Impact of Negative Workplace Gossip on Employee Creativity: Mediation of Emotional Exhaustion and Moderation of Environmental Uncertainty

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Abstract

In this fast-paced, challenging era employee have to work twice as hard to stay on top and have to face challenges like negative gossips, which ultimately increases emotional exhaustion that limits employee's ability to use resources essential to perform different kinds of duties. Using conservation of resources theory as the underlying mechanism, this research aims to find out the link between negative workplace gossip and creativity through the mediation of emotional exhaustion and moderation of environmental uncertainty. 310 useful responses are elicited from two large universities located in Lahore, Pakistan. Findings of the study reveal that negative workplace gossips increase emotional exhaustion and reduce creativity, while the relationship is partially mediated. Whereas, environmental uncertainty strengthens the relationship of negative workplace gossip and emotional exhaustion. Implications and future directions of the study are also given.

Introduction

Gossip is an event, which occurs mostly in different social settings, and it has been shown to disturb the emotions of people, people feel discomfort when they hear individuals talking about their personal affairs (Burke, 2017). Gossip can be viewed from three different angles, the angle of individual perspective, sociology–anthropology, and social psychological (Nevo et al., 1994). Although these three angles explore gossip from different viewpoints, yet the individual is present in all perspectives. No matter how we study gossip either in a positive or negative sense, the individual is the mere essence of it. According to the characteristics of gossip, two individuals must be present in a conversation to coin it as gossip (Duffy et al., 2002). When we study gossip from an individual perspective, it is all about the mirror of one's inner thoughts. It can also be viewed as a mechanism, which is used in defensive and adaptive situations by an individual. The extent to which an individual can engage in gossip is an attribute that varies people to a person, some people have a tendency to actively engage in gossip others do not (Agba et al., 2017). In the end, it all comes to attitude a person posse in their general life. If a person is optimistic, he engages in encouraging conversations and positive gossip. They know the importance of being optimistic, it gains them more friendships and helps them to form social bonds. Moreover, if the individual is gloomy it will reflect in his attitude and conversations (Litman & Pezzo, 2005). A recent study done on negative workplace gossip shows us that negative workplace gossip leads towards fear of losing face which will provoke the target of gossip to engage in behavioral responses, i.e. provide a response through participating in negative gossip (Zong, et al., 2021).

Employee spend their 35% time within the organization discussing work-related issues and the remaining time is usually spend in conversation about social issues (Şantaş et al.,2018) and mostly the topic of discussion is the third parties (Darmon, 2018). According to earlier work, workplace gossip is divided into two definite categories, positive workplace gossip and negative workplace gossip (Babalola et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2018; Ellwardt et al., 2012). At present, gossip has been studied by scholars from the perspective of an employee working within an organization, regardless of how the employees in workplace perceives gossip. Studying gossip from the aspect of an organization is very crucial (Zinko et al., 2017). Gossip within an organization is usually studied from the gossiper perspective, its impact on self-esteem (Wu et., 2018), impression management (Xie, 2018a), employee relations and organizational performance (Agba et al., 2017), gossips antecedents (Burke, 2017) and its positive and negative impact (Ellwardt et al., 2012) on individuals. Some of the researchers believe that negative gossip socially threatens the employee (Duffy et al., 2002). Negative

workplace gossip often leads to destructive consequences such as damaging reputation, creating a hostile environment in the workplace, and low productivity. The results obtained from empirically tested studies tell us that gossip is also used to keep employees in check and it tends to be a solution in overcoming behavior that is considered uncooperative this happens due to the fear of isolation, damaged reputation (De Pinninck et al., 2008; Elias and Scotson, 1965; Merry, 1984). The outcome of research conducted on perceived negative workplace gossip shows that it has a positive impact on abusive supervision, self-esteem, and psychological distress (Ye et al., 2021).

Along with the studies done on gossip, scholars have also worked around creativity. Creativity is defined as generating something unique, useable by utilizing one's mental skills. Now a day, the work in organizations is less clerical, less time and place-bound. These things have made work more complicated than before, now an employee has to be more creative and extensively conversant to compete with standards of work in today's organizations (Kampschroer et al, 2007, Becker, 2007). But how various impediments may hamper creativity is an area that is called for an investigation (Wu & Parker, 2011), as there is a lack of empirical literature focusing on the factors that may reduce employees' creativity (Liu et al., 2017). Especially, there is a dearth of literature where negative constructs are concerned. They fail to mention that decrease in one 'emotional resources' can also be the cause of negative behavior, e.g. less focus on creativity (Zhang et al., 2014). The model of these researches has diverted their focus from an important question i.e. the situation that triggers depletion of resources in employees.

To describe the impact emotional exhaustion has been considered an important mechanism, which is a phase faced by a person in which his emotional recourses are rapidly decreased and he becomes mentally and physically worn out. Studies tell us that the intensity of exhaustion depends upon the situation the employee is working. If the employee is suffering from a high level of emotional exhaustion, it will have an adverse impact on the employee's creativity (Wu & Parker, 2011). But past studies have also focused on the solutions to such problems, and have suggested the role organization may play in overcoming negative workplace events or treatments (e.g. negative gossips). One of such factors could be the organizational environment that has a lot of influence on what goes around within the walls of an organization (Alexiev et al., 2016; Islam & Tariq, 2018). The earlier researches focus, that if an organization faces environmental uncertainty, it may have a destructive impact on the productivity of the employees who work there (Spiker & Daniels, 1981). Recent work says that employees are the organization's most prized possession and the organization tries to provide a stable environment to its employees (Dessler,

2016). Studies suggest that workplace gossips depict the workplace environment, and the stability and quality of the working environment may hamper the outcomes of such an interactional factor (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007; Rosnow et al., 1988).

Considering from the environmental perspective, this study proposes that if an employee's faces negative workplace gossip and he faces a high level of environmental uncertainty she would be more prone to face emotional challenges. Building on the Conservation of Resources (COR) perspective we assume that such individuals would feel drainage of resources (due to gossips and uncertainty) which would reduce his personal resources and he would feel stress (i.e. emotional exhaustion). Furthermore, employees will be left with less reservoir of resource to use in the process of creativity.

Literature Review

Negative Workplace Gossip and Creativity

Workplace gossip occurs in social situations (Foster, 2004), i.e. a situation when an employee (gossiper) engages with another employee (the gossip recipients) in a conversation which is mostly about a person who is absent (the target) (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Negative workplace gossip is the perception of conversation about the third person (the target of gossip) within the wall of the workplace is negative. At present, the working trends in organizations are rapidly shifting, employers no longer requiring a routine solution to the problems. They want their employee to come up with an out of box creative ideas. Creativity is now the new trend (Liu et al., 2017). Creativity is termed as the process of making new ideas or creating something new, which is also unique and useful (Zhou, 1998).

Research suggests that to facilitate creativity, talking with co-workers to share ideas is an important tool (Fruchter & Sijtsema, 2010). Literature on creativity revolves around the concept of intrinsic motivation and often ignore that negative constructs can be damaging to emotional resources in employees (Zhang et al., 2014). These researches have not explored in what kind of situation emotional resources of employees are drained. Emotional resources are required during creative processes, employees need different kinds of resources to engage in creativity (Halbesleben et al., 2014). The energy level of employees should be high to formulate unique and out-of-the-box ideas. Based on the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) it is expected that when an employee faces negative workplace gossip, it will act as a negative assessment of the employee (the target of gossip) by the co-workers. The employee will have to use his emotional recourses as a

coping mechanism to mitigate the impact thus, an employee will engage his energy in coping with negative gossip instead of utilizing it in creativity.

H₁: The perception of an employee being the target of negative workplace gossip is negatively related to their creativity.

Negative Workplace Gossip and Emotional Exhaustion

Negative gossip often leads to a stressful situation and makes an individual emotionally drained (Sitzman, 2006). Literature tells us that, the responsively of an employee towards a negative phenomenon is relatively greater than a positive phenomenon (Baumeister et al., 2001), thus due to negative events employees feel strain which may lead towards emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion is referred to as a state in which an individual suffers emotional loss and physical weariness (Grandey, 2003). Literature has conceptualized the state of exhaustion in one's emotion, as a loss in resources (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007), it happens due to the target coping mechanism. The target of negative gossip needs a sufficient amount of energy to cope up with negative gossip (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007), so it causes an increase in emotional fatigue, and therefore he does not have sufficient energy and became highly emotionally exhausted (Parker et al., 2010).

When employees are exposed to negative gossip, their reputation is damaged and they face an environment, which is stressful to work within (Shackelford, 1997). Negative Workplace gossip will act a deficit in resources because an individual will feel shame after being the target of the negative gossip therefore, the individual will require time and effort and emotional resources to manage (Wu, 2018) which ultimately increases emotional exhaustion. Based on COR (Hobfoll, 1989) perspective, the target of the gossip will devote all of its "personal resources" to rectify the scenario i.e. who are the gossiper, why they have committed such an act to damage his repute in the organization. This may also lead to self-destructive behaviors. The target will be self-conscious, which will have a strain on the thinking process. Moreover, this situation can lead to anger or frustration given the situation that the gossip about the target is propaganda, this negative situation urges the employee to use his personal resource to cope up with the negative effect of the gossip which ultimately increases his emotional exhaustion.

H₂: The perception of an employee being the target negative workplace gossip is positively related to their emotional exhaustion.

Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion

Studies have shown that when an employee is emotionally exhausted and their personal resources are drained, they shift focus and attention from matters like problem-solving. This results in much bigger problems i.e. lower production of creative thoughts and only focus on routine solutions of different problems because they require less effort (Grant, 2017). The literature on creativity suggests that creative thoughts require a substantial amount of engagement and energy from an individual (Mitchell & Walinga, 2017). Therefore, employees whose degree of emotional exhaustion is low prefer to face their problems head on and find new problem-solving techniques. Such confrontation leads them towards enthusiastically finding problems and their unique solutions, observe and collect appropriate information from the surrounding environments, and be consistent with coping with the issues which arise while implementing creative ideas (Zhang et., 2014). This self-regulation the phenomenon also helps the employee to fuel their resiliency to disappointment and motivation in achieving their set goals (Zhang et al., 2014). When an employee becomes the target of negative gossip, he shall require an enormous amount to energy to cope up with gossip (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007) so, it causes an increase in emotional exhaustion, and therefore the employee losses the energy to carry out positive behavior and turns towards social non-engaging, non-communicating and non-creative behaviors (Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010). These behaviors require less energetic efforts by an individual (Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006). Based on the given discussion following hypothesis is formulated:

H₃: The relationship between workplace gossips and creativity is mediated by emotional exhaustion.

The moderating role of Environmental Uncertainty

Environment plays an important role within an organization, if the environment of the organization is a supportive lot of productive tasks can be performed and goals can be attainted (Islam, & Tariq, 2018). Uncertainty in the environment leads towards a disastrous road, where an organization can suffer may face loss of human capital and monetary assets (Alexiev, et., 2016). Several studies have also told us that, high level of environmental uncertainty within organizations can lead to lesser job satisfaction, less productivity, and high strain (Bastien, 1987; Johnson, Bernhagen, Miller, & Allen, 1996). The organizations with a higher level of environmental uncertainty tend to have high job turnover too (Hecht, 1978; Spiker & Daniels, 1981; Wanous 1980). Environmental uncertainty in various literature has been associated with high job insecurity, which leads towards high emotional exhaustion among employee (Norwood, 2018; Probst, 2005). Literature tells us that when an employee receives unfair

communication in an environment that is perceived as uncertain they tend to show negative reactions (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002; Goyanes, & Gómez, 2018). Another research shows us that environmental uncertainty strengths the impact of negative outcomes (Van den Bos et al., 2008). As the working environment is a form of resource (Hobfoll, 1989) the uncertainty could be attributed to the environment where employees' resources are not protected, and rather it is loss of a resource offered by the organization. Thus, it is expected that when there is the presence of employees' negative gossip employees would feel emotionally exhausted and when the environment is also uncertain yet another loss of resources would cause an increase in exhaustion, thus the uncertainty of the environment would increase the effects of negative workplace gossips. Thus, the following relationship is assumed:

H4: Environmental uncertainty strengthens the relationship between negative workplace gossip and emotional exhaustion.
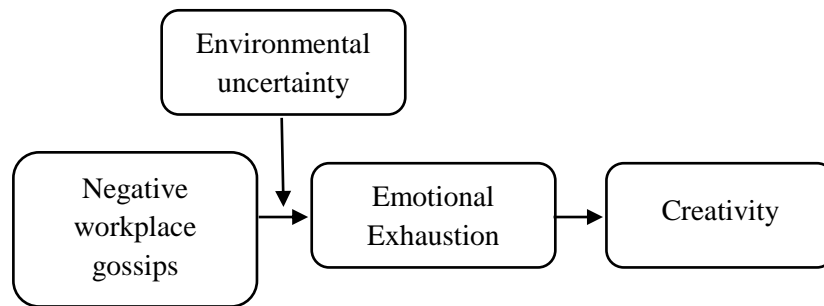
Figure 1 Conceptual model

Research Methodology

The research is conducted on faculty members of two large universities i.e. University of Engineering & Technology, and The University of Lahore. The table of Krejcie and Morgan is used to determine the sample size of our research. Sample size for this research will be 310 (Krejcie & Morgan 1970). Questionnaire is used to collect data from the respondents. Negative workplace gossip was operationalized by using a 5-items survey taken from Brady et., (2017). The sample item was "Asked a work colleague if they have a negative impression of something that you have done". Environmental uncertainty was measured by using 11-items survey, which was taken from Clampitt and Williams (2000), covering the items like "My organization does not want employees to admit that they are unsure about something". Emotional exhaustion was measured by taking the items from Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (MBI-GS; Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996). They consist of items like "I feel emotionally drained from my work". Creativity was

operationalized by using a 9-item survey developed by Tierney et al., (1999). The proposed item was "I Demonstrated originality in my work". All the measures were operationalized on five points scale.

Data Analysis & Findings

Before hypothesis testing preliminary data, analysis was carried out, which covered reliability analysis, descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The results are shown in table-1 where it is evident that Cronbach's alpha for all of the variables lies between 0.817 to 0.903, which is well above the acceptable limit of 0.70. Thus, the condition of reliability was met. The means scores of the variables are reported at five-point scale, where the minimum values is 2.91 (SD=0.848) and maximum mean score is 3.91 (SD=0.802). The correlation results reveal that negative workplace gossips is positively related with emotional exhaustion (r=.219, p<.01) and environmental uncertainty (r=.169, p<.05) while negatively related with employee creativity (r=.219, p<.01). It is also evident that emotional exhaustion is positively related with (r=.044, p<.01) and negatively related with the employee creativity (r= -.107, p<.01). The results reveal that the variables of interest are significantly related, thus I approached the further analysis.

Table 2 covers the results of hypothesis testing, where it is evident that negative workplace gossips negatively influence employees' engagement (β =-.351, t (323) = 4.178 p < 0.01, R= -.226), thus H1 is supported thus highlighting the fact that negative workplace gossips would reduce employees' creativity. The second hypothesis of the study aimed at investigating the impact of negative workplace gossips on employees' emotional exhaustion, where it is evident that due to negative gossips exhaustion level increases (β = .412, t (323) = 4.034 p < 0.01, R= .219), thus H2 is supported. The findings help us conclude that due to negative gossips at work employees feel emotionally exhausted and their resources drain.

Table 1
Reliability Values

Variables	Descriptive	∞	NWG	EE	EU	EC
NWG	2.84 (0.992)	.871	1			
EE	2.91 (0.848)	.817	.219**	1		
EU	3.91 (0.794)	.818	.169**	.044*	1	
EC	3.07 (0.802)	.903	-.226**	-.107**	-.104*	1

**p<.05; *p<.01

Table 2
Negative workplace gossips & outcomes

	R	R Square	Coeff	t	p (Sig.)
NWG – EC	-.226	.051	-.351	4.178	.000
NWG – EE	.219	.048	.412	4.034	.000

The third hypothesis explains the mediating relationship of emotional exhaustion between negative workplace gossip and employee creativity. The mediating relationship tells us that when an employee is faced with negative workplace gossip his emotional exhaustion impacts and which in return have an effect on his creativity i.e. when negative workplace gossip increases, emotional exhaustion increases and consequently employee creativity decreases. Table-3 reveals that the direct effect path was statistically significant between negative workplace gossip and employee creativity at p = <0.001, c' = -0.4066 and CI =0.2246-0.0467. A 95% confidence interval indicated that the indirect effect path between negative workplace gossip, emotional exhaustion and employee creativity was entirely above zero at CI = 0.1152 - 0.0139, resulting in statistically significant partial mediation with (coefficient=0.0559, CI =0.1152 - 0.0139) (Kane & Ashbaugh, 2017). The results tell us that the mediation is a partial mediation and support H3.

The forth hypothesis indicates a moderating relationship between negative workplace gossip and emotional exhaustion with the moderating role of environmental uncertainty. The results for hypothesis testing are shown in figure-2 and table-4. Environmental uncertainty strengths the relationship between negative workplace gossip and emotional exhaustion, thus, when in an organization environmental uncertainty occurs, employee emotional exhaustion and negative workplace gossip increase. The results reveal uncertainty strengthens the moderation between negative workplace gossip and emotional exhaustion" is supported (co-efficient = .0318, t=2.1596, p<0.05 and CI = -0.0608 – 0028).

Table 3
Mediation analysis

	R	R2	Co-eff	t	P	ULCI	LLCI
Direct effects							
NWG-EE	0.2190	0.480	0.4118	4.0336	.0001	0.6126	0.2109
EE-EC	0.2776	0.771	0.1357	3.008	.0029	0.2246	0.0467
Indirect effects							
NWG-EE-EC			0.0559			0.1152	0.0139

Table 4
Moderation analysis

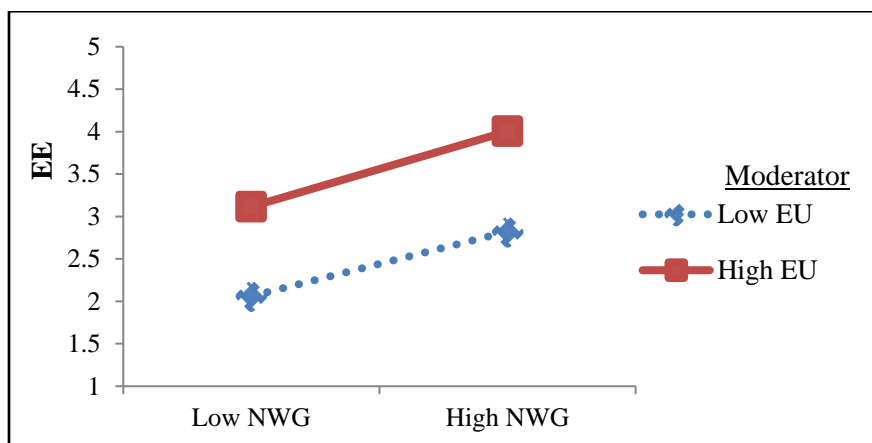|	Co-eff	t	P	ULCI	LLCI
NWG-EE	0.4118	4.0336	.0001	0.6126	0.2109
EU-EE	0.559	2.6804	.0077	0.1594	1.0393
NWG*EU-EE	0.0318	2.1596	0.315	-0.608	-0.0028

Figure 2. Slope of moderation

Discussions of Results

The core aim of the study is to investigate the effect of negative workplace gossips on employee creativity through mediation of emotional engagement and moderation of environmental uncertainty. The hypothesized relationship was proposed with the help of four hypotheses, where the first two hypotheses aimed at identifying the outcomes of negative workplace gossips in terms of employee emotional exhaustion and creativity. The findings reveal that negative workplace gossip is negatively related with the creativity and positively related with emotional exhaustion. Past studies also reveal that negative workplace effect employees' emotions and in turn they face reduction in the creativity (Zhou, et., 2019), thus the findings of the study support the results of past literature. Similarly, it is evident that due to negative gossips employees have an influence on emotional level and they tend to feel exhausted, the findings support his assumption. Past studies have also found that negative workplace situations lead to various emotional level outcomes where employees feel exhausted (e.g. Grandey, 2003; Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007). Such a situation leads to emotional loss and physical weariness (Grandey, 2003; Parker et al., 2010). In such a situations employee tend to lose energy and adopt behaviors like social disengagement and display lack of creativity (Parker et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2014). The literature on the term workplace gossip captures the attention of its readers from different viewpoints, some studied the influence it has on individuals' others were interested in its function and consequences (Leaper & Holiday 1995; Foster, 2004). This study also assumed that the relationship between negative workplace gossips and creativity is mediated by the emotional exhaustion. Previous Research shows that emotional exhaustion significantly mediates the impact of negative workplace gossip on targets' creativity (Liu et al., 2020). These results are also in-line with the theoretical assumptions built on

the basis of conservation of resources (COR, Hobfoll, 1989) theory which proposes that one tend to protect resources and loss of damage to resources may create negative emotional and psychological feelings.

This research also explored the relationship of variables with environmental uncertainty. We take environmental uncertainty as a construct which tells us that, there are certain times within an organization where they are unable to predict the situation, this occurs mostly due to the unavailability of proper data to decide (Duncan, 1972). The studies by previous researchers explored workplace gossip has a tool to help in social behavior, it helps built more closely knitted bonds among people. Research has also suggested that gossip, facilities thinking ability of people, it helps people analyze critical problems when there is difficulty in making sense of social situation. It helps fill in the missing gaps in the conversation (Bok, 1989; Levin & Arluke, 1987). This study is unique as it works with negative workplace gossip as an independent variable to explore its impact on creativity. When we study their direct impacts, negative workplace gossip has a negative relationship with creativity and positive relationship with emotional exhaustion. Environmental uncertainty works as moderator between negative workplace gossip and emotional exhaustion. When an employee suffers environmental uncertainty in organizations and hear negative gossip about himself his emotional exhaustion elevates and creativity diminishes. Our results show that all proposed hypothesis is supported. These findings are supported by the COR (Hobfoll, 1989), which assumes that individuals tend to protect and safeguard their resources, where loss of resources creative negative outcomes. The study supports that both negative workplace gossips and environmental uncertainty may be considered as loss of resources, where employees may feel threat and get emotionally exhausted and in turn they may not involve in the creative processes.

Theoretical Implications

Firstly, our theoretical contribution is that we have studied this research from the lens of conservation of resource theory. The conservation of resource theory tells us in depth how our theoretical model relates with each variable. COR tells the readers that individual have a desire to maintain their assets (called "personal resources" and to fulfil their particular goal) and obtain new resource. There are certain scenarios where an individual feel like his resources are being attacked or on a verge of loss, he retaliates by conserving these resources and fall into a mechanism knows as "defensive mechanism" (Hobfoll, 1989). Therefore, when he faces a situation where his resources are declining he is emotionally drained, which add fuel to fire on his emotional resources. Due to lower levels of resource his level of working will not be the same, it will face subsequent decrease. Secondly, we have added and studied environmental uncertainty in our model with

negative workplace gossip. Earlier research has made a significant contribution by studying gossip in workplace and its impact on individual from psychological point of view and behavioral point of view (Waddington & Fletcher, 2005). Thirdly, this work aims also to extend the already existing literature on communications (informal means) and mistreatment in social situations. In the case of negative workplace gossip, the outcome of informal means of communication can be destructive. The extension of mistreatment literature shows that negative workplace gossip is a type of mistreatment that can be done from behind the curtain, most of the social mistreatment are direct in nature such as, bullying, workplace ostracism, social undermining, aggression (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

Practical Implications

This study will help organizations in various ways, firstly, our research tells us that, when an employee hears negative gossip it affects not only his resources but his work in the organization too. Secondly, organizations should focus on keeping the employee in loop, no matter how bad the situation is, if the employee have transparent system of obtaining information they can be less affected by environmental uncertainty and can work effectively and efficiently. Third, in organizations open and direct communication channels should be open and welcomed when employee can resort to direct communication they would not find ways to flow their information through informal channels. Forth, efforts should be made by managers, supervisors, employees and co-workers not to engage in social mistreatment in office as it crosses one boundaries and knows as un-ethical behavior. Fifth, the study we have conducted helps that manager to get the deeper understanding of workplace gossip, its impacts on individuals. And how it influences the productivity in organizations. At last, our study tells us that exposure to environmental uncertainty have deteriorating impact on workplace gossip. Environmental uncertainty influences negative workplace gossip. When environmental uncertainty moderated the relationship, the impact from social support recedes declines and employee becomes more exhausted and less creative.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

Although we have made significant contributions towards literature, yet our study has some limitation, which should be thoroughly address by some future study. Firstly, the data collection source of our study is same so there might be a possibility that a common method variance has occurred (Podsakoff et al., 2003), the study which will be done by someone in the future should collect data from different sources. Secondly, the future study should pursue questions such as, what happens if an employee perceives positive workplace gossip from its boss and negative workplace gossip from its co-workers at the same time, if the target of gossip is subject to different time of workplace gossip at the same

time. Does this exposure have a different impact on the positive / negative outcomes of the gossip? Thirdly, data should be collected from same employee at various time intervals to make sure that to record their responses accurately and not under the influence of emotions. Forth, in this study, we have explored the influence of negative workplace gossip on outcome of the job, future study should explore the outcomes with positive workplace gossip. Fifth, the studies in the future should consider different methodical design to test the model, they can test this model by using experiments and longitudinal design. Finally, the researches in the future may add different conditions affected by the boundaries such as the perception of support in organization, this can help an individual to work out the level of stress he face in an organization due to gossip. Moreover, future study can also focus on different behaviors in the organization such as proactive performance, counterproductive behaviors. As we have already discussed that, workplace gossip is responsible for damages target reputation and self-esteem we can also study its impact on career development of the employee such as careerism.

Conclusion

We will be concluding this research study, by writing that, all the study hypothesis proposed by the researcher has met the criteria and are supported. This study empirically tested the relationship of Negative workplace gossip on employee creativity. The mediating and moderating role of emotional exhaustion and environmental uncertainty. Negative workplace gossip is used as informal means of communications yet they have their harmful aspects too. We live in a world where we cannot control information; a simple information perceived by the employee can be of harmful consequences and can harm employee's reputation in the organization as well as employee's productivity.

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