

Negative workplace gossip and targets' subjective well-being

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

3
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

1 **Introduction**

2 Gossip is so prevalent that virtually everyone has been involved in it to some extent,
3 whether by engaging in it or hearing it (Kuo, Chang, Quinton, Lu, & Lee, 2015). People
4 spend approximately 65% of their speaking time gossiping (Dunbar, 2004; Emler, 1994).
5 Gossip has been described as informal and evaluative talks between a few individuals about
6 someone who is not present (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). It is omnipresent and is divided into
7 positive and negative categories (Babalola, Ren, Kobinah, Qu, Garba, & Guo, 2019; Brady,
8 Brown, & Liang, 2017; Fine & Rosnow, 1978). Normally, negative information has a more
9 profound influence than positive information (Baumeister, Bratslaysky, Finkenauer, & Vohs,
10 2001; Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Divorce, extra-
11 marital affairs, and stigmatization are typical topics of negative gossip (Kuo, Lu, & Kuo,
12 2013; Michelson, Van Iterson, & Waddington, 2010; Pierce, Byrne, & Aguinis, 1996).

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

1 behaviors (Grosser et al., 2010; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Specifically, it can lower targets'
2 organizational identification (Ye et al., 2019), reduce their organization-based self-esteem
3 (Wu, Birtch et al., 2018), and decrease their proactive behaviors towards co-workers, the
4 organization, and customers (Tian et al., 2019).

5 Despite a wealth of research on the effects of negative workplace gossip, there has
6 been no focus on how it affects targets' subjective well-being (SWB), which is an inner
7 feeling rather than an external performance. SWB measures individuals' quality of life
8 (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003), and can predict their affective organizational commitment
9 (Schulz, Martin, & Meyer, 2017), as well as their supportive social relationships and work
10 performance (De Neve, Diener, Tay, & Xuereb, 2013). Some previous studies have shown a
11 causal link between negative workplace gossip and another area relating to internal feelings,
12 emotional exhaustion (Liu et al., 2020; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018); however there are important
13 differences between the two concepts. SWB consists of cognitive evaluation and emotional
14 experience. Cognitive evaluation refers to life satisfaction, which is an individual's cognitive
15 assessment of their overall quality of life, and emotional experience includes positive and
16 negative emotions (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). In contrast, emotional exhaustion is
17 a one-dimensional variable, describing a chronic state of emotional depletion with no positive
18 side (Liu et al., 2020). Therefore, the meaning of SWB is broader than that of emotional
19 exhaustion. Targets of negative workplace gossip may be negatively affected in their
20 emotional and psychological states, which will have a further impact on their SWB and thus
21 affect their work attitude and behavior.

1 Given the vital importance of SWB, it is therefore significant to focus on how it is
2 affected by negative workplace gossip. We propose a theoretical framework based on
3 conservation of resources (COR) theory to explain this process. According to COR theory,
4 individuals' resources are limited, and the loss of these resources can trigger individual
5 tension and stress (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001; Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018).
6 Gossip usually contains negative evaluations of targets and damages their reputation
7 (Chandra & Robinson, 2010; Shackelford, 1997). Targets' attempts to find the source of
8 gossip and clarify the truth will continuously deplete their **valuable personal** resources (e.g.,
9 time, energy, and mood) (Wu, Birtch et al., 2018). In addition, gossip generally indicates that
10 the targets have been ostracized, and negative evaluations in gossip may cause more
11 colleagues to shun or reject them, which leaves them constantly deprived of social support
12 resources (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Owens, Baker, Sumpter, & Cameron,
13 2016; Ye et al., 2019). Therefore, negative workplace gossip causes additional psychological
14 distress to the targets. Having had their resources drained by negative workplace gossip,
15 targets with psychological distress will lack the resources to maintain their SWB.

16 In addition, negative workplace gossip, as a work stressor perceived by individuals,
17 will produce significantly different responses in different employees, depending on their level
18 of emotional intelligence (Liu et al., 2020; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018). Emotional intelligence is
19 *“the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among*
20 *them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions”* (Salovey & Mayer,
21 1990, p. 189). Employees with high emotional intelligence treat negative workplace gossip in
22 a more positive way and have more resources to deal with it well. Hence, we argue that

1 employees with high emotional intelligence are less affected by negative workplace gossip
2 than those with low emotional intelligence; in other words, emotional intelligence can
3 moderate the relationship between negative workplace gossip and psychological distress.

4 This research therefore has three main goals: to examine the impact of negative
5 workplace gossip on employees' SWB; to expand the research in this area by introducing an
6 important mediator (psychological distress); and to integrate a new boundary condition
7 (emotional intelligence) into the theoretical framework to further assess what factors can
8 ameliorate or exacerbate the destructive effects of negative workplace gossip.

9 The study enriches the literature in several ways. Firstly, it extends knowledge of
10 negative workplace gossip by extending its adverse outcomes to employees' SWB, and
11 strengthens our understanding of the causes of reduced SWB by identifying negative gossip
12 as an essential antecedent. Secondly, by investigating the mediating role of psychological
13 distress and the moderating role of emotional intelligence, we offer important insights into
14 the inherent mechanisms and boundary conditions of the effects of negative workplace gossip
15 on SWB. Thirdly, our study shows that COR theory is an important tool in gaining a full
16 understanding of the consequences of negative workplace gossip. As individuals have only
17 limited resources, COR theory explains how employees might feel when negative workplace
18 gossip consumes their valuable resources. Finally, our multi-wave research design reduces
19 common method bias and improves the validity of our research results. Figure 1 presents the
20 conceptual model.

21 -----
22 INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE
23 -----

1 **Theoretical background and hypothesis development**

2 ***Defining negative workplace gossip***

3 Almost everyone gossips (Dunbar, Marriott, & Duncan, 1997; Emler, 1994). Negative
4 workplace gossip, one of the subsets of gossip, is defined as the discussion of a co-worker's
5 personal information, or the spreading of rumors, behind their backs (Chandra & Robinson,
6 2010). Distinct from other informal talks, negative workplace gossip involves sensitive
7 private issues and the negative evaluation of targets (Foster, 2004; Leaper & Holliday, 1995;
8 Wu, Kwan et al., 2018). As it spreads, the gossip may become distorted, and the incorrect,
9 incomplete contents will hurt targets' status, power, and esteem (Bok, 1982; Dunbar, 2004;
10 Foster, 2004; Kuo et al., 2015; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Rosnow, 2001). Targets may consider
11 negative workplace gossip as an attack, aggression, or victimization (Beersma & Van Kleef,
12 2012; Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012). However, it differs from other types of
13 mistreatment in a social context (Wu, Birtch et al., 2018) or in the workplace. For example,
14 workplace harassment, which refers to "*problematic interpersonal workplace interactions in*
15 *which one or more employees feel themselves to have been victimized by one or more other*
16 *employees*" (Claybourn, 2011, p. 283), has a number of significant differences from negative
17 workplace gossip, even though both are forms of work stressor (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Wu,
18 Kwan et al., 2018). For example, workplace harassment aims to harm others intentionally
19 (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004; Bowling & Beehr, 2006), while negative workplace gossip causes
20 harm to its targets in a more indirect way: it is spread behind people's backs, and its covert
21 nature makes it hard for targets to find its source (Wu, Birtch et al., 2018; Wu, Kwan et al.,
22 2018). Negative workplace gossip is also a relatively common behavior performed by almost

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

5 *Negative workplace gossip and SWB*

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

12 SWB influences personal mental health and the success of an organization (Schulz et
13 al., 2017). It is also a significant predictor of supportive social relationships, affective
14 organizational commitment, and work performance (De Neve et al., 2013; Schulz et al.,
15 2017). It is therefore worthy of deeper study. Most prior studies on SWB's antecedents have
16 focused on different leadership types, such as family-supportive leadership, ethical
17 leadership, and transformational leadership (Arnold, Turner, Barling, Kelloway, & McKee,
18 2007; Matthews, Mills, Trout, & English, 2014; Yang, 2014). Notably, Tan, Yam, Zhang and
19 Brown (2021) paid attention to the effect of gossip on individuals' psychological well-being,
20 i.e., the state of their mental health. However, no other studies have explored how the poor
21 mental state caused by being the target of negative workplace gossip influences SWB from
22 the perspective of COR theory.

1 The present study therefore uses the prism of COR theory to identify how negative
2 workplace gossip can diminish employees' SWB. Firstly, as shown by prior studies, negative
3 gossip can be regarded as a type of work stressor, which will cost targets significant time and
4 energy to deal with (Wu, Kwan et al., 2018), invade their privacy, undermine their reputation,
5 and make them feel excluded by supervisors and colleagues (Tian et al., 2019; Wu, Birtch et
6 al., 2018; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018; Ye et al., 2019). These consequences can cause targets to
7 feel angry or aggrieved, draining their limited valuable resources as they seek to find the
8 source of the gossip (Hobfoll, 1989; Leary et al., 1995). Secondly, negative workplace gossip
9 has been shown to adversely influence workplace atmosphere and relationships (Kong,
10 2018). For example, targets may feel pushed aside by their colleagues and supervisors,
11 leading them to consider interpersonal relationships as meaningless and worthless, and to
12 experience a decline in affective trust (Grosser et al., 2010; Leary et al., 1995; Wu, Birtch et
13 al., 2018); as a consequence, they find it harder to gain support and access resources from
14 their workplace (Chua, Ingram, & Morris, 2008; Hobfoll, 1989; Yao, Luo, & Zhang, 2020).
15 This cycle of continuous loss and non-replenishment of resources results in a decrease in
16 targets' SWB. Thirdly, COR theory suggests that human beings, as a biological species, have
17 a basic need to adapt to and survive in the environment in which they find themselves
18 (Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014; Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al.,
19 2018), which drives individuals to acquire, maintain, cultivate, and protect their resources.
20 Once negative workplace gossip has drained targets' resources and made it hard to integrate
21 into the workplace, employees' SWB will decrease accordingly. Based on the above

1 arguments, we suggest that negative workplace gossip will deplete targets' valuable resources
2 and reduce their SWB, and therefore propose:

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

4 *Psychological distress as a mediator*

5 Psychological distress refers to individuals' cognitive and emotional discomfort, and
6 anxiety (Fletcher & Payne, 1980). It is an affective state characterized by negative thoughts,
7 depression, and anxiety (Hardy, Woods, & Wall, 2003; Selye, 1976). Psychological distress
8 often arises because of stressful and emotionally traumatic experiences, including verbal
9 attacks (Keashly & Harvey, 2005). Negative workplace gossip can increase targets'
10 psychological distress in several ways. Firstly, it adversely influences targets' identity,
11 damages their reputation, and marginalizes their power and status (Rosnow, 2001;
12 Shackelford, 1997). Accordingly, targets spend personal valuable resources (e.g.,
13 psychological resources) dealing with these adverse consequences (Hobfoll, 1989). Secondly,
14 it indicates unsupportive working conditions and colleagues (Leary et al., 1995; Ye et al.,
15 2019). Targets may experience doubt and hostility in the working environment, which further
16 affects their interpersonal communication. Therefore, it is difficult for targets to access new
17 resources from their colleagues and supervisors in order to replenish their resource pool
18 (Hobfoll, 1989). The loss of existing resources and the failure to acquire new ones will
19 trigger the individual's stress response (Hobfoll, 1989). In short, negative workplace gossip
20 drains targets' resources, and causes tension and pressure (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al.,
21 2018). As a result, psychological distress arises (Lim & Tai, 2014).

1 Psychological distress due to negative workplace gossip can lead to a reduction in
2 SWB. Firstly, targets suffering psychological distress have fewer personal resources with
3 which to tackle their daily life and work. This lack of positive psychological resources makes
4 effective motivation harder, and targets will easily become trapped in a spiral of resource loss
5 (Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002; Demerouti, Bakker, & Bulters, 2004; Mäkikangas,
6 Hyvönen, Leskinen, Kinnunen, & Feldt, 2011; Whitman, Halbesleben, & Holmes, 2014).
7 Since resource depletion creates unhappy feelings for employees, their SWB is lowered.
8 Secondly, employees suffering from psychological distress are generally dissatisfied
9 (Greenley, Young, & Schoenherr, 1982). They focus more on negative aspects, make fewer
10 effective resource investments, and pay less attention to maintaining existing resources to
11 cope with future losses; therefore they face a greater chance of resource depletion (Hobfoll,
12 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). As a result, employees' SWB will be negatively affected. Based
13 on the above, we hypothesize that employees' psychological distress **will** reduce their SWB.
14 We therefore propose:

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

17 *Emotional intelligence as a moderator*

18 It is also important to identify the boundary conditions in which the effects of
19 negative workplace gossip will be amplified or weakened (Liu et al., 2020). Previous studies
20 have suggested that targets with different characteristics respond differently to gossip (Foster,
21 2004; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018). Hence, individuals with differences in emotional intelligence
22 will have different responses to negative workplace gossip. Emotional intelligence describes

1 the ability to accurately evaluate both one's own emotions and those of others, and to
2 adaptively regulate one's own emotions to guide one's thinking and behavior (Mayer,
3 Roberts, & Barsade, 2008; Sy, Tram, & O'Hara, 2006). Indeed, emotional intelligence can be
4 considered as a kind of personal characteristics resource (Hobfoll, 1989). It involves skills
5 and traits that help individuals resist stress, and can serve as a mitigating coping factor to
6 alleviate stress-related outcomes (Prati, Liu, Perrewé, & Ferris, 2009).

7 Drawing on COR theory, we assert that emotional intelligence weakens the
8 relationship between negative workplace gossip and psychological distress. The first point to
9 note is that individuals with high emotional intelligence are better able to make efficient
10 resource investments to cope with stress than those with low emotional intelligence
11 (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 2018; Ito & Brotheridge, 2003; Vinokur & Schul,
12 2002). Therefore, individuals with high emotional intelligence can recover more quickly from
13 the resource losses caused by negative workplace gossip, and can access new resources to
14 replenish their resource pool immediately by various means (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al.,
15 2018). Consequently, they are less likely to suffer from psychological distress. Secondly,
16 employees with high emotional intelligence show greater resilience, which makes them more
17 adaptable in stressful situations (Schneider, Lyons, & Khazon, 2013). Individuals with high
18 emotional intelligence regard stress as a challenge rather than a threat, and tend to take a
19 proactive approach to negative workplace gossip, e.g., resolving potential conflicts and
20 contradictions, and improving relationships with other colleagues (Sy et al., 2006). These
21 actions will bring them more resources, thereby reducing psychological distress. In contrast,
22 individuals with low emotional intelligence can easily interpret minor negative comments as

1 malicious gossip attacks (Wert & Salovey, 2004). They do not have enough resources and
2 abilities to regulate their emotions, and are more likely to be nervous and irritable (Chang &
3 Chang, 2010). Based on the above discussion, we argue that employees with low emotional
4 intelligence are more vulnerable to negative workplace gossip, leading to more resource
5 losses, which in turn causes more psychological distress. Hence, we propose:

6 **Hypothesis 3:** Emotional intelligence moderates the relationship between negative
7 workplace gossip and psychological distress, such that the positive relationship is
8 weaker when emotional intelligence is high than when emotional intelligence is low.

9 Based on the arguments outlined above, we propose an integrated model in which
10 psychological distress mediates the impact of negative workplace gossip on SWB, and
11 emotional intelligence moderates the relationship between negative workplace gossip and
12 psychological distress. Combining Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3, we further suggest that the
13 indirect effect of negative workplace gossip on SWB via psychological distress will be
14 weaker when employees' emotional intelligence is high, because these individuals have more
15 resources with which to handle negative workplace gossip, and can be expected to actively
16 seek ways to alleviate the positive effects on psychological distress and negative effects on
17 future SWB. Therefore, we propose:

18 **Hypothesis 4:** Emotional intelligence moderates the indirect effect of negative
19 workplace gossip on SWB through psychological distress, such that this indirect
20 relationship is weaker for employees with high emotional intelligence.

1 **Method**

2 *Sample and procedures*

3 The data for this study was gathered from five companies in two major Chinese cities,
4 **Guangzhou and Shenzhen**. It was collected in three stages, organized at one-month intervals
5 to reduce potential common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Lee, 2003). In the first
6 stage (T1), respondents were asked to provide their demographic information, along with
7 their perceptions of negative workplace gossip and emotional intelligence. In the second
8 stage (T2), conducted a month later, the participants reported their feelings of psychological
9 distress. In the third stage (T3), conducted after another month, they were asked to rate their
10 level of SWB. Before each wave, we made it clear to all the participants that this was an
11 anonymous survey. The respondents were asked to fill in the last four digits of their phone
12 number on each questionnaire to enable us to confirm that all three sets of information were
13 obtained from the same participants.

14 Using staff lists provided by the firms, 476 employees were randomly selected as
15 participants. In the first wave, 362 usable questionnaires were received, a response rate of
16 76.05%. These respondents were contacted again in the second wave, at which point 289
17 questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 79.83%. Finally, the second-wave
18 respondents who had completed the questionnaires were contacted again for the third stage,
19 and 243 completed questionnaires were received, a response rate of 84.08%. Of these 243
20 third-stage respondents, 55.6% were male, 49.4% were aged 26 to 35, 13.2% were aged 36 to
21 45, and 16.9% were 46 and older. Their educational background also varied, with 24.3%

1 holding a junior or high school degree, 32.5% a junior college degree, and 43.2% a
2 bachelor's degree or above.

3 *Measures*

4 All the items in our study were developed in English and then translated into Chinese
5 using a common back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1970). They were evaluated using a
6 five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The
7 items are discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

8 *Negative workplace gossip.* We used Chandra and Robinson's (2010) three-item scale
9 to measure negative workplace gossip. Sample items included "As recently as one
10 month ago, others have communicated damaging information about you to others". This scale
11 has been widely used in the Chinese context in previous studies (Cheng, Dong, Zhang,
12 Shaalan, Guo, & Peng, 2020; Wu, Birtch et al., 2018; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018; Ye et al., 2019).
13 The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.794.

14 *Psychological distress.* To measure the employees' level of psychological distress, we
15 used the 10-item scale developed by Kessler, Andrews, Colpe, Hiripi, Mroczek, Normand,
16 Walters, and Zaslavsky (2002). Sample items included "Are you constantly distressed by
17 various psychological health symptoms such as feeling restless or fidgety?" On a scale
18 ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (frequently), participants reported the frequency of these feelings
19 in the prior month. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.818.

20 *Emotional intelligence.* Emotional intelligence was assessed using the 16-item scale
21 developed by Wong and Law (2002). This scale comprises four dimensions: (1) self-emotion
22 appraisal (four items), e.g., "I really understand what I feel"; (2) emotion appraisal of other

1 people (four items), e.g., “I am sensitive to the feelings and emotions of others”; (3) use of
2 emotion (four items), e.g., “I am a self-motivated person”; and (4) regulation of emotion (four
3 items), e.g., “I can always calm down quickly when I am very angry”. Participants were
4 asked to rate all the items on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5
5 (strongly agree). Law, Wong, & Song (2004, p.488) state that “*emotional intelligence is an*
6 *overall latent construct underlying its four dimensions*”. The overall Cronbach's alpha value
7 was 0.866.

8 *SWB*. This scale includes life satisfaction and affect. The life satisfaction scale was
9 developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin (1985) and has five items such as “I am
10 satisfied with my life”. The affect scale, adapted by Segura and González-Romá (2003) from
11 Warr (1990), is made up of six items such as “To what extent, over the last weeks, did you
12 feel cheerful/ enthusiastic/ optimistic/ tense/ jittery/ anxious?” The first three items measure
13 positive affect, while the last three measure negative affect. The Cronbach's alpha values for
14 life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect were 0.843, 0.739, and 0.812,
15 respectively. Participants were asked to rate the items on a five-point scale, ranging from 1
16 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). We computed SWB by adding up the standardized
17 life satisfaction and positive affect scores, and then subtracting the standardized negative
18 affect score (Kifer, Heller, Perunovic, & Galinsky, 2013). The scores ranged from -1 to 1,
19 with higher scores meaning higher SWB.

20 *Control variables*. Previous research (e.g., Ramos and Lopez, 2018; Zhou, Zou,
21 Woods, & Wu, 2019) has observed significant relationships between demographic
22 characteristics and SWB. In the present study, the employees’ gender, age, education, and

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

8 **Results**

9 *Non-response bias and attrition analysis*

10 As some respondents dropped out in this time-lagged research, Goodman and Blum's
11 (1996) procedure was adopted to examine the risk of non-response bias in the three surveys.
12 First, multiple logistic regression was performed using the survey time as the dependent
13 variable, and the control variables and negative workplace gossip as independent variables.
14 The results showed that all the logistic regression coefficients were non-significant ($p >$
15 0.05). In addition, t -tests were used to check for significant mean differences in the control
16 variables and negative workplace gossip across waves 1, 2, and 3. The results showed no
17 significant mean differences among these variables ($p > 0.05$). These procedures therefore
18 showed that the respondents had dropped out randomly (Liu, Kwan, Wu, & Wu, 2010; Liu et
19 al., 2020).

20 *Confirmatory factor analysis and common method variance analysis*

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

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

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

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18 INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE
19 -----

20 *Descriptive statistics*

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

1 gossip was positively correlated with psychological distress ($r = 0.290, p < 0.01$) and
2 negatively related to SWB ($r = -0.289, p < 0.01$). Moreover, psychological distress was
3 negatively related to SWB ($r = -0.253, p < 0.01$).

4 -----
5 INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE
6 -----

7 ***Hypothesis testing***

8 Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were adopted to verify Hypothesis 1. The
9 control variables, independent variable (negative workplace gossip), and dependent variable
10 (SWB) were placed in separate steps. The results indicated that negative workplace gossip
11 was negatively related to SWB ($\beta = -0.288, p < 0.01$). Hence, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

12 PROCESS was used with the bootstrapping method to test the mediation effects
13 (Hayes, 2013). The results show that negative workplace gossip had a significant indirect
14 effect on SWB via psychological distress, as the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval did
15 not include zero ($\beta = -0.042, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.083, -0.009]$). Additionally, the direct effect of
16 negative workplace gossip and SWB was statistically significant ($\beta = -0.249, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.373,$
17 $-0.124]$). Hypothesis 2 was therefore partially supported.

18 -----
19 INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE
20 -----

21 To reduce multicollinearity, we mean-centered negative workplace gossip and
22 emotional intelligence when creating the interaction between them (Aiken & West, 1991). As
23 shown in Table 3, the interaction was negatively related to psychological distress ($\beta = -0.148,$

1 95% CI [-0.278, -0.017]). To understand the moderating effect more clearly, we followed
2 Aiken and West's (1991) recommendation by adopting one standard deviation above and one
3 below the mean of emotional intelligence. Figure 2 shows the interactive mode, which
4 conformed to Hypothesis 3. More precisely, negative workplace gossip was more positively
5 correlated with psychological distress when emotional intelligence was low ($\beta = 0.413, p <$
6 0.01) than when it was high ($\beta = 0.117, n.s.$). This result therefore supported Hypothesis 3.

7 -----
8 INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE
9 -----

10 To test the moderated mediation (Hypothesis 4), we adopted Hayes' (2013)
11 bootstrapping procedure. The results, presented in Table 4, suggest that emotional intelligence
12 had a significant indirect effect on the relationship between perceived negative workplace
13 gossip and SWB when emotional intelligence was low (conditional indirect effect = -0.059,
14 95% CI [-0.121, -0.016]) than when it was high (conditional indirect effect = -0.017, 95% CI
15 [-0.058, 0.004]). Furthermore, the index of moderated mediation was statistically significant
16 for emotional intelligence (Index = 0.021, 95% CI [0.004, 0.053]). Therefore, Hypothesis 4
17 was supported.

18 -----
19 INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE
20 -----

21 **Discussion**

22 This study differs significantly from previous research, which has focused on the
23 influence of negative workplace gossip on employees' attitudes, behaviors, and job

1 performance while ignoring the impact on targets' SWB. This study is the first, to our
2 knowledge, to investigate the impact of negative workplace gossip on SWB, and to explore
3 the mediating role of psychological distress and the moderating role of emotional
4 intelligence. Based on COR theory, we proposed the hypotheses. A multi-phase survey was
5 conducted to collect the empirical evidence. Our findings show that negative workplace
6 gossip reduces SWB by causing psychological distress among targets. Emotional intelligence
7 was also shown to play an important moderating role: employees with high emotional
8 intelligence were less likely than those with low emotional intelligence to suffer
9 psychological distress as a result of negative workplace gossip, and consequently also
10 experienced a weaker indirect effect of negative workplace gossip on SWB through
11 psychological distress.

12 ***Theoretical implications***

13 This study makes several important theoretical contributions. Firstly, we have helped
14 expand knowledge of the unfavorable consequences of negative workplace gossip to
15 decreasing targets' SWB. This area had remained underexplored despite the ubiquitous
16 presence of negative workplace gossip, which differs from workplace harassment (Jung &
17 Yoon, 2019; Neall & Tuckey, 2014; Wang, Bowling, Tian, Alarcon, & Kwan, 2018) since it
18 involves casual and unconstrained talks behind the targets' backs (Foster, 2004; Kuo et al.,
19 2015; Kurland & Pelled, 2000), contains sensitive information about them, and can be
20 considered an indirect attack, aggression, or victimization (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012;
21 Ellwardt et al., 2012). On the basis of these characteristics, it is important and necessary to
22 explore its influences on employees. While previous studies described and explored some

1 negative aspects of gossip, and examined the effects of negative workplace gossip on
2 employees' attitudes, behaviors, and job performance (Babalola et al., 2019; Brady et al.,
3 2017; Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Wu, Birtch et al., 2018; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018; Ye et al., 2019),
4 we have moved beyond this scope to investigate the relationship between negative workplace
5 gossip and targets' SWB. The results, based on the moderated mediation model, demonstrate
6 for the first time that negative workplace gossip results in increased psychological distress
7 and reduced SWB. In conducting this study, we have answered the call from Babalola et al.
8 (2019) for exploration of the impacts of negative gossip on employee well-being. We focused
9 specifically on employees' SWB since it had previously been shown to be essential to
10 individuals' well-being, positive psychological health, and job performance (Bryson, Forth, &
11 Stokes, 2017; Diener, Sapyta, & Suh, 1998). Our findings therefore contribute to the literature
12 on negative workplace gossip literature by extending the outcomes to SWB, which provides a
13 self-examination rather than external judgment perspective.

14 Secondly, our study reveals the "black box" between negative workplace gossip and
15 targets' SWB, that is, that negative workplace gossip decreases SWB by increasing
16 psychological distress. These results are particularly noteworthy because they confirm the
17 idea that gossip generates negative emotions (Babalola et al., 2019), complementing the
18 substantial body of findings supporting the significance of psychological distress in triggering
19 low SWB, and enhancing theory by shedding light on how and when low SWB emerges.

20 Finally, by exploring the moderating effect of employees' emotional intelligence, we
21 have moved closer to an understanding of the mechanisms and boundary conditions of the
22 relationship between negative workplace gossip and SWB, as recommended by Wu, Birtch et

1 al. (2018). As shown in prior studies, emotional intelligence is a skill set helpful for
2 regulating one's emotions effectively (Prati et al., 2009). Our findings go further, providing
3 evidence that emotional intelligence has a positive influence on alleviating the adverse effects
4 of negative workplace gossip on psychological distress. In addition to demonstrating the
5 moderating role of emotional intelligence, we have also confirmed that different employees
6 react differently to negative workplace gossip.

7 ***Managerial implications***

8 Given the prevalence of negative gossip in the workplace (Kuo et al., 2015), our
9 findings have several implications for managers, especially human resources managers.
10 Firstly, managers should recognize that, although gossip is ubiquitous and is an integral part
11 of organizational culture (Babalola et al., 2019; Georganta, Panagopoulou, & Montgomery,
12 2014), they need to reduce the occurrence of negative workplace gossip, since it will lower
13 employees' SWB. Team building and collective activities, such as outdoor sports and
14 department dinners, can create a favorable, harmonious, and positive organizational culture,
15 reducing the likelihood of occurrence of negative gossip. Supervisors should also encourage
16 positive informal talks and make clear that negative gossip is unwelcome. Other positive
17 strategies available to managers include talking to targets face to face, helping them deal with
18 negative emotions, identifying what triggered the gossip, and giving advice to avoid future
19 targeting. These activities echo previous recommendations of establishing efficient
20 information exchange channels (Babalola et al., 2019; Wu, Kwan et al., 2018).

21 Secondly, given our finding that psychological distress has a significant impact on
22 employees' SWB, managers should pay attention to the psychological state of employees and

1 alleviate their distress in a timely manner. From a resource perspective, employees suffering
2 psychological distress have fewer resources than others, making it crucial to supplement their
3 resources to relieve their tension and pressure. Previous studies have pointed out that
4 increasing job control can reduce stress for employees because it is considered as a favorable
5 work resource and coping mechanism (Chiang, Birtch, & Kwan, 2010). Thus, employees
6 could alleviate their psychological distress by improving their job control, such as striving for
7 a higher level of work flexibility and freedom (Chiang et al., 2010). Participating in training
8 could also provide them with resources to cope with future stressful situations. Managers
9 should also take the lead in creating a supportive culture, and promote the flow of resources
10 in the organization, enabling employees to feel safe and comfortable. Improving HR
11 management systems is another effective way to help with employees' psychological distress.
12 When employees are suffering, the HR department could offer counselling services or
13 mediate conflicts between staff. As suggested in prior studies, these responses will lead to
14 more effective performance by employees, and will create a more confident, competent, and
15 even passionate workforce (Chen, Lyu, Li, Zhou, & Li, 2017; Tian et al., 2019).

16 Thirdly, our finding that employees with higher emotional intelligence will be less
17 troubled by psychological distress indicates the benefits of recruiting candidates with high
18 emotional intelligence. For existing employees, HR departments can organize training to
19 improve both emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills, in order to enhance positive
20 interaction between employees (Hodzic, Scharfen, Ripoll, Holling, & Zenasni, 2018; Kwan,
21 Mao, & Zhang, 2010). A good example is introducing one-to-one or one-to-many mentoring
22 programs. Mentors can talk with employees over coffee or lunch, and offer guidance on

1 dealing with workplace problems and regulating emotions. Mentoring, as an effective human
2 resources management tool, has had profound impacts on individuals' personal lives,
3 employees' careers, and organizational success (Allen, Smith, Mael, Gavan O'Shea, Eby,
4 2009). Mentoring can perform three functions – career support, psychological support, and
5 role modeling – that are positively correlated to employees' organizational citizenship
6 behavior (Kwan, Liu, & Yim, 2011). Through mentoring programs, more experienced
7 individuals (i.e., mentors) impart their experience to younger colleagues (i.e., protégés).
8 High-quality mentoring relationships can play an important role in encouraging trust,
9 sensitivity, and effective communication, **can** improve employees' personal skills, and are
10 also helpful for improving employees' emotional intelligence (Hu, Wang, Kwan, & Yi, 2019;
11 Liu, Kwan, & Mao, 2012). Other options include designing interactive games to help
12 employees make correct judgements when they encounter tricky situations in the future.
13 Emotional intelligence training helps employees become more supportive and sensitive to
14 each other's needs, and enhances positive interaction among employees (Kwan et al., 2010;
15 Schreurs, Hetty van Emmerik, Günter, & Germeys, 2012). It is therefore an effective
16 intervention in the workplace (Hodzic et al., 2018).

17 ***Limitations and future research directions***

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

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

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

20 **Data availability statement**

21 The data that supports the findings of this study is available from the corresponding author (Y.
22 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: 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 2: 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 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	-0.050			
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 (<i>X</i>) → psychological distress (<i>M</i>) → SWB (<i>Y</i>)			
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

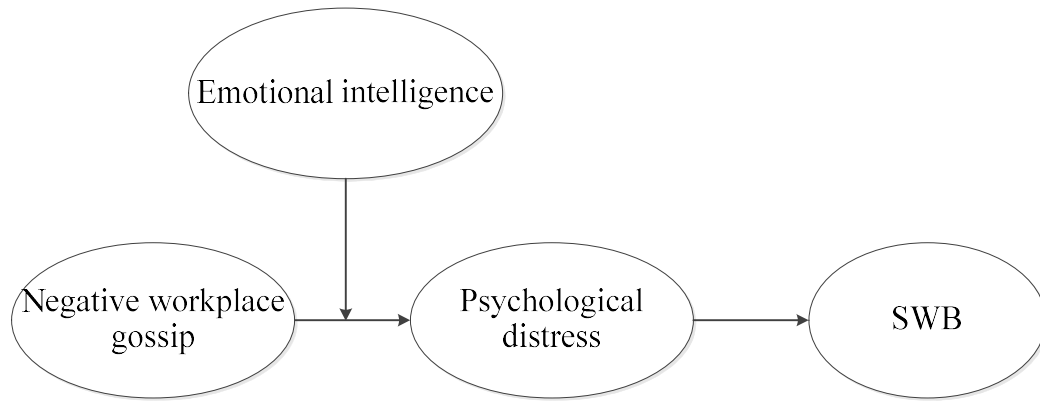
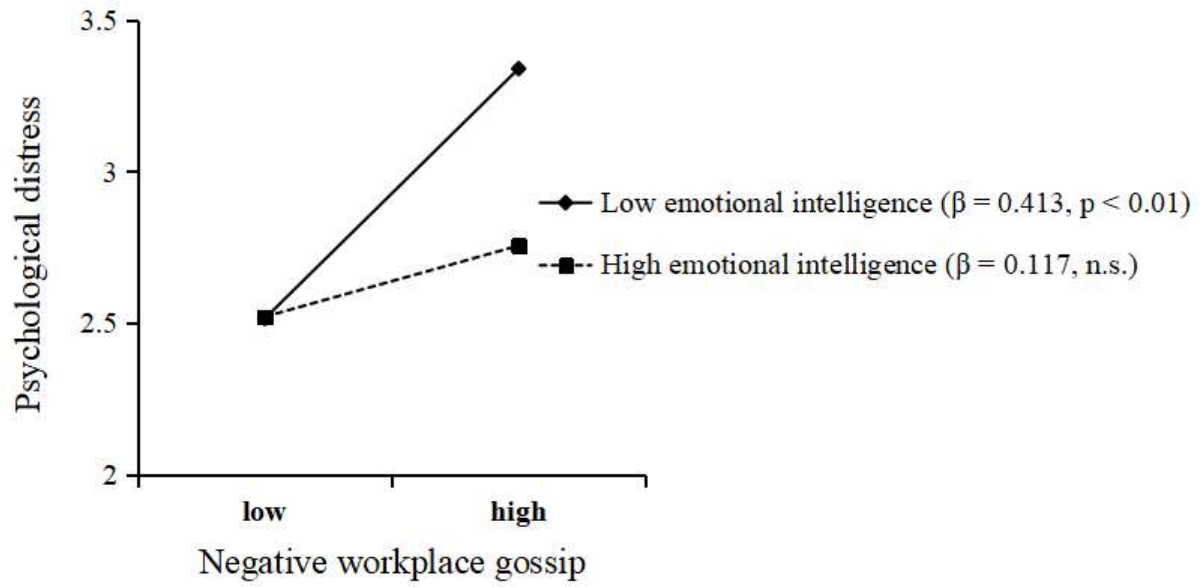


Figure 2. The interactive effect of negative workplace gossip and emotional intelligence on psychological distress



Notes: $N = 243$.