NWG (X) → Guanxi closeness (M) → Helping behavior (Y)				
	Stage		Effect		
	First	Second	Direct effects	Indirect effects	Total effects
	(P_{MX})	(P_{YM})	(P_{YX})	($P_{YM}P_{MX}$)	($P_{YX}+P_{YM}P_{MX}$)
Simple paths for low need for affiliation	-.06	.21**	-.05	-.01	-.07
Simple paths for high need for affiliation	-.37**	.23**	-.47**	-.08**	-.56**
Differences	-.31**	.02	-.42**	-.07**	-.49**

Notes: ¹N = 526; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; NWG = negative workplace gossip; P_{MX} : Path from NWG to *guanxi* closeness; P_{YM} : Path from *guanxi* closeness to helping behavior; P_{YX} : Path from NWG to helping behavior. ²Low need for affiliation refers to one standard deviation below the mean value of need for affiliation; high need for affiliation refers to one standard deviation above the mean value of need for affiliation. ³Tests of differences for the direct, indirect, and total effects were based on bias-corrected confidence intervals obtained from bootstrapping estimates.

Table 5 Results of the moderated path analysis (Y = Knowledge hiding)

Moderator variable	NWG (X) → Guanxi closeness (M) → Knowledge hiding (Y)				
	Stage		Effect		
	First	Second	Direct effects	Indirect effects	Total effects
	(P_{MX})	(P_{YM})	(P_{YX})	($P_{YM}P_{MX}$)	($P_{YX}+P_{YM}P_{MX}$)
Simple paths for low need for affiliation	-.06	.03	.04	-.00	.03
Simple paths for high need for affiliation	-.37**	-.24**	.14**	.09**	.22**
Differences	-.31**	-.27**	.10	.09**	.19**

Notes: ¹N = 526; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; NWG = negative workplace gossip; P_{MX} : Path from NWG to *guanxi* closeness; P_{YM} : Path from *guanxi* closeness to knowledge hiding; P_{YX} : Path from NWG to knowledge hiding. ²Low need for affiliation refers to one standard deviation below the mean value of need for affiliation; high need for affiliation refers to one standard deviation above the mean value of need for affiliation. ³Tests of differences for the direct, indirect, and total effects were based on bias-corrected confidence intervals obtained from bootstrapping estimates.

Figures

Figure 1

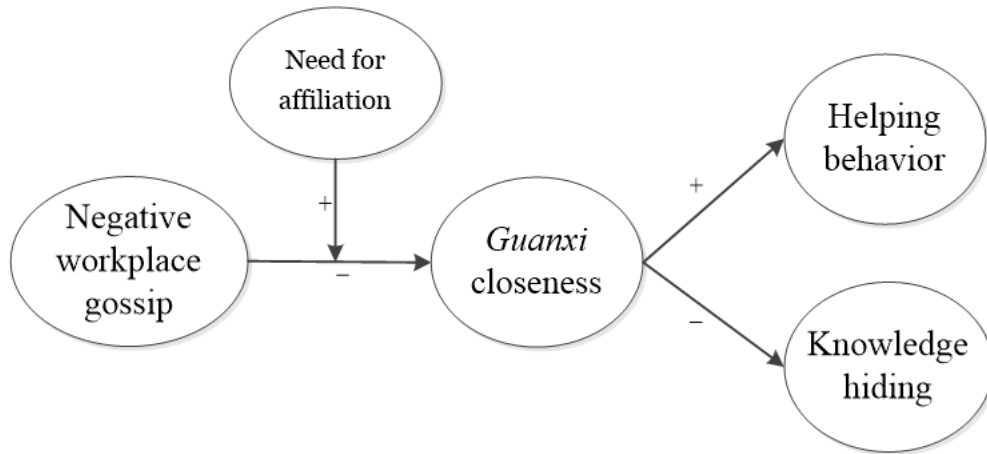


Fig. 1 The conceptual model of this study

Figure 2

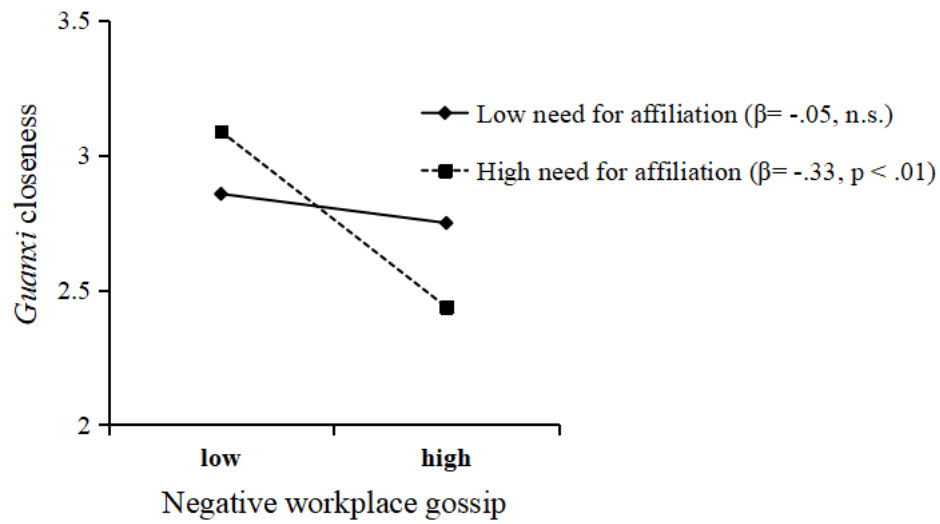


Fig. 2 The interactive effects of negative workplace gossip and need for affiliation on *guanxi* closeness