Chapter XXX

A review of workplace gossip:
The development of a process model for studying workplace gossip

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Abstract. Drawing on multi-disciplinary literature, the current chapter provides a conceptual review of the workplace gossip and contributes to the literatures in four specific ways. Firstly, we argues that workplace gossip should be separated from general gossip in literature, and we develops an integrative conceptual model to support the argument. Secondly, we examine the similarities and differences among major workplace gossip constructs. We analyze five emerging types of workplace gossip and explain their unique characteristics. Thirdly, we examine both empirical and literature-based studies that have been conducted on gossip. We then develop a conceptual model that integrates the important characteristics of the gossipers, victims, moderators, mediators, and consequences of workplace gossip. Finally, we critically discuss the important areas where future research may be needed. It is our hope that this chapter provides an in-depth look at the phenomenon of workplace gossip and inspires future research. Implications of the research findings are informative to the personnel management, helping reduce the problems associated with workplace gossip too.

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Introduction

Gossip seems trivial and unattended in the workplace, but this viewpoint has started to change. Virtually all employees find themselves involved with gossip in different ways, such as producing, hearing or otherwise participating in evaluative comments about someone who is absent from the conversation (Ellwardt, Labianca & Wittek, 2012; Kuo, Chang, Quinton, Lu, & Lee, 2015; Sun, Schilpzand & Liu, 2022). Workplace gossip has been described as idle talk about other colleagues who are not present at the scene (Chang & Kuo, 2021), and we argue that workplace gossip is more prevalent than most imagine. Cole and Dalton (2009) claim that up to 14% coffee-break at work chat is actually gossip and roughly 66% of general conversion between colleagues is related to social topics concerning talk about other employees; although not always precise, workplace gossip provides employees a channel of informal communication and knowledge sharing. Given that workplace gossip results in dysfunctional outcomes for employees and their organizations (Fan & Dawson, 2021; Grosser, Kidwell-Lopez, Labiance & Ellwardt, 2012; Wu, Kwan, Wu & Ma, 2015), research in the realm of workplace gossip has gradually increased in the last decade.

A variety of umbrella terms, such as gossip valence (Grosser, Kidwell-Lopez & Labianca, 2010), group gossip (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994), gossip evolution (Ellwardt, Steglich & Wittek, 2012), gossip power (Kurland & Pelled, 2000), peer communication (Ditmarsch, Hoek & Kuijer, 2020), sense-making gossip (Fan & Dawson, 2021), negative gossip (Babalola, Ren, Kobinah *et al*., 2019), gossip triad and distance (Michelson, Iterson & Waddington, 2010; Sun et al., 2022) and job-related gossip (Kuo *et al*., 2015) have been used to reference the overarching construct comprised of various forms of workplace gossip. Although prior studies have brought valuable insights of gossip, the understanding of gossiping behavior and its consequence to employees and their organizations remains unclear (Spoelma & Hetrick, 2021; Wu, Birtch, Chiang & Zhang, 2018).

Although previous research has made advances to gossip literature, we lack a unifying conceptual model that depicts the antecedents, consequences, moderators, and processes involved in workplace gossip. For the same reason, researchers have begun to voice concerns about the definitional, conceptual, and measurement overlap of key constructs in workplace gossip research (e.g., Grosser *et al*., 2012; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Spoelma & Hetrick, 2021; Wu *et al*., 2018). Despite some nuanced differences, the current research argues that the process by which workplace gossip arises and impacts employees and their organizations is fundamentally the same. Therefore the current research aims to make a contribution by critically examining the conceptual and empirical studies on the antecedents and consequences of workplace gossip, and by developing an integrative conceptual model that organizes previous research and provides researchers with a launching point for future research.

The development of a process model

Given the abundance of overlapping constructs that fall under the broad notion of workplace gossip, the primary goal of our conceptual model is to integrate existing research. Our integrative conceptual model illustrates the major factors and the overarching process of workplace gossip, regardless of the specific form the gossip takes. As shown in Figure 1, this model lays out the process through which gossiping behaviors occur and ultimately impact on employees, work groups and their organizations.

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We begin with an overview of environmental factors and managerial factors. We prudently examine the aforementioned factors and explain how these factors turn into the antecedents of workplace gossip; We also discuss various gossiping constructs and identify sub-constructs of workplace gossip by considering their valence, job relevance and manager's engagement. Views from gossiper(s) and victim(s) are compiled and analyzed;

Next, although we focus on the overall process of workplace gossip, we argue that the distinctive features of various gossip constructs may affect how gossiping behaviors develop and the outcomes that follow. Thus we review literature to identify moderating factors that affect workplace gossip, as well as mediating processes that help to explain how workplace gossip occurs;

Finally, we examine organizational and individual's outcomes as results of workplace gossip. It is our hope that this integrative conceptual model provides a better understanding of the process by which gossiping behaviors arise in the workplace and the outcomes that can follow. In the next sections, we first explain our philosophy underlying the model development. We then examine the various conceptualizations of workplace gossip and proceed to discuss the model in more detail.

Philosophy of the model-development

Two model-development approaches have drawn our attention. These are: *linear approach* and *convergence approach*. The former favors a step-by-step style in addressing the relationship of research variables, whereas the latter prefers an interactive style in explaining the relevance of research factors (Pearce, Figgins, & Golen, 1984; Rogers & Kincaid, 1981). Our observation is: a linear approach tends to adopt a sequential style in analysis, so its interpretation is often left-to-right or one-way oriented. Different from the linear approach, a convergence approach focuses on the interplay of research factors, so its interpretation is usually narrative and multi-phased. As both approaches have their merits, therefore, we propose a hybrid approach to build up the current research model, with the following rationale:

To begin with, the linear approach has its constraint, as the gossipier-victim relationship is not always straightforward and one-way oriented (*cf. see social-network-oriented gossip in*: Ellwardt, Labianca & Witek, 2012; Grosser *et al.*, 2010). We also concern the convergence approach, as its analytic scope could be immense and difficult to follow; likewise, the practical value may be compromised if the scope of analysis is indefinite (Smeltzer & Leonard, 1994).

Second, a hybrid approach has capacity to accommodate the diverse perspectives (Pearce *et al.*, 1984), which is imperative to the current research; to be exact, we plan to discuss gossip from both gossipier's and victim's viewpoints, and under different environmental conditions. We plan to adopt a sequential route to explain the components of gossiping behaviour, such as gossipier, content of gossip, moderator, mediator and victim.

Finally, Rogers and Kincaid (1981) indicate that a hybrid approach helps balance the simplicity of linear approach with the complexity of convergence approach. Our model merges the merits of *linear-* and *convergence-* approaches. Like linear models, our model lays out the process through which gossiping behaviors occur and ultimately impact on employees, work groups and their organizations. Moreover, with our model we improve on traditional linear models by paying more attention to the different roles of gossiper and victim, which are often ignored in gossip related studies. Like convergence models, our model focuses on the construct of various types of workplace gossip, explaining when antecedents form gossip, how gossips affect employees/organization, and how these effects are moderated or mediated by other factors. With our model, more importantly,

we are keen to advance literature by clarifying the interplay between gossiper and victim, which is found to be important to the formation as well as interpretation of workplace gossip. Overall it is our hope that our hybrid approach addresses enough components, so that mangers can relate their experiences and practices to the model, providing good insights into the gossip management.

The history and construct of workplace gossip

The word *gossip* originates from the Old English, assuming the meaning of a person, mostly woman, who delights in idle talk. Yet, the definition of gossip is constantly evolving, and there is no clear consensus on female's tendency to gossip engagement (*see review in*: Dunbar, 2004). Gossip has an unpleasant history. Take the 14th Century for example, Britain had laws against gossiping behavior and sanctioned gossipier severely (Emler, 1994); and until the 16th Century, gossip was still regarded as newsmonger and tattler (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994). Serendipitously, the religions also warn against gossip in their doctrines, for instance:

"*Gossip stopped by the wise*" (Xunzi, Da-Lue: BC168);
"*Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour*" (Ten Commandments, Exodus: 20-16); and,
"*Do not concern yourself with things about which you have no knowledge: Verily, your hearing, sight, and heart – all of them will be called to account*" (Qur'an: 17-36).

Although Buddhism, Christianity and Islam have different interpretations of gossip, they all convey a message that gossiping is not encouraged, as people shall validate their sources of information and not engage in conjecture. Perhaps for the same reason, gossiping behavior has often been the victim of various punishments, such as social condemnation and penalties (Dunbar, 2004).

Despite dark history of gossip, however, the evaluation of gossip seems to have changed recently. Scholars have started to re-evaluate the construct of gossip and divided gossip into two broad categories. These are: *general gossip* and *workplace gossip*. Both general gossip and workplace gossip are informal forms of communication, but they differ in nature. Compared to general gossip, workplace gossip is more valence-specific. For instance, Chang and Kuo (2021) indicate that manager's positive gossip is related to subordinate's commitment towards manager, revealing the merits of manager's positive gossip. From the social network perspective (Ellwardt, Labianca & Witek, 2012; Spoelma & Hetrick, 2021), human beings are a social species and their behaviors often operate in the principle of reciprocity. Thus, when managers recognize their subordinates by positive gossip (which contains a sense of positiveness and appreciation), subordinates know that they are valued and respected by managers. Chang and Kuo (2021) also advise that, following the reciprocal principle, subordinates may thank for manager's recognition by offering support and good interaction in return, such as demonstrating commitment towards managers; in contrast, manager's negative gossip does not contain any sense of recognition, so there is no motive for subordinates to act reciprocally.

Compared to general gossip, workplace gossip is more context-oriented and pertinent to job. For instance, Kuo, Chang, Quinton *et al.* (2015) examine gossip's influence by comparing *job-related-gossip* (e.g., performance-related gossip) against *job-unrelated-gossip* (e.g., family-related gossip). They discover that only job-related-gossip affects employees' perception and behavior in the workplace. According to their analysis, job-related-gossip is greatly associated with the job characteristics, colleagues and the organization, and all these associations are related to employees' perception at work (for instance, *am I being treated fairly*, *am I satisfied with the job*, and *do I receive sufficient support from my manager*), which in turn influences employees' behavior.

Interestingly, scholars have also found that employees tend to regard job-unrelated-gossip as trivial thing (or simply ignore it), so its influence on behavior remains relatively low (Kuo *et al.*, 2015).

Compared to general gossip, workplace gossip is more victim-specific. General gossip is disseminated in the absence of the victim, making it difficult if not impossible for the victim to identify its source (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). General gossip often has a broad construct, and the distance between gossipier and victim is usually unidentifiable (Foster, 2004). However, workplace gossip tends to have a much clearer gossiper-victim relationship and closer distance, because both parties are sharing the same social network (Ellwardt *et al.*, 2012). Following this logic, our proposition is: workplace gossip is traceable, as the shared environment usually has explicit boundary (e.g., a building, an office) and its membership is usually fixed (e.g., a department has three teams, or a team has five members). With explicit boundary and fixed membership, we believe that the victims are more likely to locate the source of gossip.

Additionally, scholars have attempted to link workplace gossip to three contextual conditions. These are: i). *Privacy-proof* (Noon & Delbridge, 1993): When privacy-proof is provided, workplace gossip may emerge. Employees may not engage in gossiping if they cannot avoid accountability; yet, when privacy-proof becomes available, gossip is more likely to develop in the workplace; ii). *Frames of reference* (Kurland & Pelled, 2000): Colleagues from the same workplace are likely to exchange and share with each other's values. They may share similar frames of reference or develop similarity in their thinking styles. Following this logic, when the conformity between employees is developed and their consensus forms, the likelihood of workplace gossip engagement may rise; and, iii). *Level of socialising* (Rosnow, 2001): Only when two or more colleagues have formed a congenial relationship via socialising, is gossip more likely to occur; in contrast, when the level of socialising is scarce, workplace gossip barely occurs.

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In view of what has preceded, we have learnt that workplace gossip is unique and different from general gossip, and that workplace gossip should be separated from general gossip in literature. There is also a need to clarify the role of workplace gossip and understand its influence on employees, managers and their organizations. Following this logic, we have therefore integrated prior studies by reviewing their main arguments in Table 1, in which general gossip and workplace gossip demonstrate unique construct and characteristics, respectively. For the sake of clarity and research purpose, we have categorized general gossip into three sub-constructs (i.e., *generic gossip*, *negative gossip* & *positive gossip*), and workplace gossip into five sub-constructs (i.e., *generic workplace gossip*, *job-related-gossip*, *job-unrelated-gossip*, *manager's positive gossip* & *manager's negative gossip*; We understand such categorization may not satisfy all perspectives, so we will review its implication and limitation later on). As presented in Table 1, general gossip tends to have surreptitious and negative connotation, whereas workplace gossip seems more balanced, enclosing both positive and negative connotation. General gossip has wider and abstract construct, whereas workplace gossip is often valence-specific, context-oriented, victim-specific and subject to the contextual conditions.

Finally, we would like to propose a concise and precise definition of workplace gossip, as it benefits to the model development and supports readers' understanding of our model. As such, we have consolidated previous definitions of gossip (e.g., Chang & Kuo, 2021; Ellwardt *et al.*, 2012; Kurland & Pelled, 2000) and defined workplace gossip as *an idle talk between colleagues*, because it occurs when one colleague engages in informal and evaluative communication with other colleague(s) about the absent colleague(s). Following the newly-developed definition of workplace gossip, this article now turns to discuss its potential antecedents.

Antecedents of workplace gossip

Workplace gossip is ubiquitous in all kinds of organizations, and scholars are keen to investigate how and why it occurs (e.g., Brady *et al*., 2017; Fan & Dawson, 2021; McAndrew *et al*., 2007; Michelson *et al*., 2010). To continue this line of research, the current research therefore conducts a critical review of gossip-themed literatures (e.g., Chang *et al*., 2021; Ditmarsch *et al*., 2020; Grosser *et al*., 2010; Kuo *et al*., 2015; Lincoln & Miller, 1979; Sun *et al*., 2022). We first analyze gossiping antecedents and discuss their potential influence in the context of workplace. Next, we scrutinize the overlap and distinctiveness among a variety of antecedents; specifically, we re-arrange antecedents into two categories, subject to their characteristics. Antecedents that are included in our review are based on two criteria: (a) they must fall under our definition of workplace gossip, and (b) they must have been recognized as gossip antecedents by other researchers. These two categories are labelled as: *environmental factors* and *managerial factors*, respectively. Finally, we discuss the characteristics of these factors and explain how factors become antecedents of workplace gossip. Details follow:

Environmental factors

We identify three factors in this category. These are: *expressive ties*, *instrumental ties* and *structural embeddedness*. This chapter now turns to explain the factors and their characteristics.

Social relationship of the employees matters, as it plays a crucial role in shaping people's attitude and behaviour (Ellwardt *et al*., 2012). Yet, scholars have different views about such relationship, and two particular views have drawn our attention. These are: *expressive ties* and *instrumental ties*. The former involves a commitment to the other person, arising perhaps out of friendship, kinship, shared similarity or feelings of love, whereas the latter involves co-operation merely in order to achieve shared goals (Umphres *et al*., 2003). More specifically, instrumental ties are often formed between colleagues, aiming to deliver the common goals, such as organizational targets. Once the goals are achieved, instrumental ties fade out (Zagenczyk, Gibney, Murrell, & Boss, 2008). Compared to instrumental ties, expressive ties last longer and remain stronger, as its development contains both social and emotional components; expressive ties exist outside the workplace and help to explain why colleagues may still gather together for social activities after work (Lincoln & Miller, 1979; Sun et al., 2022). In a similar vein, Grosser *et al*. (2010) indicate that expressive ties (e.g., the expressive friendship ties between one employee and another) are correlated with both positive- and negative-gossip; yet, instrumental ties (e.g., the instrumental workflow ties between one worker and another) are only correlated with positive gossip.

Additionally, *structural embeddedness* is like a measure of overlapped social relationship and cohesiveness between two individuals, such as two co-workers. According to Scott and Marshall (2015), structural embeddedness can be seen as a degree of shared interpersonal relationships between one person and another, and it facilitates communication, common goals, trust and cohesion between the pair. Take the context of friendship for example, friends who share a high degree of structural embeddedness (i.e., friends who have many mutual friends in common) should share an additional layer of trust, because their relationship is embedded in a broader web of friendship. Similarly, scholars claim that colleagues with high levels of structural embeddedness are correlated with more engagement of negative gossip; that is, structural embeddedness offers trust and cohesion between the colleagues, so they feel more confident in the gossip engagement (Fan & Dawson, 2021; Grosser *et al*., 2010).

Managerial factors

This category includes three factors. These are: *psychological contract violation*, *abusive supervision*, and *competent subordinates*. This chapter now turns to explain the factors and their characteristics.

Psychological contract can be seen as employees' perception of what they should contribute to the organization, and what they could receive in return; namely, an unwritten set of expectations of the employment relationship (Robbins & Judge, 2012). Rousseau (1995) defines psychological contras as in individual's beliefs, shaped by the organisation regarding the terms of an exchange between an individual and the organisation. As the perception of psychological contract is subjective and related to the management policies, the organization and employees may interpret contract dissimilarly; thus, should any dissimilarity emerges, one party may easily believe that the other has violated the terms of the contract and the outcomes could be damaging to both parties (Robinson, 1996). Robinson and Morrison (2000) describe this phenomenon as *psychological contract violation* and list several sample outcomes, for instance, poor manager-subordinate interaction, reduced job satisfaction, low organizational commitment and less citizenship behavior. Similarly, when the organisation (e.g., policy makers & managers) violates its obligations, employees may feel frustrated and behave against the organisation, in which employees use gossips to vent out their negative feelings about the organization (Kuo *et al*., 2015).

The second factor is *abusive supervision*. Different from the psychological contract violation that is related to an evaluation of the organization, abusive supervision is more related to personal experience and perception towards immediate managers, such as team leader and line manager. Tepper (2000) defines *abusive supervision* as sustained displays of non-physical forms of hostility perpetrated by managers against their direct subordinates, and sample cases include, for instance, public derogation, undermining, threatening and explosive outbursts. Scholars also indicate that, when abusive supervision occurs, subordinates may denigrate their organizations and refrain from pro-social behaviour (Zellars, Tepper & Duffy, 2002). Abusive supervision causes employees both stress and disappointment; consequently, employees use gossip to cope with their negative emotions and feelings about their organizations (Kuo *et al*., 2015).

The third factor is pertinent to the *competent employees*. Competent employees are great assets to the organization, as they facilitate teamwork and contribute to the organizational success (Robbins & Judge, 2012). Although competent employees are well respected and valued by the organization, a different viewpoint has emerged. Compared to the average employees, competent employees experience more job stress and poorer workplace relationship (Ismail & Abidin, 2010), as well as more covert forms of victimization from colleagues (Jensen, Patel & Raver, 2014). Scholars interpret this phenomenon through different perspectives, such as social comparison (Dai & Xiao, 2016), threats to career opportunities (Ismail & Abidin, 2010) and ostracism (Ferris, Lian, Brown & Morrison, 2015). Following this logic, we argue that employee competence may cause gossip and two studies have offered preliminary credence to our argument. *Firstly*, during the appraisal of employee performance, Grosser *et al*. (2010) discover that manager's evaluation is negatively related to employee's gossiping activity, i.e., manager's negative evaluation is related with more employee's gossiping activity. *Secondly*, some managers regard subordinates' competence as a challenger and thus develop a feeling of insecurity about their career opportunity, which then converts into the motive for ostracizing competent subordinates. Consequently, the subordinates who feel ostracized by managers show less commitment and confident in the workplace, engaging in negative gossip about their managers (Chang *et al*., 2021).

To sum up, scholars have proposed diverse perspectives to analyze the precursors of workplace gossip, and their findings have enriched the understanding of gossiping behavior; based on our literature review, we also have learnt that both environmental- and managerial-factors are potential gossip antecedents, and that their unique characteristics are important to the formation of workplace gossip. To continue this line of research, we now turn to discuss workplace gossip from both gossiper's and victim's views.

Views of Workplace Gossip: Gossiper *vs.* Victim

Scholars propose that gossiper and victim may view gossip differently, and whether gossip is severe depends on who evaluate it (Burt & Knez, 1996; Ditmarsch et al., 2020). Although this view is plausible, there is a paucity of empirical research that investigates the perception of gossip in the workplace context (*see exception in*: Wu *et al*., 2018). Following this line of research, therefore, we are keen to analyze how gossiper and victim interpret gossip. In order to ensure the clarity of analysis, we adopt Kurland and Pelled's (2000) analytic framework. To our knowledge, such framework is the most applicable and relevant to the current research, as it not only discusses the context of workplace, but also describes the interaction between gossiper and victim.

Specifically, Kurland and Pelled argue that workplace gossip can be very serious depending upon the amount of power that the gossiper has over the victim, which in turn affects how the gossip is interpreted. Kurland and Pelled's argument is developed from French and Raven's (1959) typology of power, in which five specific types of power are identified between one individual (whom we label X) and another individual (whom we label Y). These types are: i). Reward power is the power that emerges from Y's belief that X can provide him or her with desired outcomes; ii). Coercive power is the power that emerges from Y's belief that X has the ability to punish him or her; iii). Expert power is the power that emerges from Y's belief that X has special knowledge or expertise that Y needs; iv). Referent power is the power that emerges from Y's attraction for and desire to be associated with X; and, finally, v). legitimate power is the power that emerges from Y's perception that X has a legitimate right, based on position in the organization, to influence him or her. However, the current research does not adopt legitimate power to analyze the gossip-power relationship, because legitimate power is based on hierarchical status (such as ranks of position; French & Raven, 1959), which does not help explain the gossiper-victim interaction. Therefore, we believe it is sensible to exclude legitimate power from the analysis and discussion.

Based on Kurland and Pelled's framework, we have reviewed different literatures and summarised our findings in Table 2, with the following two steps. Firstly, we adopt the aforementioned framework to link four types of power to diverse gossip scenarios. By doing so, we can understand how power difference affects gossiper and victim. Secondly, for each scenario, we analyze the views from gossiper and victim, respectively. By doing so, we can observe the interplay between gossiper and victim in the workplace. With these two steps in mind, we are keen to understand the views of workplace gossip, particularly in the eyes of gossiper and victim.

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Table 2 has presented three important messages. These are: i). gossiper and victim tend to interpret workplace gossip differently, so the outcome of gossip often differs. In the eyes of victim, the valence of workplace gossip decides the outcome, i.e., positive workplace gossip brings benefits to victim, whereas negative workplace gossip damages victim. Yet, in the eyes of gossiper, the valence and benefits are irrelevant; ii). workplace gossip manipulates the power distribution between gossiper and victim; to be exact, positive workplace gossip increases gossiper's reward

power over victim, negative workplace gossip increases gossiper's coercive power over victim, and generic gossip in the workplace enhances gossiper 's expert power over victim; and, finally, iii). the outcome of workplace gossip may depend on social circles and gossiper's identity. For instance, if the work ethos is against gossip, workplace gossip may rarely occur. If gossiper talks gossip all the time, the impact of gossip on victim may become limited.

Overall, the findings in Table 2 have brought new insights into the workplace gossip literatures, clarifying the views of gossiper and victim. The findings also help explain how different variables affect gossip directly. Having said this, however, we shall not under-estimate the impact from indirect variables to the workplace gossip. As such, this chapter now turns to discuss the indirect variables, which are also important to the understanding of workplace gossip.

Moderators and Mediators

Unlike independent variable that affects dependent variable directly, both moderator and mediator affect dependent variable indirectly, so they are also known as *indirect variables* (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Karazsia & Berlin, 2018). In plain language, a moderator is a variable that influences the strength of a relationship between two other variables, whereas a mediator is an intermediary variable of causal chain effect; for instance, a variable X affects a second variable M (mediator), which in turn affects a third variable Y (*see further discussion of moderator-mediator distinction in*: Chow & Lindström, 2022). Simply put, a moderator regulates the strength of a relationship, whereas a mediator acts as potential mechanism, intervening the process through which an effect occurs (Dawson, 2014).

In the current research, we propose *gossip antecedents* as independent variables and workplace gossip as *dependent variable*; to be exact, we define moderators as variables that regulate the strength of the relationship between antecedents and workplace gossip. We also define mediators as variables that intervene the processes between gossip and its consequences. This chapter now turns to explain the rationale underlying the aforementioned definitions. Details follow:

Moderators

Prior research has offered mixed views of gossiping moderators, challenging the amalgamation of gossip literatures. To overcome such challenge, two broad types of moderators are outlined below. These are: *character-specific moderators* and *context-specific moderators*.

Character-specific moderators (e.g., credibility of gossiper, job-relatedness):

Workplace gossip is a type of informal communication and the role of communicator matters. According to Rogers and Kincaid (1981), whether the communicator (such as gossiper) is credible often affects the outcome of communication (such as gossip's influence). When gossipier is credible, people are more likely to accept his/her message; but if the credibility of gossiper is scarce, people become reluctant to recognize it. Similarly, Noon and Delbridge (1993) suggest that gossip victims may under-value the gossip or ignore its influence, if the gossiper lacks credibility.

Job-relatedness is crucial. Compared to job-unrelated-gossip, job-related-gossip has salient influence. When the nature of gossip is irrelevant to the job, people do not treat such gossip seriously; people tend to disregard job-unrelated-gossip, and victim may not vehemently respond to gossiper either (Kuo *et al*., 2015); However, when job-related-gossip occurs, people realize that it is

related to their job, so more relevant and important to themselves (Chang & Kuo, 2021; Kuo *et al.*, 2015). Simply put, job-related gossip is more influential and receives more attention too.

Context-specific moderators (e.g., work ethos, gossiper-listener interaction):

Work ethos is a set of moral principles and attitudes that employees adopt in their workplace (Robbins & Judge, 2012). Work ethos encloses employees' shared values (e.g., what matters or not) and norms (e.g., what is correct or wrong), affecting employees' attitude and behavior (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996). If work ethos does not welcome informal communication (such as workplace gossip), employees may constrain their use of gossip in spreading information (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Similarly, traditionality (part of work ethos) is found to moderate the relationship between workplace gossip and emotional exhaustion (Wu *et al.*, 2015). Following this logic, we believe that ethos may regulate the development of workplace gossip; that is to say, if formal communication is encouraged and informal communication discouraged, the chance of gossip shall dwindle.

The interaction between gossiper and listener is vital to workplace gossip. For instance, an amicable interaction between the two parties facilitates the development of workplace gossip; however, if the interaction is superficial and lacks mutual trust, gossip barely emerges (Rosnow, 2001). Grosser *et al.* (2012) explain that negative gossip tends to emerge when there is a trusted and agreeable relationship between gossiper and listener. These prior studies infer that an amicable interaction between gossiper and listener helps increase the development of workplace gossip.

Mediators

As discussed in the literature review, the formation of gossip is subject to the relationship across gossiper, listener and victim (*c.f.* Gossip triad: Brady *et al.*, 2017; Michelson *et al.*, 2010). Following this line of research, several scholars have attempted to enlarge triad by proposing victim-oriented mediators. This article now turns to introduce the proposed mediators and discuss their characteristics. Details follow:

Victim's self-esteem:

Leary, Tambor, Terdal and Downs (1995) indicate that self-esteem is crucial to both attitude and behavior, as people tend to behave consistent with their self-perception and values. Similarly, Anthony, Wood and Holmes (2007) state that self-esteem serves as behavioral principle, guiding people to make the best decision and behave accordingly. Wu *et al.* (2018) indicate that negative gossip adversely influences victim's self-esteem, which in turn reduces his/her citizenship behavior at both individual and organizational levels. That is, victim's self-esteem has a potential buffering role, regulating gossip's impact on the engagement of citizenship behavior. Whether victims may or may not show citizenship behavior is probably down to their own self-esteem.

Victim's commitment towards gossiper:

Scholars have found that manager's positive gossip is correlated with subordinate's commitment towards manager, which in turn affects subordinate's well-being and perception of job embeddedness (Chang & Kuo, 2021). From a different but relevant perspective, scholars indicate that some managers regard competent subordinates as potential challengers and hence ostracize them; in return, the ostracized subordinates show less commitment toward their managers and talk negative gossip about their managers (Chang *et al.*, 2021). Although different in nature, prior studies have highlighted the role of commitment and clarified its subtle influence on gossip. That is,

victim's commitment toward gossiper acts an intermediary variable, intervening the process through which gossip emerges and how victim receives the outcome.

Victim's relationship with manager:

Having a good relationship with managers is advantageous to the subordinates, as it helps subordinates to define themselves and feel a sense of organizational inclusiveness (Robbins & Judge, 2012), to experience a stronger feeling of teamwork (Shah *et al.*, 2004), and to perceive more group cohesiveness (Jackson *et al.*, 2006). Similarly, gossip victims that have better relationship with managers can better cope with gossip and feel less ostracized at work (Kuo, Wu & Lin, 2018). With a good relationship with managers, victims feel more support from managers, which serves as a psychological buffer and helps vent-out negative emotion; consequently, victims are less affected by gossip and do not fight against the gossipier (Kuo *et al.*, 2018). That is, a good relationship with manager is valuable to the victim, as it helps victims to alleviate the impact of gossip and maintain a more positive emotion in gossip coping.

Consequences of the Workplace Gossip

Every story has two sides, so does gossip. Although workplace gossip is defamed for its detrimental outcomes, recent studies has actually discovered that workplace gossip benefits to the employees, managers and their organizations (e.g., Chang & Kuo, 2021; Fan & Dawson, 2021; Kuo *et al.*, 2018), and that the valence of workplace gossip is crucial to its consequences (e.g., Babalola *et al.*, 2019; Wax *et al.*, 2022; Wu *et al.*, 2018). To further analyze and discuss the consequences of the workplace gossip, we have proposed three broad categories. These are: *individual level*, *work-group level* and *organizational level*. Details follow:

Individual level

Workplace gossip may harm or support individuals, subject to its content and valence. On the one hand, gossip can erode victim's working morale and confidence (Dunbar, 2004), generating a feeling of discomfort or embarrassment (Foster, 2004). Negative gossip can damage victim's reputation and self-esteem (Cole & Dalton, 2009), resulting in negative mood and poor performance (Babalola *et al.*, 2019). On the other hand, however, workplace gossip does have merits. It helps employees to collect information and strengthen their group values (Grosser *et al.*, 2012), which in turn helps individuals to better understand their teams and organizations (McAndrew *et al.*, 2007). Manager's positive gossip facilitates a healthy relationship between managers and subordinates, reducing subordinates' perceptions of ostracism (Kuo *et al.*, 2018). In a similar vein, scholars reveal that positive gossip from the team leaders sends a positive signal to the members, boosting their perception of well-being and job embeddedness (Chang & Kuo, 2021; Spoelma *et al.*, 2021).

Work-group level

Workplace gossip may undermine teamwork and group dynamics; for instance, Kniffin and Wilson (2010) indicate that gossip can bring misunderstanding and distrust to the group members, affecting their communication, cooperation and overall performance. Kuo *et al.* (2015) reveal that job-related gossip causes employee cynicism, influencing both victims and non-victims in the same group. Despite of its negative impression, workplace gossip still has benefits. It helps foster interpersonal intimacy and maintain group values and norms (Grosser *et al.*, 2012). Gossip acts as an evaluative sense-making process, encouraging members to critique decisions and shape future directions (Fan & Dawson, 2021). Manager's positive gossip is also positively correlated with

subordinates' perception of team empowerment; as a result of positive gossip, employees are more willing to engage in prosocial behaviour, such as going the extra mile and helping out their team members (Chang & Kuo, 2021; Sun *et al*., 2022).

Organizational level

At the organizational level, the consequences of workplace gossip are many and varies. On the one hand, gossip often transmits both correct and incorrect information to the employees, causing misunderstanding and miscommunication in the organization (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). Scholars have also found that miscommunication affects the organization in several ways, such as frequent employee turnover (Cole & Dalton, 2009), reduced productivity and competitive advantages (Foster, 2004) and less citizenship behavior in the workplace (Wu *et al*., 2018). On the other hand, however, managers and their organizations may benefit from workplace gossip, if it is properly managed. Scholars argue that workplace gossip deserves more attention, as it is part of the organizational communication network; for instance, it offers managers a good opportunity to explore the organization (e.g., values, ethos, culture) and collect information in an informal but authentic manner (Foster, 2004; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Workplace gossip is like a diagnostic tool for managers, acting as an early warning device that alerts the attentive managers to potential problems, such as conflicts within work teams or trust issues between managers and their subordinates (Grosser *et al*., 2012; Wax *et al*., 2022).

To sum up, we have analyzed and critically discussed the diverse consequences of workplace gossip through three different levels. These are: *individual level*, *work-group level* and *organizational level*. Through the analysis and discussion, we have noticed that scholars' viewpoints are sometimes inconsistent or even opposite to each other, challenging the amalgamation of gossiping literature. To breakthrough this challenge, we propose that workplace gossip's valence should be considered during the evaluation of gossip's consequences. Based on the outcomes of aforementioned 3-level analysis, we have found that the valence of workplace gossip is crucial to its consequences. Specifically, positive gossip helps managers and subordinates to maintain amicable interaction in the workplace, which in turn facilitates positive outcomes to the employees and their organizations. On the contrary, negative gossip has no merits but causes troubles to both employees and their managers; as a result, the entire organization suffers from a gossip-rampant workplace. To our knowledge, our findings have opened a new avenue to evaluate the consequences of workplace gossip, hence bringing valuable insights into the workplace gossip literature.

Feedback loop

Following the consolidation of prior research findings, we have developed an integrative conceptual model (Figure 1), clarifying the major factors and the overarching process of workplace gossip. The model commences from antecedents, through different components, and ends at the consequences. Although the model looks linear and one-way driven, it is vital to add a "feedback loop" to connect the consequences to the antecedents, with the following three reasons.

To begin with, as explained in the literature review that positive gossip enhances colleagues' relationship and facilitates positive behaviors (Foster, 2004), we therefore link consequence to the environmental factors. Our proposition is: a workplace with more positive gossip may lead to more positive employee behaviors, and a workplace with more positive behaviors shall lead to more instrumental- and expressive-ties (Umphres *et al*., 2003).

Next, as negative gossip is associated with detrimental outcomes to both employees and their organizations (Cole & Dalton, 2009; Wu *et al*., 2018), we therefore link consequence to the managerial factors. Our view is: when the workplace is full of negative gossip, employees' working morale and confidence could be undermined (Dunbar, 2004), affecting how employees perceive their workplace. Similarly, scholars have found that employees are keen to negotiate what they must do to satisfy their side of the bargain, and what they can expect in return. A health give-and-take relationship makes employees satisfied in the workplace (Chang, 2020; Cheng et al., 2022; Fan & Dawson, 2021; Rousseau, 1995). Following this logic, if employees perceive the workplace negatively, their psychological contract with the organization may be breached, leading to more negative evaluation about their managers, leaders, and the whole the management teams.

In addition, it is also necessary to consider the manager-subordinate relationship during the discussion of feedback loop. Earlier studies indicate that negative gossip damages victim's reputation and credibility (Cole & Dalton, 2009) and provides a sense of negativeness and depreciation (Chang & Kuo, 2021; Itegboje & Chang, 2021; Sun *et al*., 2022). Following this logic, when hearing manager's negative gossip, subordinates may feel that they are not valued and respected by managers. Due to the fact that human beings are a social species and their behaviors often operate in the principle of reciprocity (Robbins & Judge, 2012), subordinates may interpret the manager's depreciation by reducing support and behaving against managers, which are precursors to psychological contract violation (Robinson, 1996) and abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000).

Discussion and Conclusion

This research provides a conceptual review of the workplace gossip, a complicated phenomenon. In order to fully understand the process through which types of workplace gossip are triggered and how victims react, a number of factors must be taken into consideration. In this paper, we have attempted to provide an integrative conceptualization of the workplace gossip process. As shown in Figure 1, characteristics of the gossip antecedents, moderators, mediators, gossiper's and victim's views all play a role in predicting whether workplace gossip will take place and the types of consequences that will occur. Despite the fact that a great deal of research has been conducted on gossiping behavior at work, there remain several opportunities for future research. It is our hope that the review of the literature and integrated model presented in this paper will provide researchers with a launching point.

First, we understand our categorization of gossip may not satisfy all scholars, but we believe such categorization still has merits. To be exact, we have helped researchers to discriminate between constructs that are frequently studied in isolation from one another. We have prudently compared different types of gossip and proposed that workplace gossip differs from general gossip in several ways (*cf*. Table 1. Constructs comparison). Future research may take our views on board, so researchers can explore workplace gossip and understand its influence more precisely.

Next, we have identified five types of workplace gossip and clarified their respective constructs, thus contributing to the knowledge of gossiping behavior. These are: *generic workplace gossip, job-related-gossip, job-unrelated-gossip, manager's positive gossip* and *negative gossip.* Nevertheless, the relationship between various types of workplace gossip is under researched, and whether one type of workplace gossip overrides another is not clear either (Wax *et al*., 2022). Due to the ubiquity of gossip (Chang & Kuo, 2021) and gossip has social functions (Ellwardt *et al*., 2012; Spoelma & Hetrick, 2021), we assume that different types of workplace gossip may exist

concurrently. Examining this relationship between types of workplace gossip shall provide more insights into the gossip intervention strategies.

A third area in need of research is the constraint of data collection. Methodologically, workplace gossip studies have almost exclusively relied on self-rated data from general employees using cross-sectional design; as such, the relationships between research variables must be analyzed with caution, as the causality of variables could not be affirmed (Chang et al., 2023; Dawson, 2014). One way to break through the constraint is to collect data from multiple sources at different time intervals (Chow & Lindström, 2022) which shall help provide a more in-depth understanding of the different factors that lead to workplace gossip.

Further, research examining why gossipers continue to gossip is still at its infancy stage (Ditmarsch *et al.*, 2020; Sun *et al.*, 2022). Can gossiper get benefits by gossiping others? If so, what might be the underlying mechanism, and what benefits can they receive from? Is there any factors that need to be considered when analyzing why employees engage in gossiping behavior? Are these factors related to the organizational factors (e.g., workplace ethos, policies), individual factors (e.g., position ranks, self-esteem), or managerial factors (e.g., guidance or support from managers)? More investigations on these factors would provide more insights into the gossiping literature.

Finally, based on our model, we researchers shall remember that the ultimate goal is not only to understand workplace gossip, but to provide practitioners (e.g., managers, leaders) with the tools necessary to do something about it. A more fine-grained understanding of the predictors that lead to workplace gossip could provide organizations with an indication of the initiatives they might need to follow in order to alleviate gossips' impact.

Summary

The current chapter provides a conceptual review of the workplace gossip and contributes to the literatures in four specific ways. Firstly, we argues that workplace gossip should be separated from general gossip in literature, and we develops an integrative conceptual model (Figure 1) to support our argument. Secondly, we examine the similarities and differences among major workplace gossip constructs. We analyze five emerging types of workplace gossip and explain their unique characteristics. Thirdly, we examine both empirical and literature-based studies that have been conducted on gossip. We then develop a conceptual model that integrates the important characteristics of the gossipers, victims, moderators, mediators, and consequences of workplace gossip. Finally, we critically discuss the important areas where future research may be needed. It is our hope that this chapter provides an in-depth look at the phenomenon of workplace gossip and inspires future research.

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Table 12.1

Constructs comparison: General gossip vs. workplace gossip

Construct	Sub-Construct	Distinguishing characteristics
General gossip	*General gossip*: Idle chatter, chi-chat and evil tongue (Bok, 1984; Gluckman, 1963); The distance between gossipier and target is usually unidentifiable (Foster, 2004; Sun et al., 2022).	Abstract construct. Negative connotation (e.g., vicious, subjective, improper & malicious outcomes). Unwelcomed by religious writings.
	Negative gossip: A sensitive and stealthy form of gossip (Dunbar, 2004), which requires expressive ties for its transmission (Babalola *et al.*, 2019; Grosser *et al.*, 2010).	Broad construct. Causes embarrassment and discomfort to gossip victims and ruins victims' reputation. Releases pent-up emotions.
	Positive gossip: A content-positive and less sensitive form of gossip, which can be easily transmitted via social network (Ellwardt *et al.*, 2019; Fan & Dawson, 2021; Grosser *et al.*, 2012).	Broad construct. Fosters interpersonal intimacy. Provides intellectual stimulation. Communicates information.
Workplace gossip	*Generic workplace gossip*: An informal and evaluative talk in an organization, usually among no more than a few individuals, about another member of that organization who is not present (Kurland & Pelled, 2000) Gossip depends on the interaction across gossiper, listener and target. (Gossip triad: Michelson *et al.*, 2010).	Context-specific gossip in the workplace. Could be positive, negative or neutral in nature. Gossip triad affects the outcome of gossiping behavior. Excludes gossip that occurs outside the organization or workplace.
	Manager's positive gossip: Manager's positive gossip is a form of workplace gossip that contains positiveness and appreciation (Chang & Kuo, 2021).	Subordinates oriented, which implies a sense of recognition to subordinates. Maintains job satisfaction and enforces group values.
	Manager's negative gossip: Manager's negative is a form of workplace gossip that encloses negativeness and depreciation (Chang & Kuo, 2021).	Subordinates oriented, which implies a sense of unrecognition to subordinates. Decreases self-esteem at work and reduces job satisfaction.
	Job-related-gossip: Gossip occurs at work and the nature of gossip is job related (Kuo, Chang, Quinton *et al.*, 2015),	Context-specific and job-related gossip. Stimulates employee cynicism and mediates employee's perception of psychological contract violation.
	Jon-unrelated-gossip: Gossip occurs at work but the nature of gossip is not job related (Kuo, Chang, Quinton *et al.*, 2015),	Workplace oriented but not-job-oriented gossip, which does not produce negative influence on employee's experience and behavior in the workplace.

Table 12.2

Analysis of workplace gossip

Type	Gossip scenarios in the workplace	Gossiper's View	Victim's view
Reward power	When gossiper tells positive information of victim to the third party, victim assumes that gossiper may spread positive information about himself/herself as well. Positive workplace gossip increases gossiper's reward power over victim.	Positive gossip at work has explicit ability to distribute desired outcomes towards victim.	Positive gossip at work benefits victim, e.g., enhancing victim's reputation and career, and feeling valued.
Coercive power	When gossiper tells negative information of victim to the third party, victim assumes that gossiper may spread negative information about himself/herself as well. Negative workplace gossip increases gossiper's coercive power over victim.	Negative gossip at work has implicit threats of negative information against victim.	Negative gossip at work affects victim, e.g., damaging victim's reputation and career, and feeling threatened.
Expert power	When gossiper possesses crucial or exclusive knowledge to the organization, victim assumes that gossiper may help facilitate information exchange, e.g., sharing information of the organization, work environment, employees or other aspects of organizational business. Generic workplace gossip enhances gossiper's expert power over victim.	Workplace gossip spreads information via informal channels such as social chats and network activities.	Gossiper is seen as a source of information, as he/she has sufficient knowledge of workplace (e.g., business, clients or colleagues).
Referent power	Whether workplace gossip affects gossiper and victim depends on the following situations: *Social circles:* When gossiper and victim share different social circles (e.g., different branches), gossiper's referent power may increase; yet, when gossiper and victim share different social circles (e.g., same department), gossiper's referent power may increase slightly but remains unchanged when victim starts to resent gossiper; *Gossiper's identity:* When gossiper talks incessantly about others in the workplace, the gossip's influence remains limited. That is, gossiper is seen as a yenta (big-mouth), and his/her gossiping behavior is regarded as time-wasting and unethical. Gossiper 's referent power may decrease along with his/her reputation.	Workplace gossip is like a double-edged sword, which may increase or decrease gossiper's credibility and social status in the organization.	Whether workplace gossip affects victim depends on the work ethos and ethical standpoint (or policy) in the organization

*Not*e. Table 2 has consulted the following references: Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Brady *et al*., 2017; Burt & Knez, 1996; Chang & Kuo, 2021; Ditmarsch, Hoek & Kuijer, 2020; Dunbar, 2004; Ellwardt, Labianca & Wittek, 2012; Ellwardt, Steglich & Wittek, 2012; 2012; Emler, 1994; Fan & Dawson, 2021; French & Raven, 1959; Grosser *et al*., 2010; Grosser *et al*., 2012; Heath, 1994; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Levin & Arlukee, 1987; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Smith, 1996; Spoelma & Hetrick, 2021; Wax et al., 2022).

Figure Captions

Figure 1. An integrative conceptualization of workplace gossip and its consequences

Figure 12.1
An integrative conceptualization of workplace gossip and its consequences

Gossiper's views

Victim's views

Antecedents

Environmental factors
*. Instrumental ties
*. Expressive ties
*. Structural embeddedness

Managerial factors
*. Psychological contract
    violation
*. Abusive supervision
*. Competent employees

Workplace gossip
(Sub-constructs)
*. Generic workplace gossip
*. Job-related-gossip
*. Job-unrelated-gossip
*. Manager's positive gossip
*. Manager's negative gossip

Mediators

*. Victim's self-esteem
*. Victim's commitment
    towards gossiper
*. Victim's relationship
    with manager

Consequences

Levels and Consequences
*. Individual level
*. Work-group level
*. Organizational level

Valence and Consequences
*. Positive outcomes
*. Negative outcomes

Moderators

Character-specific moderators
*. Credibility of gossiper
*. Job-relatedness

Context-specific moderators
*. Work ethos
*. Gossiper-listener interaction